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Claire Katz

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For let us not be mistaken: it was precisely those liberal-minded Germans in charge of forming policy concerning Jews who worked under the assumption that emancipation will solve the Jewish question by leading to a kind of assimilation which even the most fervent assimilationist among us—as long as he wants to remain Jewish—will reject.

--Franz Rosenzweig¹

[Assimilation] failed because it did not put an end to the anguish felt by the Jewish soul. Assimilation failed because it did not placate the non-Jews, or put an end to anti-Semitism; on certain points, it stirred up heated reactions and arguments once more. Anguish and anxiety still surreptitiously alter apparently free behavior and every Jew remains, in the largest sense of the word, a Marrano.

--Emmanuel Levinas²

But in truth I know nothing about education except this: that the greatest and the most important difficulty known to human learning seems to lie in that area which treats how to bring up children and how to educate them.

--Michel de Montaigne, "On educating children"

Levinas opens his 1968 essay, "Humanism and An-Archy," with an assertion that "[t]he crisis of humanism in our times undoubtedly originates in an experience of human inefficacy accentuated by the very abundance of our means of action and the scope of our ambitions...The unburied dead of wars and death camps accredit the idea of a death with no future, making tragic-comic the care for one's self and illusory the pretensions of the rational animal to a privileged place in the cosmos, capable of dominating and integrating the totality of being into a consciousness of self."³ Put simply, the death camps put to rest any illusion that we are in control, masters of our own destiny. Although this essay was written in 1968, similar points can be found in some of his earliest essays of the 1930's.

Significantly, Levinas opens "Humanism and An-Archy," with the following epigraph from Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: "I love him whose soul is overfull so that he forgets himself, and all things are in him: thus all things become his downfall."⁴ This statement is part of Zarathustra's teaching, which, I have argued elsewhere, is ultimately ineffective.⁵ It is worth commenting, even briefly, on what this particular part of Zarathustra's teaching means and why Levinas uses it to introduce his essay. If Zarathustra is successful in teaching the Overman, the Overman will be he whose soul is so full that he is open to all others and that self-preservation is no longer his highest priority. This capacity to open himself to the world is both superlative and self-destructive. He allows all influences to touch him—thus, he lets everything come into him. This view, like the one Levinas promotes, runs counter to the prevailing themes promoted by social Darwinists, who believe that self-preservation is the highest priority.

A seminal 19th century existentialist, Nietzsche's educational philosophy, expressed primarily in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, repeats themes found earlier in the ancient Greeks, yet with a more sophisticated commentary. Additionally, Nietzsche's influence on French and German existentialism cannot be underestimated—nor should we ignore the fleeting negative comments that Levinas directs towards Nietzsche, in spite of whatever commonalities Nietzsche and Levinas might have.⁶ Like Rousseau before him, Nietzsche is also able to diagnose the problem of the age in which he lives; yet, also like Rousseau, he is unable to provide a cure.

I open this essay with a reference to Nietzsche and Rousseau precisely because they have provided educational models that continue to influence our current educational system with regard to its understanding of teaching and learning as well as the goals of education. My aim in this essay is not to demonstrate that this reading of Nietzsche is correct. My argument does not depend on whether the reception of Nietzsche has remained faithful to what Nietzsche intended, but only that this happens to be a model for understanding the process of education. I have argued elsewhere that while both Nietzsche and Rousseau were able diagnosticians, they both failed in their respective attempts to cure the disease they found. Continuing in this

prominent line of thinkers, Levinas throws his own hat into the ring, as both a diagnostician and as one who prescribes a cure.

This essay contends that Levinas's diagnosis of the problem is a "crisis of humanism," which finds its seeds in modernity but comes to fruition in the inhumanities of the 20th century. These inhumanities, Levinas would say, signify a violence toward the other that is of a wholly different order from those that preceded them. Like his predecessors, he offers an educational model as a solution, but here the model—Jewish education—is uniquely different from those offered by Rousseau and Nietzsche. Levinas's proposed solution is not only original, but it also allows his readers a glimpse of the role that education plays in his larger philosophical project—one that I would argue is indispensable to its coherence. This essay examines Levinas's interest in Jewish education as a solution to this crisis in humanism and considers what the implications of this solution are for his project as a whole.

Philosophe-Pédagogue

Levinas initially entered France when the residue of the Dreyfus Affair still lingered in the atmosphere.⁷ Many of Levinas's teachers had been adolescents at the time of the Dreyfus Affair and were deeply affected by this event, which raised important questions about the promises and limits of Jewish assimilation into the French Republic. Although Levinas introduces themes regarding the failure of Jewish assimilation and the promise of Jewish education in essays eventually published in *Difficult Freedom*, we see his specific concerns poignantly expressed in his 1954 essay "Assimilation Today."

