Thinking from the Margins: The Victims of History in Levinas and Metz

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ABSTRACT

The model of meaning that has prevailed in philosophy and theology is the Plotinian model of the unity of the One. Historically, this model of thinking ends up displacing the particular and establishing an essentially historicist, teleological model. Against this framing, this thesis claims that the suffering of the victims of history challenges thinking and obliges philosophy to respond. Grappling with the marginalization of the marginal in Western thinking, this research sets up a dialogue between Emmanuel Levinas’s philosophy and Johann Baptist Metz’s political theology in order to learn from their thoughts on the suffering of the victims. In responding to suffering philosophy and theology can meet beyond idealism and dogmatism. The essential question of this research is how to give meaning to the concrete suffering of humanity in order to redeem history from the concept of an evolutionary progress which limits the possibility of hearing the cries of the victims of history. This approach will lead us to evaluate both thinkers in relation to the categories of reason, time, and theodicy.

In spite of the differences in their philosophical and theological projects, the similarities between Levinas and Metz are explained by their focus on the consequences of the Western mode of thinking of history, particularly on the victims of such history. Levinas’s and Metz’s thinking is indelibly marked by the fracture of Western civilization in Auschwitz. They seek a way out of this tragedy by looking to the margins, that is, to the victims and defeated of history. For each thinker what is at stake is not theory but fundamentally praxis; in this way the question of truth and the question of justice are interrelated. For both Levinas and Metz, what is vital is the attempt to overcome the solipsism of the subject in philosophical and theological transcendentalism, recovering the place of the other in the human relations. In other words, their thinking is a reaction
to the glorious subject that emerges from transcendental philosophy and theology in modernity.
STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Manuel Losada Sierra

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In the course of writing this thesis several papers have been presented and/or published that contain elements of this thesis. These papers are:


2. “The prophetic Reason for Religious and Cultural Understanding,” *The International Journal of Civic, Political, and Community Studies* 11, no. 2 (2014). This paper was initially presented at *The Eleventh International Conference on*
New Directions in the Humanities held in Eotvos Lorand University, Budapest, on 20th of June, 2013.


INTRODUCTION

Against the naturalization of suffering in Western thinking, I argue that the suffering of the victims of history has a place in philosophy and, indeed, obliges philosophy to respond. More than this, I argue that the suffering of such victims is the space in which philosophy and theology can meet beyond idealism and dogmatism. The naturalization of suffering refers to the domestication of suffering which robs it of its power to shock reason and to oppose idealism and its teleological history in which suffering is just an inherent and necessary part of the historical process. In responding to the challenge of suffering, philosophy and theology meet in order for the concrete suffering of the victims to be raised as a problem for thinking and as a question to be faced from a philosophical perspective. I will show how beyond ontological thinking and the divine identity of the end of history, and beyond the Hegelian teleology of history, a new scenario for philosophical thinking can be found. Between the thinking of totality and the ultimate revelation of God, it will be necessary to account for the victims and the categories that make it possible. Put in other words, this thesis is a claim about the relevance of the marginal for philosophy, and therefore a claim against the intellectualism that ignores the singular and contingent.

The dialogue between philosophy and theology is explored by way of Emmanuel Levinas and Johann Baptist Metz. At first glance it appears problematic to try to link these thinkers. Metz is a German Catholic theologian striving to redeem theology from its idealism and to shake up the bases of both scholastic and Rahnerian-transcendental theology. Levinas is striving to prioritise ethics before and beyond ontology with support from his Judaic pre-philosophical experiences; he wants thereby to overcome the ontologization of philosophy and a parallel development in theology, to the extent that the latter participates in an intellectualism that seeks lucidity and comprehension. Levinas
insists on his credentials as a philosopher; even in his Talmudic commentaries, his readings are invariably philosophical.

Some biographical details illustrate Levinas’s and Metz’s differences. Metz was born in a village of strong Catholic tradition where “[i]t is as if one were born […] somewhere along the receding edges of the Middle Ages,”¹ and he was theologically trained in the tradition of neo-Thomist thought. Levinas, for his part, was born and raised in a Lithuanian village, “a land lacking any contact at all between Jews and Christians” a land where “Christianity was a completely closed-off world, ² and ”where one breathed in Judaism with the air.”³ Moreover, Metz, as a teenager, participated as a soldier of the Third Reich in the last year of the Second World War, while Levinas, being Jewish with a French uniform, spent five years in a labour camp. However, in spite of being on opposite sides in the war, the fracture of Western civilization in Auschwitz profoundly marked their thinking and imposed on them the unconditional obligation not to think as if Auschwitz had not taken place. In this way, Metz’s and Levinas’s thoughts are driven by the question about historical suffering which calls for a commitment beyond idealism.

In their attempts to overcome idealism the trajectories of Metz and Levinas intertwine; there are crucial intersections in their philosophical and theological projects from which we may benefit in exploring new ways to mediate between philosophy and theology in order to redeem the victims of suffering from the marginal place they have occupied in Western thinking. Both Levinas and Metz hold that human tragedies such as Auschwitz are related to the emphasis philosophy and theology have placed on the Greek

³ Ibid., 84.
logos at the expense of Jewish wisdom; the two concur that reason must be awoken from its slumber by stressing the hidden elements of European experience preserved in biblical thought and in the role that marginal and suffering figures play in Jewish wisdom. These roots prioritize the cry of those who suffer as a hermeneutical tool to awaken reason. Marked by the fracture of Western civilisation at Auschwitz, Levinas and Metz focus on the consequences of the Western mode of thinking in history, particularly as regards such victims. They maintain a line of resistance against the barbarism, despair, and nihilism into which the history and culture of Europe fell in the twentieth century.

Both thinkers find the circular thought of the Plotinian One to be the starting point of Western intellectualism in which the concrete reality of suffering is domesticated by enclosing it in a consciousness which becomes a circle from which the meaning of the whole of reality starts and finishes. In fact, the Plotinian movement of the return to the One is essentially circular: the One is the point of departure and arrival; that from where the “soul” descends and to which it ascends. Multiplicity is defined in negative opposition to this self-movement of the One, as appearance, the material, the corporeal, evil. One of the essential elements of the circularity of the return to the One is the Parmenidean conception of Being as a formal identity, that is, as identification between Being and thinking. In this way, if it is only possible to think Being, and thinking needs objectivity, it will be necessary that being is identity, precisely because thinking can only capture the identical. Therefore, if Being is identity, it is not possible to recognize the reality of the not identical, of that which is not Form, or can only be recognized if it is redirected to Form. In any case, the aspiration of the philosopher remains, as Plato noted, that of delving into the entire structure of the world, rising to a thought that captures the profound unity of all differences and comprehends all the relationships between Forms. This entails the risk that thinking about Being is
transformed into thinking about thinking, that is, into logic. For Plotinus, to know the sensible reality is to recognize in it the dialectical structure of Being and thinking, redirecting the movement and dynamism of the sensible to the movement and dynamism of thought. To the extent that thinking eludes the sensible and contingent reality, the sensible risks becoming absurd because it is not possible to account for the phenomena of reality as we experience it. Further, the experience of reality as presented before our eyes must be largely neglected: knowledge cannot be initiated from it. Therefore, reaching the truth will be based on truth itself, which is somehow present in us by the trace that the One leaves in each of the things he caused.

The Plotinian circle notably influences philosophy and Christian theology. Both philosophy and theology remain tied to the thought of identity, a closed circle of consciousness that functions as a giver of meaning for the whole exterior of reality. From a Christian theological perspective, Levinas wonders

whether the devotion that animates this religion, which was originally inseparable from the love of one's fellow man and concern for justice, would not find in this ethics itself the place of its semantic birth and thence the significance of its non-in-difference for the infinite difference of the One, instead of owing it to the non-satisfaction of knowing. A radical distinction which would impose itself between religion and relation!⁴

Philosophically, in Descartes for example, the circle is regression towards the cogito and immanent deduction within the same conscience. In Hegel the “I think” is the last form of the spirit as knowing, and therefore the intelligible system is ultimately a self-consciousness. That is, Hegel’s dialectical process reduces any negation of identity to the same identity and he affirms the identity of the identical and the non-identical. In this way, the non-identical is an illusion, it is only the product of a reduction of the non-concluded. Even Heidegger’s ontological difference is insufficient to give meaning to the

individual, to the concrete. The ontological difference is always within being, that is, the concrete reality is understood from being and the concrete individuality finds its authenticity by exiting from itself. As Orietta Ombrosi remarks, “what is repeated in this movement is the fear of the outside, the heterogeneous, the fear of alterity which force reason to favour identity, by returning the outside and the other to the same.”

In relation to this circularity of thought, Levinas and Metz share the idea that Western rationality is insufficient to respond to the concrete reality of marginality, and therefore to violence. They concur in resorting to the biblical legacy, particularly to the concepts of eschatology, apocalypse, theodicy and messianism, in order to respond to the challenge that the concrete suffering of human beings presents to reason. From this perspective, the primary interest of this thesis is not a systematic and comprehensive analysis of their philosophizing and theologizing. It is not a comparative study of Levinas’s and Metz’s general thought in which their perspectives and conclusions are compared and contrasted, even though differences and similarities will necessarily emerge. Neither is there interest in accepting or rejecting one or the other on the basis of their arguments and methods. My hope is simply to allow these two thinkers to converse without doing violence to their traditions of thought, interests and methods. This thesis takes advantage of Metz and Levinas common interest to overcome the solipsism of the subject, the circle of thought, in philosophical and theological transcendentalism in order to recover singularity in philosophy and history and the philosophical relevance of the other who suffers. In this way, I shall claim that certain thematic and strategic similarities exist between Levinas’s and Metz’s perspectives which allow singularity and contingency to be restored and to do justice to the victims of history.

In terms of mutual influences, it is worth noting that Levinas and Metz meet “for the first and only time”\(^6\) in the summer residence of the Pope, in Castel Gandolfo, in 1985. They were invited by Pope John Paul II to the biannual meetings with academics he organised in the Papal residence. In relation to his encounter with Levinas, Metz remembers: “he came up to me and embraced me without saying a word, and I could only interpret this as a sign of his recognition that I have tried with all my might to sharpen Christianity’s and theology’s conscience about the catastrophe of Auschwitz”\(^7\) Metz confesses that in spite of their intellectual closeness, Levinas never becomes his teacher and he even confesses to not being “very familiar with his writings.”\(^8\) Levinas for his part never addresses in any way Metz’s political theology. Levinas’s closest reference to any kind of political theology is the response to a question about the reception of his work in Latin America. Levinas responds that some scholars very close to theology and liberation philosophy “have also seen the same thing.”\(^9\)

The dialogue between Levinas and Metz performed in this dissertation is facilitated by Metz’s inclination to dialogue with philosophy. From his early works the interaction with philosophy has been constant in his theologising. For him, theology is a worthy subject of philosophical discussion. Furthermore, he considers this dialogue with philosophy essential for theology to the extent that theological thinking can be defined in terms that are foreign to it. In the secondary literature on Metz, some scholars have paid attention to this particularity of his work. For instance, Steven Ostovich brings Metz into conversation with Thomas Kuhn and Walter Benjamin. The encounter with Kuhn is aimed at providing a scenario for the dialogue between theology and sciences for the

\(^7\) Ibid.
\(^8\) Ibid.
benefit of theology.\textsuperscript{10} In describing the categories of messianic history and dangerous memories against the traditional model of history as empty time, Ostovich also uses Metz’s and Benjamin’s perspectives.\textsuperscript{11} Another attempt to provide a relation between Metz and philosophy is Maureen H. O’Connell’s endeavour to offer an alternative perspective for compassion that responds adequately to contemporary challenges, particularly suffering, globalization and social disasters. In doing so, O’Connell offers an account of Martha Nussbaum’s political philosophy and Metz’s political theology which seek to facilitate the comprehension of compassion as essential for personal and social transformation. Furthermore, by following the paths of Metz and philosopher Michael Walzer, Alan John Revering “explores the relation of Christian eschatology to political theory.”\textsuperscript{12} Revering also endeavours to prove that “images drawn from particular religious traditions can serve as a ground for effective social criticism.” From a more general perspective, James Matthew Ashley provides an account of the evolution of Metz’s theological anthropology. What is interesting in Ashley’s work is the genealogical view of Metz’s theology and its theological and philosophical influences, particularly Kant, Heidegger and the philosophers of the Frankfurt School.\textsuperscript{13}

Turning to Levinas’s philosophizing, it is worth mentioning that several attempts have been made to mediate between Levinas’s ethical approach and Christian theology, most of them from theology itself. One of the newest endeavours in this regard is carried out


\textsuperscript{11} Steven T. Ostovich, “Messianic History in Benjamin and Metz” Philosophy and Theology 8, no. 4 (Summer, 1994), \url{http://www.pdcnet.org/phithelo/content/phithelo_1994_0008_0004_0271_0289}.


\textsuperscript{13} See James Matthew Ashley, Interruptions: Mysticism, Politics, and Theology in the Work of Johann Baptist Metz (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1998).
by Nigel Zimmermann in his book *Levinas and Theology*.\(^{14}\) As Zimmermann shows, this conversation between Levinas and theology has been taken in two different directions in Levinas scholarship. One of these ways is the dialogue with Christian theologians such as Karl Rahner, Urs von Balthasar, Karl Barth and Bernard Lonergan;\(^{15}\) the other way is the rethinking of theological themes from Levinas’s perspective.\(^{16}\) Furthermore, the attempt to bring Levinas into conversation with theologians and Metz with philosophers, has mainly been developed by theologians seeking the benefit of Christian theology and spirituality. Zimmermann’s work itself considers Levinas “a gift for theology,”\(^{17}\) to the extent that he provokes theologians to consider the ethical nature of undertaking theology. Michael Purcell also tries to harmonize Levinas’s ethics with theology by affirming that theology is from the outset theological anthropology, that is, “its initial task is to ask the question of the person who is able to ask the question of God.”\(^{18}\) This affirmation allows Purcell to align theology with Levinas’s interests in tracing God in the face of the other human. In the same line of thinking, Glenn Morrison considers Levinas’s philosophy “a

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\(^{17}\) Zimmermann, *Levinas and Theology*, 157.

Morrison’s purpose is to unveil Levinas’s vocabulary as offering Christian theology a rich source of expressions useful to identify the encounter with Christ and the other in Him.

However, as established above, the present thesis is a philosophical conversation between Levinas and Metz which seeks the benefit of those on the margins of history and society by taking advantage of their common thematic and strategic similarities. In this way, this thesis concerns itself with a thinking that starts from exteriority, that is, from the victims and not from the ego, from the “I conquer,” from the “I think” or from the “I” as will to power. Thinking from the victims means a metaphysical thought beyond the objectifying consciousness, revealing the face that suffers injustice, hunger, oppression and death. Claiming that the starting point of philosophy is not the ego cogito but instead the victims means two things: 1) that the suffering of victims challenges philosophical thought and is therefore something to be seriously considered, and 2) that this suffering cries out for a practical responsibility.

Levinas’s and Metz’s strategic similarities and the respect for their ways of doing philosophy and theology is manifested in the organisation of the thesis. This dissertation is articulated as a triptych: it is divided in three parts joined by the same preoccupation: how to respond to the concrete situation of suffering. Each part is formed by two chapters in which each chapter takes the voice of one of the thinkers. The three parts of the dissertation are: reason, time, and theodicy. In the first part, I endeavour to show how by critiquing philosophical and theological rationality, Levinas (first chapter) and Metz (second chapter) reclaim an opportunity for reason that lies in biblical sources in order to

find a place for contingency and singularity in history. In spite of the differences in the way they critique rationality, their final claims are for a foundational rationality in which responsibility for the other who suffers is the point of departure for thinking. In the second part, I move to consider that discontinuous time which is opposed to the continuous temporality of uninterrupted progress. For Levinas (third chapter), messianic time is the moment when the “I” recognizes the necessity to bear the suffering of the other\textsuperscript{20} who suffers, and accepts universal responsibility. In this way, time does not temporalize in a linear form, rather it deviates to enable an ethical relationship with another man in which an ethical-messianic subjectivity can emerge. Metz (fourth chapter) moves into the biblical account of time with an end in which the past is still valid and has not been brushed aside by the overwhelming pace of progress. In Metz’s consideration of time it is necessary to intervene, to decide and to interrupt because everything is played out in a limited time. For both Levinas and Metz, in every moment the subject is staking its destiny.

