

The Acknowledgement of Transcendence: Anti-Theodicy in Adorno and Levinas

(published in *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 37, no. 3 (2011), 273-294)

Carl B. Sachs
csachs@uab.edu
Department of Philosophy
University of Alabama at Birmingham

Abstract: It is generally recognized that Adorno and Levinas should both be read as urging a re-thinking of ethics in light of Auschwitz. This demand should be understood in terms of the acknowledgement of transcendence. A phenomenological account of the event of Auschwitz developed by Todes motivates my use of Cavell's distinction between acknowledgement and knowledge. Both Levinas and Adorno argue that an ethically adequate acknowledgement of transcendence requires that the traditional concept of transcendence as represented in theodicy must be rejected. This rejection takes the form of a *rejection* of theodicy (Levinas) and a *negative theodicy* (Adorno). I argue that Adorno's response is superior because it is a response to the specificity and particularity of the event of Auschwitz as the destruction of, rather than merely the denial of, the humanity of both perpetrators and victims.

Keywords: Adorno – Levinas – acknowledgement – transcendence – theodicy –
Auschwitz – Cavell

0. Introduction

More than sixty years after the Soviet liberation of Auschwitz, the Nazi regime remains a source of intense fascination, guilt, and anxiety. We are entranced and horrified by the intentions and actions of the Third Reich; whether one compares feminists to Nazis or the post-Patriot Act FBI to the Gestapo, the Third Reich has permeated our understanding of who we are. At the heart of our obsession with the Third Reich is the problem, the riddle, of the Holocaust. What happened? Why did it happen? Why did the world permit it to happen? Could it happen again? Has it already happened again? What ethical response is owed to the survivors, to the victims, to the perpetrators? What ethical stance is required for anyone whose self-consciousness is marked by the Holocaust, and is there anyone whose self-consciousness is not so marked?

To be ethically responsible in the wake of Auschwitz, in a self-consciously and resolutely post-Auschwitz culture, is to find a way to live that is adequately responsive to this event. We therefore must consider how to evaluate whether or not a proposed framework for thought and action counts as ethically appropriate for us in light of our identity as members of a post-Auschwitz culture. I shall argue that a framework is appropriate only if it enables what I will call “the acknowledgement of transcendence.” By acknowledgement, I mean provisionally a form of understanding that is distinct, in ways examined below, from the understanding provided by the social sciences. By transcendence, I mean provisionally a form of experience of the other person as distinct

from the experience of objects as available for classification and manipulation. In what follows, I will show how the acknowledgement of transcendence emerges in the reconsiderations of the possibility of ethical life after Auschwitz in the work of Emmanuel Levinas and Theodor Adorno. More specifically, I will illuminate how acknowledgement and transcendence are brought into play through an interpretation of their criticisms of theodicy.

In order to bring these problems into sharper focus, I shall begin by posing the problem of what rational answerability to the event of Auschwitz must be like. Drawing on the phenomenology of Samuel Todes (2001), I contend that rational answerability cannot take the form of knowledge, whether scientific or metaphysical. Rather it requires what Stanley Cavell calls acknowledgement. I shall first sketch out this line of thought more fully (1) before presenting a reading of Levinas and of Adorno as proposing forms of acknowledgement of the Holocaust which satisfy the demand for rational answerability. I shall first turn to Levinas' insistence that in order to properly acknowledge the Holocaust, we must regard theodicy as a temptation to be resisted (2). In contrast to Levinas' refusal of theodicy, Adorno presents what has been called a "negative theodicy" centered on the event of Auschwitz (3). I will then compare these two projects and propose some reasons for preferring Adorno's negative theodicy over Levinas' refusal of theodicy (4) before concluding (5).

1. The Illusion of Knowledge

If there is an ethics of thinking for a post-Auschwitz modernity, then viable conceptions of what ‘Auschwitz’ was and is, and of who ‘we’ are, must be, and be regarded as, governed by relevant norms which are themselves available for evaluation, modification, and endorsement. One such norm emphasized and elaborated through the work of McDowell (1994) is the norm of rational answerability to the world. In response to Rorty’s (1998) criticism of “the very idea of answerability to the world,” McDowell (2000) responds that thought is unintelligible *as thought* if it is seen as detached from normative orientation towards the world. Taking this insight as a point of departure, the question arises: what is rational answerability to Auschwitz?

In order to understand what rational answerability to Auschwitz requires, we must first understand what “Auschwitz” is. In the course of a remarkable phenomenology of embodiment, Todes (2001) presents a phenomenological analysis of the event of Auschwitz. He begins by remarking on how easy it is to assume that one knows what Auschwitz was:

When one attempts ... to imagine or conceive of conditions at Auschwitz, one generally ‘succeeds’ only by drawing a false curtain of semblance of reasonableness over them; one soberly reckons up the number of people killed, the sociological causes, etc. (Todes 2001: 61)

Though Todes does not dismiss the importance of sociological and historical analyses – and it is consistent with his criticism that such analyses are indispensable in their own right – he nevertheless contends that such analyses can stand in the way of understanding what Auschwitz means.

Phenomenology, on the other hand, locates the true nature of Auschwitz as a certain type of experience:

But the hellish experience of those who died there is not expressed by such thoughts. Perhaps a great novelist could express the forced human disintegration that, for the most part, was Auschwitz. Still, he would succeed only in making us feel the unimaginability and inconceivability of this hole in the world. Auschwitz did not really happen ‘in’ the world, in the full sense of that term. It was an *exit from* the world. (Todes 2001: 61)

The difference between the social scientists and the novelist – here Todes refers to Wiesel’s *Night* – is that the knowledge produced and deployed by the social sciences (political science, economics, history, social psychology) interferes with a confrontation with the “forced human disintegration” of Auschwitz. The interference takes the form of the illusion of knowledge – the illusion that ‘one knows’ what the Holocaust was, what it did to the victims, and also the illusion of knowing what it did to the survivors and to the perpetrators.

By contrast, a “great novelist” (or phenomenologist) shatters the illusion of knowledge by focusing attention on the inconceivability of Auschwitz from the position of knowledge. The challenge faced by the novelist (or phenomenologist) is to understand Auschwitz as that which is “inconceivable” and to communicate that understanding in a form that does not reproduce in a different register the illusion of knowledge produced by the social scientist. What, then, is the understanding yielded by such efforts?

This does not mean that there was no Auschwitz. ... Something did occur at Auschwitz, but what it was, was not merely an event in the world, but a *break-out from the world*. Auschwitz was its grim chimneys, and these did not empty into the heavens we can see but into that brutal night where the delicate web of experience is torn to shreds; where no man can live, and of which no man can know. *Auschwitz was not compatible with the nature of the world*. In its space and time, body and life, heaven and earth were rent. Auschwitz was a negative fact, an *antifact*; not a fact, but a *defect of the world*. (Todes 2001: 61-2)

Building on the phenomenology of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, Todes claims that the world's "worldliness", the articulation of events and objects as bearers of significance within a unified and coherent world, is unintelligible if considered as independent of the structures of embodied behavior. The destruction of one's capacities for meaningful embodied experience is therefore the destruction of the worldliness of the world.¹

Auschwitz thus marks the limit of both the destruction of embodied experience and the destruction of the world as a coherent unity. This is why Todes calls Auschwitz an "antifact" – not something integrated into the unity of the world, but the limit of it.