In this essay, Levinas explicitly connects the Dreyfus Affair to the years of National Socialism, two events that are not only horrifying in the story of Jewish history but which also put into question the relationship Judaism had to the French Republic's founding principles—the Principles of 1789—which promise freedom and equality for all citizens in the French Republic.⁸ Moreover, the French Republic extended citizenship to groups of people who prior to this time were not able to have that relationship to the country in which they lived.⁹ Clearly expressing great pain, he reminds his readers not only *that* assimilation failed but also *why* it failed:

It failed because it did not put an end to the anguish felt by the Jewish soul. Assimilation failed because it did not placate the non-Jews, or put an end to anti-Semitism; on certain points, it stirred up heated reactions and arguments once more. Anguish and anxiety still surreptitiously alter apparently free behavior and every Jew remains, in the largest sense of the word, a Marrano.¹⁰

Referring to the Labor Zionist and educator, Chaim Greenberg, Levinas cynically observes, “if Jews do not convert to Christianity, it is not because they believe in Judaism but because they no longer believe in anything religious.”¹¹ He then notes, “the fact that assimilation can succeed only in dissolution and that only irreligiousness slows down this dissolution, is the most serious crisis of assimilation.”¹² Insofar as Jews are no longer unified as a group with a common goal—in this case, educating the youth and pursuing ethics—Levinas would say that indeed Judaism has been dissolved. Judaism is not a religion of individuals—for example, synagogue membership does not count individuals, but families. The liturgy in a synagogue is the same on any given day in synagogues around the world. For Levinas, then, the question is not simply whether some people continue to call themselves Jews; the question is whether Judaism has lost something central to it.

The discussion of the separation between church and state that Levinas takes up in this essay could not be more pressing than it is today, here in the United States and elsewhere.¹³ He notes that that the vice of a philosophy of assimilation is its forgetting, or ignorance, of the ways that secularized forms of religious life lie at the heart of the so-called secular state.¹⁴ For many in the secular state, the state’s religious framework need not be made explicit, indeed, it need not even be thought—“one breathes it naturally.”¹⁵ He remarks, “[this separation] does not simply vanish as a result of the juridical separation between Church and State.”¹⁶

Israel’s existence then presents an opportunity not available to the Jew previously, an opportunity for life in the State to converge with the life of conscience. The individual’s public life need not be separated from her private conscience. This is to say that the state of Israel allows for an individual to practice one’s beliefs in both public and private. Ironically, Israel’s reality also makes “the error of assimilation” more visible to the Jew who does not live there: “The Jew’s entry into the national life of European states has led them to breathe an atmosphere impregnated with Christian essence and that prepares them for the religious life of these states and heralds their conversion.”¹⁷ The secular states which are founded on a Christian structure, support the Christian atmosphere that informs it but which is an atmosphere that is perceived—or passes itself off—as secular.

It is to the Jew who resists, who tries to swim against this current, that the secular is revealed as religious. Thus, the Jew must make a decision, a decision that includes a return to Hebrew. And again, as he does in every other essay on Jewish education, he reminds his readers that this return, this reclaiming of Judaism, does not refute the principles achieved through the French Revolution and the development of the French Republic. Rather, “these old texts teach precisely a universalism that is purged of any particularism tied to the land... It teaches the human solidarity of a nation united by ideas.”¹⁸ Finally, the Jew must ask the most pressing of questions:

“Do we still want to be Jews? Do we still believe in the excellence of Judaism?” Importantly, Levinas distinguishes this question from the more clichéd, “Do you believe in God?” The former, he notes, has more meaning for the modern person than the latter.

I want to emphasize the biographical point that Levinas returned to France after World War II and remained in France for the duration of his life—the next 50 years. What makes Levinas’s life and thought rich is precisely his own ambivalence about the possibilities and opportunities offered by citizenship in the French Republic. The very same principles that guaranteed these opportunities also enabled the Republic to disregard or marginalize the particular groups within it.

This ambivalence runs throughout his work. He lived his life as a “particular” who both benefited and suffered because of his relationship to the “universal.” It is all the more interesting, then, that he dedicated a good part of his intellectual life to strengthening Jewish education in France—to keeping the particular alive within the universal. Indeed, he believed that the key to the working relationship between the two rested on successfully reintroducing a deeper relationship to Jewish education within the French Jewish community: “After Auschwitz, I had the impression that in taking on the directorship of the *École Normal Israélite Orientale* I was responding to a historical calling. It was my little secret...Probably the naiveté of a young man. I am still mindful and proud of it today.”¹⁹ Levinas made this statement on the occasion of a celebration for his 80th birthday, which brought together a collection of his former students from those years and issued in a small publication, *Levinas—Philosophe et Pédagogue*, which collected several short essays on Levinas as a teacher, Talmudist, and philosopher.²⁰ This collection comprises a select few of the commentaries offered by Levinas’s own students. Each in its own way reveals Levinas as a teacher and a philosopher of the highest order. But one statement in particular stands out in its unique character. Ady Steg, who was the President of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, the organization under which the ENIO operated, at the time of the celebration, offered this fable speculating about the time when Levinas stands before the Heavenly Throne.²¹

A Fable

In about forty years, when you appear before the Heavenly Throne, if he were to ask you:

“Emmanuel Levinas, what have you done with your life?”

You reply, “I committed myself to philosophy and I believed in the good and the just as I have written in my books.”

Ady Steg: “Very well,” He would reply to you, “And?”

EL: *"I studied with Husserl and Heidegger."*

HT: *"Heidegger? Hmm...And?"*

EL: *I studied also with Chouchani.*

HT: *"Marvelous! Chouchani, it is true, entered the soul of the Talmud! And?"*

EL: *"Based on his teachings, I have given numerous Talmudic Lessons to the Colloquia of Jewish Intellectuals."*

HT: *"Bravo! How indeed is one able to understand the Torah without the light of the oral law! And?"*

EL: *"Precisely. I have thus been able to comment on the Torah at the École Normale Israélite Orientale of the Alliance on Shabbat mornings."*

HT: *"At the school?"*

EL: *"Yes, I have indeed run this school during the last many years."*

HT: *"Director of the school, you, a prestigious philosopher?"*

EL: *"Yes, director of the school."*

To these words, Cherubs and Seraphs, Ofanim and Archangels begin singing a glorious hymn and you will be led to the right of the Eternal One.

