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“A Thought in Which Everything Has Been Thought”: On the Messianic Idea in Levinas¹

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In this paper I am seeking to explore Emmanuel Levinas' contribution to thinking the “messianic.” In doing so, I am partly building on some analyses contained in my book *Exemplarity and Chosenness*, in which I study how Franz Rosenzweig conceives of time, eternity and redemption. My aim is to consider how Levinas builds on Rosenzweig's insights to produce an understanding of the messianic that is, to be sure, ethically inflected, but also to show that Levinas' conception contains implications for the very project of philosophising.²

¹ I wish to thank the organizers of the North American Levinas Society for the opportunity to present an earlier version of this essay as an invited keynote lecture at their 2009 conference in Toronto.

² I thus intend this essay to be a contribution to the kind of interrogation of the continuities and discontinuities between Rosenzweig and Levinas that is opened up, for example, by Samuel Moyn's exploration into the intellectual-historical background of Levinas' thought, in which he relativises the importance of Rosenzweig for Levinas (*Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas between Revelation and Ethics* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005], e.g., 114), and by Benjamin Pollock's study of systematicity in Rosenzweig's *Star*, which cautions against unquestioningly imposing onto Rosenzweig's thought Levinas' appreciation of Rosenzweig as having broken with totality and system (*Franz Rosenzweig and the Systematic Task of Philosophy* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009], see 122–23).

I shall begin from some of Levinas' core philosophical works in order to show how some of his very well-known views are linked to the "messianic idea" and shall then work my way to his well-known Talmudic readings on "Messianic Texts," which perhaps stand in a more oblique relationship to the standard picture of his philosophy. Levinas included "Messianic Texts," which is made up of two Talmudic readings that he had delivered at the Colloques des intellectuels juifs de langue française in 1960 and 1961, in his first book of essays on Jewish topics, *Difficult Freedom*, which was published in 1963, two years after *Totality and Infinity*. It is with *Totality and Infinity* that I wish to begin: As is well known, the stage for the entire project of that book—the critique of totality effected from the point of view of an ethics of alterity—is set, in the preface, by the distinction between totality as war or politics, and infinity as eschatology or morality. The preface appeals to and seeks to capitalise on a basic intuition on the part of its reader: that traditional attempts to ground morality have failed, that in light of that failure, in light of, as Levinas puts it, "the permanent possibility of war," any continued trust in the category of morality appears "naïve." In full recognition of this condition, the preface seeks to reopen the question of whether morality can be a meaningful category. Levinas' key move in this preface, and the fundamental move that guides the entire philosophical project that comes together in *Totality and Infinity*, is to reconceive what morality is in light of its historic failure. Levinas begins from the observation that the impression that morality is a defunct category stems from the experience that morality must be suspended in war—and thus, by extension, in light of the "permanent possibility of war," which is to say, in view of the pragmatic demands of "politics," defined as "the art of foreseeing war and of winning it by every means." By defining politics in this way, Levinas sees it primarily as the task of seeking and achieving truth and certainty about things we believe we cannot afford to be wrong about. To fail to have certain knowledge in politics, conceived as the "permanent possibility of war," or to fail to set one's sights on having such knowledge, is to risk total defeat and loss. By making the scene of war into the classic scene of the pursuit of truth, knowledge or certainty, Levinas imperceptibly shifts the terms on which we inquire, as the famous opening question of the preface puts it, "whether we are not duped by morality." It is no longer a matter of whether there is room for moral considerations in spite of, or in the face of, the exigencies of politics/war. Rather, Levi-

nas shows us that what we need to be concerned about is that the traditional project of seeking truth/certainty as something fully attainable—the project of philosophy or of reason—is necessarily at odds with trust in the value of morality, which is thereby revealed to be “naïve.” It is this “naïveté” of morality, of course, that Levinas would like to recover. But Levinas does not envisage such a recovery or retrieval of morality as the mere assertion of a truth to counter another truth, the truth of war. The moral imperative he has in mind is not aligned with peace, as a competing alternative to war. Levinas writes: “Moral consciousness/conscience can sustain the mocking gaze of the politician only if the certitude of peace dominates the evidence of war.” That is, peace as a “certitude” that can dominate all evidence is not the idea of peace with which we are familiar, peace as an alternative to war. The passage continues: “Such a certitude is not obtained by a simple play of antitheses. The peace of empires issued from war rests on war.”³ Instead, the “peace” Levinas has in mind breaks with what he calls the totality of history, the alternation between times of war and times of peace conceived as part of a single, forward-moving stream or order of history. What is needed, Levinas says, is a break with this order of history, which he associates with a Hegelian philosophy of history. What is needed is an exceeding of or a rupture with that history. This exceeding has many names in *Totality and Infinity*: among other things, it is the dimension of exteriority, or of the infinite, and it is the manifestation of “the other as other”; while history as a totality, even insofar as it consists of times of peace that succeed times of war, essentially asserts “the identity of the Same.” In the perspective of total history, “individuals are reduced to being bearers of forces that command them unbeknownst to themselves.” Just as what we think of as peace is essentially a modality of war, what we think of as an “individual” is a modality of totality, an instance or member within a totality.

The irruption of “the other as other” is the only possible resource for calling into question the rationale of politics. By the same token, this

³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et infini* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1961), x; also, *Totalité et infini* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1990), 61; tr. by Alphonso Lingis as *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 22. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as TI. Page references, separated by a slash, will be first to the Nijhoff edition, then to the Livre de Poche edition, and finally to the English translation. All translations cited in this essay are modified where necessary.

irruption of alterity is a calling-into-question of knowledge and certitude as such. How could it be otherwise? The other, or otherness, is what I cannot know in advance. The source of this undoing of the order of knowledge from the point of view of morality is called by Levinas “the eschatology of messianic peace”:

Historically, morality will oppose politics and will have gone beyond the functions of prudence or the canons of the beautiful to proclaim itself unconditional and universal when the eschatology of messianic peace will have come to superpose itself upon the ontology of war. (TI, x/6/22)

