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On Reaffirming a Distinction Between Athens and Jerusalem

Abstract: Much recent work in Continental philosophy has attempted to dissolve any absolute distinction between “Athens” and “Jerusalem.” Against this trend, this article argues that contemporary philosophers and theologians must recognize precisely that distinction. The denial of a distinction between Athens and Jerusalem is philosophically dangerous because it ultimately reduces philosophy to history, since philosophy is no longer understood as a discipline that can, potentially at least, move from opinion to truth. This denial is also theologically dangerous, because it ultimately elevates philosophy to religious heights. To illustrate these points, the article turns to the thoughts of Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas, contending that despite the received interpretations of their philosophies, Strauss’ conception of the relationship between Athens and Jerusalem is correct, while Levinas’ exemplifies precisely the philosophical and theological dangers of uncritically conflating the two.

I.

Pointing to Saint Paul’s statement “no one take you captive through philosophy and empty deception” (Colossians 2:8), the third-century Church father Tertullian asked: “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians?”¹ Demanding the cessation of “all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectical

composition.” Tertullian nonetheless suggested that Athens has everything to do with Jerusalem and initiated a conversation by which not only Christianity but also Western civilization came to, and often still seems to, define itself.

At times referred to as “Hebraism” and “Hellenism,” or in more recent writings as “Hebrew” and “Greek,” the purported debate between Athens and Jerusalem also contains within it the vexing theological question of Christianity’s relationship to the Hebrew Bible, and to Judaism more generally. While the medieval scholastics emphasized the confluence between Athens and Jerusalem, or between Greek philosophy and Christianity, Protestant traditions sought to divorce the two in order to return to what many theologians claimed was a truer, unmediated Christian faith. Less known are the Jewish theological and philosophical versions of these debates, whose two classic medieval discussions take seemingly opposite stances. R. Yehuda Halevi (1086–1145) maintained that the God of Abraham and the god of the philosophers have nothing to do with each other, while Moses Maimonides, otherwise known as Rambam (1135–1204), claimed to show that Greek philosophy and the Bible ultimately complement each other. At stake for both the Jewish and Christian traditions is the epistemological status of a commanding God. Can this God be known by humans, through their own reason? And, in turn, can or should reason support such faith?

Perhaps surprisingly, with the modern waning of religious authority and the rise of a modern nation-state that requires no allegiance to particular religious communities, intellectual conversation about the relation between Athens and Jerusalem has not dissipated. This is the case not only for religiously interested parties who desire to convince others of the reasonableness of their beliefs or, alternatively, of the faith beyond reason required for religious belief, but also for intellectuals disillusioned with what they describe as modern fantasies about reason’s self-sufficiency. For a number of late-twentieth-century philosophers and political theorists, Athens, or philosophy, requires Jerusalem, which these thinkers understand now as ethics, not only to make philosophy itself possible but also to address ethically the moral shortcomings of modern civilization. In seemingly secular guise, the question of Athens’ relation to Jerusalem carries with it debates about the nature and meaning of modern politics. And while, historically, Christian debates about Athens’ relation to Jerusalem for the most part concerned Judaism implicitly, the position of Judaism, and even Jews, in contemporary discussions of this

2 Ibid.
relationship is often absolutely explicit. With varying philosophical and political agendas, thinkers as diverse as Jacques Derrida, Gillian Rose, and, most recently, Martin Kavka have all argued that philosophy and Judaism require one another and any claim otherwise is philosophically, historically, and perhaps politically suspect.

This ongoing discussion of the relation between Athens and Jerusalem in contemporary intellectual life, on the sides of both the politically Left and the politically Right, is often sophisticated and intellectually provocative. But it is also, in a very fundamental sense, odd, because it inherits the form of a theological conversation in secular guise. Current debates about Athens and Jerusalem simultaneously affirm and negate a distinction between the two in claiming their synthesis within an intrinsically nonreligious political order. In the words of one particularly vocal advocate of this position, Hent de Vries: “one can—or, perhaps, cannot but be—on both sides of the line at once, that is to say, that this line dividing the philosophical and the theological was never given (certain or theoretically justifiable) in the first place.”

Counterintuitively, the question of a distinction between Athens and Jerusalem seems at once essential and meaningless, and, by implication, a distinction between secular and religious political orders would seem essential and meaningless as well. Tertullian’s question “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” would now seem to be reversed—“What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?”—but the answer would remain the same: “Everything.” Given this conclusion, one might wonder why proponents of this position do not conclude, as their critics do, that “Athens” and “Jerusalem” are not in fact representative of paradigmatic cultural alternatives but instead false and mystifying oppositions. If contemporary debates about Athens and Jerusalem do not allow us to distinguish ultimately between secular political orders and premodern religious ones, what philosophical, theological, or political value can such debates have? And even more basically, what does it mean to repeat, or better, to reinvent a theological conversation in a nontheological context?

In what follows, I will attempt to begin to answer some of these questions by suggesting that the important and often challenging arguments to the contrary notwithstanding, what contemporary theologians and philosophers need to recognize is precisely a distinction between Athens and Jerusalem. The denial of this distinction is theologically dangerous, because it ultimately elevates philosophy to religious heights. At the

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same time, the denial of a distinction between Athens and Jerusalem is philosophically dangerous, I will argue, because it ultimately reduces philosophy to history, since philosophy is no longer understood as an activity that can, potentially at least, move from opinion to truth.