In the third part, I consider the concepts of suffering and memory involved in the concern for theodicy and therefore in the attempt to do justice to victims. Theodicy as an effort to explain that suffering is meaningless. However, for Levinas (fifth chapter) theodicy can find meaning in ethics, while for Metz (sixth chapter) it is a disturbing question \textit{unto} God for the suffering of the victims. For both thinkers the experience of Auschwitz remains the paradigm of gratuitous suffering and the response to this tragedy is in Levinas an ethical responsibility, and in Metz a political resistance transformed into

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\textsuperscript{20} As known, normally the Levinasian \textit{Autrui} (Other, capitalized) refers to the personal other, the concrete other, while \textit{autre} (other in lowercase) is for Levinas the other in a more general sense. The problem with Levinas’s style is that Levinas sometimes capitalized and sometimes did not capitalize the personal other. Furthermore, Annette Aronowicz, the translator into English of the Talmudic writings, has found that in these texts Levinas uses \textit{Autrui} and \textit{autre} interchangeably. In this regard, I have decided to use “the other” (in lowercase) in an attempt also to avoid a mystifying perception of the concrete other who suffers. The exception is direct quotations from Levinas’ texts.
compassion. Finally, in the conclusion I highlight how Levinas’s ethical responsibility and Metz’s political compassion have several points of contact. These points are governed by the idea that ethics and politics are not a theory but fundamentally a claim about praxis; that is, the question of truth and the question of justice are interrelated. Both Levinas’s ethics and Metz’s politics are a call for the human responsibility found in attending to concrete social circumstances.

Finally, it is important to note that in spite of utilising a theoretical approach, in writing this dissertation I have primarily had in mind the commitment of philosophy in the face of concrete reality. I was born, live and work as a lecturer in Colombia, a country which has suffered a conflict that has lasted for fifty years. This is a conflict that started politically with the formation of left-wing guerrillas at the end of the 1950s, animated by the Cuban revolution, and was exacerbated by inequalities and social injustices, particularly in the countryside. Then, during the 1980s, the problem of drugs arose, introducing new sources of funding for illegal armed groups to appear at the same time as new actors in the conflict, the paramilitary groups. In spite of the paramilitary groups having been demobilized and the guerrillas being in peace talks with the Government, the violence and its victims are the main problems Colombia currently contends with. In fact, according to the Colombian Centre for Historical Memory, from 1958 to 2012 the number murdered during the conflict exceeded 220,000 people, and the living victims during this period were approximately 177,000 people. From this perspective, I have always questioned myself as a philosopher, asking whether philosophy can ignore such realities and also whether philosophy can involve itself in any way in this problem. Theodor

Adorno once said in relation to Auschwitz that men will need to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz would not repeat itself, that nothing similar would happen. Is it possible to think from the perspective of victims? Is it possible that these victims can impact philosophy and also help transform concrete reality? In this dissertation I am thinking from out of these concerns, and starting to think is also starting to respond.
PART I: REASON
Chapter One

Levinas and “the Human Fiasco”

Introduction

On the eve of the First World War, the dream of a history inevitably developing towards its full realization was still in force. Humanity was witnessing a history in which it appeared that a homogenous, linear and continuous time was progressing towards a superior world. It seemed that the dream of Kant and Hegel was being accomplished. Kant’s and Hegel’s teleological perspective of history believed in progress towards a better world, that of “the kingdom of pure practical reason and its righteousness” (Kant), and the reign of the universal spirit ruled by reason (Hegel). Both philosophers were convinced that reason was the driving force of progress. However, the cannon fire of the First World War and the concentration camps of the Second seemed to indicate the opposite. Western reason had proved unable to stop the barbarism of war.

At the heart of the panorama of violence in the twentieth century, according to Emmanuel Levinas and Johann Baptist Metz, was the idealism of the Greek logos found in philosophical and theological modes of thinking. Levinas claims that theology is too theoretical and dogmatic, too universal, and is an accomplice, along with Greek philosophy, of the tragedies of the twentieth century. Metz, for his part, confesses his “terror of the logos of theology” that was capable of such indifference in relation to

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Auschwitz.\textsuperscript{24} Therefore, reason was not the means to a better life, but was rather responsible for, or an accomplice to, barbarism. From this perspective, theology and philosophy would share in the same idealist vocation towards totality which, in Levinas’s categories, is the forgetting of beings and their concrete situation in favour of universal Being. Levinas and Metz seek a different rationality: a rationality based on biblical categories, which have different priorities compared to those of Western reason. The fundamental biblical category is that of the “thirst for justice.” This is a rationality that offers the “first meaning” which emerges from the encounter with the other; and this first meaning is rational “according to a new reason.”\textsuperscript{25} This is the reason of being-for-the-other which brings into question the \textit{conatus essendi}, the perseverance in being. From this new reason it is possible to think singularity in history and to give room to the victims of history.

In line with this way of thinking, the purpose of the first chapter of this thesis is to discuss Levinas’s critique of philosophical rationality and the possibility of reclaiming an opportunity for reason from a different perspective in order to place contingency and singularity in history. I will show how by using Biblical and Talmudic sources, Levinas endeavours to think from a reasonable perspective, meaning with philosophical sense. In fact, this Biblical wisdom springs both from the history of suffering and from the prophetic spirit, which provides a new point from which to view history and the place of the victims in such history. The path which Biblical wisdom offers is a rationality that allows thinking from the perspective of the other human who suffers, and not from the autonomy of the knowing consciousness. Within this tradition, Levinas is responding to

\textsuperscript{25} Robbins and Levinas, \textit{Is it Righteous to Be?} 120.
the disappointments that mark the history guided by reason, and, subsequent to this, the victims of history gain greater significance.

The Cry of the Victims

Don Quixote is the protagonist of Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra’s novel titled “Don Quixote de la Mancha,” a masterpiece of the Spanish literature of the seventeenth century. Don Quixote is a man in his fifties who is convinced that he is a knight-errant and believes that enchanter try to impede his fighting in favour of the orphans and the needy. For Don Quixote, devils have taken possession of the world and reality is no more what it seems to be. Sancho, his loyal servant, tries to explain to the knight-errant that these devils are his friends, the curate and the barber, who, masked, carry him to the town tied up in a cage. For Sancho, in his master’s tragedy there is more malice than enchantment. Despite Sancho’s reason, Don Quixote responds

What you ought to understand and believe is, that, if they seem to be those you say, it must be, that they who have enchanted me, have assumed that appearance and likeness; for enchanter can easily take what form they please, and they may have taken that of our two friends, in order to make you think as you do, and involve you in such a labyrinth of imaginations, that you shall not be able to find your way out though you had Theseus’s clue. Besides, they may have done it to make me also waver in my judgement, and not be able to guess from what quarter this injury comes.26

In the Introduction to the Spanish version of Totality and Infinity, Levinas shows Don Quixote as the paradigm of a modern subject living in an enchanted world. According to Levinas, modernity is the world of the labyrinth of fancies without thread, amid faces that seem masks, with dubious understanding and without judgment on the causes of evil.27 The tragedy of Don Quixote is the tragedy of the modern world and its

27 Emmanuel Levinas, Totalidad e Infinito: Ensayo sobre la Exterioridad, trans. Daniel Guillot (Salamanca: Sígueme, 1977), 10
own enchantment. Reason, in fact, was enchanted by the fancies of an indefinite progress in which this reason would be able not only to lead a project of historical and social emancipation but also to realize its own mistakes in order to be able to overcome them by turning to its own intellectual tools. However, as Levinas notes, humans remained “part of a mechanism amid other mechanisms.”

Also present in this madness, according to Levinas, is the Cartesian cogito that marks idealism in modern philosophy. This cogito is the “I” enchanted and captive inside of itself and unable to go beyond its own consciousness. In this idealism, reason is equated with knowledge and enclosed within itself in a circle that makes the subject unable to escape from ontological solipsism.

The most dramatic manifestation of this modern tragedy was Auschwitz. Modern intelligence was submissive to totalitarian power and unable to stop the annihilation of human beings. This submission is clear in the case of Heidegger whose sympathy toward National Socialism was so disappointing for Levinas who viewed it “with the faint hope that it expressed only the temporary lapse of a great speculative mind into practical banality.”

However, Heidegger’s silence, even after the war, led Levinas to wonder: “doesn't this silence, in time of peace, on the gas chambers and death camps lie beyond the realm of feeble excuses and reveal a soul completely cut off from any sensitivity, in which can be perceived a kind of consent to the horror?”

Reason was unable to resist the propaganda and “the technologies of conditioning” which ended in the dehumanization of Europe. This tragedy occurred in modern, civilised and Christianised

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30 Ibid., 487.
Europe where reason was more preoccupied with its own capacity for self-determination and autonomous development, rather than hearing the cries of the victims.

Levinas’s preoccupation is shared by Metz, who also regrets Heidegger’s indifference to the catastrophe of humanity in Auschwitz and considers that the modern subject can easily fall prey to “dominant illusions.” Metz’s concept of dominant illusions has to do with the inherent contradiction that emerges when the subject who plans to control science and technology, ends up becoming controlled by them. The purpose of the Enlightenment points to making all men come of age as subjects in full use of their intellects, but this emancipation finishes in the dominance of technical-scientific reason. This aporia in modernity, according to Metz, leads to a new “planet-wide mechanism of dehumanization, regimentation and subservience.” The effect of this aporia is a subject who falls into a “second immaturity,” characterised by a loss of sense of reality, lack of consciousness of guilt and an allergy to the concept of universal responsibility. This is so because modern scientific rationality is marked by the dominative knowledge of nature, and in this view man understands himself anthropologically above all as the subject exercising control over nature. In this scenario, for Metz, the phenomenon of Auschwitz is easily forgotten by people in general and by Christians in particular. The question for Metz is not only where was God in Auschwitz? But also where was the human being in Auschwitz? How would it be possible to have faith in human beings after witnessing all that the human being was capable of doing in Auschwitz?

33 Ibid., 121.
In answering this question Metz and Levinas take a long intellectual journey. Both are convinced that another, yet still reasonable, way is possible to respond to these illusions of reason. This journey starts with the conviction that reason has to be saved by breaking the equivalence between reason and knowledge, by understanding rationality beyond knowledge, by looking for different priorities in thinking. If reason is enchanted, it has to be disenchanted. After hearing Sancho’s arguments in relation to his tragedy, Don Quixote responds:

I know, and I am very persuaded, that I am enchanted; and that is sufficient for the discharge of my conscience, which would be heavily burdened if I thought I was not enchanted, and should suffer myself to lie in this cage like a coward, defrauding the necessitous and oppressed of that succour I might have afforded them, when perhaps, at this very moment may be in extreme want of my aid and protection.35

Levinas points to the way Don Quixote endeavours to awaken reason: to hear the cry of the victims. According to Levinas there is no deafness that can ignore the cry of the needy, and from this perspective this cry is the way to achieve the disenchantment of reason: suffering forces the needy to shout until their cries break all enchantment. Furthermore, because philosophy, and its knowledge-inclined rationality, alone is unable to hear this suffering, the source of this endeavour is found in the lost part of Western spirit: Jewish wisdom. This wisdom springs both from the history of suffering and from the Biblical spirit, and it provides a new perspective regarding the social and the political. The path this wisdom offers is a rationality that allows thinking from the previous, meaning the other, and not from the autonomy of the conscience that is always in relation to being, that is, in relation to intelligibility. The conscience then has to be awakened and faced with its foundations: the nonquietude or the “shaking up of the Same by the

35 de Cervantes Saavedra, 483.
Despite the possibility that religious references could seem irrational to modern ears, and, as Levinas says, someone could “laugh a bit having the impression that I am delivering a sermon,” Levinas is convinced that the Bible is essential to thinking and that it is a call for analysis and research with social meaning.

**The temptation of the Western logos**

Turning to Levinas’s critique of Western thinking, it is worth emphasising how in spite of the two traditions that have delineated the spirit of Europe, the Greek *logos* and the inspiration of the Bible, Western thinking has devoted itself to the tradition that seeks lucidity and comprehension. However, Levinas wonders if lucidity does not consist precisely of catching sight of the possibility of war. In fact, the events of the twentieth century showed the insufficiency of “modern intelligence” to prevent the catastrophe, and even that it was committed to war and barbarism. Levinas’s thinking is profoundly marked by his personal experience of the horrors of a system that crushed human beings, hence his rejection of totality and his denunciation of ontology as violence inflicted on the other. The entire Western tradition is accused by Levinas of complicity with barbarism. This is so because philosophical humanism has centred on the subject’s freedom and therefore, in ontology, has finished in egoism and self-sufficiency in human relations, a blind spot revealed in the Hitlerian adventure in its most dramatic consequences. Levinas calls this historical experience a “human fiasco” which appears “to arise in the extension of a certain exaltation of the Same, of the Identical, of Activity, and of Being.”

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37 Robbins and Levinas, *Is it Righteous to Be?* 52.
38 Ibid., 49.
Philosophically the human fiasco, according to Levinas, shows an inherent *aporia*: the human subject feels himself to be the owner of his actions and decisions, defends freedom and rejects any exterior attempt of alienation. Everything in the subject’s life has to be assumed and reflected by rational consciousness; otherwise the subject could lose his own identity as a free and rational being. However, human reality is a constant limitation, a permanent risk of death, violence and war. In fact, a subject who feels himself owner of his acts, and therefore identifies with himself, collides with the reality of the limitedness of “being” human. To feel the power of control, man seeks to equate will with understanding, and therefore to give birth to meaning or significance. In this regard, only what is present before the subject would make sense, either by actual experience or by representable experience. Meaning is, then, linked to the “for me” of the subject. In fact, human conscience tends to grasp everything from the outside world and in this way subsumes the plural reality into its own consciousness. The final result of this perspective is an absolute thought in which will and understanding coincide with reason, that is “the knowledge of understanding, raising itself to Reason, stretches power [*puissance*] to the infinite and, with the philosophy of Hegel, claims to leave nothing else outside.”

This is the destiny of philosophy in the West, where the consciousness of the “I” is the consciousness of the all.

Similar to Nietzsche, Levinas is interested, above all, in the motivations and decisions underlying the usual way in which Westerners, formed in the tradition of Greco-Roman culture and Christianity, comprehend the world, society and themselves, and act in accordance with this self-understanding. Such understanding is egoistically dominated by the desire for power, and leads to the types of attitudes and behaviours of which the history of the twentieth century is witness. Therefore, Western philosophy is but the

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39 Levinas, *Of God who comes to Mind*, 44
theoretical counterpart of the violent history of the West, and particularly the events of
the twentieth century. “My critique of the totality,” says Levinas, “has come in fact after
a political experience that we have not yet forgotten.”

In this regard, it is also true that these extreme forms of violence are expressions of a
tradition that determines the whole Western horizon of history, and in this sense it also
determines much of the thoughts and behaviours of individuals in their ordinary, everyday
life. In fact, in the world that has witnessed the emergence of psychoanalysis, this “human
fiasco” is experienced in the ambiguity “between despair and frivolity.” In this sense,
the awareness of the limitedness of the human, on the one hand, and the exaltation of the
Same, on the other, lead to a subtle substitution of this limitedness for a frivolous
irresponsibility. Humans descend into the world of the Biblical “vanity of vanities” when
they try to mask their finite reality by substituting it for violence and power. To Levinas,
the masking of the crisis of meaning leads to a universal irresponsibility in which, as
Italian philosopher Orietta Ombrosi points out, “no one assumes responsibility for anyone
else anymore.” The human fiasco is essentiality the fiasco of the rationality of the Same,
the rationality stemming from the Greek logos.

By seeking lucidity, power, comprehension and knowledge, the Western logos is
always a “temptation,” a temptation into which Christianity and its Greek theology have
also fallen by trying to create a discourse on God. For Levinas it is time to try another
way to respond to the crisis of Western reason: a way that does not renounce reason, but
that guarantees a place for the other; a way that does not fall into irrationality, naivety and

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40 Emmanuel Levinas, Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo, trans. Richard Cohen,
41 Ibid., 48.
42 Orietta Ombrosi, L’umanit? ritrovato: Saggio su Emmanuel Levinas, (Genova: Marietti, 2010), 20.
Translation mine.
43 See Emmanuel Levinas, Nine Talmudic Readings, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana
emotionalism, but continues to be reasonable and philosophically defensible. As stated above, Levinas grounds the meaning of the social, of inter-human relationships, and therefore the meaning of the political, in a different rationality. This is “a novel rationality or one more ancient than the rationality of the solid earth ‘under the sun,’ that is, of positivity.” Furthermore, because the essential message of the Bible, according to Levinas, is responsibility for the other, reason can be separated from knowledge and the voice of the other can be heard by the Same. This is the only possible way to ensure a lasting peace and also to do justice to those who suffer and claim justice. The peace stemming from treatises of peace at the end of war rests on war, and in fact, “it does not restore to the alienated beings their lost identity. For that, a primordial and original relationship with being is needed.” This novel and, at the same time, ancient rationality stemming from the Bible allows Levinas to disenchant reason. This is the way to dissipate the brightness of lucidity and break the synchronism of the relationships between the Same and the other. Levinas’s philosophy stems from this essential derivative character of reason because prophetic reason, placed at the source of meaning, will allow the voices of suffering to be heard; voices which, so far, have not been heard by philosophy.