Although this fable is presented as a hypothetical meeting between Levinas and the Heavenly Throne, one cannot help but wonder if Steg is voicing his own sentiments as the president of the AIU and the ENIO, organizations that identify education as central to their respective missions.

Steg's fable emphasizes something unique in the life of an esteemed academic: that for all of Levinas's academic accomplishments—and there are many—it will be his directorship of a Jewish day school that impresses the Heavenly Throne. The fable indicates the weight placed on education—general studies and Jewish education—by those who worked for the AIU, some of whom were Levinas's students while he was the director. When Levinas stands before the heavenly throne and must recount his accomplishments, the Eternal One is impressed by his intellectual accomplishments. But it was his role as Director of the ENIO, which trained

the teachers who eventually taught in schools in Iran, Morocco, Tunisia, and Lebanon, of which the Eternal One takes note.

The Eternal One's surprise that a famous philosopher directed a school clearly indicates that, in spite of Levinas's academic accomplishments, he was not too proud or arrogant to devote himself to the education of the younger generation.²² Nonetheless, The Eternal One's added question—"you, a famous philosopher?"—spoken with more than a hint of doubt or suspicion, betrays the more common negative sentiment towards education and those who educate. The range of negative attitudes creates a powerful force pushing against education, hindering any possibility of real reform: no one believes that education produces anything positive; only those who are not good at anything else would go into teaching; and teaching is so easy that teachers should not be compensated adequately for doing such a job.

In contrast to this view of education and teaching, Levinas saw both as salvific, not only for the Jewish people but also for humankind in the larger sweep of history.²³ The future of the world rests on how we educate our young people. Ady Steg's fable is certainly written for effect. But it is not lost on any of his students from the ENIO; nor is it lost on those who read his essays on Jewish education that his view of education is not just a side hobby in which he engaged. It was fundamental to his philosophical project.

Ami Bouganim makes this point in his Postface to *Levinas: Philosophe et Pédagogue* when he confesses that "in France, philosophy does not hold education in much esteem; it is willing to consider it as one of its applications, but in no case as one of its determinations. However, Levinas spent the greatest part of his days on administrative tasks as a school director, melding a real interest in pedagogy with his research in philosophy."²⁴ Bouganim's essay is rich with insights about Jewish education internationally, and he tells us that even in Israel there was little success in facing the de-judaization of its young people. He proudly states that the ENIO was one of the rare places where one could reflect on Jewish education.²⁵ Although the United States saw the origination of the first Sunday schools and the first *Ramah* camps,²⁶ "[n]owhere in the Diaspora did anyone yet consider the perpetuation of the Jewish people in terms of Jewish education...Levinas was one of the rare individuals to think the Jewish destiny otherwise than in political terms, wagering on 'an education which does not separate human beings,' recognizing in ethics the first and last word of Judaism."²⁷ Importantly, and I am citing at length:

Levinas did not want to cultivate piety, thus, distancing himself from any 'pedagogy of exaltation' where enthusiasm would try to make up for the deficiencies in studying and the failures in intelligence... Levinas thought that if Judaism did not speak to the young

generations who cried out for Marx or declaimed Heidegger, falling prey to the false messianic promises or to puerile charms, it was because nobody any longer went to the trouble of addressing them on their condition with a somewhat coherent discourse. Only to harness it to education did Levinas wrench the Science of Judaism from the pure and heard philosophy which, since the beginning of the [twentieth] century, gave off—to repeat Scholem—whiffs of death: ‘To raise Judaism into a science, to think Judaism, is to turn these texts back into teaching texts’ (Levinas 1951).²⁸ ... Levinas was interested in Talmud, and more especially in the *aggada*, diving once again in the raging sea of controversies, sweeping along behind him disciples from all nations who could be filled with wonder at his obstinacy—wholly Judaic—in persisting in humanism, simply humanism. ... He spoke Greek only to better reach listeners and readers who had lost their Hebrew, not to mention their Aramaean, and only because he understood a discourse on Judaism which was articulated according to the snares of philosophical reason. Perhaps Levinas was not so much from Maimonides’s school, which installed the Greek science under ‘the tents of the Torah’ as from Philo’s school—less deceived and more experienced than the historical Philo—who carried the Judaic diversion to the very heart of Greek wisdom. In fact, he was mostly ‘Lithuanian,’ irremediably so, locating Judaism ‘at the intersection of faith and reason,’ pushing it in its secular entrenchments only to better tap into a Jewish secularism [*laïcté*] which could vie with a secularism [*laïcté*] readily masking its Christian motives.²⁹

These themes express not only Levinas’s dedication to Jewish education but also Bouganim’s belief that the relationship between this commitment and his philosophical project pervades the essays he wrote on Jewish education while he was director of the ENIO.