In order to illustrate these points, the paper turns to the philosophies of Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas. As has been argued by a number of recent interpreters, the crux of Levinas’ philosophy is his reorientation of “Greek” by way of “Hebrew.” Understood as such, Levinas is thought to be a Jewish philosopher whose achievement is to have revived the Jewish tradition philosophically. In contrast, with the exception of a few recent interpretations, Strauss has been viewed largely as a political philosopher for whom revelation is at best of instrumental significance. While Strauss maintained that what he called “Athens” is in necessary tension with what he called “Jerusalem,” many, if not most, of his interpreters continue to argue that he comes down largely on the side of “Athens.” As such, Levinas’ decidedly “Hebrew” thought would seem to be opposed philosophically to Strauss’ decidedly “Greek” thought.

Despite these received interpretations of their philosophies, I argue that Strauss’ framework for thinking productively about the relation between Athens and Jerusalem is the right one for those devoted to both Athens and Jerusalem, while Levinas’ philosophy exemplifies the twofold philosophical and theological danger of uncritically conflating Athens and Jerusalem. My argument in no way denies that Athens and Jerusalem, or Greek and Hebrew, or philosophy and Judaism, or what I will also call, for the sake of simplicity throughout the rest of this paper, philosophy and revelation, have historically interacted with and influenced one another. Nor do I deny that philosophy and revelation ought to interact with one another. Rather, my claim is that despite the mutual influence of philosophy and revelation, they nevertheless remain different sorts of orientations toward the world. Not recognizing these fundamentally different orientations, I suggest, with Strauss, betrays the meanings of, and even more so destroys the possibilities of, both philosophy and revelation.

II.

My argument is simply this: while philosophy always begins and remains within the givens of particular experiences, philosophical activity nonetheless is an attempt to move beyond them. As Socrates put it, philosophy is the attempt to move from opinion to truth. In contrast, Jewish activity,

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at least from a theological perspective, begins with the given of Jewish revelation that, however interpreted, cannot be transcended. As Franz Rosenzweig put it, there is a profound difference between thinking within and thinking about Judaism.⁵

Two obvious objections to my definitions are: First, philosophical activity always comes from somewhere and is never a view from nowhere. Second, there is no such thing as unmediated revelation; revelation always requires reasoning and hence philosophy. To these objections I respond: First, yes, philosophical activity begins from somewhere, but if it is not even possible, at least in theory, that philosophy can transcend its own situatedness, then this is historicism, as it implies that truth always reduces to context. The proper conclusion of this claim, then, is that philosophy cannot be separated from historicism. Second, while it’s true that revelation is never unmediated and always requires human reasoning, the claim revelation makes upon knowledge is that we cannot reason beyond but only within revelation. That is, unlike the philosopher, whose claim to truth stems from his own reasoning and sense of wonder, the follower of revelation’s claim to truth stems from a revelation that comes from outside of himself.

I imagine that these qualifications have not done much to assuage those who object to what seem like the dichotomous if not dogmatic views of philosophy and revelation that I have offered. But, I hope to argue, the position I am presenting is neither dichotomous nor dogmatic and, most importantly, is the only way to preserve both the possibility of philosophy and revelation along with their dynamic interaction. So in order to flesh out these points, let’s turn to Strauss and Levinas. The comparison between the two, I hope, will allow us to begin to at least question current assumptions about the seemingly cozy implications of the harmonious interchange between philosophy and revelation.

⁵ “No one became a Jewish thinker within the private domain of Judaism. Thinking was not thinking about Judaism (which was simply taken for granted, and was more of an existence than an ‘ism’); it was thinking within Judaism, learning—ultimately ornamental, rather than fundamental, thinking. Anyone who was to think about Judaism somehow had to be drawn to the border of Judaism, if not psychologically, then intellectually. His thinking was thus determined by the power that had brought him to the border, and the horizon of his gaze was defined by the degree to which he had been carried to, near, or across it. Apologetics is the legitimate strength of this thinking, but also an inherent danger.” Franz Rosenzweig, “Apologetic Thinking,” in Der Jude, Jahrgang 7 (1923), pp. 457–464, translated in The Jew: Essays from Buber’s Journal Der Jude, selected, edited, and introduced by Arthur A. Cohen, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1980), p. 267.
III.

It is helpful first to notice some basic similarities between Strauss and Levinas. Both are critics of what each understands to be modern philosophy and at the same time insist that a concern with justice is central to both Athens and Jerusalem, or, in Levinas’ terms, Greek and Hebrew. As Strauss puts it, “Western man became what he is through the coming together of biblical faith and Greek thought. In order to understand ourselves and to illuminate our trackless way into the future, we must understand Jerusalem and Athens.” And in Levinas’ words: “What is Europe? It is the Bible and the Greeks.”

Before attempting to understand what Strauss and Levinas mean by “Jerusalem and Athens” and “Hebrew and Greek,” it is necessary to know what they do not mean. In one of the few comparisons of Strauss and Levinas, Gillian Rose insists strongly that “Both thinkers are staked on opposition to modernity, evident in the defense of Platonic political philosophy by Strauss, the defense of ethics by Levinas; and evident in their opposition, in metaphysical terms, to natural human and civil rights and the modern state…. As a result, both represent Judaism and the Jewish community eschatologically as irenic and sequestered—beyond rationalism, violence, the history of the world.” While Rose is right to bring

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6 Despite Strauss’ claim that there is a mutual tension between philosophy and revelation, between Athens and Jerusalem, he nevertheless maintains that “the Bible and Greek philosophy agree not merely regarding the place which they assign to justice, the connection between justice and law, the character of law, and divine retribution. They also agree regarding the problem of justice, the difficulty created by the misery of the just and the prospering of the wicked.” Kenneth Hart Green, ed., *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 106 (hereafter cited as *JPCM*).