The future perfect tense is important here: the eschatological rupture of the identity of the Same is, of course, also a mode of futurity. Wars are won on the basis of complete knowledge compiled in the present, and future outcomes are staked on them as last outcomes of the processes of the present. What this amounts to is a reduction of future to present. As Levinas puts it: “The unicity of each present is incessantly sacrificed to a future appealed to to bring forth its objective meaning. For the ultimate meaning alone counts; the last act alone changes beings into themselves.” (TI, x/6/22) This future is a future of self-identity or sameness. In the realm of classical philosophy, to give true futurity its due is to resort to the realm of “opinion,” or of “revelation without evidence,” or of “faith.” But Levinas does not mean to counterpose irrationalism to traditional philosophy, nor does he wish to speak in the name of a faith or religiosity that would pose some sort of alternative to philosophy. The latter kind of project would amount to “assimilating” “prophetic eschatology”—which is, by its very nature, an “*extraordinary* phenomenon”—to “philosophical evidence” or knowledge; it would amount to allowing that eschatology might “complete” or fill in the gaps of what is knowable philosophically, and would thus be subordinated to the classical philosophical project of knowing the all. “Eschatology institutes a relation with being *beyond the totality* or beyond history.” (TI xi/7/22) This “being” is not locatable in some “void that would surround the totality and where one could, arbitrarily, think what one likes”; eschatology is not subjectivism. For Levinas, this also means that the “beyond” of history is not a “beyond the past or the present”; it is not outside time. Rather, “it is reflected *within* the totality and history, *within* experience.” In “drawing”

“beings out of the jurisdiction of history,” the eschatological “calls them forth to their full responsibility.” Eschatology’s reference point is not the end of history, some “last judgment” that decides on and “rationalizes” history in Hegel’s sense, but “the instant,” “each instant”: For each instant in time—“before,” or without regard for, “the accomplishment of history, before the fullness of time, while there is still time”—must be brought to “its full signification,” must be judge-able in its own right. It is here and now, in the instant of decision, “while there is still time,” that responsibility is borne in an each time singular way. The positive religions or theologies do not succeed in articulating eschatology in this sense, for they, like the order of history or totality, understand or contextualise the present moment teleologically, with respect to its ultimate future meaning. Levinas speaks of the possibility of eschatology revealed as “the possibility of a *signification without a context*.” (TI, xi–xii/8/23) This possibility, far from being a subjectivist alternative to “objective” philosophising, is “a situation that conditions the totality itself.” Levinas characterises it as “the gleam [*l’éclat*] or exteriority of transcendence in the face of *autrui*, the Other.” (TI, xiii/10/24) Consequently, the subject does not become, in the light of this “gleam of exteriority,” an alternative source of knowledge that might challenge the knowledge of totality. Rather, subjectivity becomes the site of “hospitality,” a “welcoming” of the Other. This welcoming is contrasted with the traditional understanding of what happens when I know or experience something, according to which my idea of the thing is “adequate” to, or matches up with, the thing itself. Instead, this is a scene of “non-adequation,” in which the self “contains *more* than [its] capacity” (TI, xv/12/27; my emphasis), along the lines of Descartes’ account of how I can “have” the idea of God or of the infinite, whose reality by definition exceeds the capacity of my finite mind. This idea of the excessive or surplus is what “moves consciousness” and “sustains activity,” that is, it is the common source of theory and action. (TI, xv/12/27) If ethical action is possible, it is not as the result of theoretical deliberation over time, deliberation among competing options measured against already-known norms, but only by virtue of the transcendence of the other that commands me.

The possibility of ethics resides in an “instant,” a “while-there-is-still-time.” In much of his work, Levinas explains the condition of commandedness in conjunction with a novel philosophy of temporality or temporal existence—one that both builds on and breaks with the phi-

losophies of temporality developed by Husserlian phenomenology and in Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Husserl's theory of internal time-consciousness had already called into question the primacy of the present over the past and the future: intentional consciousness, for Husserl, is constituted by an interplay between the present time, anticipatory "pro-tentions," and recollections or "retentions" of moments that were once present. And Heidegger's foregrounding of temporal existence takes future, present and past as three "extases," three modes of "standing outside myself"—an understanding of time that is opposed to conventional theories of time as a homogeneous and linear series of "nows." If I conceive time in this linear fashion, then I understand each moment in a way that is indifferent to whether it belongs to the present, past or future. I understand a future moment in the same way, according to the same model, as the present one—the only difference being that it is a present moment that is not yet present. Its status as being in the future does not essentially alter my relationship to it as a temporal moment.

For Levinas, to grasp the pastness of the past and the futurity of the future is at the same time to grasp alterity. What this means is that a theory of temporality is not ethically indifferent; it is not geared primarily toward making sense of the intentionality of consciousness or the nature of my being-in-the-world. For instance, while part of Heidegger's characterisation of temporal existence is that it is essentially a being-toward-death, toward a death that is singularly, irreplaceably my own, Levinas' project of establishing "ethics as first philosophy" is, among other things, intended to call into question the priority that Heidegger accords to my own death as my own: To understand alterity as the most originary phenomenon is to understand the Other as taking precedence over me, and thus over my future possibilities. Thus, to cite the title of one of Levinas' early philosophical works, his project is, from the outset, one of thinking "time and the other" in conjunction with each other. For Levinas, to think temporality and to think alterity are one and the same task. Let me quote from *Time and the Other* (1947):

The future that death gives, the future of the event, is not yet time. For in order for this future...to become an element of time, it must also enter into relationship with the present.

This relationship of future to present is a “tie between the two instants, which have between them the whole interval, the whole abyss that separates the present and death, [a] margin at once both insignificant and infinite, where there is always room enough for hope.” In order for such a relationship with the future to truly encompass “the power [of the present] to be beyond itself,” this relationship must be “accomplished in the face-to-face with the Other [*autrui*].”

The situation of the face-to-face would be the very accomplishment of time; the encroachment [*empiètement*] of the present on the future is not the feat of the subject alone, but the intersubjective relationship.⁴

In *Existence and Existents* (1947), which is contemporaneous with *Time and the Other*,⁵ Levinas introduces his philosophy of time as alterity in contrast to what he terms “economic time,” an ordinarily lived time which is not unlike the time of politics and war in *Totality and Infinity*. In this “conception of time which fits our life in the world,” “the effort of the present lifts off the weight of the present.”⁶

The alternation of efforts and of leisure when we enjoy the fruit of efforts, constitutes the time of the world.... It moves toward a

⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Le temps et l'autre* (1947; repr., Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991), 68–69; tr. by Richard A. Cohen as *Time and the Other* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 79. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as TA. Page references, separated by a slash, will be first to the French, then to the English text.

⁵ For the following, I have found helpful Michel Vanni's readings of *Existence and Existents* in view of messianism and eschatology, “Messianisme et temporalité eschatologique dans la philosophie d'Emmanuel Lévinas,” *Revue de théologie et de philosophie* 130 (1998), 37–50; and ch. 3 of *L'impatience des réponses. L'éthique d'Emmanuel Lévinas au risque de son inscription pratique* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2004).

⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *De l'existence à l'existant*, 2nd ed. (1947; Paris: Vrin, 1978), 154, tr. by Alphonso Lingis as *Existence and Existents* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1988), 90. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as EE. Page references, separated by a slash, will be first to the French, then to the English text.

