

Michael Portal

Project: Philosemitism in Post-War European Philosophy

“What makes Jewish philosophy *Jewish*?”¹

July-August 2016; Paris, France

I. Introduction

This research summary provides a cursory look into archival research I conducted in Paris, France during July and August 2016. The goal of the research was to identify and better understand the essential characteristics of a given philosophy that could justify it being considered “Jewish philosophy.” This project participates in larger, ongoing discussions concerning the highly non-static Jewish identity and the consequences it may have on a thinker’s work. Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995), who drew a distinction between his Athens (philosophy) and Jerusalem (religious thought), is an obvious candidate for this kind of study; there is no better place to scrutinize the role and impact of naming and categorization on intellectual work than with Levinas’ contested legacy both as a secular postmodern philosopher and as the preeminent Jewish thinker of the 20th century. At its core, this study asks one question: What makes Jewish philosophy *Jewish*?

II. Background

This question is not original; Shmuel Trigano (2001) and David Patterson (2006) are but two examples of the contemporary academic interest that has explicitly returned to the ‘Jewishness’ of Levinas’ work. This renewed interest rejects implicit and explicit arguments made by Levinas about the role of philosophy in understanding the truth of revelation; “By denying that he is a Jewish thinker, Lévinas meant that he rejected approaching religious concepts and texts solely on the basis of tradition, without a philosophical critique” (Jospe, 1997, p. 24). The impossibility of “Jewish philosophy”, for Levinas, had little to do with some essential conflict between religion and philosophy but, rather, with the ‘redundancy’ the two systems brought to understanding “the goodness beyond being embodied in what Levinas calls the responsibility for the other”

¹ I cannot thank enough Rice’s Jewish Studies Department and the generosity of Desirée and Max Blankfeld for providing me the opportunity to conduct my research and benefit from the cultural experiences I had while in France. While only a short trip, I found my time in Paris and Aix-en-Provence illuminating beyond simple description. Thank you.

(Batnitzky, 2006, p. 5). The normative priority of this responsibility, and the absoluteness of the Other, produces an ethical theory and world view that (as Levinas argues) predates philosophy. As such, Levinas maintained that he was, first and foremost, a thinker:

“In fact, when Lyotard presented to Levinas his own interpretation of Levinas’ philosophy as thought of the Old Testament God, Levinas responded, “I am not for all that an especially Jewish thinker; I am a thinker, *tout court*” (Levinas 1988: 83, my trans.). Lyotard even remembers Levinas claiming, “It is not under the authority of the Bible that my thought is placed, but under the authority of phenomenology ... You make of me a Jewish thinker” (*ibid.*: 78–9)” (Oppy & Trakakis, 2014, p. 195)

Realizing the significance of these conceptual distinctions “concerns not only the question of how to read Levinas but also the broader issue of how to understand the very idea of Jewish philosophy” (Fagenblat, 2010, p. 14). Framing Judaism -- through the thinker, the thinker’s work, the consequences of that work, etc. -- in an academic context has profound consequences on the nature of that identity (Charmé, Horowitz, Hyman, & Kress, 2008; Charmé & Zelkowicz, 2011). For researchers with an interest in Judaism the very core of their discipline shifts and evolves alongside these conceptualizations that make visible, identifiable, and traceable select components of the identity while inevitably leaving other components behind (Tirosh-Samuelson, 2004, pp. 74–75). While a push for a more robust and complete understanding of the historical underpinnings of Jewish identity may best capture the concept’s trajectory and provide the identity (as some argue) a much need reprieve from the dangers of flux, any predicative analysis of what that identity might mean in the future so as to solidify and protect it has remained a deeply illusive and challenging goal (Jospe, 1997; Seltzer & Mazal Holocaust Collection, 1980).

Samuel Moyn’s *Origins of the Other* (2005) provided me with the drive to see if such a systematic understanding of Jewish thought was even possible. Moyn argues, alongside (to a lesser degree) Fagenblat, that “it is ultimately impossible to understand the shape of Levinas’s intersubjective theory except as a secularization of a trans-confessional, but originally Protestant, theology of encounter with the divine” (Moyn, 2005, p. 12). Levinas is not some “Jewish philosopher” to Moyn but, rather, a beleaguered man whose work had more to do with the cold war than with the Holocaust (Moyn, 2005, p. 196). Shocked by this perspective that would

remove Levinas from the ‘annals of Jewish thought’ (Putnam, 2008) I was concerned that the intellectual history developed by Moyn would only further complicate and jeopardize something I have found increasingly important in my life: the philosophical aspects of Judaism for which Levinas provided immense insight.