Many of these essays are collected under the title *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, and they span approximately twenty-five years, from the early 1950’s to the mid 1970’s. These essays on Jewish education were written not only during his fifteen years as Director of the *Ecole Normale Israélite Orientale*, but also after he left the ENIO to become a university professor. They mirror themes in Levinas’s philosophical project from the 1960’s, which we could argue he was developing at the same time that the majority of these essays were written. Additionally, the concerns expressed most explicitly in the essays on Jewish education pick up the concerns he expressed in several writings before the war, most notably the 1934 essay,

“Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism,” and the one immediately following it in 1935, which was published in English as *On Escape*. That is, his essays in Jewish education mirror the same suspicion he has of Western or European man—even that which he calls the philosopher—found in his other writings, both Jewish and philosophical.

Bouganim’s comments also go directly to the heart of Levinas’s essays in *Difficult Freedom*, which when read together powerfully reveal a secularity that is not secular. The political structure that appears secular in fact masks the Christianity that pervades it. Tying these points together, one cannot help but see that Levinas’s suspicion of Western subjectivity is at root a suspicion of Christianity, thus revealing another of Levinas’s ambivalences. Although he sees a fraternal relationship between Judaism and Christianity, and although he credits individual Christians whose courage during the Nazi occupation is to be noted and commended, he nonetheless sees Christianity as the origin of the Western subjectivity that allows for an ego-centric ethics and a subjectivity that values freedom above all. As Levinas warns us in these essays, the Jew who pushes against the mask cannot help but see behind it; the Jew who does not resist the status quo continues to believe that he is following a secular, universal state. Yet, the latter believes this only because he is not versed enough in either Judaism or Christianity to know otherwise. Bouganim’s reading of Levinas is telling and many often forget that the articulation of the Hebrew into Greek is not only for the benefit of those who are not Jewish but also for the benefit of those who no longer know, or never knew in the first place, the language of Judaism.

These essays are written contemporaneously with several essays in which Levinas argues for Judaism’s universalism. Read together, they ask us to consider both the peculiar nature of Judaism and its potential for a universal application. There is a dimension of Judaism, Levinas argues, that is universal and this dimension is also what makes Judaism uniquely Jewish. Thus, while Jewish education hopes to succeed in maintaining that which makes Judaism unique, it is clear from Levinas’s writings on Judaism in general, that he believes the ethical impulse that is fundamentally and uniquely expressed in Judaism applies to everyone. At this point, I wish to return to Levinas’s final essay on Jewish education and explore it in some detail.

Levinas opens his 1973 essay, “Antihumanism and Education,” by connecting the Western view of humanism with a conception of freedom that is protected by the liberal state.³⁰ The movement of humanism begins with a respect for the person, the blossoming of human nature, the cultivation of creativity in Art, intelligence in Science, and pleasure in daily life.³¹ The introduction of just law follows from our freedom to pursue our own pleasures—but this introduction also reveals the limit of law. On the one hand, law is necessary to safeguard our freedoms—to maintain peace among the nations, with other states. It provides the “opening up for

individuals as broad as possible a domain for private life," which is where the law stops.³² But in this regard, humanism can see only the law of the state or the laws of nature. Humanism worships the principles for which it stands. Levinas reveals his distaste for this kind of humanism when he notes that the focus on the beautiful transmission of these ideals led to a focus on the beautiful language in which these ideals are expressed. The noble ideals and principles themselves were "lost in rhetoric and ideology," and the intellectual contact with these ideals thus became confused with action.³³

Levinas admits that there is nonetheless a connection between the humanism of the *belles-lettres* and the Biblical ideal of humanism. The attachment to books is also fundamental to Judaism, which is tethered to the Torah, the Talmud, and other sacred writings. Judaism too is vulnerable to degenerating into ideology.³⁴ This connection though is only apparent and he asks, "Can the whole of Western humanism pass for a secularization of Judeo-Christianity? Have the rights of man and of the citizen and the new spirit that conquered in the eighteenth century not fulfilled in our minds the promises of the prophets?"³⁵

These questions reveal precisely what is at stake in his discussion. In the move to secularize Judaism's ethical impulse into Western humanism, Judaism let go of what made it unique. It severed the particular link it had to the prophets, in particular, to the rabbinic tradition through which the voices of the prophets reverberate. This forgetting, however, enabled a Judeo-Christian friendship, a noble friendship secured by noble and courageous actions during World War II. But this friendship masks their fundamental differences at the level of doctrine and belief. The Jew lives in a world that has been fashioned by Christianity, and in Levinas's view, the Jew has not overcome what it means to be in this position. Nonetheless, liberal humanism offers a level playing field on which Jew and Christian can be equal, or at least on which the Jew can feel that she is the Christian's equal. And it is for this reason, Levinas confesses, that he does "not speak lightheartedly of the Crises of humanism."³⁶

Here we find Levinas's central concern—this crisis is a crisis in Jewish education, which has lost its meaning. On Levinas's view, it is not that Jews have become detached from Judaism but rather that they have capitulated to Western humanism—to its ideals, hermeneutic methods, and abstract universalism. As a result, rabbinic exegesis, which is the hallmark of a Jewish reading of scriptural writings, has not simply been lost or forgotten; it has been rendered inappropriate.