Sunday, a pure leisure in which the world is given. The Sunday does not sanctify the week, but compensates for it. The situation or engagement in existence that is effort is repressed, compensated for, and amortized, instead of being repaired in its very present. Such is economic activity.

By contrast, for the weight of the present to be borne in the present would be an embracing of a true future, beyond the economic or teleological question of whether future outcomes reward present efforts. What is at stake here for Levinas is the possibility of hope, which cannot be a phenomenon of economic time:

Hope...is not satisfied with a time composed of separate instants given to an I [*moi*] that traverses them so as to gather in the following instant, as impersonal as the first one, the wages of its pain. The true object of hope is the Messiah, or salvation. (EE, 155–56/91)

Levinas describes this hope as an act or “caress” of consolation. He does not want to see consolation as a psychological fact or datum, but to recognise it as “infinitely mysterious.” At the same time, he notes that the effects of consolation are “among the best known.” Consolation “does not promise the end of suffering, does not announce any compensation.” It “does not concern...the *afterwards* of economic time.” Instead, it concerns the present instant, “the very instant of physical pain.” Hope—in a non-economic, non-teleological, messianic sense—happens in the realisation that “pain cannot be redeemed” and that no future retribution can “wipe away the pains of the present,” “just as the good fortune of humanity,” or progress in history, cannot “justify” individual suffering. (EE, 156/91) Hope in (or “for”) the present instant means “hope for the reparation of the irreparable,” and thus “hope hopes for the present itself.” (EE, 156/92) The time of hope is thus here opposed to any notion of eternity. Eternity is commonly taken to be the “locus of salvation,” but Levinas rejects such a view as a denial of what we might call an authentic time. The problem is that, from the point of view of eternity, the instants in time become insignificant, while for Levinas, it is time itself, and not time by means of some temporal dimension such as eternity, that must “respond to [the] exigency of salvation.” Thus, the future properly

speaking is not a dimension indifferent to the present time, but a “resurrection of the present.” (EE, 157/92) “All the acuteness of hope in the midst of despair comes from the exigency that the very instant of despair be redeemed.” (EE, 158/92)⁷

⁷ Note that a couple of years after the publication of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas comes to think about the term “eternity” differently than he did in 1947: In the essay “Meaning and Sense” (1964), and the earlier lecture “The Trace of the Other” (1963), which it incorporates, Levinas writes that an “absolute orientation to the Other” entails a specific kind of “patience” such that one “renounce[s] being the contemporary of” the achievement of that orientation, of the “triumph” of what in this essay Levinas terms one’s “work,” *Œuvre*. Extending the analysis we saw previously in *Time and the Other*, in which Levinas understands the relation to futurity as calling into question the significance of the self’s own death for understanding human existence, Levinas here aligns a true orientation to the future with “indifference to my death.” Correcting Heidegger’s “being-toward-death,” Levinas terms this orientation *l’être-pour-au-delà-de-ma-mort*, “being-toward-the-beyond-of-my-death” or “being-toward-beyond-my-death.” Heidegger’s being-toward-death is insufficiently future-oriented in that it entails “giving oneself the time of personal immortality.” The orientation to the future instead involves “glimpsing” (*entrevoir*) or “intending” the “triumph” of my *Œuvre* in a “time” or “world” “without me.” This dimension of a “time beyond the horizon of my time” is called, consistently with the preface to *Totality and Infinity*, “eschatological.” But whereas in *Time and the Other* and *Existence and Existents*, a future orientation was what enabled “hope,” here Levinas operates with a narrower concept of hope: “hope” as merely a “hope for myself,” aligned with a “banal thought that extrapolates my own duration,” which seeks personal immortality. Considering the “passage to the time of the Other,” Levinas then asks: “That which makes such a passage possible, ought one to call it *eternity*?” (“La signification et le sens” [1964] in *Humanisme de l’autre homme* [Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1972], 42–43; tr. as “Meaning and Sense” in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Peperzak, Critchley and Bernasconi [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996], 49–50) A few pages later, in the well-known section of the essay that originated as the stand-alone lecture “The Trace of the Other,” Levinas solidifies his reflections into an account of the “trace”: The idea of the “trace” is introduced in order to capture the conjunction between time and the other that Levinas had begun to explore in the 1947 essay: “The beyond from which the face comes signifies as a trace. The face is in the trace of the utterly bygone, utterly past Absent.” (*Ibid.*, 58/61) Seen in its temporal aspect, the relationship with the face is one with an “irreversible” and “im-

Just as eschatology in *Totality and Infinity* is an eschatology of the encounter with the Other, so, according to the earlier work, *Existence and Existents*, “We are not going to find in the subject the means of its salvation. It can only come from elsewhere” and “can only be constituted by my relationship with the other.” (EE, 159–60/93) For Levinas, “sociality” is thus “time itself.”

We are talking about a messianic time, then, as a margin or an interval between the present and another time, the time of the other, the

memorial” past—“immemorial” in the sense that “no memory can follow the traces of this past.” Here again, Levinas can envisage “eternity” as a useful name for this “immemorial past,” in that its “signifyingness” “obstinately throws one back to the past. Eternity is the very irreversibility of time, the source and refuge of the past.” (*Ibid.*, 59/60–61) Reintroducing the term “eternity” thus allows Levinas to elaborate the idea that the trace is not a simple reference to the “past”—the concepts of past and future being “still set in my time.” Rather, the trace “is the very passing toward a past [*la passe même vers un passé*] more remote than any past and any future.” “Eternity” thus here becomes a name for the time of the other: “the past of the Other” is that in which “eternity takes form [*se dessine*]” as “an absolute past which unites all times.” (*Ibid.*, 62–63/63) The idea of an “irrecoverable” or “irreversible” past is later further mobilised by Levinas in his analyses of subjectivity in *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, (tr.) Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1974), see pp. 104–5.

For a helpful account of the key role that the temporal dimensions of the “trace” and associated concepts play in Levinas’ philosophy, which draws on both “Meaning and Sense” and the closely related essay “Enigma and Phenomenon,” see Diane Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 111ff.