Knowledge of Auschwitz – whether as economic theories about the rise and fall of the Third Reich, social-psychological theories about anti-Semitism, or political theories about totalitarianism – can serve to obscure the phenomenological fact of the event of Auschwitz by re-integrating Auschwitz into the fabric of worldliness, or making Auschwitz into something that is a part of the world.

If the phenomenological significance of Auschwitz as an "antifact" signifies the breakdown of all phenomenological significance, then there is a serious problem in

determining what rational answerability to Auschwitz requires. This is not to say that such empirically-grounded theories are unnecessary; they are clearly indispensable for a sober and demythologized understanding of both past and present. The problem is not that such theories fail to dispel illusions, clichés, and propaganda; the problem is that, in the course of succeeding at doing so, they can produce another kind of illusion and so fail at satisfying rational answerability to the event of Auschwitz *despite* being precisely the kind of knowledge we require. But if empirical knowledge is insufficient for rational answerability to the event of Auschwitz, would anything be sufficient? Perhaps, as Todes suggests, only the gifts of a great novelist are sufficient.² I neither know nor pretend to know what would be *sufficient* for rational answerability to Auschwitz, but there is something *necessary* to a rational response to Auschwitz in addition to empirical knowledge, what Cavell calls *acknowledgement*.

The difference between knowledge and acknowledgement can be more clearly seen by considering the different purposes served by philosophy and by science. It can be tempting to suppose that philosophical theories, if there are theories in philosophy, should satisfy the demand for knowledge. The idea that philosophy provides a special kind of knowledge, different from that provided by the sciences, has again and again fueled the temptation to dogmatism. Against that temptation, Cavell appeals to the insight of Kant and Wittgenstein that philosophy must stand on guard against the temptation of dogmatism as well as cynicism. As Cavell puts it:

Cynics about philosophy, and perhaps about humanity, will find that questions without answers are empty; dogmatists will claim to have arrived at answers; philosophers after my heart will rather wish to convey the thought that while

there may be no satisfying answers to such questions in certain forms, there are so to speak, directions to answers, ways to think, that are worth the time of your life to discover. (Cavell 1988: 9)

The problem of rational answerability to Auschwitz, like the problem of evil generally or like the problem of the external world or the problem of other minds, does not – unlike problems in the sciences -- have a solution, but there are better and worse ways of thinking about it.

The distinction between knowledge and acknowledgement trades on this distinction between scientific theorizing and philosophical thinking. In his “Knowing and Acknowledging,” Cavell points out that it is one thing to know that another person is in pain; it is another to acknowledge that pain, to respond to it. Conversely, there are different notions of failure at stake: “A ‘failure to know’ might just mean a piece of ignorance, an absence of something, a blank. A ‘failure to acknowledge’ is the presence of something, a confusion, an indifference, a callousness, an exhaustion, a coldness. Spiritual emptiness is not a blank” (Cavell 2002: 64). It is also true that – though this point owes more to Iris Murdoch than to Cavell – knowledge can also *interfere* with acknowledgement. If I can claim to know why one suffers, then I can exert cognitive mastery over that suffering, and in doing so, close myself off to the reality of that suffering. Yet that suffering also demands to be acknowledged, and through a form that can provide normative guidance over judgments and deeds.

But what sort of acknowledgement is at stake? What sort of acknowledgement is being asked for? And more precisely: what sort of lack of acknowledgement (Cavell’s “spiritual emptiness”) must itself be acknowledged? A shared point of departure for

Adorno and for Levinas is that their reflections on Auschwitz take place through re-thinking the problem of transcendence.³ ‘Transcendence’ is typically taken in a metaphysical sense: x transcends y if x is some entity which goes beyond or exceeds some y . Thus, the theistic conception of God is transcendent insofar as He enjoys an existence radically different from the kind of existence that characterizes the world in which ordinary human experience is located. But while Adorno and Levinas are everywhere in conversation with theological language, as shown in considerable detail by De Vries (2005), the possibility and desirability of transcendence in their thought is quite different from what is associated with the modern theistic conception.

Instead, I take Adorno and Levinas to be concerned with what I call “transcendence in the minimal sense.” Transcendence in the minimal sense consists of the awareness of a ‘something’ which is not recognized as part of normal epistemic practices. Transcendence in the minimal sense is explicitly and self-consciously hesitant with respect to both ontological and epistemological claims. First, it is marked by hesitance regarding the ontological status of this ‘something’ – what it is and what relations it does and does not have to that which is cognizable in everyday terms. Second, it is marked by hesitance with respect to claims about how this ‘something’ could be known as a ‘something’ of any sort, however indeterminate. The ‘something’ of transcendence cannot be *wholly* contentless; it is prudent to recall the remark of Wittgenstein: “a nothing would serve just as well as a something about which nothing could be said” (2001: 304). Any philosopher who wants to insist on transcendence in a minimal sense must therefore show how transcendence can be given *some* content without rendering it so determinate as to cease to transcend ordinary cognition in the first place.

Transcendence is possible only if it can be reframed in a way that avoids the paradox of insisting that one can know what the limits of knowledge are. (This paradox has vexed even the most sympathetic readers of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.)

Transcendence in a minimal sense is therefore a *negative epistemological* claim – that is, it is a claim regarding the limits of knowledge. In that sense Adorno and Levinas are firmly within the post-Kantian tradition. At the same time, however, the resources drawn upon for presenting and evaluating the concept of transcendence are markedly different: the concept of transcendence is arrived at through a phenomenological justification in Levinas and a materialist dialectical justification in Adorno.

With this in mind, we are now in a better position to see just how Adorno and Levinas think of Auschwitz as having epoch-making (and epoch-breaking) ramifications for how one can even ascribe any content whatsoever to the concept of transcendence, and for how the concept of transcendence can play a normative role in judgment and experience. In the remainder of this paper, I will show how the philosophies of Levinas and Adorno should be interpreted as proposals to satisfy the demand for rational answerability to the event of Auschwitz as forms of the acknowledgement of transcendence.

2. Resisting the Temptation of Theodicy

The philosophy of Levinas resists easy summary. He is at times a maddeningly difficult writer, at times a deceptively transparent one. His work is replete with arrangements – though not quite a system – of concepts: responsibility, proximity,

substitution, the Face, alterity, asymmetry, the Other, the third. Each of these concepts is an attempt to think about ethical life, about what it means to be ethical, and the difficulties of ethics. Much of Levinas' work takes place in phenomenological terms, that is, the description of the structures of experience – though it would be more accurate to describe it as a “phenomenological critique of phenomenology” (De Vries 2005: xxii). Levinas does not merely *do* phenomenology, but he also provides us with phenomenological analysis of the points of breakdown of phenomenological descriptions, and through which the limits of the possibility of phenomenological description are themselves revealed.

Yet there is also a concrete dimension to Levinas' work: the question of how to respond, ethically, to Auschwitz. His second magnum opus, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, bears the well-known dedication: “To the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, and of the millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-Semitism” (Levinas 1997). It is followed by a Hebrew inscription with the names of members of Levinas' family who were killed in the Holocaust. Yet one must pause here for a moment: “the *same* anti-Semitism”? If all hatred is the same, then there is nothing unique about the Jewish case; what drove the National Socialists to murder the Jews is not different in kind from what motivated older and more recent acts of genocide and “ethnic cleansing.” All hatred is anti-Semitism, because Levinas, as Hilary Putnam puts it, “universalizes Judaism. To understand him, one has to understand the paradoxical claim implicit in his writing that, in essence, all human beings are Jews” (Putnam 2002: 34). We are all Jews, not by creed or by ethnicity, but

by being in the position of taking on ethical responsibility for the other person that is embodied in the commandment: “Thou shall not murder”. It is this peculiar *identification* of the singular with the universal that drives Levinas’ thinking about ethics and its fundamental role in human life.