With the move toward liberal humanism, an idiosyncratic religion no longer served any purpose. It had lost its "social effectiveness and intellectual meaning." Thus, to be "of a Mosaic confession was to be ruled by the uncertain, the outdated, and the subjective."³⁷ As Richard Kearney writes in the Preface to his most recent book, *Anatheism*, the God-question

keeps returning and with it a new set of criticisms as we see in the recent spate of attacks by public intellectuals from Christopher Hitchens to scientists like Richard Dawkins to comedians like Bill Maher, all of whom want to paint religion in its entirety with the same tarred brush.³⁸ In the views of these commentators, to be a religious person necessarily renders one unsophisticated, unreflective, provincial—and even violent. For Levinas, however, it is the move away from Judaism that leads down an unreflective and dangerous path. Levinas describes Jewish education as having become mere “religious instruction in which ideas detached from the civilization that nurtured them, express in abstract and bloodless form, the ultimate difference still separating Jews from the homogeneous society into which they entered.”³⁹

Similar to concerns voiced by Rosenzweig in the earlier part of the 20th century, Levinas laments that Judaism has become only a “mental reserve” rather than a religion that would be an organic part of daily life. Religious instruction has become reduced to a few hours a week and to a *bar* or *bat mitzvah* where the student recites basic elements of reading and a few quickly forgotten gestures; it becomes separated from the very humanism that informed it in the first place.⁴⁰ Because Jewish civilization is stored in written texts, the loss of Hebrew education within the Jewish schools means that this civilization remains hidden, inaccessible and forgotten. Levinas tracks this loss to the Emancipation, to the principles of 1789 that gave Jews their citizenship even as it asked them to give up their particularity as Jews. It is not that Levinas wants to give up the privileges—rights—that accompanied this emancipation. Rather, he recognizes that insofar as Emancipation was grounded on a Christian structure, which the secularists ignored, Jews were increasingly encouraged to become more like Christians.

In order for Jewish education to mean something other than religious instruction narrowly construed, Levinas claims that we needed a crisis of humanism such as we have seen in the inhumanities of the 20th century: World War I, the Russian Revolution refuting itself in Stalinism, fascism, Hitlerism, World War II, atomic bombings, genocide, and most certainly the philosophical discourse of Heidegger, which subordinates the human to the anonymous gains of Being.⁴¹ Thus Levinas questions not only what Western liberalism promised and what modern humanism delivered, he also worries about the recent critiques launched against them. The fragility of Western liberalism was revealed by the inhumanities of its time and he pointedly asks whether this fragility consists in nothing other than “a basic inability to guarantee the privileges of humanity of which humanism had considered itself the repository.”⁴²

This crisis of humanism revealed the Jew as such. That is, while the Jew had attempted to move into the background, to become like everyone else, to live in the universal world set out by Western humanism, these crises revealed to the Jew precisely the fragility of humanism—he asks, is there a

fragility to humanity in humanism?⁴³ And he answers simply, “Yes.” In the truest sense of the term, the Jew became a martyr and as such revealed that the “meaning of humanity is not exhausted by the humanists, nor immune to the slippage that is at first imperceptible but can ultimately prove fatal.”⁴⁴ Western humanism has failed and it fails because it simply cannot capture all of what makes us human and cannot protect humanity from those who would persecute others.

The aftermath of World War II was not the first time that the Jews responded to their surrounding world with a recognition that something profound was missing from their lives. Levinas offers several examples of the ways that Jews tried to incorporate a dimension of “being Jewish” into their Western lives: the French Jewish Scouts movement, the Maimonides school, etc. His point is not that the Jews wanted to announce themselves as persecuted but as a recognition that humanism did not capture or deliver all that was human. These projects, Levinas surmises, were attempts by Jews “to keep alive the persecuted man’s human essence—that is to say, to act in such a way that in his rebellion or patience, he does not himself become a persecutor...”⁴⁵ It was an attempt to move towards a doctrine that was better able to deliver meaning to life.

Levinas finds himself situated between the fragility of a failed humanism that promotes universal values on one side and the response to the inhumanity of the 20th century, which he calls antihumanism, on the other. Yet, he does not want his audience to misunderstand his mistrust. It is not a mistrust that abandons all human ideals. Rather, he wants to put into doubt the humanism as has just been described. He protests the *belles-lettres* and the allegiance to them, which give the appearance of having a conviction of principles—his worry is that revolutionary literature becomes confused with the revolution itself. It is a protest against “the decency that covers hypocrisy, the anti-violence that perpetuates abuse...” It is an antihumanism that in response to the failed Western humanism, “protests against all-powerful literature and finds its way even into the graffiti that call for such literature’s destruction. It is an antihumanism as old as the prophecy of Ezekiel, in which the real prophetic spirit is offered as the only thing capable of putting an end to such writing.”⁴⁶ Yet, Levinas warns of this temptation also. The appeal of Ezekiel is an appeal to unhappiness and just as the rhetoric of the *belles-lettres* can confuse readers into believing that reading is the same thing as doing, so too Levinas worries about the rhetorical power “that builds its nest in pathos.” This kind of pathos easily leads to self-complacency, the enemy of education.

In the penultimate section of this essay Levinas assures his readers that the crisis of humanism cannot be reduced to being opposed to the *belles-lettres* nor does antihumanism “confine itself to this denunciation of literature and an eloquence that disguises misery.”⁴⁷ Real intellectuals are able to remind us of the cracks in our civilization, not cover them over. They

are able to identify these shifts in meaning, especially when these shifts point to the potentially crumbling foundation. But if intellectuals identify these shifts, our mistake lies in asking them to act as moralists and repair the structural defects they identify. We can note the failure of the intellectual to perform such a task simply by recalling our earlier comments vis-à-vis Rousseau and Nietzsche.