9 Gillian Rose, *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 17–18. Rose also writes, “Strauss misrepresents Greek rationalism by presenting classical philosophy as if it were simply skeptical or silent regarding Greek gods.” This characterization is also entirely wrong. See, for instance, Strauss’ statement “the divine law, it seems to me, is the common ground between the Bible and Greek philosophy” (Leo Strauss, “Progress or Return?” in *JPCM*, p. 107). Rose’s characterization is particularly odd since she quotes “Progress or Return?” elsewhere in her essay. Ironically, Rose’s own proposal mirrors what I will suggest in the following pages: “I discern and propose a different *tritium quid*: that the relation between philosophy and Judaism be explored neither in terms which presuppose self-identity nor in terms of mutual opposition but in terms of their evident loss of self-identity.” Rose, *Judaism and Modernity*, p. 18.
Levinas and Strauss together, her characterization of each of them, and hence both of them, is entirely wrong. Neither opposes modernity, but both do criticize modern philosophy as not being able to defend properly “natural human and civil rights and the modern state.” Neither Levinas nor Strauss represents Judaism as “irenic and sequestered.” Judaism, for both, is rational, at times violent, and essential to the history of the world.

In fact, Judaism is so essential to and not separate from the world and its history that Strauss' and Levinas' shared claim is that “Judaism” points to a truth philosophy anticipates but cannot quite articulate on its own terms. As I have argued elsewhere, for both Strauss and Levinas, Plato anticipates revelation.10 Describing his work Totality and Infinity as a “return to Platonism,”11 Levinas claims that the true universality of reason is predicated upon Plato's conception of discourse, which “implies transcendence… [and] the revelation of the Other to me.”12 Totality and Infinity is, as its subtitle indicates, “an essay on exteriority.” Philosophy, for Levinas, anticipates the exteriority of revelation. As such, philosophy is bound to revelation, which reorients philosophy.13 Freedom, for Levinas, which includes philosophical freedom, cannot justify itself on its own terms. My freedom is justified by the Other, by the Other’s revelation to me.

Like Levinas, Strauss makes his argument about the philosophical need of revelation with reference to Plato. For Strauss it is the Plato of the Laws and not of the Republic (or as Levinas argues in greater detail in Totality and Infinity, the Plato of the Phaedrus) that is definitive for recognizing philosophy’s anticipation of revelation. As Strauss puts it: “Platonic philosophy had suffered from an aporia in principle that had been remedied only by the revelation.”14 While I do not mean to discount

10 Batnitzky, Strauss and Levinas, ch. 1.
13 Totality and Infinity ends with a succinct summary of this reorientation: “Freedom is not justified by freedom. To account for being or to be in truth is not to comprehend or to take hold of..., but rather to encounter the Other without allergy, that is, in justice.” TI, p. 303.
14 Leo Strauss, Philosophy and Law: Contributions to the Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors, trans. with an introduction by Eve Adler (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), p. 76. As Strauss put it later, “The Laws opens with the word ‘god’; there is no other Platonic dialogue that opens in this manner. The Laws is Plato’s most pious work. In the Apology of Socrates, Socrates defends himself against the charge
the different conceptions of ethics and politics that emerge from Strauss’ and Levinas’ respective interpretations of Plato, we see that there is a striking formal similarity in their shared use of Plato to argue for philosophy’s anticipation and need of revelation.

IV.

Where, then, do Strauss and Levinas differ with regard to the relation between Athens and Jerusalem? Levinas disagrees with Strauss’ basic premise, which is that revealed religion and philosophy are fundamentally irreconcilable. But before turning to the meaning of this disagreement, we should be clear that this irreconcilability doesn’t mean for Strauss that revealed religion is irrational and that philosophy is rational. For Strauss, the tension between revelation and philosophy is not one between irrationality and rationality but between fundamentally irreconcilable criteria for what constitutes the rational starting point of truth. Philosophy begins and ends for Strauss with the philosopher’s sense of wonder, while revealed religion begins and ends with adherence to the divine law.

Nonetheless, in an important sense, philosophy and revelation share more with each other than they differ from each other. Both begin with nonrational criteria, yet both subsequently move toward rationality. The philosopher, Strauss maintains, believes that his own judgment is the starting point of all knowledge. Yet this can be the case only after the philosopher faithfully commits to the philosophical life. However, Strauss contends that this path, which begins at a non-rational starting point and is common to both philosophy and revelation, poses no problem for revealed religion, because the believer wholly acknowledges that his source of truth, revelation, comes from outside of himself—from God. Philosophy’s weakness in regard to revelation lies here, because the philosopher, unlike the believer, contends that the source and final authority of truth comes from the philosopher himself. Revelation’s weakness in regard to philosophy, on the other hand, lies in the impossibility of making revelation wholly evident on the basis of human experience.