What that role turns out to be is made vivid in his essay “Useless Suffering” (1998a). Here Levinas considers the problem of “the meaning of suffering” by considering what a phenomenological analysis of suffering does – and does not – reveal. The essay therefore begins with a phenomenological description of suffering which reveals that suffering is “an excess ... inscribed in a sensorial context” (ibid.: 91). To suffer is not, therefore, to have before one the object of an experience. To speak of “experience” here imputes too much activity to the one who undergoes suffering. What is specific to suffering is “the way in which the refusal, opposing the assemblage of data into a meaningful whole, rejects it” (ibid.: 91). Levinas directs our attention to the ways in which suffering is a “refusal of meaning” (ibid.: 91); it is meaningless to the one who suffers. Insofar as I engage in a phenomenological analysis of my own suffering, what such analysis reveals is that my suffering is without significance to me. Levinas assumes that something counts as the object of an experience if it is conceptually identifiable, and so something that we can exert mastery over. The object of an experience can be held at arm’s length, as it were, contemplated, questioned; one can inquire into its significance, value, or causal relations with other objects. The impact of suffering for consciousness does not have this character; it is not an object over and against which we can play the part of conceptual master. Rather, “the passivity of suffering is more profoundly passive than the receptivity of the senses” (ibid.: 92).

When I suffer, the suffering absorbs my consciousness, my subjectivity – I disappear into the suffering. And for this reason it is absurd to inquire into the meaning of suffering – in suffering, the very possibility of meaning has disappeared.

But Levinas does not thereby draw the conclusion that all suffering is completely and utterly absurd, unredeemably absurd; instead, he claims that “for pure suffering, which is intrinsically senseless and condemned to itself with no way out, a beyond appears in the form of the interhuman” (1998a: 93-4). The suffering that is in me, or that has absorbed my consciousness, has no “beyond” for me and so cannot take on a meaning for me – it cannot be cognitively grasped. Nevertheless my suffering can take on a meaning for another. What is meaningless, absurd, useless to me can speak to you, can call out to you, can become an injunction, a moral imperative. This space that opens up between us is what Levinas calls “the interhuman,” that which takes place *between* human beings. The suffering in me is meaningful as a call from the beyond to you that solicits your attention, calls you out of yourself, and demands an ethical response. Yet the relation is asymmetrical.⁴ I do not respond to your need, to your pain, by asking, “what are you going to do for me?” The demand for reciprocity is, in fact, the height of egoism.

The interhuman takes on a deeper force and importance for Levinas when set in contrast with the complete and total denial of the interhuman that is Auschwitz, “the end of a century of unutterable suffering” (1998a: 94). Auschwitz marks a failure to acknowledge how one is subjected to the suffering of the other. This is not only a failure to recognize the humanity of the other. There is recognition between humans, according to Levinas, but this must not be understood as a symmetrical relation. Instead

the face of the other, through “nakedness” that is – importantly, for Levinas, a nakedness that is not indecent -- speaks to us from a position of “destitution” and vulnerability but also that “commands” us, from a height: “Thou Shall Not Kill.”

Yet one must ask whether the suffering of the other can take on any meaning other than the imperative to respond. Levinas’ response is unequivocal: “the consciousness of this inescapable obligation brings us close to God in a more difficult, but also a more spiritual, way than does confidence in any theodicy” (1998a: 94). Thus, on the one hand, the obligation to the other necessarily involves us with God. But on the other hand, this relation to God cannot be translated into the terms of a theodicy, and especially not in light of “the smoke from the ovens of the ‘final solution’ crematoria where theodicy abruptly appeared impossible” (ibid.: 99). Yet it is crucial to attend to the delicacy of Levinas’ phrasing; the final solution did not actually render theodicy impossible. Rather, it is with Auschwitz that theodicy appears impossible, and moreover, this appearance is abrupt. Levinas’ point is not that theodicy still remains possible but merely appears impossible, but rather that it was always impossible, and should have been seen as such; the significance of Auschwitz is that the impossibility of theodicy is now seen as such. It is that sense alone that Auschwitz reveals to us, to use a title from section of Levinas’ essay, “the end of theodicy.”

It may not be immediately apparent why theodicy is and always has been an impossible project. Certainly there have been, and continue to be, versions of theodicy, not all of which are directly yoked to Auschwitz. Consider, however, what one attempts to do in theodicy: one attempts to justify the existence of suffering. The problem with this is, as Levinas states, that “the justification of the neighbor’s suffering

is certainly the source of all immorality” (1998a: 99). As soon as one offers up a justification of suffering, one denies oneself the possibility of responding to it as suffering. The response to the suffering of the other is at the same time a demand for a faith beyond all theodicy: “It is in the interhuman perspective of my responsibility for the other, without concern for reciprocity, in my call for his or her disinterested help, in the asymmetry of the relation of one for the other, that I have tried to analyze the phenomenon of useless suffering” (ibid.: 101).

It may seem at this point that Levinas accomplishes the reorientation of faith without theodicy only at the price of dismissing the ‘problem of evil’ to which theodicy is a solution. That this is not so can be seen by considering the phenomenology of the transcendence of the other in “Transcendence and Evil” (Levinas 1998c). The transcendence of the other is irreducible to knowledge, but it can and must be acknowledged. Levinas himself distinguishes between our understanding of the other from empirical knowledge by developing his thesis through a roughly Kantian epistemology. Consider, for example, how thoroughly Levinas emphasizes the role in experience of what is “thematizable,” “integratable,” and “synthesizable.” Despite the subtle differences between these terms, each refers to everything that can be approached as an object of some possible experience.

Yet there is also, in Kant and in Levinas, the realization that there is a way of thinking that does not concern objects of possible experience. Levinas accepts that Kant was “the first to separate thought from knowing” (1998c: 175). The Ideas of pure reason – the existence of God, the freedom of the will, and the immortality of the soul – cannot be objects of any possible knowledge, because all knowledge is limited to

possible experience. In Kant's famous formula, he "had to deny **knowledge** in order to make room for **faith**" (*Critique of Pure Reason* 1999: Bxxx) – bearing in mind that this was also, in Kantian terms, a purely rational faith, "religion within the limits of reason alone." Thus Levinas follows Kant seeking a spiritual commitment that resists all 'scientism' – in this case, straight-out assimilation of religious language to the categories of empirical knowledge – without thereby lapsing into irrationalism or mysticism.