For Levinas, if we go beyond the Said—within which the intellectual communicates—we will find the responsibility for the Other, a commandment before it is pronounced. That is, we will find an originary message on which the collection of *belles-lettres* is formed. Thus Levinas questions not only what Western liberalism promised and delivered, he also worries about the recent critiques launched against them. In other words, even thinkers like Foucault would offer a compelling critique of modern liberalism and reveal liberalism's hypocrisy—this critique could also be an anti-humanism. However, for Levinas, the kind of critique that someone like Foucault would offer would not in the end deliver the anti-humanism that he desires, a humanism of the other person. We see this point made most clearly in the penultimate section of the essay when he takes on the sex, drugs, and rock and roll culture of the 1960's. It is difficult not to hear him sounding like an old-fashioned "fuddy duddy," who is just not hip with the times. His concern however is not *per se* with the behaviors that follow from a view of sexual liberation, but with the libertine approach to it, one that in the end is only about the satisfaction of one's own sexual pleasure. He astutely observes that while this might be a kind of anti-humanism, that is, a critique of the hypocritical liberalism that prevails in the 20th century, it is not the anti-humanism that he seeks.

He finds himself, then, positioned between two poles—the fragility of a failed humanism on one side and the anti-humanism that responded to it on the other. He is not unaware that by situating himself in this position, he locates himself at the more conservative end of a political spectrum in the battleground of the culture wars. He recognizes that the young people in the Jewish community are more inclined to choose or desire, like their non-Jewish peers, a life of "if it feels good do it" and "it's all about me" than to choose a life that is "for the other person." In spite of what appears to him an impossible dream, Levinas turns to Jewish education. He upholds Judaism's view that "children who must become adults open to the misfortunes of others should [not] be educated in moral confusion, with no distinction being made between good and evil—by which I mean without their knowing how to recognize the misery lurking within the illusions of happiness, and the contentment and satisfaction to be had from mere happiness."⁴⁸

The most significant point in this essay is his belief that through Jewish education, the young people of his day would be more able to swim against a current that might otherwise simply carry them along. For Levinas, Jewish

education fundamentally teaches that justice is the response to the other person and that an education based on the Talmud would not ignore the sexual dimension of our lives but would help portray it in all its complexity, ambiguity, and indeed occasionally its tragedy. And here Levinas makes his final dig at the *belles-lettres* for the simple and sentimental manner in which love and sex are often described. But his point here is that while he wishes to situate himself in contrast to the libertine approach to life, he also wants to distance himself from the brutality of a totalitarian state that would also impose constraints on our personal behavior. His goal is not to control sexual behavior—that misses the point. For Levinas, Judaism at its core focuses our actions on justice towards the other. To live one's life in this humanistic way will necessarily lead to a change in other behaviors.

This crisis revealed the loss incurred by Jews as they embraced a so-called secular life and adopted the modern liberal tradition of France. Instead of being the echo of the surrounding civilization, Levinas implores French Jews to take the lead.⁴⁹ His mistrust of the surrounding humanism is a protest against “the declamation that takes the place of necessary activities, against the human decency that covers hypocrisy, the anti-violence that perpetuates abuse; but equally against the violence of the verbal indignation of revolutionaries themselves who immediately become inverted into a cultural pastime as they turn themselves into revolutionary literature.”⁵⁰ He expresses a similar point in “The Transcendence of Words,” where he writes, “The presence of the Other is a presence that teaches; that is why the word as teaching is more than the experience of the real, and the Master more than a midwife of minds” a clear reference to Socrates.⁵¹ At the end of this essay, Levinas states simply that Jewish education is:

the conviction that a limit must be imposed on the interiorization of principles of conduct, that certain inspirations must become gestures and rituals... Jewish education does not rely on the ineffective brutality of constraints imposed by the totalitarian State in order to maintain a law within freedom and guarantee freedom through law... These are practices carried out to please God only to the extent that they allow one to safeguard the human in man. Is this a particularism? Of course. But it is not some limitation or other that is brought to bear on national allegiances, civic duty and fraternity. It is a particularism with regard to doctrines, anthropologies, axiologies and theologies. It involves no separation from men.⁵²

What distinguishes Jewish education from other forms of education, for example, *les belles-lettres*, is that it contains within it, not simply a few geniuses whose work we try to repeat, but also the breadth of experience amassed over thousands of years; it calls us to return to its wisdom—the

Word, when elevated, is the Word of God.⁵³ It calls for a new (or old) relationship to the law and moral obligation. Hence, by tracing the roots of the problem back to 1789, Levinas links the problems of Jewish assimilation, Jewish humanism, and Jewish education to the development of the French republic and the consequences of the liberalism that it produced.⁵⁴ Although he recognizes the tremendous benefits of the French Republic to the Jews, he also recognizes the dangers. It is in this ambivalence that Levinas locates the *difficult freedom* of being Jewish—the temptation of the secular world in which the Jew lives, the temptation to forego what seems old and obsolete only to adhere to these same values in a flashier package, the tension created by living a particular life within a public space that demands homogeneity. It is in these essays on Jewish education that we find Levinas struggling with all of these themes and trying to reach an audience who is also struggling. These essays both identify the problem and the solution—the Jews have lost their way, they have become too Western, and by that he means they no longer put the other before themselves and thus they no longer fail to serve as the light unto the nations, to become a model for others to do the same.