III. Research and Experience

“There is no Judaism *and* philosophy, no *between* Athens *and* Jerusalem. That sort of a picture distorts our perception of Levinas’s work, of much of the history of Jewish thought, and of the very idea of a modern philosophy of Judaism” (Fagenblat, 2010, p. 14)

I realized very early on that I was ill prepared for this project; the amount of intellectual work already available on the subject and the immense amount of research material for which to base my study made for an intimidating and daunting venture. How could I possibly, in one month, conduct research that could both (a) remain objective to the complicated realities that surrounded Levinas’ Jewish and non-Jewish work and, (b) fairly fight back against the tides onset by authors like Moyn? The immense personal value of this trip revealed itself in the challenges faced during this one-month foray into the French culture, archives, and intellectual life that couch the perplexing philosophy and Judaism of Levinas.



First, upon arrival I connected with some close friends of mine also working in France. Some of their work for the Fulbright commission would overlap with my interests in humanistic research and play an important role in an emerging theme for my study: the often forgotten, but inevitable, human trace that persists in all things we produce. Perhaps emblematic of the way that our identities and experiences are constituted socially in the human interactions we cherish, my small group of friends attended Bastille Day celebrations on the Champs-Élysées together

and, despite my jet lag, profited from the outpouring of national pride that engulfs the entire country.

While particularly militaristic, Bastille Day celebrations play on the national memory of World War II that remains a dominant force in French politics and identity. The relevance of the past to the expressions and culture of the present are perhaps most obvious on days of such symbolic significance where there is, both, a call to forgotten nostalgia and a push for renewed fervor and solidarity. This French



solidarity, manifest in symbolic politics, at least as I stood and listened to the hum of tanks rolling by and the roar of jets and bombers overhead, represented a highly visible and concentrated expression of power and ideology. Would this remain true for my academic subjects who were also engaged in their own conflict and battle over identity?

Second, I returned to Aix-en-Provence to meet with past professors of mine at the Institut Américain Universitaire. Immediately thrust back into the academics of the institution where I had previously studied abroad, I spent considerable time in their library and with faculty discussing my research and refining my points of contention. I had originally hoped to find the overlooked artifacts Levinas may have



left behind in old manuscripts that would, in one way or another, reveal his true relationship to

his faith, philosophy, etc. While I was uncertain what specifically would constitute proper evidence of this (I was heavily relying on an “I know it when I see it” evidentiary standard) I quickly realized that I would need substantially more time and access to discover the perennially sought after “breakthrough.” As I continued to read and immerse myself in the literature base, I found myself garnering my most valuable insights on my project from informal conversations on tangential subjects that concerned French culture pre- and post-War. Long afternoon lunches discussing the political ideologies of the 1940s, the media response to Algeria in the burgeoning age of French modern philosophy, and the future of the EU in the wake of the Brexit would all, in one way or another, lead me to realize the importance of a human centered study of philosophy.

“Jewish existence is thus the fulfillment of the human condition as fact, personhood and freedom... It is not situated there for theological reasons, but for reasons of experience. Its theology explicates its facticity”
(Levinas, 2007, p. 210)

Aix, thus, played a pivotal role in my research period. While I had originally set out to isolate the insularly academic components of a Jewish philosophy I was slowly coming to the realization that all of these identities, narratives, histories, etc. *happened in the real world*. As naïve as that sounds, the vitality of philosophy is often lost when studied in the academy; only a return to the cafés and boulevards of these great thinkers would bring me up against the living and breathing

components of their thought. The significance of this was made explicit in the archives.

Third, my return to Paris marked the beginning of my retreat into the primary source material that I had isolated in my application to come to France. Housed in two locations -- Alliance Israélite Universelle and the Bibliothèque nationale de France (François-Mitterrand Library, Richelieu Library) -- my work would grant me unparalleled access to the letters and documents of Levinas. Instead of demonstrating the absolute applicability of any



particular categorization to Levinas' thought, these adventures would humanize his oeuvre.