The light that dazzles the subject.

Philosophy has been unable to recognise the voice of the other because ontology, meaning most of the Western philosophical tradition, has carried out a reduction of the exterior world, including the other human, compressing it violently into the subject that thinks and knows. This is, for Levinas, the quintessence of the philosophical commitment to violence and war. In other words, the ground of violence is the theoretical movement

44 Levinas, Of God Who Comes to Mind, 49.
that goes from the I to the other to determine it and reconvert it into the Same. It is a movement that starts from the Same and ends in the Same, and in which the other is determined by the Same without the Same being determined by the other. This circular movement is the spirit of Western philosophy: a continuous turn on itself, a long process aimed at returning to the Same. If thought follows this circle, the worst could happen. Levinas personifies this spirit in the figure of Ulysses. Philosophy would be the Odyssey of a thought that continually returns to its native Ithaca. 46 Ulysses leaves his homeland retaining all his belongings and, at the end of his journey, returns to it by putting aside and marginalizing, through tricks and cunning, all external dangers that oppose his return. By overcoming these dangers he becomes a hero. Ontological totalisation is performed thanks to the violence which places the light at the centre of the triumphant subject and relegates what is different to the insignificant margins: “Philosophy’s itinerary still follows the path of Ulysses, whose adventure in the world was but a return to his native island - complacency in the Same, misunderstanding of the Other.” 47

One of the concepts that best describes the situation of the heroic subject dominated by the siren song of reason is that of intentionality. In fact, the phenomenological concept of intentionality, that is the ability to form representations, brings to an end the conception of the tradition in which the manifestation of being is the starting point of all sense. The term ‘ontology’ appears reiterative: every logos is a logos of being [l’être], and being is the light in which beings [l’étants] become intelligible. In fact, the bestowal of meaning requires a logos or noesis to make it possible for the

phenomenon to appear. In order for the thing to be shown, that is to be a phenomenon, as it is in its being, a light is necessary in which this thing is shown and that allows the shown to be seen. *Logos, sinngebung or noesis* acts precisely as the light that allows the seeing of what is shown. In this sense, they are the wellsprings of representation, which are no more than the process by which the things are shown as a phenomenon to a subject. Representation also unifies temporality in the present; it is the synchronic unification of time as presence thorough intentionality. Synchrony is the activity of the subject who recapitulates and judges.

Therefore, there is a risk present in the very basis of representation. In fact, to what extent does the light of *logos*, with its game of brightness and reflections, not dazzle, deforming what is shown, making it appear as what it is not? To what extent is what is shown deceiving and bewitching? The excess of light does not illuminate, but blinds. How to be sure that what appears in the light of the *logos* is not a mere appearance? In fact, all acts of appearing run the risk of being appearance, and appearance makes things appear as what they are not. Levinas describes bewitchment as this disturbing risk of failing to distinguish between appearance and appearing. The latent bewitchment of every phenomenon is essentially the difficulty of demarcating appearing from appearance, to the extent that every appearing is ultimately the result of a making-appearing. That is, all appearing is to appear under the work of a *noesis* or *logos*, meaning it is difficult to be sure of its genuine character. The doubt about the genuineness of that spectacle grows to the extent that the world itself is a spectacle that consciousness offers to itself, a spectacle that is not interrupted by any voice that tears the continuity of images. Is the world that is offered to consciousness really the world as it is, or it is the result of deceitful and deceptive enchantments? Basically, this is the problem of modernity and its search for absolute certainty.
In Totality and Infinity Levinas describes the enchantment of reason as a masking. Indeed, the chaotic world of appearances is a visible but silent world because nothing in it is true, and enchantment works as an imprisonment within a maze of uncertainties. The subject remains captive inside itself, unable to abandon the bewitched world created by its own self-sufficient consciousness. In this labyrinth, any connection with the human face is lost, and the face becomes a mask and appearance. Thus, interpersonal relationships become relationships with masked characters that hide the true face of the other. In this masking lies the possibility of violence. This is so because a subject who is consolidated in his world and unable to transcend pure being considers himself to be the giver of the meaning of the external world, including other human beings. The subject erected as a giver of meaning does not admit moral culpability. It feels itself lord and master of the world. In this regard, Peperzak points out that for a subject “limitations are experienced as provisional or as tragic features of human finiteness; it has immunized itself against the discovery of those resistances by which the human will is accused as unjust.”

In political terms, the most evident consequence of self-centred humanism is the totalitarianism of political systems “that certainly never abandons ethical language and has already spoken – and still speaks - of the good and the better... Fascism itself never admitted that it glorifies crime.” Reason, and its weak humanism, unveils through rhetoric its commitment to war and violence. From this perspective, politics belongs to the totalitarian perspective of ontology, the closed circle of the Same, that could culminate in violence because it ignores the cry that comes from the other. This is why “the art of foreseeing war and of winning it by every means – politics - is henceforth enjoined as the

48 Adriaan Peperzak, To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1993), 146
49 Robbins and Levinas, Is it Righteous to Be? 223.
very exercise of reason.”\textsuperscript{50} This opinion is not a hyperbolic resource to draw the attention of the readers. Levinas is talking from his own experience of the Second World War and the experience of the Jewish people. This is why war is a “harsh reality” in which is revealed the closeness between ontology and war. Regarding the \textit{aporia} between the real finitude and the affirmation of autonomy in human beings, Levinas shows that the political expression of this \textit{aporia} is the dream of obtaining “infinite power” which remains for man an \textit{“idée fixe.”}\textsuperscript{51} In this psychological condition, “a man thirsting for power, aspiring to his divinization”\textsuperscript{52} appears to be trying to dominate, and in this way hides his natural limitation. A deified man and his virile values, converted to a hero by the State, is therefore the prototype of the subject enclosed in itself and isolated.

Before exploring Levinas’s critique of Western rationality via biblical and Talmudic sources, it is worth hearing other contemporary voices in relation to the place of the Jewish-Christian heritage in philosophy. Particularly important in this regard are Jürgen Habermas and Gianni Vattimo, two of the most important post-metaphysical thinkers, who point to biblical categories to give meaning to vital human experiences that philosophy needs to declare itself insufficient to think.

\textbf{Habermas and Vattimo on the Jewish-Christian Heritage.}

German Philosopher Jürgen Habermas recognizes the filtering of Jewish and Christian ideas into philosophy and into post-metaphysical thinking through the medieval symbiosis of Greek philosophy with Christian and Jewish thinking.\textsuperscript{53} For Habermas, ideas such as subjective freedom and the demand for equal respect for all, including and

\textsuperscript{50} Levinas, \textit{Totality and Infinity}, 21.  
\textsuperscript{51} Levinas, \textit{Of God Who Comes to Mind}, 44.  
\textsuperscript{52} Levinas, \textit{Totality and Infinity}, 275.  
precisely for the alien in its particularity and difference, as well as the concept of liberation from demeaning conditions, come from Christian and Jewish backgrounds. Therefore, the call for a universal and inclusive fraternity in which philosophy is open is nourished by the communitarian life of Jewish-Christian religion.

Despite this philosophical openness to religious ideas, Habermas admits that the problem of suffering remains out of the dominion of philosophy. The culture of “regret” is extraneous to philosophy and “profane reason remains sceptical before the mystical causality of an act of remembrance inspired in salvific terms.”

This is because despite the porous frontier for semantic content between philosophy and religion, the borders between them remain firm. Therefore, according to Habermas, when facing the problem of suffering philosophy can use anamnestic reason for transcendence within immanence. That is, philosophy can provide a historic reflection about the unjust situation of the human condition to open space for values such as justice, solidarity and truth. Furthermore, language provides believers with the tools to share religious experiences and beliefs publicly and in rational terms. However, philosophy and communicative discourse are not able to provide the same strong hope which can be transmitted by religion. Habermas’s approach will be revisited in the sixth chapter in regard to the discussion he held with Metz on anamnestic rationality.

Another contemporary thinker giving religion, and particularly the Jewish-Christian tradition, an important place in philosophy is the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo. Vattimo is the initiator and most important exponent of the postmodern movement called pensiero debole (weak thought). Vattimo recognizes the crisis of the enlightened and positivist idea of life, meaning the exhaustion of the technical-scientific

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54 Ibid.
rationalization of life and politics. This crisis means the possibility of the return of religion to the philosophical arena. This epistemological weakness facilitates what Richard Rorty calls the “narrative turn,” which rescues poetry, narrative and religion. In fact, from Vattimo’s perspective, the rediscovery of religion happens in the moment of the dissolution of metaphysical meta-narratives and the unfolding of science and technology as supporting structures of modern society. The postmodern dissolution of objective truth in an infinite plurality of interpretations leads, from a religious perspective, to the acknowledgment of the human condition as dependent on someone else, meaning as a creature dependent on the creator.

By placing createdness as the centre of religious experience, Vattimo is in line with Friedrich Schelling’s and Friedrich Schleiermacher’s absolute dependence, meaning the perception that the fundament of all existing things is in the other. In Vattimo’s terms: “the ‘religious’ as an interruption of the ‘Other’ and as discontinuity in the horizontal course of history.”55 The experience of finiteness and contingency is in close relation with the feeling of guilt and acknowledgment of the inexplicability of evil from which the experience of forgiveness emerges. For Vattimo, “if religion today re-presents itself as a profound and also philosophically plausible need, this is due in part, indeed above all, to a general dissolution of the rationalistic certainties that have made the modern subject what it is.”56 In fact, the religious experiences (creatureliness, guilt, and forgiveness) cannot be expressed in rational and argumentative logic, but instead require a return to the Hebraic-Christian heritage, to the texts of the Old and New Testament. This return is

56 Ibid. 87.
hermeneutic, which is to say that these texts need interpretation and to be accepted by a community of interpreters without falling into objectivist affirmations.

Both Habermas and Vattimo rely on the figure of a God Who contracts Himself to allow the human to have a place in the world. While Habermas uses the Jewish *topos* of the *Tzimtzum* to save human freedom and responsibility, Vattimo uses the Pauline text of Philippians 2: 6-11 to explain the relation between weak ontology and kenotic incarnation, which gives way to a Jewish-Christian religion of humanistic commitment rather than a religion of strong metaphysical affirmations. In the case of Habermas, he refers in his early writings to the Kabbalistic theme of the *Tzimtzum* developed by the mystic Isaac Luria, according to which God withdraws Himself to make way for creation, and particularly to a free man. That is, God limits Himself, hides Himself or makes Himself absent in order to enable human freedom. This absence will be felt in human history and explains the longing for the absolute other. Habermas makes a rational translation of this mystical place in the following terms: as God indicated with his withdrawal, there is no freedom without autonomy. If God is absent, the responsibility for the injustices of this world that God hates is man’s; there is no way of reconciling human freedom with the active presence of God.57

From the perspective of the weak thought, Vattimo considers God’s presence as the trace of the Creator who retires Himself to make way for the creature. From Vattimo’s perspective there is a relation between God’s kenotic appearance in history and the post-metaphysical thinking of the contingency of Being. Put in other words, there is a relation between weak ontology and incarnation. He refers to the Pauline text of Philippians:

But emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.  

To Vattimo, this kenotic abasement and self-emptying of God mean the presence of a friendly and loving God Who offers and presents Himself in weakness to the world. In this way, he criticizes the access to God via pathos as Protestantism, Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Dostoyevsky do. One of the consequences of this relation between weak ontology and incarnation is the breaking of the strong metaphysical affirmations in theology which tend towards violent imposition. Via a reading of the French anthropologist Rene Girard’s violence of the sacred, Vattimo wants to purify the Judeo-Christian religion of strong metaphysical claims and return to a religion of humanizing work: work that is critical of the historical situation, and committed to its salvation. Some critics have however highlighted Vattimo’s neglect of the problem of evil and suffering, thereby overlooking an important perspective in the Jewish-Christian religion. This presence of the other who suffers is what Levinas tries to rescue from the ontologization of philosophy and theology.

The prior order

In the 1964 Talmudic commentary The Temptation of Temptation, Levinas considers how to discover “the prior order to the one in which a thought tempted by temptation is to be found;” that is, an order in which philosophy would lose its fundamental character. Levinas is not considering the uselessness of Greek philosophy, which might be suggested by a superficial reading of the text. In fact, he acknowledges throughout his work that Greek philosophical thought has delineated, along with the Bible, the spirit of the West. The problem posed in this analysis is the uni-directionality

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58 Phil. 2:7-8 New Revised Standard Version.
59 Levinas, Nine Talmudic Readings, 36
of philosophical thought as knowledge, that is, as the understanding and assimilation of being. Levinas is convinced that Jewish wisdom provides a framework to think about the social from a different perspective. This perspective is born in and is enriched by the message of the Bible and the Talmud. This is because the Bible “breathe[s] differently,” that is it is not interested in lucidity and knowledge, but in justice and peace. The importance of these values is testified historically in the facts of 1968, when all Western values were “contested as bourgeois… all except one: the other.”

As has been stated above, the problem of Western thinking is the relationship between knowledge and understanding, and therefore the consideration of the subject as the centre of meaning. The subject, according to Levinas, is driven by curiosity, the desire to prove, and exploration. Hence, everything has to be proved, seen, and experienced in order to be true. In this movement, the ego, isolated and without engagements, turns to itself and recognises itself as test of the true. Because its relationship with the world is through vision and knowledge, philosophy, according to Levinas, “will no longer leave the other in its otherness but will always include it in the whole,” and he concludes that “from this stems the inability to recognise the other person as other person, as outside all calculation, as neighbour, as first comer.”

Before continuing with the analysis of the Talmudic text mentioned above, it is worth underlining the philosophical relevance of the Talmudic commentaries, as Levinas himself claims: “a Talmudic text is an intellectual struggle and courageous opening unto even the most irritating questioning.” In using these texts, it is not my intention to address the complexities of Levinas's use of philosophy and Talmud, but rather to

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62 Ibid., 4.
acknowledge the philosophical mark present in the commentaries which contain philosophically relevant experiences and problemata. In Levinas’s terms: “[i]f the Talmud is not philosophy, its tractates are an eminent source of those experiences from which philosophies derive their nourishments.” In fact, the commentaries are not religious exercises such as a meditation or a sermon performed within a liturgy, but a rational exposition of the Jewish texts in order to illuminate social problems in a double movement. As Annette Aronowicz says: “they are simultaneously an attempt at letting the Jewish texts shed light on the problems facing us today and an attempt at letting modern problems shed light in the texts.”

In this regard, I distance myself from interpretations such as Richard Cohen’s Levinasian Meditations which claims that there is really no difference in content between his religious and philosophical writings, “the only difference between these two sorts of writings is not in what Levinas says, but in who he says it to.” I also take issue with Levinas scholars who ignore the Talmudic commentaries as being philosophically irrelevant, or radically separate both types of writings. Rather, I take the path of scholars like Catherine Chalier and Ephraim Meir who recognise the differences but also the profound relation between them. Chalier, for example, states that the fact that Levinas uses different publishers for his philosophical and religious writings “should not lead us to think that Jewish sources were foreign to his philosophy or that his questioning of the Hebrew word remained free of all contamination by Greek influences.” In the same vein, Meir concludes that “Levinas’s Jewish and philosophical writings are therefore

63 Ibid.
65 Richard A. Cohen, Levinasian Meditations: Ethics, Philosophy, and Religion (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 2010), 220
interdependent – they clarify each other.”67 In commenting on the Talmudic texts, Levinas wants to recall to Western rationality what it has lost: sensitivity to the other’s suffering.