Taking a cue from Elliot Wolfson’s combined reading of Levinas and Rosenzweig on temporality, we can also see that Levinas’ more nuanced efforts over time to understand “eternity” in conjunction with time go along with his having underscored that, for Rosenzweig in the *Star*, it is “within the very dimensions of time” that “eternity” attains its “singular *significance* [i.e., the fact of signifying, or “signifyingness].” Levinas, preface to Stéphane Mosès, *Système et Révélation. La Philosophie de Franz Rosenzweig* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), 15, tr. by Catherine Tihanyi as *System and Revelation* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), 21; cited in Elliot R. Wolfson, “Light Does Not Talk But Shines: Apophysis and Vision in Rosenzweig’s Theopoetic Temporality,” in *New Directions in Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Aaron W. Hughes and Elliot R. Wolfson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 98.

time of a future, the time of death. To recall Levinas' description in *Time and the Other*, this is "[a] margin at once insignificant and infinite, where there is always room enough for hope." I would like now to look at two concurrent movements of this messianic time as they are envisioned by Levinas, and also to relate them to some ideas of Franz Rosenzweig. Rosenzweig is of course generally speaking a thinker who greatly influenced Levinas, and I think that drawing on some of the ways that the messianic is articulated in Rosenzweig's thought can help illuminate what I would like to identify as two concurrent movements of messianic time in Levinas' early writings, which I shall call a movement of "anticipation" and a movement of "accomplishment" or "realisation."

Anticipation

Recall that Levinas, in the preface to *Totality and Infinity*, writes that the "beyond" of history is not outside time, but is to be "reflected *within* the totality and history, *within* experience." This is what it means for eschatology to pertain to "the instant," to "each instant," and for hope to be hope in or for the present, and not an economic reward for current suffering projected onto an ultimate future. We may link this to the movement of anticipation or *Vorwegnahme* that is a central part of Rosenzweig's account of Jewish existence in the *Star of Redemption*.⁸ Part of the project of the *Star* consists of sketching out Judaism and Christianity as two distinct ways of bringing eternity into time: While the Christian path leads "through the world" and consists of a universal Christian mission, the Jewish path "negates" the world and shuns any mission. What Jesus says in John 14:6 about the redemption of the world—"No one comes to the Father except through me"—is amended by Rosenzweig, writing to Rudolf Ehrenberg in 1913, as follows:

⁸ I have published a fuller treatment of Rosenzweig on time and history in *Exemplarity and Chosenness*, ch. 6. The confluence between Rosenzweig and Levinas concerning temporality is also very well explained in Wolfson, "Light Does Not Talk But Shines," 95–102. In addition to looking at core philosophical texts by Rosenzweig ("The New Thinking" and *The Star of Redemption*) and Levinas (*Time and the Other*), Wolfson draws important insights from some of Rosenzweig's commentaries on Yehuda Halevi and from Levinas' account of Rosenzweig's philosophy in his preface to Mosès, *System and Revelation* (see note 7 above).

No one *comes* to the father [except through the son]—but it is otherwise if someone no longer needs to come to the father because he *is* already with him. And this is the case for the people of Israel....⁹

“Already-being-with” thus characterises the Jewish relationship to God, its condition of being “elected.” Later, in the *Star*, Rosenzweig associates this condition with the temporal mode he calls “eternity.” Rosenzweig says of the Jews that they are the

only [community]...that cannot utter the “we” of its unity without hearing deep within a voice that adds: “are eternal.”¹⁰

Now, although Levinas at times has reservations about the term “eternity,”¹¹ it seems that in Rosenzweig’s vocabulary, eternity designates a temporal condition that is much like what Levinas means by eschatology, in that here it is also a matter of an *immediate* relation between the present and this “being at the end.”

What for other communities is the future and is thus something which still lies beyond the present—for this community alone it is already present; for it alone the future is nothing alien [*nichts Fremdes*], but something proper to itself [*ein Eigenes*]. (S, 332/299)

This eternity is not understood by Rosenzweig as “a very long time” (S, 250/224); the one “eternal people” does not live “in between” the be-

⁹ Letter to Rudolf Ehrenberg dated 31 October and 1 November 1913, in Rosenzweig, *Der Mensch und sein Werk. Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. I.1: *Briefe und Tagebücher, 1900–1918* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1979), 132–137.

¹⁰ Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung* (1921), 4th ed., in *Der Mensch und sein Werk. Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. II (Dordrecht: Nijhoff, 1976), 331; tr. by William Hallo as *The Star of Redemption* (1970; repr., Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 298–99. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as S. Page references, separated by a slash, will be first to the German, then to the English text. All translations modified.

¹¹ See note 7 above.

ginning and the end of time. “Its eternal life constantly anticipates [*nimmt vorweg*] the end.” (S, 467/420) This notion of *Vorwegnahme* is no mere intellectual “anticipation” but actually a “foreclosure” or “pre-empting” of the end, a “bringing to an end before the end.” In the 1913 letter to Ehrenberg, Rosenzweig writes that, until the end of the world, “Israel’s life” consists in “anticipating/foreclosing/preempting [*vorwegnehmen*] this day in its avowals [*Bekennen*], in the sense of religious confession or creed] and actions, to stand as a preliminary sign [or prefix, *Vorzeichen*] of this day.” “Not having to go through the son” in order to reach the end of days amounts to “not having to go through worldly history,” as Rosenzweig underlines in this early characterisation of Jewish election:

The people of Israel, chosen by its father, fixes its gaze [*blickt starr*] over and past the world and history at that last and most distant point, at which [God] its father, this same one, the one and unique one, will be “all in all.”¹²

This last reference is to the characterisation of Christ’s resurrection in Corinthians 1:15, according to which Christ reigns until the end of days, upon which time he himself becomes subject to God as the father, who then becomes “all in all.” “The world and history,” which the Jewish people can look across and beyond, and thus disregard, is the purview of Christians, who “must go through the son,” and thus through history, in order to finally reach God.

Although again Rosenzweig’s characterisation of messianic temporal experience is much more explicit about God and “the end” as reference points than Levinas’ account could be, what I wish to highlight in both thinkers is their shared vision of a coinciding of future and present moment, by virtue of a kind of anticipation or foreclosure, which, according to Rosenzweig, makes for the immediacy of the Jewish relationship with redemption. I believe that it is this sense of redemption that Levinas has in mind in the works I have been considering.

In this connection, it is worth remarking further on both Rosenzweig’s and Levinas’ relationships to the category of “history.”

¹² Letter to Rudolf Ehrenberg dated 31 October and 1 November 1913, 132–137.

There has been a strong temptation to take Rosenzweig in the *Star* and related writings as putting forward a so-called ahistorical view of Judaism, and those who succumb to this temptation are often motivated by a concern that his theory of Judaism fails to ground a viable contemporary Jewish political existence. But such characterisations miss the mark, in my view, because in positing an “outside” of history, a “messianic” dimension, Rosenzweig’s account suggests a new concept of history, in which it is no longer possible to speak of historical agency as opposed to the ahistorical or the apolitical. Rosenzweig’s approach is “historical” in that it generates and relies upon a new understanding of history. Similarly, I do not think that we should be misled by Levinas’ opposition between history and eschatology in *Totality and Infinity* into thinking of him as having no regard for concrete historical or political existence. Such a reading is belied by his insistence on hope having its point of reference strictly in the present. Thus, in *Time and the Other*, in explaining that “the relationship with the future, the presence of the future in the present, [is] accomplished in the face-to-face with the Other,” he makes clear that this encounter with the Other is, in fact, the same thing as “history”: “The condition of time lies in the relationship between humans or in history.” (TA, 69/79) The work of Levinas, like that of Rosenzweig, invites us to rethink what history is, beyond what Levinas objects to as the category of history as a totality that cannot account for merely ethical considerations and individual sufferings.