At the Alliance I found myself in Levinas' old workplace. Documents on display on computers in AIU's basement would, by and large, present an uninteresting trail of official papers signed or approved by Levinas. Rather than hidden and underappreciated philosophical treatises, I found myself reading over old correspondence about Jewish education and schooling or about Lithuanian issues he found proximal. More often than not I stumbled on documents about transferring money or confirming the reception of a document, i.e. run of the mill bureaucratic and secretarial work that Levinas oversaw during his time working at AIU. While it appeared completely unusable to my stated research, these documents would most concretely solidify my earlier realization that philosophy and Judaism do not truly exist and flourish in the sterile and empty workplaces of isolated academics and religious practitioners. These documents were evidence that Levinas, who I had previously thought of as too significant in the world of philosophy to dare do anything but leave the comfort of his home and desk where he could write continuously, also worked and dealt with mundane life *like any other normal Parisian*.

Of course the letters, personal correspondence, and writings of normal Parisians are not commonly held in public institutions. At the François-Mitterrand Library entire stacks were devoted to the work of Levinas, but these were everyday normal texts like the kind of I had been working on for the past couple of months leading up to this trip. While it was nice to have my copy of Levinas' *Difficult Freedom* (1990)



side-by-side with the pristine French copy held on the shelves, this library would only serve to expand my reading list and the sinking feeling that I had a long way to go before I would find answers. The Richelieu Library, on the other hand, would put me in direct contact with the aged paper and ink of Levinas' correspondence with peers. Printed text fails to carry the same spirit or

energy evident in the physical manuscripts and small notecards scribbled with Levinas' cursive that I had the pleasure of handling. While many of the letters, like the work documents at AIU, failed to convey or speak specifically to anything Jewish, the glimpse these letters gave into the professional politics and informal exchanges Levinas had was illuminating.

Levinas had to be concerned with politeness, ending letters with the all the formalities customary to French correspondence. Levinas had peers, people whom he sent his drafted ideas and whom he assisted as they worked on their own drafts. These letters gave the impression of a authentic individual, a person concerned about the wellbeing of close friends and acquaintances and who write back diligently to continue a conversation. Communicating with others about the proficiency of a specific translation, a cunning line from Walter Benjamin, or any of the litany of other subjects preserved in the library's tomes helped me realize a more nuanced vision of Levinas and his scholarship, a vision that would surely shirk any totalizing categorization or label. In this context the premise of my original research question is put firmly into doubt; how does one justly categorize or label an intellectual project that is still alive, well, and occupied with the banalities of life?



IV. Synthesis

A conversation with a Levinas scholar early into my trip proved very insightful: ‘While I am unsure if anyone can definitely prove that Levinas counts as Jewish philosophy, his work only becomes richer when read alongside the Talmud. Not many authors work that way.’ As I continue to read all that I can to substantively engaged these issues, I keep returning to the idea that one can enrich their reading of Levinas by contextualizing it in particular traditions, philosophies, and paradigms. This does not always hold for other authors of Levinas’ stature; sometimes students can be encouraged to simply read and reread the source material in isolation, a practice sometimes deemed sufficient for intellectual enlightenment with thinkers like Heidegger. My research rejects this approach without necessarily making any claims to the future of Jewish identity or to the intellectual history put forth by Moyn. By circumventing the gatekeepers to academic Jewish thought -- the texts that may drain this rich history of its vitality -- I was able, in my own particular way, to gain insight into the complex nature of Levinas’ Jewish thought.

“Ethic is not the simple corollary of the religious, but is, by itself, the element in which religious transcendence receives its original meaning” (Levinas & Cunneen, 1994, p. 495)

While I had hoped to isolate the characteristics of philosophy that could, if arranged properly, produce “Jewish philosophy,” I instead ran head first into the forgotten significance of context to Jewish thought. This type of religious thinking on the divine and infinite is all too often considered above and beyond any particular time, place, or history. If Levinas can reject the myth of the sterile intellectual laboratory when writing on Spinoza -- “Human thought is overwhelmed by historical, social, and economic phenomena” (Levinas, Hollier, & Krauss, 1999, p. 28) -- there is no reason one cannot use this approach reflexively to better understand Levinas. For Levinas, ethical duty is centered around this context and our pragmatic obligation to respond to the otherwise absolute and abstract otherness of our neighbor; instead of simply thinking, our “relation with being in everyday life is action” (Levinas, 2007, p. 207).