Strauss’ contention that philosophy and revelation are different is rooted in his philosophical skepticism, in which “the problems are always more evident than the solutions. All solutions are questionable…. Therefore, the right way of life cannot be established metaphysically of impiety, of not believing in the gods in whom the city believes. In The Laws the Athenian stranger devises a law against impiety which would have been more favorable to Socrates than the corresponding Athenian law.” Strauss, The Argument and Action in Plato’s Laws (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 2.
except by a completed metaphysics, and therefore the right way of life remains questionable.”

For this reason, “philosophy is meant—and that is the decisive point—not as a set of propositions, a teaching, or even a system, but as a way of life, a life animated by a peculiar passion, the philosophic desire, or *eros*; it is not understood as an instrument or a department of human self-realization.” Strauss’ claim for what he called “the mutual influence of philosophy and theology” despite their irreconcilable differences stems from his philosophical skepticism, which at once denies philosophy’s ability to justify philosophically the choice of the philosophical life as well as the possibility of revelation being made wholly evident on the basis of human experience.

Ironically, perhaps, in the context of contemporary perceptions of the implications of Strauss’ and Levinas’ philosophies, it is on the issue of the scope and power of philosophy that Strauss and Levinas differ from one another. Strauss continually limits the social and political capacities of philosophy. For Strauss, philosophy’s limitations highlight the social, political, and even epistemological significance of revelation. In contrast, Levinas, who is so often today considered a defender of revelation and critic of a totalizing vision of philosophy, elevates the status of philosophy, which, I contend, only calls into question the meaning and relevance of revelation in his thought.

Appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, Levinas’ relationship to the Western philosophical tradition is far more complex than he or his interpreters often allow. While Levinas is at times critical of the tradition of Western philosophy via his emphasis on the ethics of the “Hebrews” as opposed to the ontology of the “Greeks,” his messianic claims for philosophy are in fact—perhaps ironically—part and parcel of a particularly modern philosophical project. Despite Levinas’ contentions that the task of ethics is infinite, his employment of philosophy and philosophical analysis suggests that philosophy can provide society with a definitive answer to who we are as human beings. As Levinas claims in connection with his reading of Franz Rosenzweig, the philosophical opposition to the idea of totality not only does not diminish the relevance of philosophy, but signifies the beginning of an era in which “everything is philosophy.”

But the question that remains for us is whether Levinas’

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15 Strauss, “Progress or Return?” pp. 122–123.
16 Ibid., p. 122.
17 Batnitzky, *Strauss and Levinas*, ch. 4.
claim that “everything is philosophy” can be anything other than a totalizing view of philosophy, despite his contention to the contrary.

Before answering this question, it is important to notice that Levinas’ notion that “everything is philosophy” also makes his relationship to Judaism far more complex than he and his interpreters suggest. Despite the ways in which Levinas often presents himself and the ways in which he is often received, his expansion of the task of philosophy—in which “philosophy” becomes “everything” and is revealed through nonphilosophers—is a piece with a particular post-Christian philosophical project that historically does not, as is most often argued, secularize theology but which makes philosophy theological. Levinas’ philosophy, despite his claims to the contrary, reenacts this very Christianization of philosophy that defines German metaphysics and, again despite claims to the contrary, also marks post-Kantian moral and political philosophy. My suggestion is that rather than a turn away from philosophy toward Judaism, Levinas’ philosophy as an instantiation of the contemporary melding of Athens and Jerusalem is in fact an instance of this modern, historical Christianization and totalization of philosophy.

Strauss helps us to focus on this historical and philosophical phenomenon when he considers the different historical statuses of philosophy for Judaism and Islam on the one hand and Christianity on the other. Strauss writes:

we are touching on what, from the point of view of the sociology of philosophy, is the most important difference between Christianity on the one hand, and Islam as well as Judaism on the other. For the Christian, the sacred doctrine is revealed theology; for the Jew and the Muslim, the sacred doctrine is, at least primarily, the legal interpretation of the Divine Law (talmud or fiqh). The sacred doctrine in the latter sense has, to say the least, much less in common with philosophy than the sacred doctrine in the former sense. It is ultimately for this reason that the status of philosophy was, as a matter of principle, much more precarious in Judaism and in Islam than in Christianity: in Christianity philosophy became an integral part of the officially recognized and even required training of the student of the sacred doctrine.

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19 In making this argument I rely on the historical analyses of Ian Hunter, who, in his recent book, Rival Enlightenments: Civil and Metaphysical Philosophy in Early Modern Germany (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), shows the religious roots and, even more importantly, the religious aspirations of modern German philosophy.

Strauss’ assertions about Christianity are not comprehensive, nor do they do justice to the full array of Christian traditions. Nevertheless, Strauss’ contention about the status of revealed theology for the Christian tradition is useful not only for appreciating broadly one important difference between Judaism (along with Islam) and Christianity, but also for understanding the development of modern metaphysics as it relates to Levinas’ philosophy.

While the standard story of the development of Enlightenment philosophy suggests that modern philosophers properly separate philosophy from revelation, and that medieval theologians do not make such a separation, the recent work of a number of intellectual historians shows that this misleading account of the historical circumstances in which the modern study of metaphysics arose is in fact the outcome of how deeply imbedded we are in what has become and remains the religious aspiration of the development of the discipline of modern philosophy. For instance, as Walter Sparn has argued, rather than attempting to free philosophy from the shackles of theology, the fusing of philosophy and theology in university metaphysics had theological aims and used theological tools to achieve these ends. The basic goal of university metaphysics was not to rationalize theology (as most of its subsequent histories would have it), but to keep secular subjects within Christian academic culture.