Despite his debt to Kant's distinction between "thought" and "knowledge," Levinas also registers his profound disappointment at the *emptiness* or – what is the same thing for Levinas – the *formality* – of the Ideas. The Ideas of pure reason do exceed all possible knowledge, but only because the Ideas are unschematized concepts; there is no contribution from sensible intuition, and so the Ideas lack any experiential content whatsoever. By contrast, Levinas turns to phenomenology in order to show that transcendence – "thought" or "faith" – has its grounds in a cognitively significant experience of its own, distinct from cognition of objects. Thought not only goes beyond cognition, but is located within an 'originary' experience in which a specific "psychic modality" is made manifest. It is not enough, in other words, to provide merely a formal characterization of the Ideas of transcendence; one must also locate that very transcendence within experience, in light of a richer and more nuanced account of human life than is available in Kant's analysis of our cognitive capacities.⁵

Transcendence is revealed to us through the originary experience of evil, and Levinas develops this thought through an examination and critique of *Job and the Excess of Evil* (Nemo 1998). Nemo's exegesis of the book of Job, and in particular of Job's rejections of the theodicy offered by his friends, forces us to confront the reality of

evil. Conversely, Job's friends, in their attempt to justify his suffering, refuse to see it truly for what it is. What one learns from Nemo's reading, Levinas argues, is that "transcendence appeared to us to shine forth in the face of the other man: an alterity of the non-integratable, of what cannot be assimilated into a totality" (Levinas 1998c: 185). In the suffering of the other person, in the evil that he or she undergoes, we find the experience that grounds transcendence and provides it with a content, although not a content that can be integrated into a totalizing, systematic theory. Thought does go beyond knowledge, but it is not without an experiential content of its own. This experience is an acknowledgement of transcendence, and it comes into view as possible and as necessary at the same time as theodicy is rejected.

The result of Levinas' phenomenological analyses is that an ethically adequate understanding of, and response to, the Holocaust requires a cognitive attitude towards the reality of suffering, and the reality of the other, which is not reducible to scientific knowledge. It requires, in other words, an acknowledgement of transcendence. The alternative to such acknowledgement, theodicy, succeeds only if suffering can be shown to be justified.⁶ If theodicy fails, then there seems to be no alternative to seeing suffering as superfluous or gratuitous. Yet it is hard to know which alternative is more monstrous, more inhuman – that the spiritual and physical annihilation of the camps was actually somehow deserved, or that it was utterly gratuitous.⁷ The moral failure of theodicy is that it confronts us with these alternatives; in either case we are forced into a position that perpetuates, rather than addresses, the calculative, inhumane, and ultimately monstrous logic of the camps themselves. What we require, if we are to respond adequately to Auschwitz at all, is recognition of the reality of evil. The

knowledge of theodicy closes us off from precisely that acknowledgement of the suffering of the other which is necessary for morality. Accordingly, being open to the demands of morality requires that we resist “the temptation of theodicy”.⁸

Yet one may wonder if Levinas’ analysis allows us acknowledge the specificity of the evil that is Auschwitz. For it may seem that Auschwitz does not merely strike us as the paradigm of evil and suffering, but even more calls into question the very legitimacy of moral categories altogether. Levinas himself comes close to acknowledging this in his deeply moving essay, “The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights” (Levinas 2000). Levinas concludes this essay by commenting on a dog, named Bobby, who befriended Levinas and other Jewish prisoners of war in Nazi Germany. Levinas writes:

The other men, called free, who had dealings with us and gave us work or orders or even a smile and the children and women who passed by and sometimes raised their eyes – stripped us of our human skin. We were subhuman, a gang of apes. ... We were beings entrapped in their species; despite all their vocabulary, beings without language. ... And then, about halfway through our long captivity, for a few short weeks, before the sentinels chased him away, a wandering dog entered our lives. ... For him, there was no doubt that we were men. ... This dog was the last Kantian in Nazi Germany, without the brain needed to universalize maxims and drives. (Levinas 2000: 152-3)

To acknowledge what Auschwitz means, we must confront the fact that this stray dog, without the capacity to participate in, “the space of reasons” (to use the increasingly common term adopted from Sellars), was the last Kantian in Nazi Germany. What does this mean for morality, when a half-feral animal was the only creature capable of moral

recognition and responsiveness? We must confront the question whether or not Auschwitz in fact abrogates morality altogether. To understand this disturbing thought, I turn now to the problem of Auschwitz in the thought of Theodor Adorno.

3. Auschwitz as Negative Theodicy

Adorno, no less than Levinas, is a thinker haunted by the trauma of Auschwitz. He is also, in some loose sense, a Jewish thinker. But Adorno's Jewishness is muted, quieted – unlike Levinas, he came from an assimilated and affluent family, and did not grow up as an observant Jew. His Jewishness is therefore, one is tempted to say, cultural rather than religious. But it is also part of his intellectual culture, and therefore inseparable from the content and style of his philosophy. Hent de Vries, cited above as aptly describing Levinas' philosophy as a "phenomenological critique of phenomenology," at the same time describes Adorno's philosophy as a "dialectical critique of dialectics" (De Vries 2005: xxii) What opening in thought, what reorientation, not only made possible the critique of method, but also made it seem desirable, even necessary? In the case of Levinas, the "phenomenological critique of phenomenology" is given orientation and depth by his deep familiarity with Biblical thought, with the ethics of the Talmud, and with the powerful anti-Hegelian theology of Franz Rosenzweig. In the case of Adorno, the dialectical critique of dialectics also owes much to a theological thinker, Adorno's friend and mentor Walter Benjamin.⁹

Whereas Benjamin 'translated' theology into a dialectical critique of dialectics – with all the risks and rewards of translation – Adorno brings this 'profane theology' into

conversation with a sociologically and historically rich materialism indebted to Lukacs. In a recent study, Espen Hammer writes that “while Lukacs provides Adorno with most of the basic terms of his social analysis, it is ultimately Benjamin who inspires the construction of his “critical” or “negative-dialectical” response to this analysis” (Hammer 2005: 37). In this discussion, I shall largely follow through on the “Benjaminian,” messianic dimension of Adorno’s thought, although the “Lukacsian,” materialist dimension is no less important.¹⁰

Adorno’s magnum opus, *Negative Dialectics*, is a sustained exploration of the conditions of possibility of a critical rationality, that is, of a form of rationality that enables us to reflect on the limits of rationality.¹¹ This abstract problem that runs through *Negative Dialectics* is also, at the same time, a concrete and specific response to Auschwitz. The structure of *Negative Dialectics* begins at a high level of generality, with a criticism of the dominant assumptions of Western metaphysical and epistemological thinking. But the claims presented in the general term are only fully explicated through their application to concrete cases, and in Part III of *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno offers a series of what he calls “models.”

What Adorno calls a “model” I understand as an arrangement of facts, concepts, and images designed to reveal an aspect of a situation, event, or text that is concealed by our ordinary understanding. (Putting it this way is intended to bring out the contrast with what Benjamin called “constellations”.) The third of these models, entitled “Meditations on Metaphysics,” begins with a section called “After Auschwitz”. There, Adorno writes that

[after Auschwitz] we cannot say anymore than the immutable is truth, and that

the mobile, transitory is appearance. The mutual indifference of temporality and eternal ideas is no longer tenable even with the bold Hegelian explanation that temporal existence, by virtue of the destruction inherent in its concept, serves the eternal represented by the eternity of destruction. (Adorno 1983: 361)¹²

Adorno wants to provoke us with the claim that we can no longer affirm the immutability of truth and the transience of materiality. This claim contests traditional assumptions about metaphysics: that metaphysics just is a set of claims about how the world really is, independent of how we might take it to be. Even if one were to adopt some version of idealism, phenomenism or positivism, and thereby deny that there is any metaphysical reality independent of appearances, the history of philosophy shows that it is difficult to express any rejection of metaphysics in a form that is not itself a metaphysical thesis.