This does not provide explicit evidence to reject Moyn but, rather, give reason to more authentically locate Levinas' thought as embroiled in reality, Jewish or otherwise. My trip gave me a glimpse of that reality, of the French intellectual tradition and times that would produce the need for Levinas and the unification of "philosophy and religion via ethics" (Cohen, 2006, p. 171). A return to the role of Jewishness in Levinas' work is not a strict rejection of his wishes but a consequence of the non-static nature of Jewishness and its drive to both understand the context for *all* thought in general and to promote *Jewish* thought in particular. The reality of Jewishness as a framing question for understanding this history and context ought not be ignored as Jewish thinkers continue their push to better understand the interplay between our times and our religion, our faith and our philosophy. My short foray into all of these issues proved personally enriching as I become increasingly immersed in the intricacies of my diasporic cultural heritage as it persists today.

Together, my experience in France helped me understand more about my stated research question than about what it might take to answer it. The unappreciated significance of these issues to the modern Jewish experience demonstrates the need for further study into all facets of the intellectual tradition my people call home. To do this, however, is to take a personal and human centered approach to ideas, figures, and events whose humanization might appear inconceivable. This opportunity has led me to believe that, moving forward, it might best to avoid asking 'What makes Jewish philosophy Jewish?' and to instead ask 'What does it mean to study philosophy as a Jew?'

Work Cited;

- Batnitzky, L. (2006). *Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas: Philosophy and the Politics of Revelation*. Cambridge University Press.
- Charmé, S., Horowitz, B., Hyman, T., & Kress, J. S. (2008). Jewish Identities in Action: An Exploration of Models, Metaphors, and Methods. *Journal of Jewish Education*, 74(2), 115–143. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15244110802126640>
- Charmé, S., & Zelkowicz, T. (2011). Jewish Identities: Educating for Multiple and Moving Targets. In H. Miller, L. Grant, & A. Pomson (Eds.), *International Handbook of Jewish Education* (pp. 163–181). Springer Netherlands. Retrieved from http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-94-007-0354-4_10
- Cohen, R. A. (2006). Emmanuel Levinas: Philosopher and Jew. *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia*, 62(2/4), 481–490.
- Fagenblat, M. (2010). *A Covenant of Creatures: Levinas's Philosophy of Judaism*. Stanford University Press.
- Jospe, R. (1997). *Paradigms in Jewish Philosophy*. Fairleigh Dickinson Univ Press.
- Lévinas, E. (1990). *Difficult freedom: essays on Judaism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Levinas, E. (2007). Being Jewish. *Continental Philosophy Review*, 40(3), 205–210. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11007-007-9052-7>
- Levinas, E., & Cunneen, J. (1994). The Jewish Understanding of Scripture. *CrossCurrents*, 44(4), 488–504.
- Levinas, E., Hollier, D., & Krauss, R. (1999). Existentialism and Anti-Semitism. *October*, 87, 27–31.

- Moyn, S. (2005). *Origins of the other: Emmanuel Levinas between revelation and ethics*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Oppy, G., & Trakakis, N. N. (2014). *Twentieth-Century Philosophy of Religion: The History of Western Philosophy of Religion*. Routledge.
- Patterson, D. (2006). Emmanuel Levinas: A Jewish Thinker. *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia*, 62(2/4), 591–608.
- Putnam, H. (2008). *Jewish philosophy as a guide to life: Rosenzweig, Buber, Levinas, Wittgenstein*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. Retrieved from <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10579848>
- Seltzer, R. M., & Mazal Holocaust Collection. (1980). *Jewish people, Jewish thought: the Jewish experience in history*. New York: Macmillan.
- Tirosh-Samuelson, H. (2004). *Women and Gender in Jewish Philosophy*. Indiana University Press.
- Trigano, S. (2001). Levinas and the Project of Jewish Philosophy. *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, 8(3), 279–307.