This historical point raises an important philosophical point that has been lost in most histories of the rise of German metaphysics. The metaphysical philosophers, rather than moving beyond theology, in fact created a new theology of metaphysics. As Ian Hunter succinctly puts it, “the metaphysical philosophers regarded their ‘natural theologies’ as new moral theologies for public life, shifting the locus of salvation to metaphysics itself.” Modern metaphysics arose as a spiritual exercise that recommended itself not just to individuals (as was the case for ancient philosophy) but to society at large. In arguing and eventually triumphing philosophically against the civil philosophers, the metaphysical philosophers championed a new vision of, to borrow a term from Levinas, a messianic future in which metaphysics as philosophy becomes “everything” and saves society.

21 See, for instance, J.B. Schneewind, The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998). In many ways, Schneewind’s study captures what Hunter’s seeks to criticize, namely, the simultaneously ahistorical and teleological claim that moral philosophy culminates in Kant.


23 Hunter, Rival Enlightenments, p. 26, emphasis added.
Seen in historical context, Levinas’ messianic claims for philosophy do not represent a break with the aspirations of modern metaphysics and the totalizing aspirations of philosophy. Like the early modern German metaphysicians, Levinas regards philosophy as a spiritual exercise, which is designed to perfect not just our understanding of philosophical matters but the kind of person we may become. As Hunter puts it, “From a purely historical perspective… it is the *paideia* of metaphysics itself—inculcated in religious or academic institutions dedicated to grooming the spiritual elite—that is responsible for inducing the desire for metaphysical knowledge.”

But a historical look at the development of early modern metaphysics also points to something more important than this common quest for spiritual improvement (common also to ancient and medieval philosophy) that much of the subsequent reception of the modern metaphysical tradition has eclipsed. Levinas’ deepest formal affinity with the rise of modern metaphysics is in ascribing moral and social authority to, in Hunter’s words, “the self-transformative function of university metaphysics.”

Prior to the rise of modern metaphysics, moral and social authority came from the Church (and scholastic philosophy). The development of modern metaphysics historically transformed what had been the social function of Christian theology.

In this sense, Levinas’ positive use of the term “metaphysics” is akin both to the historical functions of Christian theology and to what became post-Christian metaphysics. Referring to Plato and describing his use of the term “metaphysics” as the subsuming of theology by philosophy, Levinas writes: “The very dimension of height is opened by the metaphysical Desire. That this height is no longer the heavens but the Invisible is the very elevation of height and its nobility. To die for the invisible—that is metaphysics. This does not mean that Desire can dispense with acts. But these acts are neither consumption, nor caress, nor liturgy.”

For Levinas, metaphysics means, to use his word, that *everything, including theology*, is philosophy. Philosophy does not dispense with theology but rather uses the philosophical truths of theology for salvific purposes.

To illustrate this point, let us consider briefly Levinas’ use of Christological terms, such as “incarnation,” in the context of Hunter’s analysis of Kant. Hunter argues that Kant “superimposes the Christological doctrine of Christ’s divine and human natures onto the metaphysical doctrine of man’s noumenal and phenomenal natures, thereby conceiving

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24 Ibid., p. 56.
25 Ibid., p. 57.
26 *TI*, pp. 34–35.
of moral renewal as a kind of secular spiritual rebirth taking place via philosophy within the person.”

Incarnation, for Levinas, is the way in which I am for the Other: “Here what is due goes beyond having, but makes giving possible. This recurrence is incarnation. In it the body, which makes giving possible, makes one ‘Other’ without alienating. For this Other is the heart, and the goodness, of the same, the inspiration or the very psyche of the soul.” As the ethical relation, incarnation also fuses the human with the divine. The trace of the Other is divine, and the only meaning the divine trace can have, for Levinas, is an ethical meaning. In this important sense, ethics, Levinas’ main theme, is the fusing of divine and human nature. Incarnation is my spiritual rebirth, but this rebirth is at one and the same time secular, in that it can and does concern only human relations. For Levinas, philosophy is the mediating force that effects this spiritual change.

Levinas might reply that it is actually the other person and not philosophy that effects this change within me. But this reply would only beg the question of why he finds the highly technical, metaphysical, and indeed philosophical language of phenomenology necessary for describing the ethical relation. And why also does Levinas, in his confessional writings, insist upon recourse to philosophical points and arguments in attempting to articulate the true meaning of the Talmud? We need but mention Levinas’ own dictum, taken not from his philosophical writings, but from his confessional writings: “Philosophy derives [dérive] from religion. It is made necessary by religion adrift [en dérive], and in all likelihood religion is always adrift.” Levinas ascribes to the philosophical, indeed metaphysical, enterprise the very prestige and even more so the social importance assigned to it by the university metaphysicians in the early modern German university. And while many subsequent histories of the modern metaphysical tradition, as well as many subsequent philosophies premised on these histories, continue to deny the religious claims of modern European philosophy, the continuity of Levinas’ thought with this tradition can help us to rethink the reception of this history as well. Indeed, we might say that Levinas’ very attempt to return philosophy to its ethical origins is a return to the origins of modern metaphysics itself.