Turning to the Talmudic commentary extracted from the Tractate Shabbath, 88a and 88b, it is worth noting that Levinas’s purpose is to explore an alternative path, in which knowledge, that is, the “temptation of temptation,” ceases to have priority in human relationships; or as he says, to establish “the relation between being and knowing in another way.”68 There is a way in which the voice of the other could be heard and recognised. This path should overcome the above-mentioned aporia: the consciousness of human limitations and the exaltation of the Same that leads to irresponsibility in relation to the other. By following this way, Levinas challenges the tradition that considers everything outside philosophical knowledge as naive and childish. In fact, the text of the Talmud could be seen as part of the profession of faith without being weighted in philosophical thinking. But Levinas is convinced that knowledge does not exhaust the notion of reason and that some other reasonableness is still possible to find beyond the temptation of temptation.

The Talmudic passage in question refers to a Jewish milestone: the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai after the departure from Egypt. Levinas starts by wondering whether the Torah has been given by God to the Jewish people under the threat of death, and therefore questions the place of freedom in accepting the Law. This concern stems from Rav Abdimi bar Hama bas Hasa’s words referring to Exodus 19:17: “if you accept the Torah, all is well, if not, here will be your grave.”69 Is there still freedom when one

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68 Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 32
69 Ibid., 37
chooses responsibilities? This seems to be the cornerstone of the whole problem of being Jewish. The acceptance of the Torah is the acceptance of responsibility for the other; a responsibility established prior to the possibility of choosing between freedom or non-freedom. The Torah cannot come to the human being “as a result of a choice,” because the Torah is received “in order to make freedom possible.” Levinas complements this assertion by establishing a difference between Revelation and philosophical reason: the latter functions through internal adherence as a result of evidence, the former precedes freedom and therefore precedes freedom of thought. Nevertheless using Levinas’s insight, reason could rest either in violence or in a mode of consent prior to the alternative between freedom and non-freedom. The first possibility was chosen by the political systems that committed the atrocities of the twentieth century. To re-establish trust in reason it will be necessary to re-discover its lost part, which rests upon the infinite responsibility of man for the other, as taught by the Torah.

The Talmudic text recalls then the Megillah, the events of Esther, a Jewish woman who became Queen of Persia and who saved her people from Hamans’s genocidal plan. Levinas draws attention particularly to Raba’s affirmation: “they nonetheless accepted it in the time of Ahasuerus, for it is written (Esther 9:27): ‘the Jews acknowledged and accepted. They acknowledge what they accepted.’” The Torah was therefore accepted by the people, “after Jewish history has been lived,” in the hard times of King Ahasuerus. Jewish people assumed the Law not during the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai, but ten centuries after it, during the persecution planned by Haman. What does this fact mean? Two meanings come to light from this text according to Levinas. In the first place, the threat of death does not suggest the imposition of the Law through violence,

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70 Ibid.
71 Ibid., 38
72 Ibid., 39
but stands for its exposure to being, meaning exposure to violence, which the Law opposes. This is because the Law dwells within fragile human nature, which does not respond adequately to the mission given in the Law. The event of Haman, the noble who conspired to kill all the Jews in the Persian Empire under King Ahasuerus, has attested to the danger to which the Torah was exposed. But, if the Torah has been exposed to the danger of violence, it is also the way “to break the block of being stupidly sufficient unto itself.” This is why in *Totality and Infinity* Levinas wonders “is the subject only a subject of knowings and powers? Does it not present itself as a subject in another sense?”

The problem of philosophy is precisely that it has made the subject “stupidly sufficient unto itself.” The Torah also brings to light a connection between Law and Creation that emphasises an ethical order prior to the logical order of philosophy. This means an ethical order to which Creation is subordinated. This is attested by Resh Lakish’s words:

> What does the verse (Genesis 1:31) mean: ‘Evening came, then morning, it was the sixth day’? The definite article is not necessary. Answer: God has established a covenant with the words of the Beginning (with the Real called to come forth): If Israel accepts the Torah, you will continue to exist, if not I will bring you back to chaos.  

The ethical meaning of the Law is essentially related to the event of creation. In fact, creation is the place to realize the Torah; the world is the place in which the ethical order can be fulfilled. The second consequence of the acceptance of the Torah advances this affirmation further.

The second consequence of Levinas’s interpretation of Rabas’s words is something more anti-logical: the acceptance of the Torah before the alternative between

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73 Ibid.  
74 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 276  
75 Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 41
freedom and non-freedom is equivalent to doing before hearing, meaning the acceptance of the Torah before knowing it, or acting before understanding. This assertion refers to Rav Sinai’s words: “When the Israelites committed themselves to doing before hearing, 600,000 angels came down and attached two crowns to each Israelite, one for the doing, the other for the hearing.” Even though the affirmation of doing before hearing could seem to be blind faith or childish trust, Levinas wonders if this is not the model of any inspirational act in which “it only now recognizes its model, never glimpsed before.” Furthermore, this is the way Jewish wisdom goes beyond the temptation of temptation, and this is an adult effort. For Levinas, adulthood opposes the blind acceptance of religious messages for virtue of ignorance or emotivism. The adult effort in pursuing the understanding of the Torah is an echo of the 1957 talk titled “A Religion for Adults,” in which, among others things, Levinas recalls the intellectual effort that drives Judaism and therefore Jewish monotheism. For example, thanks to this closeness between the Torah and intellectual effort, the Maimonidean synthesis between revelation and philosophy was possible. Closeness, however, does not mean equality. In fact, this inverted order is opposed to the one in which philosophy functions.

To illustrate once more the way in which philosophy and history function, Levinas falls back on Rav Hama bar Hanina’s phrase which compares Israel’s commitment to doing before hearing with an apple tree in which “fruits precede leaves.” In the order of Western logic, particularly that of Hegel, the fruit dialectically opposes the seeds and flowers. They chronologically precede the fruit. The Talmudic idea of fruits preceding leaves is essential for the order of doing before hearing. In this order the fruits are always

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76 Ibid., 42
77 Ibid.
79 Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 45
already there, for eternity. However, to Western ears this idea sounds illogical. The objection raised by a Sadducee to Raba points in this direction: is not this idea a hasty conclusion?

Raba places the answer to the Sadducee again in the order of Revelation: “It is written about us who walk in integrity: ‘the integrity of the upright guides them’; about those who walk upon tortuous paths, it is written: ‘the crookedness of the treacherous destroys them [Proverbs 11:3]”

Levinas’s conclusion is forceful: integrity, more than a norm of conduct, is a norm of knowledge, and therefore the subject “made for the true would enter into alliance with it prior to any manifestation of this truth in an idea.”

Therefore, if the fruit of the Torah is the good, meaning an undeniable responsibility for the other, it is understandable that the prior order reveals the deep order of subjectivity. The subject is no longer free and autonomous; in this order it is engaged to the other with an engagement prior to any free decision. The face of the other is the place where the Torah reaches its deep meaning. In this context, it is also clear why for Levinas some aspects of Greek philosophy can be called “biblical,” particularly Plato’s good beyond being, because “[t]here is something divine in the advent of a human being able to think of others before himself.”

Conclusion: Reason in the service of responsibility.

Levinas proposes an evasion of ontological universalism in philosophy in order to propose a more fundamental prior order. That is, Levinas is not denying the necessity of theory and discourse in philosophy. Rather he seeks to establish an order in which ontology loses its pretension to be a source of meaning, and therefore loses also its

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80 Ibid., 47
81 Ibid.
prerogative to have the last word on the meaning of being. Similarly, knowledge that has an immediate reference to being loses its ultimate or fundamental character and the origin of meaning is referred instead to “otherwise-than-being.” As Tina Chanter affirms “Levinas seeks not to displace knowing as such, only to divest us of our tendency to assume that objectivity offers the ultimate transcendence, and to affirm that justice is ‘the condition for knowing’” 83

For Levinas, the meaning and purpose of philosophy are defined not so much by the achievement of truth as by the accomplishment of responsibility in a context defined by justice in relation to the victims of human tragedies. In fact, the “temptation” of universalization in philosophy and theology has ignored the contingency and particularity of individuals, reducing reality to a universal being. This universal being dwells in the closed circle of the Same which controls the meanings of the external world. Furthermore, as will be shown in the next chapter, Metz believes that modern reason and Christianity suffer from the same wrong: the halving of the spirit. The lost part of modern rationality is the spirit of responsibility stemming from biblical categories. This ignorance of the Biblical spirit has produced an insensitivity to the cry of those who suffer and the turning of deaf ears to the claims of universal justice. The predominance of Greek reason has led Christianity to fall into an “idealistic,” “Platonic” or “rational” reason, and therefore towards an indifference in relation to historical suffering.

Levinas and Metz agree that reason must be woken up by emphasising the hidden elements of European thought represented in biblical thought and in the role that marginal and suffering figures play in Jewish wisdom. These roots emphasise the cry of those who

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suffer as a hermeneutical tool to awaken reason. Marked by the fracture of Western civilisation in Auschwitz, Levinas and Metz focus on the consequences of the Western mode of thinking in history, particularly regarding the victims of such history. They maintain a line of resistance against the barbarism, despair, and nihilism that took control of history and culture in Europe in the twentieth century. In responding to Philippe Nemo´s question about the significance of his proposal, Levinas affirms

I mean to say that a truly human life cannot remain life satis-fied in its equality to being, a life of quietude, that is awakened by the other, that is to say, it is always getting sobered up, that being is never—contrary to what so many reassuring traditions say—its own reason for being, that the famous conatus essendi is not the source of all right and all meaning.

Because the singular experience of the defeated and victims are also lost in history, this singularity needs to be saved. This salvation will be possible only by turning to the biblical categories of messianism, apocalypse and eschatology, as will be developed in the next two parts of this thesis. These categories will allow the subject to take responsibility for the other who suffers and asks for justice in the heart of history. For Levinas and Metz the cry of the victims breaks the enchantment of a self-centred reason, and reverts being to the being-for-me in being-for-the-other.

84 Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 122.
Chapter Two

Metz and the “terror of the logos of theology”\textsuperscript{85}

Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that Levinas’s philosophical critique of theology criticizes its tendency to focus on discourse about God and to forget the concrete situations of human beings. Contrary to Heidegger, Levinas’s forgetting is the forgetting of beings in favour of Being. In fact, Western thought, that is philosophy and theology, has been the understanding of Being as the fundament of beings. As a foundation of beings, Being is understood as God. In this way, theology is the “knowledge or comprehension of God.”\textsuperscript{86}

Furthermore, because theology is always the intellectual knowledge of God, biblical responsibility for the concrete suffering of man appears as derivative and not as original. Theology would be affected by the universalism of Greek philosophy, following the same pattern of intellectual access to the object of knowledge. For Levinas, in Michael Purcell’s words, theology is “too theoretical, too dogmatic, too divorced from the actuality of the ethical encounter with the other.”\textsuperscript{87}

Levinas’s critique regarding the theoretical character of philosophy and theology is shared by Metz. The German theologian also regrets Heidegger’s indifference in relation to Auschwitz and his ontology which, empty of concrete men, led him to speak about humanism “without even remembering such a catastrophe with one word.”\textsuperscript{88} In relation to theology, Metz wonders why “one sees and hears so little in our theology of

\textsuperscript{85} This is Metz’s expression in Metz, A Passion for God, 3-4.
\textsuperscript{86} Emmanuel Levinas, God, Death, and Time, 123.
\textsuperscript{87} Michael Purcell, “Is Theology Fundamental?” 133.
\textsuperscript{88} Johann Baptist Metz, Por una cultura de la memoria, trans. José Ma. Ortega (Barcelona: Anthropos, 1999), 90.
such catastrophe, or of the whole history of human suffering. “He claims that Christian theology needs new horizons because during its history, Hellenistic philosophy has taken the place of the Jerusalemite roots. In this way, the Western world has lost the culture of appreciation of the singular and contingent, and therefore the culture of the response to injustices and the commitment with the weak and forgotten in history. That is, history in which suffering cannot be idealistically explained but rather can only be remembered with a practical intention.

In this chapter, I will discuss Metz’s interest in overcoming the universalism of theological thinking by turning to biblical categories in which the encounter with the other who suffers becomes the cornerstone of his political theology. I will show the initial influence on Metz of his teacher Karl Rahner, and then of Ernst Bloch and the Frankfurt School, which allow Metz to turn from transcendental to political theology. In fact, the encounter with Bloch and the other thinkers of the Frankfurt School allows Metz to overcome the thinking of Being by confronting theology with the concrete reality of human suffering. Furthermore, the appreciation of practical theology and his concern with the subject led Metz to evaluate the place of this subject in the modern world, focusing particularly on the cultural situation of Europe after the event of Auschwitz and the consequences of the Enlightenment for the configuration of subjectivity in modern world. Finally, I conclude that in spite of having different interlocutors and following different paths in their projects, Levinas and Metz share the same concern: how to overcome universalism by means of a rationality sensitive to contingency and singularity. For both thinkers, theology and philosophy have to leave behind this universalism which is alien

89 Metz, A Passion for God, 3.
to human situations and apathetic in the face of the catastrophes of history, particularly the victims of Auschwitz in the twentieth century.

**Rahner and the Anthropological Turn.**

Modernity has raised several challenges to the Christian world. The most relevant are: the separation between society and religion and the concomitant privatization of faith; the critique of tradition and authority; and finally the so-called “turn to the subject,” that is, from the religiously dependent subject towards an autonomous and self-sufficient human being. This is why the standard version of the relationships between modernity and Christianity was that of mutual exclusion, at least until the Second Vatican Council. As Geffré and Jossua point out

Western Christianity sought to be resolutely anti-modern where it felt that Enlightenment reason had undermined the authority of revelation and tradition and where the advent of democratic societies was a direct challenge to the hierarchical principle of the church as a society.\(^{90}\)

This situation has led some theologians to seek new methods to present God to the secularized world, and to defend the conceptual basis of the Christian world before the increasingly adverse cultural and intellectual environment born in the Enlightenment. Two movements appear relevant in this defense: the Catholic Tübingen School, from the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries, and Neo-Scholasticism, during the late nineteenth century until the mid-twenty century. While the Catholic Tübingen School carried out its defense through a critical dialogue with modernity from the perspective of philosophy and science themselves, Neo-Scholasticism attempted a dialogue which delved into traditional Thomism, an approach that was highly appreciated in the official

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Catholic spheres at that time. The Neo-Scholastic apologetics resulted in a defense of
dogmatic faith and therefore “raised a protective wall around catholic dogmatic theology
to defend it against historical, philosophical and general scientific questions that attacked
it.”91

As Ashley outlines, Metz’s “philosophical and theological apprenticeship took
place during this last spasm of Neo-Thomism before the birth of a Catholic theology freed
from ecclesial constraints and open to modernity.”92 In this sense, it is also worth noting
that the major influence on Metz’s theologizing came from Rahner’s transcendental-
idealism. For Metz these two models, the Neo-Scholastic and the transcendental-
idealistic, are different theological paradigms. In fact, while the conservative-Scholastic
paradigm was an attempt to return to the mediaeval corpus christianorum, bound by a
Catholicism isolated from the modern world, the Rahnerian model sought to engage in
discussion with modernity “from the heritage of the classical patristic and scholastic
traditions”93 in conversation with Kant, Heidegger and German idealism. Metz starts his
theologizing in the fifties under Rahner’s transcendental theology and remains in it until
his encounter in the sixties with the Marxism of the Frankfurt School and his concomitant
project to raise awareness of the significance of victims for theology.

Rahner’s influence on Metz is clear, for instance in his theological dissertation,
supervised by the same Rahner, Christliche Anthropozentrik. Über die Denkform des
Thomas von Aquin.94 Published in 1962, this work focuses on the anthropocentric
character of Thomas’s thought, differentiating it from the cosmocentric model of Greek
thought. For Metz, Thomas is the first Christian thinker who situates Christian revelation

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91 Metz, Faith in History and Society, 19.
92 Ashley, Interruptions, 41.
93 Metz, A Passion for God, 32.
in anthropocentric forms and categories of thought rather than in cosmo-centric ones.\textsuperscript{95} In Metz’s view, Thomas’s material principle of anthropology is the intrinsic embodiedness of the human being, which means “that human spirit does not produce or possess itself absolutely; its self-realization is always enacted within the context of a prior situation in which it finds itself.”\textsuperscript{96} Metz’s Thomas is therefore a modern thinker who was able to situate human beings in a material world, not only in the formal spiritual sphere. Due to this anthropocentric character of Thomas’s philosophy, he is, in Metz’s view, the father of modern philosophy, and not Descartes. This interest in man and his material conditions has remained important for Metz in the later developments of his theological career.