If Catherine Chalier's observation that "[t]he exigency of study is not sufficient in a world scarred by suffering, personal or collective" is correct, then she is also right to remind us that the commandment "thou shalt not kill" is a requirement for everyone. We must then "question ourselves... about everything our own being kills, through thought, through worlds, and through deeds, before we think about God, or, more precisely for the idea of Him to gain meaning within ourselves." And the universalism of Levinas's teaching is found in Chalier's statement, that "[herein] lies the highest exigency of [Levinas's] teaching, an exigency from which no one is ever released, an uneasiness which lasts as long as the span of life which is imparted to us..."⁵⁵

Chalier further recalls that Levinas taught them on those Saturday-morning meetings that one should not enter a house of prayer or study with a cold heart. Neither should one be so self-certain about one's relationship to God. Although one should get back in touch with one's inner life, this move entails reading the Book, and that requires "a master who guides the attention, who makes the letter a teaching experience." The link, then, becomes clear—the highest exigency is not to kill, to question all the ways in which our own being kills, to get back in touch with our inner life, to return to the Hebraic words, such as *hineni*, here I am. These words, according to Chalier, were brought to life by Levinas's presence and it is "our responsibility to keep them alive."⁵⁶

Levinas recasts "the humanity of man" at stake in those writings from the 1930's—"Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism" and *On Escape*—as a crisis in humanism in his essays from the 1950's. Importantly, he couches this discussion within the context of Jewish education and the failure of

Jewish assimilation. If the problem was that the Jews had lost their way by giving up their ties to a robust Jewish education and the cultivation of a unique subjectivity this education delivers, then the solution to the problem must be a return to that particular approach to education, it is through this approach to education that the responsibility to keep alive “those words” – the Hebraic words, such as *hineni* –is fulfilled. Levinas then has offered this return to Jewish education as a solution for the crisis of humanism facing not only the Jews but all of humanity. If the Jews are to return to Jewish education to achieve this new subjectivity, then the other side of this question is, “How will non-Jews accomplish this task, if they have an understanding of Christianity that will not let them?”

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- ¹ Franz Rosenzweig, “Concerning the Study of Judaism” in *On Jewish Learning*, edited by N. N. Glazer (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1955), 42.
- ² Emmanuel Levinas, “Assimilation Today” in *Difficult Freedom* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 255; originally published as “L’Assimilation Aujourd’hui,” *Difficile Liberté* (Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, 1973), 354.
- ³ Emmanuel Levinas, “Humanism and An-archy” in *Humanism of the Other*, trans. Nidra Poller (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 45. Originally published in French as “Humanisme et an-archie” in *Humanisme de l’autre homme* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1972), 73.
- ⁴ Levinas, “Humanism and An-archy,” 45. See “Thus Spoke Zarathustra” in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1982), 128.
- ⁵ Claire Elise Katz, “Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Thus Listened the Rabbis: Philosophy, Education, and the Cycle of Enlightenment,” in *Nietzsche and Levinas: After the death of a Certain God*, Bettina Bergo and Jill Stauffer, eds. (New York: Columbia University Press 2008), 81-95.
- ⁶ See Bettina Bergo and Jill Stauffer, eds. *Nietzsche and Levinas: After the death of a Certain God* (New York: Columbia University Press 2008).
- ⁷ See Howard Caygill, *Levinas and the Political* (London: Routledge 2002), 8-15; Vicki Caron, “The ‘Jewish question’ from Dreyfus to Vichy,” in *French History Since Napoleon*, ed. Martin S. Alexander (London: Arnold Publishers, 1999 and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 172-202; Emile Zola, *The Dreyfus Affair: ‘J’accuse’ and Other Writings*, edited by Alain Pagès and translated by Eleanor Levieux (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).
- ⁸ In this essay, Levinas makes repeated reference to the Emancipation [of the Jews] and to what the Jews achieved in “the last 150 years.” Although he does not make explicit reference to the Principles of 1789, the dates that he references refer to this time period and the impact these principles had on French Jewry. I use this phrase as a shorthand to refer to this time and this event.

- ⁹ The Principles of 1789 guarantee freedom and equality to all—allowing all people, including Jews, to become French citizens in the republic. The documents that represent these principles, most specifically, the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man, became the blueprint used by the United Nations. Yet for all its promise, the Principles of 1789 also caused great problems. First and foremost is the question of equality before the law—the emphatic enforcement of this principle means that minority groups are often marginalized in their need to express themselves differently in public. Thus, the question of the role of the republic in guaranteeing freedom and equality remains a persistent political question, even in 21st century France. With regard to discrimination, there is an argument to be made that the anti-semitism of the Vichy government was a deeper violation of the French Republic than previous anti-semitisms, including the Dreyfus Affair. As Vicki Caron points out, one difference between the two is that the anti-semitism of the Vichy regime was state-sponsored. See her “The ‘Jewish question’ from Dreyfus to Vichy,” 198.
- ¹⁰ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 255/354.
- ¹¹ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 255-256/354. Grinberg (sometimes spelled “Greenberg”) was a member of the Labor Zionist movement. He was also part of the Zionist Organization that helped found the network of Tarbut Hebrew schools, which were also secular, that were developed in Eastern European countries before the Holocaust.
- ¹² Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 256/355.
- ¹³ The recent discussions over the teaching of evolutionary theory in public schools and the controversy surrounding the veil and more recently the burqa in France point to this tension.
- ¹⁴ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 257/357.
- ¹⁵ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 256-257/357.
- ¹⁶ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 257/357. We see this point only too well in the battle lines being drawn over public education and health care where policy decisions explicitly reflect the interests of the religious groups that support them.
- ¹⁷ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 257/357.
- ¹⁸ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 257/357.
- ¹⁹ Cited in Salomon Malka, *Emmanuel Levinas: His Life and Legacy*, trans. Michael Kiegel and Sonja Embree (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press: 2006), 84; originally published as *Lévinas: La vie et la trace* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2005), 99.
- ²⁰ *Levinas—Philosophe et Pédagogue* (Paris: Les Editions du Nadir, 1998). Essays were contributed by David Banon, Ami Bouganim, Catherine Chalier. Additionally, Ady Steg provided a brief story at the beginning and the collection included a discussion between Levinas and Paul Ricoeur.
- ²¹ Ady Steg, “A fable” in *Levinas: Philosophe et Pédagogue*, 7. All translations are mine.