27 Hunter, Rival Enlightenments, p. 47.
V.

The question that remains for us is: why is this problematic? As I suggested at the beginning of this paper, Levinas’ conflation of Athens and Jerusalem, again as an instantiation of a current and increasingly widespread trend in Continental philosophy, is theologically dangerous because it elevates philosophy to religious heights, and it is philosophically dangerous because the proper implication of this fusion is radical historicism. Let us turn first to the theological danger and then to the philosophical one.

Theologically, the elevation of philosophy to religious heights eradicates the meaning of revelation. To appreciate this point, it is helpful to recognize at least one important motivating factor for those arguing for Athens’ need of Jerusalem. There are certainly strictly philosophical reasons to question the contemporary status of philosophy, or Athens, but there are also pressing existential reasons, the most important of which are the perceived evils of the twentieth century. If Athens, that is, philosophy, in the late twentieth century has turned to Jerusalem, that is, religion, it did so largely in response to these particular horrors. As Derrida, drawing on Kant, writes in “Faith and Knowledge,” “The possibility of radical evil both destroys and institutes the religious.” 30 It is of course an attempt to respond to evil—and specifically to the evil of the Nazi genocide—that is at the heart of both Levinas’ and Strauss’ philosophical projects. And it is precisely in their respective responses to evil that we can appreciate the theological danger, if not calamity, that results from Levinas’ elevation of philosophy to religious heights, which, as I have shown throughout this paper, follows from his melding of Athens and Jerusalem.

To illustrate this point, let us consider briefly Levinas’ discussion of the first murder recorded in the Bible, Cain’s murder of his brother Abel. We will turn then to how Strauss might interpret this story. Levinas makes much of the meaning of Abel’s murder in Totality and Infinity as well as in some earlier essays now published in Difficult Freedom. Cain’s murder of Abel represents for Levinas the moral, though obviously not actual, impossibility of murder. As Levinas puts it:

> For in reality, murder is possible, but it is possible only when one has not looked the Other in the face. The impossibility of killing is not real, but moral. The fact that the vision of the face is not an experience, but a moving out of oneself, a contact with another being

and not simply a sensation of self, is attested to by the ‘purely moral’ character of this impossibility. A moral view [regard] measures, in the face, the uncrossable infinite in which all murderous intent is immersed and submerged. This is precisely why it leads us away from any experience or view [regard]: it is not known, but is in society with us. The commerce with beings which begins with ‘You shall not kill’ does not conform to the scheme of our normal relations with the words, in which the subject knows or absorbs its object like a nourishment, the satisfaction of a need. It does not return to its point of departure to become self-contentment, self-enjoyment, or self-knowledge. It inaugurates the spiritual journey of man. A religion, for us, can follow no other path.\textsuperscript{31}

It was possible for Cain actually to murder Abel, Levinas argues, only because he did not look at his brother’s face. Here Levinas emphasizes a point made by many traditional commentaries on the narrative of Cain and Abel.\textsuperscript{32} When Cain meets Abel in the field, the text reports no verbal exchange between them. Levinas maintains that this silence between Cain and Abel results from Cain’s refusal to look at his brother’s face. According to Levinas’ analysis, had Cain looked at his brother’s face, had he listened and spoken to him, he would not have been able to murder his brother.

What is most significant for our discussion of the ultimate difference between Levinas and Strauss is the implication of Levinas’ position that morality is not something that needs to be taught, for it is part of our very makeup as human beings. Philosophy is not responsible for morality in the sense that it posits moral rules, because, as Levinas states again and again, morality is not a cognitive matter.\textsuperscript{33} Nevertheless, philosophy can articulate on its own terms the meanings of the human face. Such a philosophical articulation is the goal of Levinas’ phenomenological analyses. To use his own words, “ethics is first philosophy.”

In regard to religion and the veracity of any conception of divine law, Levinas’ argument is that philosophy articulates the human, ethical meaning of religion and law. Levinas in fact reads the story of God’s dialogue with Cain in this way:

The personal responsibility of man with regard to man is such that God cannot annul it. This is why in the dialogue between God and

\textsuperscript{31} DF, p. 10.
\textsuperscript{33} See especially DF, pp. 8–9.
Cain—“Am I my brother’s keeper?”—rabbinical commentary does not regard the question as a case of simple insolence. Instead it comes from someone who has not yet experienced human solidarity and who thinks (like many philosophers) that each exists for oneself and that everything is permitted. But God reveals to the murderer that his crime has disturbed the natural order, so the Bible puts a word of submission into the mouth of Cain: “My punishment is greater than I can bear.” The rabbis pretend to read a new question to this response: “Is my punishment too great to bear? Is it too heavy for the Creator who supports the heavens and the earth?”

Rather than understanding God’s question to and punishment of Cain as indicators of a divine law above human will, Levinas understands these as indicating the primacy of interhuman relations and human responsibility. Levinas reads the rabbis as making precisely this point. Cain’s punishment is meant as a human rebuke to God rather than a divine rebuke to the human. Cain can recognize that the murder of his brother “disturbed the natural order” only when he recognizes the centrality of human, and not divine, nature.