Here the historical, temporal dimension to Adorno's criticism is crucial; it is not that one should or can not distinguish between eternal truth and temporary appearance, but that one cannot do so *anymore*. We cannot do so because doing so undermines our capacity to acknowledge Auschwitz as the collapse or failure of transcendence. After Auschwitz, the historical tradition of metaphysics as quest for transcendence running from Plato to Hegel must be seen as itself disrupted. Adorno continues:

After Auschwitz, our feelings resist any claim of the positivity of existence as sanctimonious, as wronging the victims: they balk at squeezing any kind of sense, however bleached, out of the victims' fate. And these feelings do have an objective side after events that make a mockery of the construction of

immanence as endowed with a meaning radiated by an affirmatively posited transcendence. (Adorno 1983: 361)

Our emotional responses to the horrors of the Holocaust, then, outweigh and ought to outweigh any attempt to explain the Holocaust. This is not to say that the Holocaust cannot or should not be explained; in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno and Horkheimer offer a historically, sociologically, and psychologically rich – though not unproblematic – explanation of the Holocaust.¹³ *Negative Dialectics* does not conflict with the explanation presented in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*; the point, rather, is that *any* explanation, even that of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, must be set alongside our emotional responses, that our emotional reactions to the atrocities have a rationality and validity of their own that no explanation can fully accommodate or assuage.

The event of Auschwitz makes a mockery of all metaphysical projects, and above all, all versions of theodicy, that attempt to interpret the world of experience – “immanence” – as infused with meaning derived from some transcendent source – regardless of whether that transcendence is construed as Platonic forms, the God of theologians, Kantian Ideas of Reason, or Hegelian Spirit. Nevertheless, I argue that it would be a mistake to read Adorno as utterly rejecting *all* thoughts of transcendence.¹⁴ What must be rejected is precisely “affirmatively posited transcendence”: that is, transcendence conceptualized as having an original, self-sufficient content through which it can be distinguished from everything belonging to merely material, contingent existence. Yet this leaves open a different conception of transcendence, one that is *negative*.

The ideas of the “negative” and “negativity” reverberate throughout Adorno’s work,

and one must be careful in tracking what this concept does and does not do for Adorno. First and foremost, negativity for Adorno means the absence of identity, and more specifically, absence of identity between the concepts we use in describing and evaluating experience and the objects thereby described and evaluated. The abstract discussion in the “Introduction” to *Negative Dialectics* develops the insight that objects are not exhausted by or reducible to the concepts; there is always a side of the object – its “nonconceptuality, individuality, and particularity” (1983: 8) – that escapes our formulations and judgments, however precise and rigorous those might be. But this insight, which might seem to be strikingly similar to mystical or spiritual doctrines, can only be expressed by means of concepts themselves. Although philosophy does attempt “to say what does not permit itself to be said” (ibid.: 9; trans. modified), it does so only through the concept itself: “philosophy ... must strive, by way of the concept, to transcend the concept” (ibid.: 15). A fully critical rationality would therefore be one that reflected on the lack of identity – in Adorno’s terms, on the negativity – between sensuous experience and conceptual judgment.

In order to see how negative transcendence is both possible and necessary as a rational response to Auschwitz, we must first underscore the importance of negativity in relation to Auschwitz: “If thought is not measured by the extremity that eludes the concept, it is from the outset in the nature of the musical accompaniment with which the SS liked to drown out the screams of its victims” (1983: 365). Only a critical rationality, fully conscious of its own limits and able to articulate that consciousness, could avoid becoming mere aesthetic ornamentation of systematized violence. And only a critical rationality could draw our attention to deep structural similarities between the

logic of the camps and the overriding assumptions that underpin Western culture, in the following sense: in the camps, “it was no longer an individual who died, but a specimen” (ibid.: 362). In other words, human beings were treated in the same way that we continue to treat animals and other inhabitants of the natural world.¹⁵

In order to acknowledge that the camps succeeded in wholesale and systematic spiritual destruction, to which physical death was a mere afterthought, Adorno’s philosophy should be interpreted as a “negative theodicy” (Bernstein 2001, p. 372). Theodicy consists of the integration or synthesis of, on the one hand, empirically-grounded, historical explanations and, on the other hand speculative metaphysics. This synthesis of immanence and transcendence confers metaphysical intelligibility and moral justification on sequences of empirical events, which can nevertheless be explained on their own terms. Thus theodicy must not be seen as a passive acceptance of actuality, but a justification of it. (Hence it was easily lampooned through Voltaire’s Dr. Pangloss.) “Negative theodicy,” like traditional (“positive”) theodicy, sees actuality as standing in need of justification; hence as something that should not be passively accepted. The “negativity” is the consciousness that actuality is bereft of justification. There is thus an experience of discovering actual social conditions to be in need of an ethical justification that is unavailable. At the same time, this resolute negativity does not license any inferences as to the content of what is on the other side of what is given as actuality.

The difficulty posed by Auschwitz is that the very logic of the camps was designed in order to destroy the very possibility of human dignity and freedom, of what James Rachels calls “biographical life,” as distinct from merely “biological life” (Rachels

1986). Whereas “biological life” refers to life in a strictly metabolic sense, “biographical life” refers to life as something that is meaningful and significant to self and to others. It is in the context of biographical life that one can ask the question as to how one should or might live, and it is also in this sense that the horror of Auschwitz can be properly acknowledged. The intentional destruction of the possibility of coherent, bodily experience can and should be explained. Yet not only is it unjustifiable; it is integral to our moral reaction to Auschwitz that it be seen as unjustifiable. What acknowledgement requires is the realization that these two projects – explanation and intelligibility – were completely severed in Auschwitz.

In order to recognize that and how the camps succeeded in the destruction of biographical life, and re-orientate our thinking in response, Adorno argues, we must learn how to regard Auschwitz as the culmination of a trajectory embedded in the history of Western culture in the wake of the Enlightenment. There can be no genuine acknowledgement of the Holocaust that does not begin with the realization that “ ‘we did it’, that it was done by people whose lives and culture is so proximate to our own that the attempt to make ‘them’ somehow wildly different from us can be accomplished only by self-deception” (Bernstein 2001: 380n8). Since it is necessary to retain a solid grasp both of socio-historical explanations of the atrocities and of the ethical response that is traditionally secured through the thought of transcendence, Adorno must therefore engage in a form of theodicy. Yet it must also be a *negative* theodicy, because the synthesis or integration of history and transcendence must be denied if one is to avoid denying or negating the individuality and particularity of those who perished. Doing that would only repeat, at the level of abstract thought, the logic of the atrocities

themselves. Only negative theodicy, then, can enable us to acknowledge what Auschwitz was: the annihilation of the conditions of possibility of a meaningful life and death – that is, biographical life – as the culmination of the disenchantment and destruction of the natural world. In short, transcendence comes into view, and is available for acknowledgement, only by comprehending the event of Auschwitz as the negation of transcendence. For this reason, the concept of transcendence in Adorno's thought is the acknowledgement of negative transcendence, and comprehensible only through a negative theodicy.

It is one thing to accept that rational cognition is empty and trivial if not informed by acknowledgement of Auschwitz; quite another to express adequately that acknowledgement. Adorno responds to this problem through what he calls "a new categorical imperative": "Hitler has imposed on humanity, in its state of unfreedom, a new categorical imperative: to arrange its thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz is not repeated, that nothing similar happens" (1983: 365; trans. modified). That Adorno writes here of a new categorical imperative is intended to provoke and surprise – for the categorical imperative has supposedly been inscribed in the transcendental, *a priori* structure of pure practical reason. Just as the acknowledgement of Auschwitz demands of us a new understanding of metaphysics – and an understanding that our previous conception of metaphysics cannot be maintained if the destruction of transcendence at Auschwitz is to be acknowledged – so too does acknowledging Auschwitz require that we revise our conception of morality and of freedom.