I will return to this movement of “anticipation” below, but let me first turn to the concurrent movement of “accomplishment.”

Accomplishment

Levinas calls “the situation of the face” “the accomplishment of time”; he says that the power of the present to be “beyond itself” is “accomplished” in the face-to-face, and that the intersubjective relationship should be thought of as an “encroachment [*empiètement*] of the present onto the future.” This movement, while it goes, speaking in linear terms, in the “opposite” direction from that of “anticipation,” can nevertheless be seen as concurrent with anticipation. Both movements are essential to messianic time: the immediacy of hope or redemption in the present instant that Rosenzweig called *Vorwegnahme*, anticipation or foreclosure,

and the idea that the ethical relationship is an accomplishment of time. The latter notion can be made sense of by looking at another key notion in Rosenzweig's theory of messianic time: that of *Bewährung*, which is a name he gives in the *Star* to the possibility of redemption, or of what he calls "the Kingdom." *Bewährung* is often translated into English as "verification," but it is more accurately understood as a "being-made-true" or "holding out" for, or "standing up to," the truth. In the *Star*, *Bewährung* is the attaining of truth—or rather, of God as truth. (S, 429ff.) In this sense, Rosenzweig writes:

...the truth only ever appears at the end. The end is its locus/place [*Ort*]. We do not regard it as given [*gegeben*] [i.e., as traditional philosophy did], we regard it as result [*Ergebnis*, from the German "sich ergeben," meaning "to ensue" or "to come about"]].

Only from a divine perspective, only for God, is truth a given, in the particular sense of being "given by him, a gift [*Gabe*]." (S, 443/398)

In his 1925 essay "The New Thinking," in which he provides a novel account of the role of time in knowledge, which he calls "messianic epistemology," Rosenzweig continues his discussion of *Bewährung*. In that essay, he insists on narrativity and its "interest" in the verb—for which he employs the German term *Zeitwort* (literally "time word")—as constituting the departure from traditional philosophy (what Levinas will later call philosophy as totalisation) that the *Star* sought to accomplish.¹³ For Rosenzweig, narration is valuable not because it is the conjuring-up of a past time as "real," but because it is time itself being made real. He writes: "It is not in [time] that what happens happens; rather [time], [time] itself is what happens." Thus, he points out that in Part II of the

¹³ "Das neue Denken. Einige nachträgliche Bemerkungen zum 'Stern der Erlösung'" (1925) in *Der Mensch und sein Werk. Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. III: *Zweistromland. Kleinere Schriften zu Glauben und Denken* (Dordrecht: Nijhoff, 1984), 148; tr. by Alan Udoff and Barbara E. Galli as "'The New Thinking.' A Few Supplementary Remarks to the *Star*," in *Franz Rosenzweig's "The New Thinking,"* (ed.) Alan Udoff and Barbara Galli (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 82. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as ND. Page references, separated by a slash, will be first to the German, then to the English text.

Star, the sequence of the chapters on creation, revelation and redemption is crucial not only to explaining, for example, the sequence of God's transformation from distant to near and from near to distant, but because sequence is itself the "important matter which is to be communicated." And lest we think that the importance of temporality becomes clear only by virtue of a theological concern with the God-man-world relation, Rosenzweig is quick to point out that the importance of this "method" is readily apparent in the most mundane activities of thought. The "new thinking" follows what he calls the "age-old thinking of common sense" in knowing that "it cannot know independently of time." (ND, 149/83) Rosenzweig illustrates this circumstance with a series of examples from ordinary life:

As little as one could just as well begin a conversation from the end, or a war by making peace (which of course the pacifists would like), or life with death, but must learn rather for better or for worse, actively or passively, to wait until the moment is ready, and not skip any moment, so too cognition/knowledge is at every moment bound to that very moment and cannot make its past not past, its future not in the future. This is true of everyday matters, and everyone grants that. Everyone knows that for an attending physician, for instance, the treatment is present, the getting sick past, and the determination of death future, and that it would make no sense if out of the fancy of timeless knowledge he wanted to eliminate learning and experience in the diagnosis, cleverness and stubbornness in his therapy, and fear and hope in his prognosis. In the same way, no one who makes a purchase seriously believes that he can see the merchandise in the delirium of its purchase in the same way as afterwards, in the throes of regret. (ND, 149/83–84)

This view of the role of time in knowing also has consequences for how the "new thinking" approaches traditional philosophical problems. Thus, in place of traditional conceptions of God as immanent or transcendent, the new ("narrative") thinking traces "how and when [God] turns from the distant to the near God and again from the near to the distant one." (ND, 148/82) And instead of inquiring whether human beings are free or determined, the new thinking traces the "path [*Weg*] of the deed" "from"

the particular character of the doer and the various motives “tugging” at him/her, “through” the event of a “grace-filled moment” of choice “to” a “Must that is beyond any freedom.” (ND, 148–49/82–83) Rosenzweig thus conceives this new kind of knowing as the exploration of a dynamic sequence of events that avoids getting mired in thinking about the static constitution of the entities under consideration. This is consistent with the model Rosenzweig pursues in the *Star*, in which the three “elements”—God, World and Man—are studied by exploring the “paths” or “courses” (*Bahnen*) they take with respect to one another, which are then named “creation,” “revelation” and “redemption.”

Just as Levinas’ conception of hope in *Existence and Existents*, and his conception of eschatology in the preface to *Totality and Infinity*, are rejections of the idea that the present derives its meaning, and thus its justification, from a projected future outcome, Rosenzweig describes the “new thinking” as a “knowing how to wait” for insight. Just as for Levinas hope concerns “the very instant” of the present, Rosenzweig’s “common sense” “goes on living” without holding fast to an “idée fixe.” It knows that “(only) time will tell” (*kommt Zeit, kommt Rat*) (ND, 149/83), that meanings unfold and are *bewährt*/“verified” in and as time.