Levinas’ faith is in the human and, more narrowly, in the ability of philosophy to articulate, without recourse to history, culture, or religion, what it means to be human. And it is on both of these points that Strauss parts with Levinas. The reality of evil for Strauss means that we should have faith neither in the human being who is capable of creating such suffering nor in philosophy divorced from its complex relationship to politics, culture, and religion. Philosophy in itself cannot, in the end, give an account of the necessary strictures of divine law. From his early writings on Jewish themes to his broad argument in *Natural Right and History*, philosophy, for Strauss, can articulate a local morality but not a universal one. Cain needs God to tell him that he is his brother’s keeper. Strauss does state in *Natural Right and History* that “the experience of history’ and the less ambiguous experience of the complexity of human affairs may blur, but they cannot extinguish the evidence of those simple experiences regarding right and wrong, which are at the bottom of the philosophic contention that there is a natural right.” Yet this contention is significantly qualified by Strauss’ claim that “it is unfortunate for the defenders of justice that it is also required for the preservation of a gang of robbers: the gang could not last a single day if its members did

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34 *DF*, p. 20.

not refrain from hurting one another, if they did not help one another, or if each member did not subordinate his own good to the good of the gang.” Strauss does not deny that we can know right and wrong, but he does question strongly whether philosophy in and of itself can defend a universal morality beyond that of a closed city or society.

As Strauss puts it elsewhere, “only revelation can transform natural man into ‘the guardian of his city,’ or, to use the language of the Bible, the guardian of his brother.” In the absence of a particular society, Cain’s murder of his brother Abel points for Strauss to the necessity of divine law for a universal morality. The divine law teaches the human being how to act morally. This is not something that the human being can know by himself, and it is not something for which any phenomenological analysis can account. For Strauss, moral education, if it is to have any universal application, as opposed to a more limited application within a closed society, begins with stepping out of the human order. This is God’s lesson to Cain: God is watching. You are your brother’s keeper. For Levinas, in contrast, no education is necessary, for we already are moral beings. What is necessary is a philosophical articulation of our fundamental nature.

The theological danger of this position should be clear. Levinas purports to overcome a totalizing image of philosophy by way of the disruption that comes from revelation, but his fusion of philosophy and revelation, of Athens and Jerusalem, ends by making revelation irrelevant if not redundant to the truth of philosophy.

VI.

But Levinas’ elevation of philosophy to religious heights is also philosophically dangerous, and this danger to Athens follows from his depletion of the meaning of Jerusalem. I suggested above that Levinas’ philosophical

36 Ibid., p. 105. The reference of course is to Plato’s parable of the robbers in Republic, book 1, 342b-d. But Strauss’ reference is also to Halevi’s use of this parable. For more on this issue, see Strauss and Levinas, ch. 6

37 As Strauss puts it in “Jerusalem and Athens”: “The messianic age will be the age of universal peace: all nations shall come to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, ‘and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore’ (Isaiah 2:2–4). The best regime, however Socrates envisages it, will animate a single city, which as a matter of course will become embroiled in wars with other cities. The cessation of evils that Socrates expects from the establishment of the best regime will not include the cessation of war” (Strauss, “Jerusalem and Athens,” in JPCM, p. 403).

38 PAW, p. 140.

39 NRH, pp. 106–107; PAW, pp. 140–141.
description of Judaism does not cohere with classical Judaism, which, as Strauss rightly argues, understands revelation primarily (though not exclusively) in terms of law, and not philosophy or theology. I have also argued that Levinas’ thought actually has much more in common with the German metaphysical tradition than it does with classical Judaism. But it is necessary to note an important objection that Levinas could make to my argument. From his perspective, neither the historical record of the development of his thought in relation to German metaphysical tradition nor an answer to the question of how Judaism has historically understood the relation between philosophy and law would change what he claims is the philosophical significance of Judaism. Levinas rejects the notion that the meanings of the texts of the past—philosophical and religious—derive from the contexts of their own historical eras. Instead, he contends, all philosophical truth derives its meaning from its ethical significance. Yet Levinas’ answer would only beg the question of whether, as I have argued in this paper, his philosophy is not better understood as an attempt to make religious claims for philosophy (which, again, is what Hunter and others have suggested is the innovation in the rise and historical triumph of German metaphysics) than as a return to Judaism. We would seem to be at an impasse.

As a tentative attempt to get beyond this impasse, I would suggest that while historical accuracy may not be the sufficient condition for philosophical truth, it is nevertheless a necessary condition. In other words, a philosophical claim has at least to cohere with the historical record. In making his messianic claims for philosophy, does Levinas really mean to understand, as Kant did with Plato, the Talmud and indeed the Hebrew Bible better than they understand themselves? Levinas disavows a historical interest in Judaism and yet claims that his interpretation of Judaism is the true and even original one. Paul Ricoeur has noted a parallel tension in Levinas’ thought in which he eschews history but nonetheless explicitly dedicates his work to the memory of the victims of National Socialism. In the context of his conception of “Jerusalem,” Levinas’ claim that understanding classical Jewish sources as they understood themselves is irrelevant to their true, original meaning is particularly ironic and telling. In the context of a philosophy and ethics of the Other, Levinas does not fully acknowledge the “otherness” of the Jewish tradition. From an ethical perspective, rather than remaking the Other or the tradition in one’s own image (and, in Levinas’ case, in the image of his ethical philosophy), is it not better to admit honestly that an impasse may exist?

To respond to this issue, Levinas could perhaps take a cue from Rosenzweig, who claimed not to articulate the original meaning of the timeless, philosophical truths of both philosophy and Judaism but to consider how modern Jews, in fact modern people, might reorient themselves toward revelation through a negotiation with the past.⁴¹ For Rosenzweig, this reorientation institutes a “new thinking” that is marked first by contemporary awareness not of our timeless relation to the past but of our distance from it.⁴² Perhaps Levinas would want to suggest that in the modern era, that is, in an era in which Jewish communities and individual Jews are not constituted first and foremost by a legal system (which is also an era in which the Christian community, in its various forms, lost its historical constitutions), philosophy provides the door into a lost world, not to regain its original meaning, but to create new meaning. An acknowledgment of historical change would thus constitute a philosophical opportunity to ask what is perhaps the most basic of philosophical questions: what is the meaning and scope of philosophy? In an important sense, this is Levinas’ very question.