Adorno elaborates on this point in a lecture course, recently published in English, under the title *History and Freedom* (Adorno 2006). Here he emphasizes very clearly

that we necessarily employ ethical categories in order to confront the abolition of ethics as a socio-historical *fait accompli*:

I have not *just* shown you that the content of the moral principle, the categorical imperative, changes as history changes ... but *also* we have approached a threshold at which we must ask whether the entire moral sphere ... the entire sphere in which it is meaningful to speak of good and evil, has not approached a threshold at which it is no longer meaningful to apply these terms. (2006: 207; emphasis added)

Auschwitz was possible because of “the state of unfreedom”: “if Auschwitz could happen in the first place, this was probably because no real freedom existed, no freedom could be regarded as an existing reality” (2006: 202). The only ethical response to Auschwitz, the only way of taking up the burden of the new categorical imperative, means that “we must abandon the illusion that freedom is a reality so as to salvage the possibility that freedom might one day become a reality after all” (*ibid.*, 203). A world so arranged that nothing like Auschwitz would be possible would also be a world in which freedom would be, for the first time, actualized rather than a mere regulative idea or postulate of pure practical reason. The event of Auschwitz has transformed our concept of freedom by presenting us with a more radical negation of freedom than any previously encountered. Conceptual content cannot be isolated from historical events, and any attempt to demarcate the conceptual and the empirical will necessarily destroy the very possibility of that critical rationality which is necessary (though not sufficient) to prevent anything similar to Auschwitz from happening again.

All this may seem unnecessarily pessimistic. I am not convinced that the pessimism

is unnecessary. To speak even of hope may well seem like a childish craving for a soft blanket and a full belly in a world where millions of children have neither. In *Minima Moralia: Reflections on Damaged Life*, Adorno refuses to offer any consolation, but something nevertheless remains: the “standpoint of redemption”:

The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light. (Adorno 1984: 247)

This, then, is a thought of transcendence – redemption, the “messianic light” – but resolutely one that is *not* “affirmatively posited”. Instead it is a negative transcendence. It reveals the difference between the world as it is – the world after Auschwitz – and the world as it might be. It thereby allows us to acknowledge the institutionalized and “normalized” violence routinely visited upon nature and upon human nature. Yet Adorno rejects any form of hypostatization or reification of redemption: “But beside the demand thus placed on thought, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters” (ibid.: 247). A critical rationality informed both by the critiques of the Enlightenment and by the horrors of the Holocaust – not to mention what Levinas calls other “the unspeakable horrors of the twentieth century” -- demands of us that redemption has the status of nothing more than a conceptual resource for reflection and acknowledgement. Hence it is no more than a requirement for us to be able to

acknowledge Auschwitz – but that, for Adorno, is enough.

4. Ethics after Auschwitz

It is now possible to compare Levinas and Adorno with respect to the acknowledgement of transcendence after Auschwitz. Both philosophers hold that the notion of transcendence, with all its theological inflections, is indispensable for any attempt to develop an ethically mature response to the event of the Holocaust. In the course of pursuing the rethinking of the concept of transcendence, both thinkers re-think questions about metaphysics, knowledge, ethics, history, and experience. I have argued that developing such a response requires, in turn, a deliberate and forceful rejection of any type of theodicy. The whole cluster of assumptions embodied in any kind of theodicy, whether a theodicy of nature or of history – about rationality, history, significance – has become impossible after Auschwitz. The critique of theodicy is an element of the critique of the Enlightenment because theodicy is itself built into the Enlightenment project.¹⁶ Levinas' refusal of the temptation of theodicy, and Adorno's insistence on a negative theodicy, are specific cases of their more general reactions to the successes and failures of the Enlightenment as a whole as a culmination of that trajectory of Western thought which runs from Plato to Hegel and beyond. Moreover, both Levinas and Adorno insist that whatever kind of thought, or faith, we might allow ourselves, cannot be construed along the lines of a scientific or empirical knowledge.

In a recent comparison of Adorno and Levinas, Smith (2007) notes that both philosophers insist that there must be something that exceeds or escapes our everyday

conceptual frameworks. Adorno calls this “particularity” and more often “the non-identical”; Levinas calls this “the Other” or “the Face.” These terms are sign-posts for a shared protest against a modernity which has culminated in “a system of mere means [that] supplants the kingdom of ends” (Smith 2007: 3). Undoubtedly there is a fundamental agreement at this point between Adorno’s “dialectical critique of dialectics” and Levinas’ “phenomenological critique of phenomenology.”¹⁷

Nevertheless, there are several important, even irreconcilable, differences and points of contention, both methodological and substantive, across a wide range of issues.¹⁸ Here I shall focus on two points of substantial disagreement with respect to how we are to understand our situation as members of a post-Holocaust culture. The first concerns what the camps did to human beings. The second concerns the status of morality in light of Auschwitz.

In addition to articulating the content and status of moral principles, there are also philosophical problems posed by the scope of morality. It is relatively clear that other people are moral agents and deserve moral consideration; it is a contentious matter as to whether such considerations extend to non-human animals or to other parts of the natural world. Smith suggests that Levinas and Adorno would agree that “the death camps are distinctive not simply because they exemplified the utter failure of abstract moral laws, but because they systematically drained the prisoners of their ethical status by reducing them to subhumans to whom the guards would feel no responsibility” (Smith 207: 5-6). The systematic dehumanization of the camps made it possible for the camp guards to fail to treat their prisoners as even so much as meriting moral status of any kind, independent of any considerations about what kinds of ethical obligations

were owed to them, and on what grounds. The difficulty with this formulation is that it elides a crucial difference: did the camps *deny* the humanity of the prisoners, or did they *destroy* it? There is no simple answer to this question, and no doubt a fully adequate answer would have to be a sophisticated elaboration on “well, it depends.”

Nevertheless, we can make some progress as to how Levinas and Adorno would approach this problem.

Levinas, in his account of his experience of his time in POW camp, describes the radical differences between how he was treated by the guards and the villagers near the camp and how he was treated by a stray dog, “the last Kantian in Nazi Germany.” The essential humanity of Levinas and his fellow prisoners is recognized by the dog and denied by the guards. When he speaks of those who perished in the concentration camps, Levinas regards their deaths as “the death of martyrs, a death inflicted in the torturer’s unceasing destruction of the dignity that belongs to martyrs” (Levinas 1998a: 98). Even so, they retain, for Levinas, the status of individuals, of people with names and histories, people who can be loved or hated – such as the names of his family members inscribed on the dedication page to *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*.

Adorno, by contrast, insists that the camps did not merely deny the individuality and particularity of the prisoners, but destroyed it: “it was not an individual who died, but a specimen” (1983: 362). This aspect of Adorno’s thought invites comparison with Primo Levi’s account of what were called *Muselmänner*: “Their life is short, but their number is endless; they, the *Muselmänner*, the drowned, form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead in them, already too empty to suffer. One

hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand” (Levi 1986: 90). Levinas provides us with an extensive analysis of the phenomenon of suffering (however “useless”), but this analysis appears to side-step the question: what about those who are no longer capable of even suffering? As long as one suffers, it may be said, the divine spark remains alive – that is, life in the biographical sense. The lesson of the camps is that biographical life can be extinguished without the loss of biological life.