Rahner’s turn to the subject is present not only in Metz’s reading of Thomas, but also in the anthropological commitment of Metz’s entire theological career. In fact, in his last book Metz confesses: “My theological allegiance to Karl Rahner takes roots in the affirmation of the ‘anthropological turn’ of the Christian discourse about God.”\textsuperscript{97} In line with Joseph Maréchal’s transcendental Thomism, Rahner’s anthropological turn is an attempt to exit from the initial dogmatism of the Neo-Thomism that characterizes the theological approach to modernity. By introducing Heideggerian existential anthropology into classical Thomism, Rahner moves towards a model of subject and historicity “understood as an existential dimension of that ‘subject’.”\textsuperscript{98} That is, Rahner departs from dogmatism and attempts to dialogue with modernity by reading Thomas’s philosophy and theology under the gaze of his teacher Heidegger and by using Kant’s transcendental method. In fact, in Heidegger’s existential anthropology, or analytic of the human, Being [Sein] is revealed through the transcendental appearing; the truth of the

\textsuperscript{95} See Ashely, Interruptions, 41
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{97} Johann Baptist Metz, Mystik der offenen augen. Wenn spiritualität aufbricht (Freiburg: Herder, 2011), 177.
\textsuperscript{98} Gaspar Martinez, Confronting the Mystery of God: Political, Liberation, and Public Theologies (New York: Continuum, 2001), 216.
Being [Sein] of beings [Seindes] is not therefore specified in certain contents and structures but in the continuous doing of the historical consciousness according to the variable components of existential factors operating in the temporal situation. This Heideggerian philosophical position provides the key to Rahner’s turning point in theology: human subjectivity as the foundation of being, reveling in the hermeneutics of divine revelation.

Therefore, in Rahner’s view, transcendental anthropology does not mean the displacement of God because theology is at the same time theocentric. Anthropocentrism and theocentrism are reconciled in man’s openness to the world and to God at the same time. The purpose of Rahner’s second work, Hearers of the World, is precisely to “work out a transcendental anthropology based on man’s potential ability to respond to God’s revelation in and through the world.”

In so doing, Rahner, under the influence of Heidegger, claims that the transcendence of knowledge is the basic constitution of man as spirit. In affirming this relationship, Rahner summarizes what had already been claimed in Spirit in the World, that is, “that being and knowing are primordially unified as self-presence (Bei-sich-sein).” This interrelation between being and knowing points to the interrelatedness in man between man’s acting in the world, his making as historical subject, and his openness to the infinity in the horizon of space and time (nature and history).

Moreover, Rahner establishes a parallel between the structure of human knowing and the structure of man. In the case of knowing, this structure shows an oscillation between the horizon of all being and the sensible singular; and in the case of man, between

100 Ashley, Interruptions, 74.
God and the categorial world. In this panorama, history is the scenario in which man receives and obeys revelation in the world. That is, man’s attitude is that of looking “to the world for a possible ‘hearing of God’s revelation’”\textsuperscript{101} Historicity is therefore based on a \textit{priori}: man’s natural religious knowledge. In fact, Rahner claims that

historicity in the \textit{human} sense… only exists where freedom actually manifests itself within a context of free persons with all their diversity. This means in a world (in space and time) in which intelligible acts of freedom, in order to be realized, must be extended in space and time, in which they need spatio-temporality in order to exist themselves.\textsuperscript{102}

Rather than a succession of events, history is therefore an expression of the freedom of the spirit. This spiritualized perspective on history is based on Thomas’s hylomorphism in which the spatio-temporal existence is that of the spirit shaping matter. The final purpose of history is the reunification of spirit and matter, made possible by God’s revelation in the world. Influenced by Heidegger’s \textit{Dasein} as being-in-the-world, Rahner places man in the world but in a more spiritualized way than Heidegger does. In doing so, Rahner takes the side of transcendental Thomism in his most scholastic viewpoint. That is, the spiritual component of man in the world becomes central for Rahner. In this sense, Rahner writes, “[t]hus, man is the mid-point suspended between the world and God, between time and eternity, and this boundary line is the point of his definition and his destiny: “as a certain horizon and border between the corporal and incorporeal.””\textsuperscript{103} Metz finally felt unsatisfied with Rahner’s ahistorical subject. In relation to history it is also worth mentioning Metz’s dissatisfaction with Heidegger. As Ashley points out “Metz is worried about how Heidegger’s understanding of the temporality of \textit{Dasein} relates to concrete history.”\textsuperscript{104} In this sense, Metz questions the absence in

\textsuperscript{101} Johns, \textit{Man in the World}, 37.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 407.
\textsuperscript{104} Ashley, \textit{Interruptions}, 63.
Heidegger of any concrete relation of history to “the specific histories of interactions between persons.” In relation to Heidegger and Rahner, Metz questions the “historicity” of the human being as a “formalized existential,” which prevented history from accessing the core of theology.

Metz ended up convinced that Thomism and Neo-Scholasticism, Rahner included, were not the correct ways to carry on the controversy regarding ideas or theoretical systems in modernity. In the past, when metaphysical thinking was predominant and when the religious character of man was taken for granted, theology preoccupied itself with the theoretical foundations of Christianity and the clarification of its own dogmas. However, this way of thinking, according to Metz, is no longer possible today. These theoretical foundations had also been insufficient to respond to the new challenges of the world, meaning the epistemological challenge of Marxism, which considers that all knowledge is bound by interest, the crisis of modernity in Auschwitz, and the relations of Europe with the Third World.

These challenges can be properly addressed by a new paradigm in theology that overcomes idealism by being closer to the concrete history of human beings. This new paradigm is the political theology which is theoretically closer to philosophy and ethically more responsible before the historical suffering of victims. As Martinez outlines, “the catastrophes in history, the real presence of evil, and the experiences of discrimination, systemic injustice, and radical ambiguity are the challenges that function as the loci theologici of post-Rahnerian theologies, particularly Metz’s theology. In this way,

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105 Ibid., 83.
107 Martinez, *Confronting the Mystery of God*, 216-17.
Metz moves away from the Rahnerian view of God as mystery to uncover God’s countenance in the face of those who suffer. Metz’s preoccupation about the concrete face of suffering and its relation with subjectivity will be retaken in the sixth chapter when speaking about theodicy.

Before looking in greater detail at the relationship between modernity, the dissolution of the subject and the death of God, I will take a look at the influence of Ernst Bloch in Metz’s turning towards political theology. Metz’s dialogue with Bloch will be further developed in chapter six from a theodical perspective. Sufficient for now is to emphasize in what follows how Bloch helps Metz to understand Christianity from a new perspective that moves away from transcendental theology.

**Ernst Bloch and the Turn to Political Theology**

Metz’s encounter in the sixties with the Frankfurt School and Jewish thought, particularly with Ernst Bloch’s and Walter Benjamin’s works, was critical for Metz’s more practical approach to theology and his turning towards political theology. In fact, this encounter with the thinkers of the Frankfurt School awoke in Metz new concerns in relation with concrete reality in which theology is done, and particularly taught him the presence of the concrete victims and the demand for responsibility and justice. From a philosophical point of view, this new approach meant also the transition from the thought of Being towards “Bloch and Benjamin, to the School of Frankfurt, and, in stemming from that and going beyond it, to Jewish thought and the Messianic wisdom of Judaism.”

Among the thinkers of the Frankfurt School, Bloch plays a genealogical role in Metz’s turning to political theology. In fact, Bloch was the first of the philosophers of

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the Frankfurt School Metz encounters, and the one who awoke Metz’s interest in categories like utopia, future, hope, and eschatology, and particularly to the Bible as a narrative of the relations between God and a particular people. T. R. Peters speaks about Bloch as “the true birth attendant [Geburtschilfe]”\textsuperscript{109} of the birth of Metz’s theology. Metz met Ernst Bloch for the first time in 1963 in the Academy of Weingarten where they were invited to reflect on the theme “The Future of Man.” After this first meeting, they participated in different academic encounters in Germany. Regarding these encounters Metz confesses: “Bloch was, I think, taken with the way I asked questions, although the people were surprised at the way in which Metz ‘went after’ Bloch.”\textsuperscript{110} They maintained a close friendship and constant communication until Bloch’s death in 1977.\textsuperscript{111}

Bloch’s philosophy of the future contains an anthropology that sees man as "utopian," as someone who "daydreams". From Bloch’s perspective, "utopia" is not merely an ideal but is conceived as a "function," as a form of knowledge of reality, as an ontology "of the not-yet been [das Noch-nicht-geweseme]," and in this way is part of the essential structure of man. In this sense, Bloch looks for a transcending without transcendence, a consideration of religion in which “hope” makes sense. Religion provides the symbols and narratives which articulate the “more" for which we yearn and struggle in history, a “more” which is found not beyond history but before history and as Ashley affirms, “in front of us, awaiting our hope-inspired praxis for its irruption in our present."\textsuperscript{112} That is, the otherworldly hope of religion becomes a concrete worldly utopia

\textsuperscript{109} Tiemo Rainer Peters, Johann Baptist Metz und die Theologie des vermißten Gottes (Mainz: Grunewald, 1998), 38
\textsuperscript{110} Ekkehard Schuster and Reinhold Bochert-Kimmig, Hope against Hope: Johann Baptist Metz and Elie Wiesel Speak Out on the Holocaust (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 19
\textsuperscript{111} See, Johann Baptist Metz, Unterbrechungen. Theologische-politische Perspektiven und Profile (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Mohn, 1981), 58-69.
\textsuperscript{112} Ashely, Interruptions, 104.
by making the religious spes, often blind, in docta spes, meaning a "comprehended hope" which is based on reason and is the stimulus of concrete utopia.

In a certainly paradoxical way an atheist thinker like Bloch provides Metz with an understanding of the potential power of liberation of the biblical narratives. Metz understands through Bloch that the Bible contains the categories to oppose, as Martinez remarks, “any kind of injustice” and to “confront the issues of justice and solidarity in relation to Christianity.” Metz now understands the Bible as centrally preoccupied with resistance to socially caused suffering and as eschatological impulse; and faith is now prophetic, meaning it has a historical and social character. In modernity, faith can make sense “by defining itself as a transformative praxis on the horizon of eschatological future created by the reality of a ‘God before us,’ who is at the base of Christian hope.” Put in other words, Bloch initially, and then Benjamin and Adorno, provide Metz with the categories to overcome transcendental theology, and to transform the manner in which he comprehends Christianity. Theology is transformed from transcendental to critical, that is, a theology that look closely to history and society. This negative theology is intimately linked with a history viewed from the margins, from the standpoint of the oppressed, and injured. This perspective is critical of the ideology of progress and reveals Metz’s interest in “deprivatizing” Christian faith, “which means bringing its resources to bear on the social and political milieu that is an inalienable dimension of the individual.”

Furthermore, Bloch is the start of Metz’s contact with Jewish scholars who, irrespective of being believers or nonbelievers, were all marked by the constitutively Jewish character of thinking as memory and narrative. This contact has led Metz to hold

113 Martinez, Confronting the Mystery of God, 47.
114 Ibid., 50.
115 Ashley, Interruptions, 102.
up the essentially Jewish character of Christianity and to articulate his radical eschatology. Metz recognizes Bloch’s influence when writing the "Noncontemporaneous Theses on the Apocalyptic View."¹¹⁶ The theses "also constitute my own special tribute to the late Ernst Bloch and his apocalyptic wisdom, a vision that he inherited from the Jewish traditions that have for too long been closed to Christianity."¹¹⁷

Modernity and the Death of Man

Turning to the above-mentioned relation between modernity and the dissolution of the subject, it is worth remembering how Kant characterised the Enlightenment as a time of maturity because the critical and public use of reason was possible for the first time. For Kant the essential character of enlightened reason, that is a fully mature reason, is the capacity to think with independence from any authority. Generally, Kant is confident in the progress of the Enlightenment, and in the possibility that future generations could continue the evolution towards a final enlightened age, making the subject stronger, meaning more autonomous. However, for Metz, after two centuries of Enlightenment the modern subject faces a second immaturity. The result of the Enlightenment was a subject that may be described by its lack of sense of reality, impoverishment of language, absence of the consciousness of guilt and, especially, rejection of the concept of universal responsibility. In short, a subject weakened in its second immaturity.¹¹⁸ In fact, in analysing the place of the subject in the modern world, both culturally and philosophically, Metz concludes that the process of modernization has meant not only attempts to privatize and dissolve religion but also the dissolution of the human being.

¹¹⁶ Metz, Faith in History and Society,” 169-179.
¹¹⁷ Ibid., 169.
¹¹⁸ See, Metz, Por una cultura, 66-72.
In this sense, Metz finds a close relationship between the philosophical perspective of the death of God and the crisis of the moral situation of the world. In fact, according to Metz, Nietzsche’s proposal to situate enlightenment and modernity in the horizon of the death of God is already well known, but it is also crucial to remember that he also sets forth the death of the human subject. In describing the idea of the subject as a mere fiction and the discourse on the “I” as anthropomorphism, Nietzsche would be paving the way for the dissolution of the human being due to the subject’s lack of memory and the decomposition of language with regard to truth claims. Metz’s preoccupation is the configuration of a subject without history or memory, as well as being politically isolated from social responsibilities. Closely related to this stance on the dissolution of human beings is Nietzsche’s announcement of the end of history in which history plunges into an anonymous evolution and a temporally unlimited seeking of evolution for evolution’s sake.\(^{119}\)

Moreover, the godless world is not only a religious or ecclesial problem. To Metz the consequences of a world in which God does not count is not confessional; rather, it affects the moral structure of humanity. The absence of God does not mean the absence of religiosity. The time of great atheisms has passed; now is the time of the mythical or light relationship with God, that is, with God as a theme used in banal conversations or as a referent in public or legal ceremonies or in aesthetic and psychoanalytic discourses; but “the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Jesus?”\(^{120}\) Religion is sought as a kind of aesthetic charm, and as welfare for the soul, while the biblical Commandments and the Sermon of the Mount, for example, are laid aside. This distance from the God of the Bible has consequences. In Metz’s viewpoint, this crisis of God is

\(^{120}\) Ibid., 78
manifested particularly in the moral and cultural crisis of Europe and of humanity generally, and also in the growing scepticism about the universal tradition of the European Enlightenment. Metz and Levinas agree in considering that time has proven Nietzsche’s insight on the crisis of European morality to be correct.\textsuperscript{121} For Metz, this crisis is evident in the so-called “small morality”, which is reluctant to accept universal commitments and responsibilities. This small morality is present in the privatization of life within the process of the economization and marketisation of human relationships, in the ideology of progress as a positivistic and technocratic version of history, and in the growing influence of mass media and its culture of information and entertainment. The modern, light religion, conceived as a path to happiness, is merely the counterpart of this morality.

Culturally, the threatened subject of this small morality emerges in a society in which the principles of economy have colonised human life, and therefore the principles of exchange prevail in inter-human relationships. These principles leave to individual and private choice that which does not conform to calculating reason. From this perspective there is no room for public and universal meanings of memory, responsibility, and solidarity. Quite the opposite: a culture of apathy and lack of feeling have emerged amid progress-oriented society. The death of man signifies essentially the fall of man into these economic-technical processes which are closely related to the loss of memory and therefore the loss of universal responsibility. The ideology of progress is the concrete expression that better describes this spirit. Progress is the acceptance of technical rationality that functions as a myth in modernity and in front of which man is “caught up in the waves of anonymous process of evolution sweeping pitilessly over everyone.”\textsuperscript{122}


\textsuperscript{122} Metz, \textit{Faith in History}, 6.
Inherent to the ideology of progress is the conception of time as an always open dynamism which leads both to the past of the losers and defeated in history being toned down and also to man himself being considered an experiment. The ideology of progress, for example, increases the risk of psychological and genetic manipulation as well as forgetfulness in society as a condition for happiness.

This subject, identified by Metz as a middle-class or bourgeois subject, is “the autonomous and rational man who comes of age in the modern era,” and therefore is the heir of the privatization of human life caused by the Enlightenment. From a religious perspective the privatization of life is manifest in the attenuation of the great traditions of religion that traditionally gave meaning to public life. For the middle class subject, on the contrary, religion is a private matter, useful, as has been said, for cultural or aesthetic needs, but not for the purpose of being the subject. The Enlightenment has also debilitated the relationship of man to authority; an indispensable condition, according to Kant, for the maturity of the modern subject. The resulting autonomy of the subject in relation to external tutelage, both political and religious, and the confidence in the use of his own reason, strengthens the condition of the autonomous and isolated subject. The new political theology takes note of this condition and formulates a corrective manoeuvre based on the tradition of Biblical wisdom present in the European tradition. By denouncing the loss of the Jewish-based culture in the Western world, the new political theology attempts to salvage universal responsibility and recuperate the place of the other as a source of meaning for ethics, particularly the other oppressed, conquered, and dead.