But it is necessary to recognize that the question thus asked and answered assumes an implicitly historicist framework, which is in sharp tension with Levinas’ attempt to move philosophy and ethics beyond historicism. As I have argued elsewhere, despite Levinas’ and several other interpreters’ claim to the contrary, Rosenzweig is in fact a historicist for precisely the reasons mentioned above.⁴³ Rosenzweig does not believe that reason, or philosophy, produces history, as Hegel does, but he does believe that history produces reason, or philosophy, as Heidegger does. Levinas of course rejects both Hegel’s and Heidegger’s respective historicisms. But if, as I have argued, Levinas’ philosophical conception of Judaism does not resemble classical Judaism, the only way he can defend his view is to acknowledge, perhaps rightly so, that Judaism, as a living and historical tradition, like all other historical traditions, changes throughout time. To do so is to let go of the idea that philosophy captures


⁴² The necessity of recognizing our distance from the past is at the heart of Rosenzweig’s hermeneutic approach to the translation of the Bible that he worked on with Martin Buber. See in particular Rosenzweig’s and Buber’s essays in Buber and Rosenzweig, Die Schrift und ihre Verdeutschung (Berlin: Schocken, 1936) (Scripture and Translation, trans. Lawrence Rosenwald [Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1994]).

the original, true meaning of a tradition, because, from a historicist perspective, there is no true, original tradition. If Levinas were to take this route, he would be abandoning the very impetus for his philosophical project in the first place. Put another way, that there is no true, original Judaism also means that there is no timeless philosophical truth, but multiple, contextual truths.

VII.

Levinas’ philosophy aside, perhaps one can and should conclude that historicism is something we today cannot overcome. And it may be that this is not a bad thing. In this paper, I have not set out to implicitly criticize a historicist view, though I do think, as I have suggested, that embracing a historicist perspective requires us to give up a conception of timeless truth. Indeed, though people sometimes seem to forget this, this point is merely definitional. In one way or another, historicism means that truth does not, cannot, and ought not aim to transcend its context. But the issue of historicism and its implications is a matter that I leave aside in this paper. What I think cannot be left aside, however, is that if we embrace a historicist perspective, it makes no sense whatsoever to speak of “Athens” and “Jerusalem,” not just as distinct from each other, but to speak of them at all. From a historicist perspective, any philosophical, theological, or political conversation about “Athens and Jerusalem” is predicated on false and mystifying oppositions. If this is correct, there is no “Athens” or “Jerusalem” or “Athens and Jerusalem.” It is for this reason that I have argued in this paper that Strauss’ framework for considering the relation between Athens and Jerusalem is the right one for those interested in defending “Athens” or “Jerusalem” and equally important for those interested in defending “Athens and Jerusalem.”

Again, Strauss does not deny significant overlaps between these two worldviews. Nor does he deny that they have interacted, do interact, and should interact. For Strauss, there is reason in revelation and there is revelation in reason, but this does not mean that philosophy and revealed religion are the same thing. Athens and Jerusalem are in tension with one another, but to exist in tension with another is to be in relationship with another. Maintaining that there is a distinction between Athens and Jerusalem is for this reason neither dichotomous nor dogmatic but a recognition of the irreducibly complex legacy of the very different intellectual legacies that together have constituted and continue to constitute Western civilization. As I have argued throughout this paper, to conflate Athens and Jerusalem is to dissolve them both.
VIII.

In conclusion, I return to a question that I raised at the beginning of this essay: what does it mean to repeat, or better, to reinvent a theological conversation in a nontheological context? As I suggested briefly, the motivation for current claims in Continental philosophy that, to quote Hent de Vries once more, “this line dividing the philosophical and the theological was never given (certain or theoretically justifiable) in the first place” stems not only from epistemological considerations, but also from the very real quest for moral resources for speaking about ethics and politics in today’s world. I am sympathetic to Martin Kavka when he writes that “Athens and Jerusalem were the best of bedfellows, intersecting in a portrait of the world as the site of privation” and that “The practical benefits of such an argument are, at least in the American context, largely political. If divine presence is deferred toward death or the eschaton, then the authority of religious arguments in the public sphere comes into question, and a space for a pluralist polity is created.” But here I say: Isn’t Strauss’ claim that Athens and Jerusalem limit each other in their distinctiveness from each other far more conducive to the simultaneous questioning of religious and secular arguments in the public square? In this way, does not reaffirming a distinction between Athens and Jerusalem create “a space for a pluralist polity” in which true differences may coexist?

Recognizing the irresolvable tension between Athens and Jerusalem is the basis of any possibility of rationalism, philosophically, theologically, and politically. If we understand “rationalism” simply as an insistence on providing reasons for embracing one view (philosophical, theological, or political) over another, the mutual influence of philosophy and revelation, which is one of tension and not fundamental confluence, creates the possibility of a rational politics, because this divergence, and not union, between Athens and Jerusalem invites rather than dismisses competing conversations about the good life.

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