It is crucial to Levinas that those who perished nevertheless remained, and can therefore still be regarded as, “singular human beings with a unique and unexchangeable history and identity” (Hammer 2005: 68). The standpoint of the kingdom of ends loses none of its normative force even in the face of the camps. Yet it is also crucial to Adorno’s project, though he is admittedly less clear on this point, that “the *Endlösung* implied that the perpetrators succeeded in eradicating every possible perspective from which the victims could be viewed in terms of any other characteristic but their corresponding generic concept (i.e. their strict identity with other victims)” (ibid.: 68).¹⁹ On this construal, the camps did not merely destroy the guards’ ability to regard the prisoners as moral agents, but actually destroyed the prisoners’ ability to regard themselves as moral agents. In other words, it destroyed the capacity for moral agency itself. This distinction makes contact with the broader question of the meaning of morality today, and what is required of us in order to acknowledge Auschwitz, in order to avoid all of the false consolations of knowledge, whether scientific or theological.

On the one hand, Levinas admits that the Holocaust, along with other twentieth-century horrors, demands that we take up with an intensified consciousness the *problem*

of ethics. On the other hand, he implicitly denies that the *content* of ethics must be taken up in a new way. Levinas' ethics are Biblical ethics, as elaborated and codified in the Talmud; what is novel in Levinas is that these ethics are given an experiential foundation as indicated through the phenomenology of the face of the Other (more precisely, in how the face of the other evades cognitive mastery constitutive of objects as given in experience). Nothing in the Torah, whether Written or Oral, is abrogated by Auschwitz. If anything, Auschwitz demonstrates how utterly bankrupt all versions of merely secularized, rationalized ethics are – but Biblical ethics seem entirely immune to this criticism.

By contrast, Adorno argues that the Holocaust *has* abrogated the moral law, and that we require a new moral law, a new categorical imperative, in order to respond adequately to the fact of Auschwitz at all. The question therefore posed here is this: is the Torah abrogated by Auschwitz? Can the revelation at Sinai mean anything for us today? Adorno accepts that modernity has abrogated the Law -- an abrogation of which Auschwitz is the culmination.²⁰ The concept of “redemption” has attenuated to the status of a mere regulatory ideal for thought. We are “in between” revelations – the old revelation which has been abrogated, and the new one that is not yet.

The significance of this difference is indicated in light of the overriding question of this paper: what is required of us in order to *think well* about Auschwitz? Levinas is able to acknowledge the actuality of Auschwitz in terms of suffering and evil, but the response he offers is a revival of Biblical ethics that is novel only with respect to the philosophical justification he provides for it. The content of ethics is unaltered, and in that respect, Levinas actually *fails* to acknowledge adequately the historical specificity

of the Holocaust. For Levinas ethics continues, and *must* continue, unabated and unaltered, lest the murder of the six million by the National Socialists be without significance, a mere fact.

Levinas does accept that the Holocaust places an extraordinary demand on us.²¹ As he put it as the very beginning of his first *magnum opus*, *Totality and Infinity*: “Everyone will readily agree that it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality” (Levinas 1969: 21). But he proposes to answer this demand positively, by telling us under what conditions we can know whether we are being duped by morality or not; we are not being duped by morality when we are passively subjected to the vulnerability and force of the face of the other person. In Adorno’s thought, on the other hand, one finds much more emphasis on what it could mean to be moral after the Holocaust. As a consummately dialectical thinker, Adorno forces us to revise the content of our concepts in light of actual events.²² As a consummately phenomenological thinker, Levinas isolates the conceptual from the empirical. For this reason, it is ultimately Adorno, not Levinas, who offers us deeper insights into what could mean to acknowledge Auschwitz, to respond to the specificity, to the actuality, of this event.

5. Conclusion

Throughout this paper I have been concerned to show that the rejection of theodicy emerges as a prominent theme in both Adorno and in Levinas because both are concerned with developing adequate forms of acknowledgement of transcendence, and because theodicy interferes with our capacity to acknowledge the Holocaust. For

Levinas, this means acknowledging the evil of the suffering of the other person; for Adorno, this means arranging our lives in light of a new categorical imperative that becomes available to use once we recognize our “state of unfreedom” in light of the messianic light of the “standpoint of redemption.”

The question, then, is this: is acknowledgement of the Holocaust impossible *without* the thought that those who were sent to the ovens were unique individuals with identities and histories (Levinas), or does acknowledgement of the Holocaust demand that even this seemingly indispensable thought must itself be subjected to relentless scrutiny (Adorno)? If individuality and humanity – biographical life -- can be not merely denied but actually annihilated, and the perpetrators of the atrocities were in many fundamental respects “like us,” then acknowledgement of Auschwitz as the destruction of transcendence must play havoc with our understanding of who “we” are in the first place. And how then should we think of ourselves? Are we all Jews? Or are we all Nazis? Or are we – and perhaps *this* is the paradox that we must face if we are to think well, and thereby to live well, after Auschwitz – are we *both*? If, for Adorno, there is a sense in which we are all Nazis, it is also true that for Levinas, we are all German Jews. Yet both perspectives are necessary in order to understand what we have done, and are doing, to ourselves. Thinking well, in Cavell’s sense, about the ‘artifact’ of Auschwitz, requires nothing less.²³

Bibliography

Adorno, Theodor (1983) *Negative Dialectics*. Trans. E. B. Ashton. New York: Continuum Publishing Group.

Adorno, Theodor (1984) *Minima Moralia*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. London: Verso.

Adorno, Theodor (2006) *History and Freedom*. Trans. Rodney Livingstone. New York: Blackwell Publishing.

Adorno, Theodor and Max Horkheimer (2002) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Alford, C. Fred (2003) *Levinas, the Frankfurt School, and Psychoanalysis*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.

Bauer, Yehuda (2000) *Rethinking the Holocaust*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Bernstein, Jay (2001) *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

- Bernstein, Jay (2006) "Intact and Fragmented Bodies: Versions of Ethics 'after Auschwitz'" in *New German Critique* 97, 31-52.
- Bernstein, Richard (2002) "Evil and the temptation of theodicy" in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, ed. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 252-267.
- Cavell, Stanley (1988) *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Cavell, Stanley (2002) *Must We Mean What We Say?* New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Cohen, Josh (2003) *Interrupting Auschwitz: Art, Religion, Philosophy*. New York: Continuum Press.
- De Vries, Hent (2005) *Minimal Theologies: Critiques of Secular Reason in Adorno and Levinas*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press.
- Hammer, Espen (2000) "Adorno and Extreme Evil." *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 26 (4), 75-93.

Hammer, Espen (2005) *Adorno and the Political*. New York: Routledge.

Horowitz, Asher (2002) “By a hair’s breadth: Critique, transcendence, and the ethical in Adorno and Levinas.” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 28(2), 213-248.

Kant, Immanuel (1999) *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated Paul Guyer and Allen Wood. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Kaufmann, David (2000) “Correlations, constellations and the Truth: Adorno’s ontology of redemption.” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 26(5), pp. 62-80.

Kaufmann, David (2001) “Beyond Use, Within Reason: Adorno, Benjamin, and the Question of Theology.” *New German Critique* No. 83, pp. 151-173.