Admittedly, Metz is not rejecting the positive aspects that the Enlightenment and modernity have brought about. On the contrary, he is attempting to save the

123 Ibid., 32.
Enlightenment from the Enlightenment itself. In this regard, Martinez points out that from Metz’s perspective “the Enlightenment is a positive historical development that must be criticised in order to preserve and to promote further its most important values and historical longings.”\(^1\)\(^2\) The Enlightenment, for instance, has brought to the fore the role of emancipation, the pre-eminence of practical reason, and the distinction between state and society.\(^1\)\(^5\) In relation to progress and technological and economically oriented society, Metz is aware that the problem is not progress itself but the negative consequences of the lack of sensibility and responsibility when the subject is sacrificed to the forces of technical rationality.

**The Frankfurt School and One-Sided Rationality**

As has already been noted, the panorama of the negative effects of the Enlightenment and the process of the dissolution of the subject are also preoccupations of the members of the Frankfurt School whom Metz has regarded with sympathy. Witness of this preoccupation in particular is Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.\(^1\)\(^6\) Indeed, it is a consistent theoretical examination of the consequences of the dominance of instrumental rationality that has driven the process of Enlightenment in the West. Influenced by Weber’s analysis of modernity, Adorno and Horkheimer examine the situation of society and the history of reason to conclude that the failure of the Enlightenment to provide authentic freedom and progress is the result of the one-sided rationality inclined to power and dominance over nature. The criteria for this rationality, therefore, are those of manipulation and control, calculation and utility. The scientific-technical rationality is essentially instrumental and for “the Enlightenment, whatever does

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\(^1\)\(^2\) Martinez, *Confronting the Mystery*, 59

\(^1\)\(^5\) See Ibid., 55

not conform to the rule of computation and utility is suspect”.

This rationality ends up turning against the same individual, reducing his own interiority as the object of this dominance, as Ashley points out: “human beings as part of a nature, become themselves the object of reason’s domination of nature.”

In lectures delivered at Columbia University in 1944, in the same year as the publication of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer criticises the dominance of formalised or subjectivised reason in modern philosophy. Horkheimer’s vision of the decline of the individual sits within the wider horizon of the modern eclipse of reason. For Horkheimer, formalised reason makes it meaningless to talk about truth in moral decisions. This lack of confidence in the possibility of finding a universally valid moral truth is a direct consequence of the debilitation of objective reason, which falls back on the force of the reason that compels individuals to act according to ultimate goals. On the contrary, subjectivised or formalized reason focuses on the means rather than on the end, that is, this reason refers to the purpose of the action rather than “the superiority of the one action over another.” With objective truth and its universal validity being thus debilitated in modern society, the self-interest of subjetivised reason gains an advantage by being fundamental to the functioning of society. In this way, for Horkheimer, ideas such as justice, equality, freedom or tolerance have lost their relationship to objective reason, and therefore “there is no rational agency authorised to appraise and link them to an objective reality.” Reason becomes instrumental to the extent that it is accepted in

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127 Ibid., 6; see Metz, *Faith in History*, 110.
130 Horkheimer contrasts subjective reason and objective reason. While the latter rests upon concepts “on the idea of the greatest good, on the problem of human destiny, and on the way of realization of ultimate goals,” the former “is essentially concerns with means and ends, with the adequacy of procedures for purposes more or less taken for granted and supposedly self-explanatory.” Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 3, 5
131 Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 6
132 Ibid., 23
its operational form, focusing on the domination of men over nature. Furthermore, the predominance of empiricism and scientism in the modern outlook considers truth as a problem of positivistic procedures, thus verifiable and demonstrable empirically. Another manifestation of the formalisation of reason is the divorce between reason and religion. This divorce has to do with the possibility that man makes ethical decisions without any reference to revelation and religious dogmas. Religion in this perspective is another cultural good and does not have the privilege of determining the truth that has to be followed by all people. This neutralization of religion as the administrator of objective truth, brought forth by the Enlightenment in the name of reason, is linked with the attenuation of reason itself.

The instrumentalisation of reason, the impossibility of grounding universally valid truths, the marketisation of human values, and the neutralization of religion are preoccupations shared by Metz with Adorno and Horkheimer. However, while the dialectic of enlightenment remains a paralysed analysis, anchored in its negative vision of modernism, Metz sets up a Biblically-grounded proposal of reason that, through a universal commitment to the marginalized of history, saves subjectivity from its dramatic destiny. In fact, according to Metz, without an anamnestic rationality that feeds on the resources of memory and cultivates moral sensitivity for the weak, no long-term human rationality would be possible. This is the reason why the German theologian criticizes modernity to the extent that it comes under the sway of cultural amnesia by privileging technical-oriented rationality. As with Levinas, Metz seeks an order that supports the new conception of human responsibility for the victims and the weak. This responsibility can

only be grounded in the order of the Biblical categories, in which the memory of victims and responsibility for the suffering of others are saved.

**The corrective character of political theology**

Like Levinas, Metz seeks an order that allows justice for the victims in society, moving away from any theoretical or intellectual account of beliefs. By piling up tragedies everywhere, the enlightened rational model has proved to be insufficient to build a more humane society. This is why political theology “can and should never be a theology that is purely confined to books or lectures for its claim of justification”\(^\text{134}\). In this context, for Metz the “happy illiterate” in its second immaturity also suffers from a deficiency consisting precisely of ignorance of a different rationality that comes from Jerusalem and not from Athens.

In fact, it is commonly held that Europe is culturally constituted by twofold sources: Greek philosophy and the spirit of Jerusalem. In brief, while the former would have provided the *logo*\(^s\), the latter would have offered faith. This is, for instance, the basis of Ratzinger’s claim that Christianity is the synthesis between Israel’s faith and Greek spirit.\(^\text{135}\) Similar to Levinas, Metz considers that “Europe is fundamentally marked by the Greek spirit, as well as by a Christianity in which soon a strategy of repudiation of its Jerusalemite origin was set in motion.”\(^\text{136}\) According to Metz, a strategy of concealment regarding Jewish traditions was initiated very early in the history of Christian theology. This strategy had a twofold origin: first, the belief that Christianity was the replacement of Israel in the New Jerusalem and in a new people of God. Second was the conviction that theoretical support of dogmas came from the Greek *logo*\(^s\), not the Jewish spirit.

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\(^\text{134}\) Metz, *Faith in History*, 10.
\(^\text{136}\) Metz, *Memoria passionis*, 236.
The question Metz raises in this regard is: has Judaism not provided another mode of thinking, a different *logos*: “Did the Biblical traditions, Israel’s history of faith, have no intellectual offering whatsoever to Christianity, and Europe?” However, Metz does not provide any reference to the Jewish theological or philosophical tradition, in which, for example, the Talmud plays an important role, as Levinas has demonstrated. What Metz emphasizes is that this *logos* is the thought of the covenant and the message of a time in which it is possible to recall the suffering of the innocents and to take responsibility for their fate. In considering this offering as intellectual, Metz is underlining the universal validity of Biblical categories and their rational character, thus attempting to overcome fideism and societal particularism. Even if he is thinking in the validity of these categories for the Christian world, and particularly for the Catholic Church, he is also convinced that this message is valid for all people who are capable of reasonable thinking. As stated above, this is also Levinas’s preoccupation when speaking about the adult effort through the Jewish account of Biblical categories so as to overcome the ontological temptation of assuming knowledge and comprehension as givers of meaning.

In relation to the double source of Western culture, Metz detects in the history of Christian theology the prevalence of Hellenistic philosophy over Jerusalemite roots. This prioritizing has resulted in the dogmatization and conceptualization of meanings, particularly in the categorical influence of the medium of Platonism and Plotinus in early Christianity. By becoming theology under Greek philosophical influence, Christianity lost the spirit of Israel, meaning its sensibility in the face of the suffering of the others and the universal responsibility that stems from the Bible. Metz confesses his “terror of

137 Ibid., 52.
the logos of theology”138 that was capable of such indifference. In fact, by placing God in the Platonic sense, meaning in the sense of idealism and the conceptualization of God, traditional theology is incapable of responding to modern tragedies. Metz’s political theology focuses, on the contrary, on the presence of evil in the world, on the subject’s response to suffering, and on the theodicy question that is addressed to God for the suffering of the innocents.

As a correction to traditional theology, political theology can face the above-mentioned challenges of the modern world that Neo-Scholastic and transcendental-idealistic theology were unable to deal with. Metz argues that political theology is the recovery of the Jewish spirit for theology and philosophy in order to respond to three new crises in modernity: the Marxist critique of religion, the historical phenomena of Auschwitz and, finally, the poverty of the third world. Firstly, the Marxist challenge affects above all the theory of knowledge. That is, it is a question about truth, about the relationship that Marx establishes between knowledge and interest in which all knowledge is bound by interest. This relationship is the basis of the Marxist critique of ideologies and religion. In Metz’s stance, Marx’s critique is not the trivialization of the truth question; it is rather to put it in a new form: are there interests capable of leading to the truth? For Metz, the only interest with this characteristic is one capable of being universal. Now, the Bible knows this type of interest: “It is the hunger and thirst for justice, for universal justice, justice for all, the living and the dead.”139 In this sense, according to Metz, the problem of truth and the problem of justice are related. For him, the interest in strictly universal justice is one of the presuppositions of truth finding. To

138 Metz, A Passion for God, 3-4.
that extent, the knowledge of truth has a practical foundation. It is in this critical and liberating power of knowing that the truth is rooted.

Another important aspect of Marxism that Metz is concerned about is the consideration of the world as a historical project. History and God, or God in history, are guiding categories for Christianity when setting aside the Hellenistic inheritance and taking the Jewish one seriously. For the new political theology, there is only one history. The history of salvation is the history of the world in which there is hope for universal justice, meaning justice also for past sufferings, for the victims and the defeated of history. For Metz, “on the shoulders of these forgotten victims we build our paradises, even though these paradises can never make up for those past sufferings.”\textsuperscript{140} The Marxist’s stance on history shares the same nature of evolutionary consideration for the time of progress. As will be considered in the third chapter of this work, Metz’s interpretation of historical time, on the contrary, is rooted in the biblical traditions of time, with a finale in which responsibility for the other takes root.

The second crisis of modernity in which Metz’s new political theology originates is the challenge of Auschwitz. Metz regrets theology’s ignorance of the holocaust, and particularly Rahner’s ignorance. This is the starting point of Metz’s rift with transcendental-idealistic theology: “I slowly became aware of the great apathy in theological idealism and its inability to confront historical experience in spite of all its prolific talk about historicity.”\textsuperscript{141} From this perspective, Metz’s theology can be understood as a theology “after Auschwitz,” which means a theology that cannot turn

\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., 147
\textsuperscript{141} Ibid., 149.
away from the voiceless suffering of the poor and oppressed of the world. In this regard Metz affirms:

there is no meaning of history one can save with one's back turned to Auschwitz; there is no truth of history which one can defend, no God in history which one can worship. Theology must take seriously the negativity of history in its interruptive and catastrophic character.¹⁴²

This failure of humanity uncovers the meaninglessness of talking about history idealistically. Auschwitz obliges theology to reconsider history from a different perspective. This new perspective moves away from the Hegelian or Marxist conception of history which points teleologically to a final realization in which the victims are forgotten. The negativity of history means to recover the frustration of singular lives, the destiny of the concrete faces of the defeated, in the agenda of theology. In this sense, the rationality of theology, linked to universal being, must be able to be affected and even forced to reflect on itself by the singularity and contingency of historical catastrophe.

Furthermore, political theology formulates the God question as a theodicy question. That is, “discourse about God [is] a clamour for salvation for the others, for those who suffer unjustly, and the vanquished in history.”¹⁴³ The question is how to talk about God in view of the inscrutable history of the suffering of the world. For Metz, “this question is the question of theology that can never be conclusively answered.” It is “the eschatological question,” and the main task of theology will be to seek “a language always new that prevents the question from being forgotten”¹⁴⁴ Auschwitz does not demand an answer in reason, it cannot be comprehended; it is rather a challenge to man. Auschwitz can only be remembered by a memory capable of dealing with the screams of millions of innocent victims in the hope that it never recurs. Memory becomes the central category of Metz’s

¹⁴² Ibid.
¹⁴³ Metz, Memoria passionis, 4.
¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 5.
political theology. In fact, for Metz, in a world in which instrumental and pragmatic rationality is spread everywhere and therefore human relationships are based on production and effectiveness, anamnestic rationality saves the memory of the losers and those defeated in history.

Finally, the third crisis for theology is the challenge of the Third World. It is the challenge of a world socially divided and culturally polycentric. The relations between Europe and the third world have been established in terms of developed-undeveloped nations. This terminology establishes the first world as a paradigm of evolution to which the undeveloped world would have to point. This is a defense mechanism to hide the original relationship with the Third World as the victims of exploitation. This is why theology will have to articulate a response to the experiences of exploitation, oppression, racism and death which are habitual in the Third World.

**Conclusion: Theological reason as “awakening to the other.”**\(^{145}\)

Metz’s political theology acts as a corrective to the privatization of religion in modernity and to the Hellenization of the biblical message by claiming that theology needs to shift from transcendental and idealist theology to a theology that takes seriously the historical situation in which humans beings live. Metz believes that modern reason has lost the spirit of responsibility stemming from biblical categories and has produced a subject indifferent to the claims of universal justice, and insensitive in relation to the cry of those who suffer. In this way, Metz tries to find an order that permits doing justice to the victims in history and society based on the Jewish (biblical) legacy. Furthermore, Metz’s political theology moves away from any theoretical account of beliefs by acknowledging the other who

\(^{145}\) I take this expression from John K. Downey, “Suffering as common Ground,” in *Constructing Human Rights in the Age of Globalization*, ed. Mahmood Monshipouri et alt. (Armonk: Sharpe, 2003), 311
suffers. As Downey remarks “political theology focuses on hearing the voices of the marginal, those who have disappeared behind the projection of universal essences.” By taking human suffering seriously, political theology provides direction for human praxis.

Although Metz maintains Rahner’s essential insight in relation to the modern turn to the subject in theology, he regrets that his “great teacher” never spoke about suffering, and particularly never mentions the tragedy of Auschwitz. Furthermore, the encounter with Bloch at the beginning of the sixties and then with Benjamin, and Adorno inspired him to think of theology from the perspective of history and society; this encounter also taught him that the biblical narratives provide the instruments to deal with the issues of justice and solidarity in Christianity. Metz’s encounter with Jewish thinkers and with the concrete history of suffering also led him to wonder if biblical traditions have not provided a different and more reasonable logos with a universal meaning that is valid for all people irrespective of religious background. In spite of the differences between Levinas and Metz in terms of background, interlocutors and academic interests, they both ultimately conclude that Western rationality needs to be disenchanted by the recovery of the Jewish source which provides a vision centred on the other who suffers and calls for responsibility. Both thinkers believe that this rationality shapes a more primordial order which acts as a corrective to the universalism and idealism of philosophy and theology. The concrete form in which this previous order is encountered in both philosophy and theology follows the concepts of time and theodicy as developed in the next two parts of this dissertation.

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146 Ibid., 312.
PART II: TIME
Chapter Three

LEVINAS AND MESSIANIC TIME

Introduction

The consideration of time is one of the most relevant points of discord between modern philosophical humanism and the humanism stemming from the Bible and rabbinical commentaries. As Levinas writes, ‘it is through the way they [Israel and the West] experience and are affected by time, the ultimate difference, that we can still, perhaps, distinguish brotherly humanities amongst which we rank Israel and the West.’\(^{147}\) Indeed, humanism based on the prominence of a subject who is open to progress and entrenched in a solid rationality and who is therefore tied to a consideration of time that depends on ontology, collides with a humanism that considers subjectivity a response to an essential vocation of service in which history depends on a time tied to other humans. This, at least, is Levinas’s idea when confronting the Bible and the Talmud with the values of the West, particularly philosophical reason. Catherine Chalier has captured Levinas’s idea pointing out that “[w]hile the philosopher contemplates at the end of his ascension into the light, an immutable reality, the eternity of an idea – that of beauty, of justice, or even that of good- the prophet hears a word that is addressed to him, in the same heart of temporality.”\(^{148}\)

Following this line of thinking, this chapter will discuss Levinas’s critique of historicism, that is, the time of history as totality to open the horizon of the messianic time. From this discussion, Levinas’s rejection of teleological-directed temporality and the concept of the universal final judgment in history will be clear. In the now of the


present time, an ethical response to the other in his/her particular situation will be possible. From this perspective emerges therefore an ethical-messianic subjectivity as a universal responsibility.