The Messianic of Ethical Philosophy

For the final part of my paper, I would like to follow these observations about messianism in Levinas to the two Talmudic readings that he published as “Messianic Texts.” It must be stressed that at the time when these Talmudic readings were presented, the institution of the Colloque des intellectuels juifs de langue française was very new. It had been formed under the auspices of the French section of the World Jewish Congress and had held its first meeting in 1957, and a second in 1959 (at which Levinas gave the first of his contributions to the Colloque, his tribute to Franz Rosenzweig, entitled “Between Two Worlds”). Each of the Colloques had a theme, and the proceedings were subsequently published in full, including all discussions following the individual presentations. The resulting volumes are a fascinating document of post-war Western European-Jewish thought and culture. The third Colloque, which met in 1960, bore the title “Jewish Morality and Politics,” and it was this meeting that for the first time included what would henceforth

become an annual tradition, a Talmudic reading by Emmanuel Levinas. In the published proceedings, this contribution bears the title “Messianic Time and Historical Time in Chapter 11 of Tractate Sanhedrin.” The following year, 1961, the theme of the Colloque was “Jewish Messianism and the Ends of History.” Here too, Levinas’ Talmudic reading concentrated on passages from chapter 11 of Tractate Sanhedrin; it was entitled “Messianism According to a Talmudic Text.”

In giving, for the first time, in 1960, a discussion of a Talmudic passage as part of the Colloque—and indeed, this applies generally to Levinas’ early Talmudic readings—Levinas places at the centre of his reading a succession of methodological reflections on what it might mean for contemporary Jewish intellectuals to engage with this traditional Jewish source. As he presents his reading, he repeatedly calls attention to what he thinks he is doing and how he is doing it. Levinas is speaking to fellow academics and intellectuals; it is thus no surprise that in presenting his approach he explicitly sets it off against more or less well-known models of interpretation and criticism. He is fond of identifying what is in vogue in contemporary thinking about history, politics, culture and Jewish life, and of explaining what he is doing in opposition to such trends. Further, as we might expect from reading, say, the preface to *Totality and Infinity* (which was published at about the same time as these early Talmudic readings, in 1961), these Talmudic readings, concerning as they do morality and politics and the “ends of history,” are aimed at challenging what Levinas regards as the truisms and complacency concerning these categories, especially in view of what he regards as the dominance of a Hegelian-Marxist world view.

Let us recall how Levinas approaches the problem of morality and politics in *Totality and Infinity*. Working from the commonplace opposition between moral and political considerations, as a mutually exhaustive opposition, Levinas recognises that if there is to be a true possibility of morality, it must be based on a refusal to accept that opposition as fundamental and mutually exhaustive. Ethics is a possibility that is asserted from outside this opposition, and this, I believe, is why it is aligned with eschatology, with an analysis of time that asks, What is the time of the other? The axis on which another possibility turns—one that would be more fundamental and on a different plane than the conventional opposition between politics as necessity and morality as possible only within the limits of politics—must be time.

In “Messianic Texts,” Levinas engages the question of morality versus politics by looking at classic Jewish texts on the subject of messianism, and his method in the passage I want to focus on is the same as the one I have been sketching out: He takes stock oppositions that seem to allow for no alternative and introduces an optic under which their terms are not mutually exclusive, in order to bring out the moral dimension that is, for him, of decisive importance.

The first passage that Levinas looks at, from Tractate Sanhedrin 99a, presents a traditional distinction between the days of the messiah (*yemot ha-mashiah*), or messianic era, and a world or future to come (*olam haba*).

R. Hiyya b. Abba said in R. Johanan's name: All the prophets prophesied [all the good things] only in respect of the Messianic era; but as for the world to come [Levinas translates this: *monde futur*, future world], “no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him” [Isa. 64:3]. Now, he disagrees with Samuel, who said: This world differs from [that of] the days of the Messiah only in respect of servitude to [foreign] powers.¹⁴

The messianic era is supposed to be the time of fulfilment of prophecies, while the future world, as Levinas puts it, “seems to exist on another level,” in that it is, in the words of the quoted passage from Isaiah, reserved “for the one that waits for him.” What this connotes, according to Levinas, is a dimension of personal salvation apart from the prophecies for the messianic era, which he describes as “a transitional period [*charnière*, lit. “hinge” or “articulation” or “bridge”] between two eras” that “consists in the fulfillment of all the prophecies” and promises “a delivered and improved humanity,” including the disappearance of “the injustice and alienation introduced by the arbitrary workings of political powers into every human enterprise.”¹⁵ In addition, we have what is

¹⁴ The translation is from *The Babylonian Talmud*, (ed.) I. Epstein (London: Soncino, 1961); for the biblical verse, I have used the New Revised Standard Version, where it appears as 64:4.

¹⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, “Textes messianiques,” *Difficile liberté*, 3rd rev. ed. (Paris: Albin Michel, 1976), 91; tr. by Seán Hand as “Messianic Texts,” in *Difficult Freedom. Essays on Judaism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press,

posed as a disagreement between the position given as that of Yochanan and that of Samuel: Supposedly, the principle articulated by Samuel is that “this world differs from [that of] the days of the Messiah only in respect of servitude to [foreign] powers”—or, to use what sounds like a more literal translation by Adin Steinsaltz, “there is no difference between this world and the days of the Messiah except for the oppression of kingdoms.” Reading this last expression (*shiye’ebud malchuyot*) at the Colloque, Levinas glosses it as “la fin de la violence et de l’oppression politique,”¹⁶ the end of violence and political oppression. Re-editing his text for inclusion in *Difficult Freedom*, he interposes an in a sense more “literal” translation, “la fin du ‘joug des nations,’” the end of the “yoke of nations.”

Since the Talmudic text instructs us to read Samuel’s position as being in disagreement with the previous one attributed to Yochanan, the interpretative challenge is to figure out: Why is the alternative between the days of the messiah, in which political oppression is lifted, and the future-to-come, a dimension of personal salvation that is beyond history, not exhaustive? Levinas’ approach to a solution is to find a perspective in which Samuel’s description of the messianic era can be taken to add something new to what has already been said about it. He does this by citing a different version of the same disagreement from Tractate Berakhot 34b, which gives the passage almost verbatim, except that an additional biblical verse is added in support of Samuel’s position:

.... These Rabbis differ from Samuel; for Samuel said: There is no difference between this world and the days of the Messiah except [that in the latter there will be no] bondage of foreign powers [or, in Levinas’ translation: except for the end of violence and political oppression—DH], as it says: For the poor shall never cease out of [i.e., disappear from—DH] the land [Deut. 15:11].

1990), 60–61. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as DL. Page references, separated by a slash, will be first to the French, then to the English text.

¹⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, “Temps messianiques et temps historiques dans le chapitre XI du ‘Traité Sanhédrin,’” in *La conscience juive. Données et débats*, (ed.) Éliane Amado Lévy-Valensi and Jean Halperin (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963), 270.