- ²² Although it is the case that Levinas did not complete and publish *Totality and Infinity* until 1961, at which time he received a university appointment at Paris, Nanterre, by his own account, he immediately returned to the AIU after the war. That is, it is not the case that he first sought a university position and did not receive one. Additionally, it is worth noting that he worked at the AIU in the 1930's, again, when he first moved to Paris after leaving Strasbourg.
- ²³ My thanks to Martin Kavka for suggestions about phrasing this point.
- ²⁴ See Levinas: *Philosophe et Pédagogue*, 71.
- ²⁵ Bouganim, *Levinas: Philosophe et Pédagogue*, 16. Subsequently translated and published as "Emmanuel Levinas: School Master and Pedagogue," in Denise Egéa-Kuehne, *Levinas and Education* (New York: Routledge, 2008). 15.
- ²⁶ These are overnight camps that served the Conservative Jewish movement. See, Riv-Ellen Prell, *Jewish Summer Camping and Civil Rights: How Summer Camps Launched a Transformation in American Jewish Culture* (Ann Arbor, MI: Jean and Samuel Frankel Center for Judaic Studies, 2006).
- ²⁷ Bouganim, *Levinas and Education*, 16/71. Emphasis added.
- ²⁸ Translation from *Difficult Freedom* modified.
- ²⁹ Bouganim, *Levinas and Education*, 16-17/71-72. Translation modified. See also, Emmanuel Levinas, "La Réouverture de l'ENIO," *Les Cahiers de 'Alliance* 11 (1946-7).
- ³⁰ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 277-288.
- ³¹ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 277/385-286.
- ³² Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 277/385.
- ³³ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 277/385.
- ³⁴ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 278/386-387.
- ³⁵ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 278/387.
- ³⁶ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 279/388.
- ³⁷ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 280/389.
- ³⁸ Richard Kearney, *Anatheism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).
- ³⁹ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 280/390.
- ⁴⁰ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 280/390.
- ⁴¹ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 280/390. In January 1963, the *Cahiers d'Alliance* published an announcement of Levinas's participation as the external examiner for Bill Richardson's dissertation defense at Louvain on November 29, 1962. As is commonly known, Richardson's dissertation was entitled, "Heidegger: through phenomenology to thought," which was dedicated to Heidegger's philosophy. Although the announcement reveals that those who

work at the AIU are proud of this invitation for Levinas, we also see that the controversial subject matter of the dissertation does not escape them. They write: “Philosophy does not guarantee wisdom.... In 1933, Heidegger was a supporter of Hitler, and the magazine, *Mediations*, recently published the translation of some Heidegger texts of that period... [Levinas’s participation in Richardson’s thesis defense included] an attempt to denounce [in Heidegger’s philosophy] a fundamentally foreign and hostile message to the great Biblical tradition....” (archived document, all translations are mine). Levinas participated in Richardson’s defense only one year after the publication of *Totality and Infinity*, which is frequently read or interpreted as a critique of Heidegger’s philosophy. That seems an uncontroversial statement. What the last point of this announcement makes clear, however, is that the critique of Heidegger’s philosophy is linked to a critique of the message which he views as opposed to “the great Biblical tradition” and which is fundamental to Heidegger’s philosophy. That is, the critique of Heidegger is a philosophical critique that turns on a religious base.

⁴² Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 281/390-391.

⁴³ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 281/391.

⁴⁴ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 281/391.

⁴⁵ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 282/392.

⁴⁶ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 283/393.

⁴⁷ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 283/393.

⁴⁸ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 285/397.

⁴⁹ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 285/397.

⁵⁰ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 282-283/393.

⁵¹ Emmanuel Levinas, “The Transcendence of Words” in *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 148; originally published in *Hors sujet* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1987), 202.

⁵² Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 288/400-401.

⁵³ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 286/398.

⁵⁴ In his book *Humanism of the Other* (2006), a collection of essays initially published separately, Levinas addresses the problem of humanism produced in modernity’s wake—and the critique of that humanism offered by Heidegger. Levinas does not support either and in turn he argues that we do not find our humanity through mathematics, metaphysics, or introspection, but instead we find it in the recognition that the suffering and mortality of others are the obligations and morality of the self (see, in particular, the essays “Humanism and An-archy” and “No Identity”).

⁵⁵ Catherine Chalier, “Emmanuel Levinas: School Master and Pedagogue,” 14.

⁵⁶ Chalier, "Emmanuel Levinas: School Master and Pedagogue," 15.