**Ontological History**

*Hegel and Kant: History Tied to Ontology*

When Levinas thinks of history tied to ontology, he primarily has Hegel in mind. In fact, the oblivion of the singular absorbed into the universal is clear in Hegel’s philosophy of history, in which the individual experience only makes sense from the universal. In the Preface of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel expresses that “the task of leading the individual from its uneducated standpoint to knowledge had to be seen in its universal sense, just as it was the universal individual, self-conscious Spirit.”\(^{149}\) In this text two senses of history are already announced. Firstly, the history of the formation of the particular subject, meaning Hegel’s contemporaneous individual aspiring in the transition from the 18\(^{th}\) to the 19\(^{th}\) century to reach philosophical knowledge. Then, the historical evolution of the thinking humanity, which has achieved at this time the conditions that make possible the fullness of knowledge, is also announced. From this perspective, *Phenomenology of Spirit* aims to set forth the stages of the formation of the universal spirit in history to which the individual must conform in its own process of formation. The formation of the individual consciousness must be open to history properly inasmuch as any identification with contingent and temporary historical figures would prevent it from reaching the degree of development reached by the universal spirit.

Regarding these two senses of history, Hegel refers to them as empirical and philosophical histories. The former relies on the “historical truths” which have to do with the contingency and arbitrariness of individual facts; Hegel remarks that “[a]s regards historical truths ... it will be readily granted that so far as their purely historical aspect is considered, they are concerned with a particular existence, with the contingent and arbitrary aspects of given content, which have no necessity.”\footnote{Ibid., 23.} Ordinary historians therefore, are committed to the accurate delineation and narration of facts either contemporaneous or non-contemporary to the historian. History in the philosophical sense, on the contrary, cannot be reduced to the repertoire of contingent and empirical facts in the same way that ordinary history can. The philosophical historian is struck by the fragmentary and inconsequential character of empirical facts, and looks for the divination of the meaning “of the whole historical process, the exhibition of reason’s working in the sphere of history.”\footnote{William Henry Walsh, \textit{An Introduction to Philosophy of History} (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1992), 142-3.} Indeed, history “concentrates its attention on the concrete spiritual principle in the life of nations... and deals with a universal thought that runs throughout the whole.”\footnote{Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, \textit{Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction: Reason in History}, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 30.} By addressing universal and not individual and contingent phenomena, philosophical world history integrates all of the different and possible experiences of nations and peoples into one unit. This unit is the universal spirit, which constitutes the aim of history from a philosophical perspective.

Time in world history is therefore an ontological background in which the particular is subsumed into the universal order. The isolated individual is subdued by the social reality; the individual must perish for the good of the “whole,” that is, for the nation or state. For Hegel, only some individuals are chosen instruments of destiny when their
individual aims produce far-reaching results they could not themselves have foreseen. Only “the great individuals of word history” are indispensable if the plot of history is to be worked out, for ideas are impotent until will-power stands behind them. They are the heroes whose deeds and realisations far outweigh the ordinary and regular human actions. Nietzsche’s Übermensch is closed to Hegel’s description of the world-historical individuals, particularly when following the passion and energy of their ego they seek to accomplish their personal will. In the accomplishment of personal will “a mighty figure must trample many an innocent flower underfoot, and destroy much that lies in its path.”\textsuperscript{153} The ordinary people have to be ready to obey them and respect their will because their vision is superior. With their actions, these historical figures work in favour of the “higher universal and make it their own end.”\textsuperscript{154} As Silvia Benso wonders “[b]ut what is the Übermensch if not the highest instantiation of heroicity, insofar as he or she is the one who, by accepting the eternal return as the object of his or her own will to power, has turned heroism into his or her chosen nature?”\textsuperscript{155} Despite their differences, for both Nietzsche and Hegel, history is the history of heroes.

Before Hegel, the meaninglessness of the individual’s singular and contingent experience for universal history is patent in Kant’s philosophy of history. In fact, Kant’s enlightened idea of history shows how the confusing and irregular character of individual actions can only reach its complete sense from history which attends “to the play of freedom of the human will in the large.”\textsuperscript{156} In the essay “Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective,” Kant emphasises how history helps to find a regular course

\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 89.
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., 82.
in the seemingly chaotic human behaviour. Only from an historical perspective is it possible to discover a progression in the unarticulated appearances of the human actions. This hope is founded on an analogy with the natural sciences which can predict natural phenomena, such as the atmospheric phenomena, that seem to behave arbitrarily if they are analysed singularly, but when they are viewed together show regularities and, actually, they may be predicted. Kant believes that history aims at human actions which, despite being phenemenic manifestations of will, are subject, like the rest of the natural phenomena, to the general laws of nature. For Kant, it is hard to believe that human existence lacks any purpose. So, in realizing that individual actions seem to be unregulated by any rational plan, Kant supposes that it is possible to discover, amid the apparently contradictory course of human life, an intention of nature.

This teleological idea of human existence leads Kant to rely on the progress of humanity. For Kant, the plan of nature is precisely to put men under adverse conditions so that they can develop their full rational capacities and transfer their knowledge from one generation to the next. With this transference, the human race will progress to reach the state of perfection: a state of global or cosmopolitan citizenship in which to develop all human dispositions. In fact, Kant affirms: “the history of mankind can be seen, in the large, as the realization of Natures’ secret plan to bring forth a perfectly constituted state as the only condition in which the capacities of humankind can be fully developed.”

Therefore, he believes that it is possible to build a universal history that shows human actions as aiming to progress according to a plan of nature. Thus, although the result may seem more like a novel, history would be useful to explain actions as a "system" that otherwise would see only a set of human actions without any plan, and also in order to establish predictions about the political future. For Kant, the most important aspect of this

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157 Ibid., 27.
view of history is its propelling effect, since with this thread which can serve "for giving a consoling view of the future... in which there will be exhibited in the distance how the human race finally achieves the condition in which all the seeds planted by Nature can fully develop and in which the destiny if the race can be fulfilled here on earth."  

If in modern philosophy history appears under the form of progress, in Augustine it appears under the form of the two cities. Essentially, they are the same. Augustine, in effect, opposes to the pagan doctrine of the eternal return the promise of the messianic liberation. The beginning and the end of history has to be accomplished in time, thus breaking the cycle of the mythical eternal return. Moreover, in Augustine concepts like progress, liberation and historical process form an orderly constellation, with sequences which are strictly established. So, for example, progress is unthinkable without the redemption brought forth by Jesus: only a redeemed humanity may be on their way to the kingdom of God, that is, time can be understood as a continuum, a continuous walk toward the heavenly homeland. Progress is a theological category. The civitas terrena (the Earthly City) gains access to progress when releasing from human history, which shows that history is not something of this world. What is important to emphasize is the schism between human history and sacred history: the progress towards the true telos of man is accomplished by the strength of the divine grace which is the substance of the sacred history. That schism finishes with the philosophy of history that understands progress as a linear and temporal process capable of self-realization. Salvation no longer consists of liberation from history because the telos of history is that liberation. That immanence of progress can be called in Kant, humanity; in Hegel, absolute spirit; in Marx, the communist kingdom of freedom. All these powerful abstractions reveal how, for the modern philosophies of history, the details or minutiae of daily life are not really

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158 Ibid., 31.
interesting, the greatest thing is not the individual but the fate of the species. The quotidian and temporary, that is, pain and misery are now passing moments, the outdated that does not merit historical consideration. In this sense, Augustine would be close to Kant and Hegel.

In trying to make sense of history by means of the notion of progress, Kant and Hegel both show an attachment to the universal in which singularity dims. For them philosophical history must concern itself with some larger unit than individual men and their singular experiences. The singularity of the experiences of pain and suffering are not history, they are only the price to be paid for the progress of history. For Levinas, this universal is tyrannic and impersonal, and against it “man affirms himself as an irreducible singularity, exterior to the totality into which he enters.”159 Franz Rosenzweig also denounces the inherent danger of the Hegelian teleological conception of history. For him, Hegel’s conception of history is a secularization of the theological notion of theodicy. This means that everything that happens in history is justified from the point of view of the divine project, meaning from the “last judgement of history.” In other words, the supreme criterion of legitimacy of a historical action would reside not in its intrinsic moral value, but in its success or its failure. For Rosenzweig as well as for Levinas, the present injustices cannot be justified in the name of the utopia of a final stage of history where all contradictions will be resolved. So, every moment judges itself. From Levinas’s perspective, the heroic history, the virile judgement of history, is violent and unjust. It will be necessary to hear the voice of the vanquished who demand justice “until the end of time, a justice beyond the triumph of the triumphant.”160

159 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 242.
160 Levinas, Difficult Freedom, 287.
From Levinas’s point of view, the judgement of the historiographers appears clear in the appropriation and interpretation that the works of the dead suffers in world history. Separated from the will that produced them, the works remain in history ready to be interpreted and used by the others’ will. History is therefore the action of the appropriation and interpretation of works; history is always in relation to works, to actions. Interior life is not historical, and meaningless actions are not relevant to history. From Levinas’s perspective, the historiographers “interpret, that is, utilize the works of the dead,” and therefore, historiography is “the usurpation carried out by the conquerors, that is, by the survivors; it recounts enslavement, forgetting the life that struggles against slavery.”

The problem detected by Levinas in history is what Ombrosi terms “an attack upon life...upon the unique and single life of those who lay prostrate. Of those who no longer exist. Who no longer speak.” The “virile judgement of history” decides what is relevant and what is not important enough to be recognised. In this judgement, only the visible is taken into consideration because “Western humanism has never managed to doubt triumph or understand failure or conceive of a history in which the vanquished and the persecuted might have some value.”

**Bergson and Human Time**

As has been mentioned, behind this consideration of history tied to ontology there is a frame of reference constituted by a continuous, linear, representable, and progressive time. This has been the concept of time present in science and philosophy in the occidental world from Aristotle onward. Although the West has been unable to place the vanquished in history as a result of this concept of time, Levinas finds that Henri Bergson is, from within the modern European tradition, “an essential step in the movement which put in

161 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 228.
question the framework of a spirituality borrowed from knowledge and therefore from
the primary and privileged significance of presence, being and ontology.”¹⁶⁴ In this way,
Levinas identifies Bergson as part of “the biblical-Occidental spirituality,” different from
Heidegger who belongs to “pagan thinking – or more exactly Greek.”¹⁶⁵

In a short text titled “Hommage à Bergson” published in the Carné de captivité,
Levinas praises Bergson as “one of the greatest philosophical geniuses of all time.”¹⁶⁶
Bergson’s legacy is, for Levinas, incalculable, both for the greatness of his behaviour and
for the intellectual mark visible in philosophy and in arts. He also considers Bergson’s
philosophy “essential” for his own philosophising particularly for its critique against the
“mechanistic humanism,” and the proposal of “the lived experience of ‘profound time,’
consciousness, and knowledge of duration... interpreted as a relation with the other and
with God.”¹⁶⁷ Even though Bergson does not totally overcome ontological time, he “seeks
the abolition of the difference in meaning between “being” and “becoming,” in a quality
that is epekeina tês ousias, that is, beyond being.”¹⁶⁸ In other words, Bergson begins a
movement of de-substantialization of beings [étants] and conscience that finishes by
putting into question being as coincidence with itself and spirituality as knowledge, that
is, as presence and ontology.

In terms of temporality, de-substantialization implies the overcoming of the temporal
mode of presence, which is the ontological expression of time. In fact, the horizon of this
presence has been the mode of knowledge of the Western tradition, which privileges the

¹⁶⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, “Transcendence and Intelligibility,” in Basic Philosophical Writings, ed. Adrian
Theodore Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press,
1996), 154.
¹⁶⁵ Michaël de Saint Cheron, Entretiens avec Emmanuel Levinas 1983-1994 (Paris: Le Livre de Poche,
2010), 44.
¹⁶⁶ Levinas, Carné de captivité, 217.
¹⁶⁷ Robbins and Levinas, Is it Righteous to Be?, 200-1.
phenomenological correlation between noesis and noema. In this horizon, according to Levinas, the present constitutes the temporal mode of immanence, of synchrony, and of coincidence with itself. In other words, Western thinking privileges the present to which past and future “are the temporal failures of presence but are nevertheless susceptible to the recuperation of this presence in the guise of the thinkable, indeed, susceptible to re-presentation,”\(^\text{169}\) thanks to memory and anticipation. For Levinas, presence is the privileged temporal mode in the activity of knowing and its connection to the hand as that which seizes, grasps, and reduces the objects that are presented available, transforming them into items of knowledge. Indeed, in Levinas’s stance,

Knowledge is the incarnate practice of seizure, appropriation and satisfaction. Presence, of itself, becomes the now… the conceptual synopsis is stronger than all the diversity and incompatibility of the unassemblable terms, stronger than any diacrony which would want to be radical and irreducible\(^\text{170}\)

When talking about the relation between knowledge and present time, it is clear that Levinas has in mind, in particular, Husserl. In Levinas’s view, Husserl defines time in terms of presence and simultaneity, that is, in terms of comprehension and the reduction of the external into the consciousness. Time becomes the eternal present of retention and protention, of the gathering and systematization of past and future into the present of consciousness. In fact,

[t]his presence or being is also a temporal modality. But it thus concretely signifies an ex-position of the other to the \(I\), and thus precisely an offering of itself, a giving of itself, a Gegebenheit… The presence of the present as temporality, an essential "at-handness" [main-tenance] so to speak, is the promise of something graspable, solid. This is probably the very promotion of the thing, the "something," the configuration of a being [étant] in being [être], to presence. And this prototypical trait of the knowledge of things is the necessary forerunner of the abstractions of understanding’s idealized knowledge, as we have learned from Husserl's \textit{Krisis}, or already, in theory at least, from his \textit{Logical Investigations}.\(^\text{171}\)
Therefore, because time in the Western tradition is conceived from the present, nothing new could surprise the Same. This means that the ego is the source of meaning, and as Ombrosi outlines “[i]t is through this solidification of egoism...that the ego becomes and recognizes itself as the Same.”\textsuperscript{172} This is what happens in the Hegelian dialectic, in which the objective spirit integrates the contradictory in thought, or in Timaeus’s closed circle, in which the circle of the same “surrounds that of the other.”\textsuperscript{173} In this sense, the history that privileges the universal is but the expression of a time closed in on itself, not open to the new, to the strange, to the exterior. It is the integration in a system that sees everything in a succession, the other in succession.

However, within the same Western tradition, Levinas recognises in Bergson’s philosophy the possibility to break the primacy of knowledge and presence in time. He confesses the sensation of the novelty he encounters in Bergson’s notions of duration as lived time, and also in the putting into question of the privilege and solidity that knowledge had in Western philosophy. Bergson’s questioning is based on the conviction that reality is multidimensional, and that human knowledge must be more comprehensive than that offered by intelligence and science. Indeed, he establishes from his starting point a difference between instinct and intelligence, which for him are different but not separable. While the latter is an abstract and general knowledge, and therefore leaves aside the concrete and individual, the former deals with the concrete reality and things as they are. Moreover, intelligence is a formal capacity that addresses difficulties and problems in order to guarantee human survival, but so limited: it tends to transform everything into solid and immobile instruments. It is unable to understand movement and life. So, Bergson seeks gnoseological access to being different from intelligence. This

\textsuperscript{172} Orietta Ombrosi, \textit{The Twilight of Reason}, 22.
\textsuperscript{173} Levinas, “Transcendence and Intelligibility,” 151.
access is intuition which seeks a knowledge that is not objective, that is, according to an intentional known object. Therefore, Bergson shows zones in reality that cannot be considered by discursive intelligence, the first of them, human life. The soul’s interior life is a continuous mobility. If the scientific categories are applied to know it, the resulting effects are its hardening, fossilization and reduction to an atomism of the state of consciousness. Intelligence is the faculty of concepts and thus of the abstract.