This alternative formulation of Samuel's position allows Levinas to see in the discussion in Sanhedrin an element that is left out of the opposition between the end of political oppression/violence and the achievement of personal salvation, that is, social justice, which for Levinas is the dimension of morality. If the idea of a messianic era is to have any meaning, he seems to have Samuel say, it cannot be merely to accept the terms of the preface to *Totality and Infinity*, peace as the absence of political war or oppression. The common habit of thought is to oppose that political sphere of oppression to individual, spiritual fulfilment. But Levinas interposes instead social justice as the ethical relation to alterity. Samuel's position, he writes, is to see that "spiritual life as such cannot be separated from economic solidarity with the Other." To this relation to the Other, Levinas here gives the name "giving," *le donner*, which he calls "in some sense the original movement of spiritual life." "The messianic outcome," he adds, "cannot suppress" this original movement, which is the movement in response to alterity, the moral life as such. (DL, 93–94/62)¹⁷ If we recall what we said about the opposition of politics/history and eschatology in *Totality and Infinity*, that far from being apolitical or ahistorical, it is meant to insert the force of eschatology into history, then the following lines from Levinas' reading of Samuel's reinterpretation of the supposed division between the "future world" and the messianic era can be understood in their full meaning:

The "future world"—that is to say, that level of life to which the *individual* accedes through the possibilities of inner life and which is not announced by any prophet—opens up new perspectives. The messianic time that makes up history (and where the meaning of our real responsibilities in history itself is consequently revealed) is as yet unaware of these perspectives. (DL, 94/62)

That is to say: the future world opens up "perspectives," or moral demands, *in history*. With this reading, through the voice of Samuel, Levinas makes the future world concurrent with the messianic era, by virtue

¹⁷ Levinas adds, in this sense: "The Other is always the poor one, poverty defines the poor person as Other...."

of a temporal structure that is akin to that of the “hope in the present” that we encountered in his earlier philosophical works.

Levinas’ use of these Talmudic passages for the purpose of grasping this other perspective, that of morality or social justice, becomes even clearer in light of his remark that the passage he cites from Sanhedrin is “a very well-known text, which Maimonides will take up and will attempt to create a synthesis between the opinions of Samuel and of Rabbi Yochanan.” Levinas is here referring to the famous section on the messianic era that concludes the *Mishneh Torah* (chapters 11 and 12 of Hilkhot Melakhim (the Laws Concerning Kings and Wars)). There is a great deal of debate about whether Maimonides’ account should be read primarily as a political program for Jewish sovereignty, and about the relation of this political program to other modes of messianic salvation such as individual or collective prosperity, and the attainment of religious faithfulness by the Jewish people, or the redemption of the world as a whole. Samuel’s dictum, “The only difference between the present and the Messianic days is delivery from servitude to foreign powers” is cited by Maimonides in chapter 12, the final chapter of Hilkhot Melakhim. The lines following this citation read:

Taking the words of the Prophets in their literal sense, it appears that the inauguration of the Messianic era will be marked by the war of Gog and Magog; that prior to that war, a prophet will arise to guide Israel and set their hearts aright, as it is written: *Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet* (Mal. 3:23). He (Elijah) will come neither to declare the clean unclean, nor the unclean clean; neither to disqualify those who are presumed to be of legitimate descent, nor to pronounce qualified those who are presumed to be of illegitimate descent, but to bring peace in the world, as it is said: *And he shall turn the hearts of the fathers to the children.* (Mal. 3:24)¹⁸

¹⁸ Maimonides, *The Code of Maimonides (Mishneh Torah)*, Book 14: *The Book of Judges*, (tr.) Abraham M. Hershman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949), 241. In the New Jewish Publication Society translation (2nd ed., 1999), the biblical verse *ve-heshiv lev-avot al-banim* is translated as “He shall reconcile parents with children.”

Without entering into the ongoing debate about the elements of the messianic era that are highlighted by Maimonides, we may notice that Levinas, by calling this an attempt at “synthesis” between Rabbi Yochanan and Samuel, shows the Maimonidean reading to be one in which political sovereignty is combined with the individual salvation Yochanan ascribes to the “world to come,” which here is represented also as a spiritual flourishing or restoration, and even an interpersonal reconciliation. A combination or sublation of two alternatives into a synthesis of course leaves no room for the other alternative that we saw Levinas trying to envision by means of Samuel’s position: that the meaning of messianism cannot be simply to negate or deny political oppression in the name of spiritual fulfilment, but must involve or invoke an ethical alterity.

There is a further aspect of Levinas’ reference to Maimonides that is not immediately visible, but that is also highly significant for this text: A footnote that was originally appended to the 1961 Talmudic reading in the published proceedings of the Colloque and that in *Difficult Freedom* was moved to the front of “Messianic Texts,” refers to Gershom Scholem’s 1959 lecture at Eranos “Toward An Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism.”¹⁹ This essay by Scholem famously contains a long citation from the above-cited chapter from Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides’ discussion of the messianic era. As is well known, Scholem’s deployment of this passage in the service of his distinction between what he viewed as two principal streams of Jewish messianism, the “restorative” and the “utopian,” became a touchstone for much of the subsequent discussion of Maimonides’ views on messianism. If we take Levinas’ “Messianic Texts” as an early response to this thesis of Scholem’s, we may readily align Scholem’s term “restorative” with the interpretation of the messianic era as merely political, and align the “utopian” with the interpretation that emphasises a future world that cannot be the object of prophecy, that is wholly unknown. Scholem sees Maimonides’ account as purely “restorative,” as emphasising the pragmatic restoration of national sovereignty. This is significant for him, be-

¹⁹ Gershom Scholem, “Zum Verständnis der messianischen Idee im Judentum,” *Judaica* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1963). “Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism,” (tr.) Michael A. Meyer, in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism, and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken, 1971). Subsequent page references, separated by a slash, will be first to the German, then to the English text.

cause he views Maimonides as shoring up the trend of rabbinic codification that consistently worked at suppressing the “utopian” stream that Scholem himself finds most exciting in Jewish thought, particularly in Jewish mystical currents. (The chapters on messianism in *Hilkhot Melakhim* famously contain the admonition “Let no one think that in the days of the Messiah any of the laws of nature will be set aside, or any innovation be introduced into creation. The world will follow its normal course,” which Maimonides backs up with decidedly figurative interpretations of biblical images such as the pronouncement that “the wolf shall dwell with the lamb.”²⁰) Scholem, of course, was quite ambivalent about the “utopian” strain of messianism that he believed had been suppressed by rabbinic authority and by Maimonides: on the one hand, it seems to hold for him the value of revolution and new political possibilities; but on the other hand, he famously concluded his *Eranos* lecture with the observation that the Jewish people had paid too steep a “price” for its messianic beliefs, in that these beliefs had held the Jews back from “coming forward onto the plane of history.”