Levi, Primo (1986) *Survival in Auschwitz*. Trans. Stuart Woolf. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Levinas, Emmanuel (1997) *Otherwise than Being*, trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

Levinas, Emmanuel. (1969) *Totality and Infinity*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

Levinas, Emmanuel (1998a) “Useless Suffering” in *Entre-Nous*. Trans. Michael Smith and Barbara Harshav. New York: Columbia University Press.

Levinas, Emmanuel (1998b) “Philosophy, Justice, and Love” in *Entre-Nous*. Trans. Michael Smith and Barbara Harshav. New York: Columbia University Press.

Levinas, Emmanuel (1998c) “Transcendence and Evil” in *Collected Philosophical Papers*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

Levinas, Emmanuel (2000) “The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights” in *Difficult Freedom*. Trans. Sean Hand. New York: Athlone Press.

McDowell, John (1994) *Mind and World*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

McDowell, John (2000) “Towards Rehabilitating Objectivity” in *Rorty and His Critics*, ed. Robert Brandom. New York: Blackwell Publishing.

Neiman, Susan (2004) *Evil in Modern Thought*, second edition. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Nemo, Philippe (1998) *Job and the Excess of Evil*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press

O'Connor, Brian (2004) *Adorno's Negative Dialectic: Philosophy and the Possibility of Critical Rationality*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Putnam, Hilary (2002) "Levinas and Judaism" in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, ed. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 33 – 62.

Rachels, James. (1986) *The End of Life: Euthanasia and Morality*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Rorty, Richard. (1998) "The Very Idea of Answerability to the World" in *Truth and Progress. Philosophical Papers Vol. 3*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Smith, Nick (2007) "Adorno vs. Levinas: Evaluating Points of Contention." *Continental Philosophy Review* 40 (3): 275-306.

Todes, Samuel (2001) *Body and World*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Villa, Dana (2007) "Genealogies of Total Domination: Arendt, Adorno, and Auschwitz." *New German Critique* 34 (1): 1-45.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig (2001) *Philosophical Investigations*. Third Edition. Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. New York: Blackwell Publishing.

¹ The destruction of the human, and especially the destruction of integrated and coherent bodily experience, as constitutive of the immorality of Auschwitz, is helpfully developed in Bernstein (2006).

² Or of a poet – or, for that matter, those of a great graphic novelist, such as Art Spiegelman’s *Maus I & II*.

³ Horowitz (2002) also emphasizes the re-problematization of transcendence in Levinas and Adorno. My treatment differs from his in that (a) I emphasize the particularity of the event of Auschwitz as prompting the re-thinking of transcendence, and (b) I emphasize that transcendence as re-thought requires in turn a specific kind of cognitive response, what I call “acknowledgement.”

⁴ The asymmetry of the encounter with the other, or what Levinas calls “the Face,” has provoked significant criticism. This criticism may be somewhat mitigated if one takes into account Levinas’ admission that there is reciprocity when we consider ourselves as citizens, although this relation is derived from the more primordial, asymmetric encounter with the Face (Levinas 1998b, 107).

⁵ The procedure taken by Levinas here is paralleled in *TI*; there Levinas introduces as a transcendental condition on thought and agency “the Idea of the Infinite”, and then argues that this “Idea” must undergo a concretization or “deformalization” by being grounded within human experience as the encounter with the face of the other.

⁶ For an overview of attempts at theodicy in response to Auschwitz within contemporary Jewish theology, see Bauer (2000, 186ff).

⁷ One might object that the suffering need not be deserved in order for the claims of theodicy to be maintained. For instance, one might argue that the Nazis acted out of their own free will, and a world in which humans are without free will is less good than a world in which humans have free will. Thus a world in which Auschwitz was impossible, because moral evil generally is impossible, would be a less good world. There are two problems with this response. The first is that the innocence of the victims

dwarfs the evil of the perpetrators. The second is that it *assumes* that the category of moral evil is ethically adequate as a response to Auschwitz, whereas for Levinas and for Adorno – as for Arendt, Agamben, Primo Levi, and many others – the question concerns how we should re-think our intellectual and moral categories in order to be rationally answerable to Auschwitz at all.

⁸ I have borrowed this phrase from Bernstein (2002).

⁹ I am indebted to Kaufmann (2000) and Hammer (2005) for my understanding of the Adorno-Benjamin relationship.

¹⁰ Keeping an equally keen eye on the materialist and messianic dimensions of Adorno's thought has proven difficult, to say the least. In this respect it might be that Adorno is *both* Hegelian (via Hegel and Lukacs) *and* anti-Hegelian (via Benjamin), whereas Levinas is *merely* anti-Hegelian (via Rosenszweig and Husserl); clearly further examination of this view of the Adorno-Levinas relation is called for.

¹¹ The importance of a self-critical rationality also motivates and orients O'Connor's (2004) extremely important analysis of Adorno's epistemology.

¹² Here I follow Bernstein (2001) in reading the section title as also the phrase with which the text of the section begins.

¹³ See for example Villa (2007) for an illuminating comparison of Adorno with Arendt on the causes of the Holocaust.

¹⁴ Smith (2006) argues that Adorno would therefore be as critical of the transcendence of the face of the other in Levinas as he is of the Kantian and Hegelian concepts to which Levinasian transcendence is opposed. However, Smith does not sufficiently accommodate the ways in which Levinas' account of transcendence differs from the traditional models of transcendence to which Adorno is opposed.

¹⁵ The structural continuity between “the disenchantment of the world,” the destruction of the individuality of natural beings, and the culmination of this trajectory in the logic of the camps are all emphasized by Bernstein (2001).

¹⁶ On this point I am deeply indebted to Neiman (2004).

¹⁷ Smith’s insight here is paralleled by that of Hent De Vries (2005). De Vries interprets Adorno and Levinas as developing a hermeneutics of experience that emphasizes the tension between discursivity and “non-discursive intelligibility” (149). De Vries rightly underscores the ways in which Adorno and Levinas propose to navigate the tensions inherent in a discourse concerning non-discursive intelligibility. My contention here is that non-discursive intelligibility becomes an important theme for Adorno and for Levinas in part because it is necessary in order for rational answerability to Auschwitz to be possible.

¹⁸ Smith (2006) focuses on their differing accounts of art and on Levinas’ neglect of the social context in which the Other is encountered. Alford (2003) distinguishes between Levinas and Adorno through psychoanalytic categories; a similar but more quickly sketched account is presented in Hammer (2005, 120).

¹⁹ On my reading, Adorno is implicitly committed to the view that the camps were an actualization of the possibility of the destruction of biographical life. Hammer (2005) reads Adorno as equivocal on the issue of denial vs. destruction. Bernstein (2006) arrives at a conclusion similar to mine through what I understand as an “Adornoian” criticism of Agamben.

²⁰ Kauffman (2001) emphasizes Adorno’s indebtedness to Benjamin, but also to Scholem and Kafka. The importance of theology to Adorno is also clarified in crucial and important ways by Kauffman (2000).

²¹ See Bernstein (2002) for further development of this interpretation.

²² Horowitz brings out the difficulties and achievement of materialist metaphysics by seeing it as something that “would not seek to bring the sun into the cave, or lead its inhabitants out into the direct light of the sun, but join in excavating the cave itself, opening it to a flood of light and warmth. What would become visible would be what is already there in the cave to be seen” (Horowitz 2002, 240).

²³ Acknowledgements are due to helpful comments from Sarah Allen, Jeffrey Birnbaum, and Scott Davidson on previous drafts of this paper.