The magnitude/greatness [*Größe*] of the messianic idea corresponds to the infinite weakness [*Schwäche*; the English edition translates this phrase as “endless powerlessness”] of Jewish history, which in exile [or: during the exile] was unprepared to come forward onto the plane of history.²¹

(Scholem’s actual wording here for what Jewish history was unprepared to do is “Einsatz auf der geschichtlichen Ebene,” meaning that the Jews did not “engage” or “stake themselves” on the plane of history.) I have tried to show how I view both Rosenzweig and Levinas as having produced a more profound and radical notion of the meaning of history, which I think goes beyond the empiricist historicism of Scholem’s question concerning “the price of messianism,” and even beyond the economy of engagement/staking/laying oneself on the line of history, and which bypasses any attempt to oppose history or the political to some sort of ahistorical or apolitical dimension. This is, in my view, the significance of Levinas’ reading in “Messianic Texts” of Samuel’s position

²⁰ Cited in *ibid.*, 59–60/28–29.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 73/35.

as bypassing or surpassing the opposition between a messianic age that offers a *political* freedom and a “future world” that offers a spiritual, apolitical salvation. This interpretation goes along with Levinas’ concern in his presentation at the Colloque (and indeed, in general, in his addresses to the Colloques over the years) to propose an alternative to a “Hegelian” concept of an “end of history.” Thus, in characterising the messianic era as a hinge or articulation (*charnière*) between two eras, Levinas adds “rather than an end of history.” With this figure, then, Levinas, following Rosenzweig, is trying to envision an alternative to the opposition between historical time—whose culmination according to a certain reading of Hegel is an end of history—and some sort of ahistorical or apolitical dimension, by conceiving of time and history otherwise.

But the reference to Scholem in Levinas’ footnote has a further significance for my discussion. For Scholem, the fact that Maimonides represents the “restorative” current of messianism is symptomatic of his being a rationalist philosopher—indeed, Maimonides stands at the apogee of rationalist philosophy in Jewish thought. For Scholem, Maimonides was bound to want to suppress or domesticate any supernatural or irrationalist Jewish traditions, for instance, by reinterpreting them, as he does in the passage I cited, allegorically. We know from the preface to *Totality and Infinity* that Levinas’ project is to generate a thought that, while it seeks to break with classic philosophical conceptions of knowledge and truth, is not irrationalist—a thought that seeks to transcend the rationalist/irrationalist distinction. It is from this point of view that we can read Levinas’ footnote on Scholem’s Eranos lecture:

In a recent article in *Eranos*, Mr. Scholem, evincing an admirable historical science and a remarkable intuition of the systematic meaning of the texts studied (an intuition sometimes lacking in other historians), distinguishes between apocalyptic messianism that is above all popular, and the rationalist messianism of the rabbis, which culminates in the famous page on the messianic era which Maimonides gives in his *Mishneh Torah* at the end of the chapter relating to the laws of political power. Not everything has been said, however, as Scholem sometimes seems to believe, once one has affirmed the rationalist nature of this messianism. As if rationalization meant only the negation of the miraculous and as if, in the realm of the spirit, we could abandon

one set of contestable values without engaging [*embrayer sur*] other values. It is the positive meaning of the messianism of the rabbis that I want to demonstrate in my commentary. (DL, 89–90 n. 1/296–97 n. 1)

Scholem had implied that Jewish thought—or a philosophical thinking from out of Jewish sources—is at least historically caught between the alternative of a rationalist reduction of those sources and their embrace as extra-rational. Levinas reads Talmud philosophically, which means that this Jewish source is for him not a repository of outmoded irrational beliefs, but that it concretely engages questions of contemporary import, philosophical questions concerning moral values. Interestingly, Levinas shows this activity of reading and retrieval itself to be a sort of experience or enactment of messianic time—as opposed to the mundane historical retrieval that he sees the historian Scholem engaged in. In the midst of his commentary on the messianic passages in Sanhedrin, Levinas reflects on what it means to read the Talmud in view of philosophical problems, for “the thought of the Doctors of the Talmud proceeds from a reflection that is radical enough also to satisfy the demands of philosophy.” (DL 101/68) The task Levinas sets himself is to access the “rational meaning” of these texts, which for him means approaching “the laconic formulae, images, allusions, and virtual ‘winks’ through which thought finds expression in the Talmud” “from the angle of a concrete problem or social situation.” To favour such an approach means to disregard “the apparent anachronisms committed as a result,” which, Levinas adds,

can shock only the fanatics for historical method, who profess that it is *forbidden for inspired thinking to anticipate the meaning of all experience* and that not only do there exist words that, before a certain time, are *unpronounceable*; but that there are also thoughts which, before a certain time, are unthinkable. (*Ibid.*)

For the “fanatics of historical method,” then—and I propose that we read this point in conjunction with Levinas’ critical footnote on Scholem’s treatment of messianism—each thought has its time and context, and to allow obviously outmoded ideas to speak to us directly about philosophi-

cal questions is to commit an anachronism. For Levinas, by contrast, to treat the Talmud as a philosophical source is to read it in a non-historicist fashion,²² to read it, as he puts it, as “inspired thinking,” and to proceed from the following presupposition:

We begin with the idea that inspired thinking is a thought in which everything has been thought, even industrial society and modern technocracy. (*Ibid.*)

To me, there is no better way of saying what it means to do philosophy in light of the history of philosophy, i.e., in conversation with sources. Drawing seriously on the history of thought as part of pursuing original thought means to treat past instances of inspired thinking as potentially already having thought *everything*. It is to find myself in relationship with a thought that is not mine, that has preceded me and to which I must respond—a thought that sets a task of thinking for me—but to be open to the possibility that it holds more than I can myself grasp, and that it has already surpassed me. To refer to the two movements of messianic thinking that I mentioned earlier, it is to find my thinking already anticipated and foreclosed (*vorweggenommen*) before me and at the same time to be engaged in a movement of seeking to accomplish what has been anticipated. In considering the question, What does the figure of messianism offer to contemporary thought? —I would suggest that Levinas offers and enacts, at least in his Talmudic readings, a conception not of messianic philosophy/thinking, but of messianic thinking as thought itself, as philosophy. What this messianic task of thinking amounts to, for him, as I have sought to show, is the chance that the possibility of ethics can intervene into the apparent certainty of total knowledge, or politics.

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²² For a more sustained reading of “Messianic Texts” in view of Levinas’ rejection of historicism, see Oona Ajzenstat (Eisenstadt), *Driven Back to the Text. The Premodern Sources of Levinas’s Postmodernism* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), ch. 4.