Considering that Bergson wants to revise the mode of being of the interior life irreducible to the world of things covered by science, he starts from the study of psychic life or consciousness in relation to time. By opposing the dynamics of life, with its spontaneity and singularity, to positivism, he wants to emphasize the qualitative uniqueness of psychic life, irreducible to the quantitative and their measurements. The positivism of science deals with time in a mathematical mode, that is, spatially as an empty and homogeneous receptacle forming a line. On the contrary, the real time, which is pure duration, is captured in the interior experience. The time of the concrete experience escapes from mechanics which deal with time as a series of instants, one next to another, a spatialized and reversible time made of external and equal instants like the isochronous time of Newton. Duration for its part is the basic characteristic of the time of consciousness in which instants works differently, that is, an instant penetrates another and is bound to it.

Therefore, philosophy has to take charge of real time and for that it turns to intuition, which is the immediate consciousness or direct perception of reality. Bergson re-integrates consciousness into concrete existence and aims to free the life of consciousness from the fictitious intellectual structures, catching it in its purity. The spiritual life viewed from the consciousness is essentially self-creation and freedom in a unique flux. In fact, for a conscious being, to exist is to change, to change maturing, and
to mature creating itself indefinitely. Therefore, for Bergson duration is a “continual creation, continuous burst of novelty.” He insists that the more we study the nature of time, the more we shall comprehend that duration means invention, the creation of forms, the continual elaboration of something new. For Levinas, this is a new form of intelligibility that could open new ways to overcome the totality of the Western mode of knowledge. Bergson opens consciousness to the novelty of the foreign, of the other, so that the closed circle of knowledge loses its priority. This openness is given thanks to the notion of time as duration in which the succession of instants does not form a totality, but they are always new. Bergson appears, in Levinas’s eyes, as an answer to the totality of an integrator discourse to which there is no novelty from the exterior, from the other who can affect the consciousness devoted to contemplation.

From the above mentioned, it is clear that Bergson occupies a central place in Levinas’s critique of the active role played by the philosophies of the “I” in Western thinking. This is so because the solidity of the product of consciousness is put into brackets for the creativity of reality as a perpetual creation. So, Levinas takes sides with Bergson in the critique of time as an infinite succession of instants. In this sense, Levinas remains “faithful” to Bergson’s philosophy, particularly “in the manner in which, for the man of our time, time is no longer simply a broken eternity or the missed eternal that always refers to something solid, but on the contrary, the very event of infinity in us, the very excellence of the good.” Moreover, the introduction of the inner life in the model

176 Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 176.
177 Emmanuel Levinas, “Interview with François Poirié,” 31.
of durée is, for Levinas, an important step towards a new conception of time in which the singular experiences could count in history.

However, Levinas has detected a problem in Bergson’s time. For Levinas, “[i]f time does not make moments of mathematical time, indifferent of one another, succeed one another. It does not accomplish Bergson’s continuous duration either.”¹⁷⁸ In spite of Bergson’s comprehension of time beyond concept, he nonetheless does not totally exit from the modern frames of comprehension of the “I.” This is so because intuition is the philosophical method by which consciousness acts as a source of meaning. Though Bergson “was the first to raise a hand against the cold time of science before which all philosophers had bowed,”¹⁷⁹ he continues considering time as a continuous reality, but from consciousness. Bergson’s critique of the continuous succession of instants implies the consideration of continuous time from the psychological perspective. Instants in Bergson’s view do not place one next to another spatially, but they are mutually bound by consciousness, forming in this way continuity in which a progress towards the best is perceptible.

For Levinas, the consideration of existence as persistence in time, that is to say, going through time forming duration, shows how for modern philosophy the instant is insufficient to give reason for the whole existence. In fact, modern philosophy “professes a scorn for the instant,”¹⁸⁰ and considers existence as something that “traverses” the instant “bypasses it and effects a duration.”¹⁸¹ Levinas, on the contrary, values the instant as a permanent possibility of beginning anew. In this sense, Bergson was right in

¹⁷⁸ Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 283.
¹⁷⁹ Levinas, Carné de captivité, 218.
¹⁸¹ Ibid., 75.
criticizing time as a continuous succession of instants, but was wrong in considering the instant insufficient to give expression to time. He was also ingenious in introducing the concept of *new* in *durée*, but unable to go beyond towards the other. In Bergson’s stance, according to Levinas, “time adds something new to being, something absolutely new.” Levinas retains this concept, clarifying that the time of the novelty is the time of the relation with the other because “[t]he face arrests totalization. The welcoming of alterity hence conditions consciousness and time.”

In Levinas’s philosophy a conception of time arises from a messianic perspective which takes issue with historicism and therefore with the progressive and cumulative time of progress, science, and philosophy. The teleology of historicism, as Robert Bernasconi concludes, is based on progress insofar as “the grand philosophies of history all propose a system of thought in which the meaning of the individual derives from overwhelming forces that subsume the individual and that will be revealed only at the last.” For Levinas it is the moment “to ask whether this gathering of time into presence by intentionality—and thus whether the reduction of time to the essence of being, its reducibility to presence and representation— is the primordial intrigue of time.”

Therefore, for Levinas there is a temporality other than the one that allows itself to be assembled into the presence of the said and the written, a temporality that is concrete in this ‘from-me-to-the-other,’ but that immediately congeals into the abstraction of the synchronous in the synthesis of the "I think" that grasps it thematically in which the individual summons the subject to take responsibility for its suffering and pain.

This temporality is based on a different rationality, as was demonstrated in the first chapter, a rationality in which the responsibility for the suffering of the others takes

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182 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 283.
183 Ibid., 281.
185 Ibid.
roots. Against the continuity of time, Levinas opposes the discontinuity of the messianic time. The Messiah is someone who will come at any moment. It will not be necessary to wait for the end of history. Each moment, each instant is ready to receive the Messiah. Time is mature and could be fecund if man is ready to accept the mitzvot which command “thou shall not kill.” For Levinas, this command is a responsibility for the life and death of the Other, and “responsibility for the other is already nonindifference and love.”

This command does not signify merely “the interdiction against plunging a knife into the breast of the neighbour. Of course, it signifies that too. But so many ways of being comport a way of crushing the other” Levinas refers to Matthew 25 to illustrate this new meaning. It signifies positively that the other “concerns me in all his material misery.” In this sense, the Messianic time is fecund, or the fecundity of time is the acceptance of a messianic subjectivity which feels itself questioned by the other’s suffering and death.

**Messianic Time**

*The Prophetic Eschatology beyond Teleology*

Despite the difficulties in delineating a clear and unified approach to messianism in the history of Judaism, the expectation of the Messiah plays a fundamental role in the historical hope of the prophetic texts, rabbinic writings and Jewish liturgy. As Neusner affirms, several questions arise in facing messianic expectations: “What of the Messiah? When will he come? To whom, in Israel, will he come? And what must, or can, we do

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186 Levinas, “Interview with François Poirié,” 65.
187 Ibid., 53
188 Ibid., 52.
while we wait to hasten his coming?” The critical questions in this regard are those of the identity of the Messiah and the concept of the time involved in the expectation of the Messiah’s coming. In relation to time, the prophetic literature from a future-oriented perspective seems to express the confidence in a messianic era in which tears will be wiped away and justice will be re-established by Yahweh’s anointed for the house of Israel. This confidence coincides with the popular thought that the Messiah will “put a miraculous end to the violence in the world, the injustice and contradictions which destroy humanity.” This thought of hope in a better future extends not only to spiritual, moral and religious life, but also to political, economic and social dimensions. These expectations are expressed in terms of the days in which “the one who plows shall overtake the one who reaps,” “the treader of grapes the one who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine,” and finally “I will plant them upon their land, and they shall never again be plucked up out of the land that I have given them.” In spite of these prophetic expressions, one question remains: Is this perspective teleological? In other words, does it point to a better world in a final era as the consummation of history? An affirmative answer could be deduced from a literal reading of the prophetic texts. However, there is no unanimous interpretation in the Jewish tradition.

One example of this dispute in relation to the messianic era could be traced in the eleventh chapter of the Tractate Sanhedrin of the Babylonian Talmud. In reference to Isaiah’s 60:21, the discussion starts from a question, “who will not participate in the future kingdom?” In this regard, Levinas analyses two positions represented by Rabbi Johanan.

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190 Jacob Neusner, “When did Judaism become a Messianic Religion?” *Concilium* no. 1 (February 1993), 46.


192 Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 59


194 Four passages of this chapter are commented by Levinas during the third and fourth conferences of Jewish intellectuals in 1960 and 1961; see Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 59-96.
and Rabbi Samuel in the Tractate *b.Sanhedrin* relating to the nature of the messianic redemption and, therefore, the time in which it will be accomplished. Rabbi Johanan believes that the messianic era ‘consists in fulfilling all the prophecies, a promise of a delivered and better humanity’\(^{195}\) The messianic era will therefore be a type of interim period in which all political and social contradictions stop and the way is cleared for a spiritual and metahistorical dimension that moves into an indefinite future called ‘the world to come.’ According to Levinas, Johanan’s position has nothing to do with the history of peoples and their destinies; rather, it concerns the salvation of individuals in their personal and interior dimensions. For this reason, Johanan ‘believes in the ideal of a disincarnated spirit’ that is distant from any drama in human life. In this stance, the other ‘no longer appears as poor, but as a friend.’\(^{196}\) Against this framing, Rabbi Samuel, in relation to the messianic era, points not only to the overcoming of political violence but also to solidarity with the other, and ‘the Other is always the poor one; poverty defines the poor person as Other, and the relation with the Other will always be an offering and a gift, not an ‘empty-handed’ approach.’\(^{197}\) Therefore, in Samuel’s approach, the messianic era is part of history, and from this relationship, new historical responsibilities arise. Messianic times are those in which every man has a responsible relationship to the other, which is understood as the poor and the victim.

In relation to the nature of the messianic era, the twelfth century Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides tries to articulate Johanan’s and Samuel’s opinions by considering a teleological approach to messianic times from a political and spiritual perspective at the same time.\(^{198}\) According to Maimonides, there are different approaches to messianic

\(^{195}\) Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 60  
\(^{196}\) Ibid., 63.  
\(^{197}\) Ibid., 62.  
expectations in believers, most of them based on a literal reading of the prophecies and the Talmud. The correct approach should be rational to the extent that the Bible has a pedagogical character that has to be considered by believers when facing the messianic texts. In this line of thinking, the glorious age in which “[t]he wolf shall live with the lamb”\textsuperscript{199} does not point to a time of miraculous changes in nature, but it meant metaphorically; that is the messianic age will be a time in which Israel will cease to be subdued by the violence of nations, and in this sense “no people will rule over Israel any more, and all peoples will live in peace with Israel: ‘the wolf with the lamb’.”\textsuperscript{200} Maimonides’s messianism points thus to a political teleology insofar as the messianic era will mean peace for Israel created by political means. The Messiah will be an earthly ruler with political power who will gather the exiles to the land of Israel. Maimonides also considers a spiritual meaning of the messianic era to the extent that it will be the time in which men will enjoy a great spiritual perfection and lead a spiritual life devoted to the study of the Torah. This spiritual and intellectual scenario is however closely tied to the resolution of the political contradictions in Israel’s life. Maimonides’ messianism is therefore a naturalized messianism leading away from supernatural teleology. As Michael Fagenblat comments, “[f]or it was Maimonides, before Levinas, who first naturalized Jewish messianism.”\textsuperscript{201} However, from Levinas’s perspective, this naturalization of messianism will point to an ethical responsibility for the other which is ignored by Maimonides’s intellectual religion.

Furthermore, in challenging the teleological interpretations of time, Levinas values the singular occurrence in human life, rather than the universal meaning of the historical

\textsuperscript{199} Isaiah 11:6 New Revised Standard Version.
\textsuperscript{200} Marcel Poorthuis, “Messianism between Reason and Delusion: Maimonides and the Messiah,” \textit{Concilium} no. 1 (February 1993), 61.
\textsuperscript{201} Michael Fagenblat, \textit{A Covenant of Creatures: Levinas’s Philosophy of Judaism} (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 95.
events. The prophetic expectations from Levinas’s point of view do not intend to place messianic salvation in a final era of the times, and even less in a world-to-come. In this respect, Levinas’s perspective does not allow thinking time as a continuous, progressive and accumulative process and as he points out: “I don’t say that all is for the best, and the idea of progress doesn’t seem to me very reliable.” In favouring a discontinuous time, Levinas points to singularity in history, meaning the singular experiences of individuals, which could be lost in the continuity of temporal flow and in the universality of events. From this perspective it is possible to open a fissure in the continuity of time with the purpose of introducing the singular stories of the victims and vanquished in history. As will be shown in the next chapter, this is also similar to Walter Benjamin’s attempts in thinking about history from the victims’ perspective: the rescue of singularity and suffering crushed by the power of progress. Benjamin’s political motivations and the implications of his conception of history will have a lasting influence on Metz’s political theology.

The prioritisation of a singular occurrence in human life over the universal meaning of historical events is clear in *Totality and Infinity*. In his 1961 book, published parallel with the Talmudic messianic speeches, Levinas emphasizes the discontinuous character of the prophetic eschatology. He confronts the ontology of totality with prophetic eschatology. While the former relies on the Hegelian final judgement of history, the latter is in connection with “being beyond totality or beyond history.” That is, eschatology does not consist of “teaching the orientation of history,” nor in adding

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“information about the future by revealing the finality of being.”\textsuperscript{204} The final judgment of history would mean the sacrifice of the single events and the particular existences to a final and universal meaning in which singularity is “integrated into a whole.”\textsuperscript{205} In the teleological dynamic the voice of the death and the cry of the victims are lost. The only voice that is heard is that of the historiographers, the voice of the survivors who write the history after the victory of the powerful. Indeed, in the time of history particular beings are lost, are counted, recapitulated: "Birth and death as punctual moments, and the interval that separates them, are lodged in this universal time of the historian, who is a survivor."\textsuperscript{206} In this regard, in the Talmudic commentary “Model of the West”, from the Tractate Menahoth, Levinas wonders if the fundamental difference between Israel and the West does not rest precisely on the Western historicism which “relativises and devalues every moment,” while Israel has attached itself to “an ‘always’ –in other words, to a permanence in time, to a time held by a moments of holiness... where not one of these moments is lost, or to be lost, but they are all to be deepened, that is to say sublimated?”\textsuperscript{207}

As has already been shown, by equating history with totality in Western historicism, Levinas places history in the sphere of the universal where knowledge and lucidity take the place of justice. In relation to this closeness between history and totality, Paul Olivier points out that Levinas’s philosophy is based upon a double criticism, to the philosophies of being and the philosophies of history, united by a common reference to totality.\textsuperscript{208} In spite of this criticism, Levinas’s eschatology being beyond history is reflected “within the totality and history, within experience.”\textsuperscript{209} Levinas is aware that it is not possible to evade

\textsuperscript{204} Levinas, \textit{Totality and Infinity}, 22.  
\textsuperscript{205} Ibid., 54.  
\textsuperscript{206} Ibid., 55.  
\textsuperscript{207} Levinas, \textit{Beyond the Verse}, 17.  
\textsuperscript{209} Levinas, \textit{Totality and Infinity}, 23.
and escape from history and his purpose is to save history by introducing a breach in time. This breach is eschatological in the sense discovered by the Bible “which consists in feeling responsible in the face of the future one hopes for others.”\textsuperscript{210} This is the meaning of eschatology given by Rabbi Samuel which entails responsibility for the poor and the victims. In this eschatology, the causes of the dead, the weak and those who suffer unjustly “are ready to be heard”\textsuperscript{211} in each instant, and not only the causes of the heroes when history is written at the end of the wars. The eschatological fissure in time constitutes a positive meaning to the extent that it introduces personal responsibility into the universal and continuous time.

\textit{The Novelty that interrupts history}

As has been mentioned previously, for Levinas the prophetic eschatology does not seek the final events of history in which a day will come when all injustices will be repaired and all tears will be wiped away. This would be the same frame of reference of the Kantian’s and Hegelian’s teleological historicism against which Levinas would say that “happiness of humanity does not justify the misery [\textit{malheur}] of the individual, retribution in the future does not wipe away the pains of the present.”\textsuperscript{212} The philosophies of history assume that progress has a human cost, as Hegel describes it in his \textit{Lectures on the Philosophy of World History}: victims are “an innocent flower” trampled underfoot by the mighty figure. In the same framework, the Marxist version of history seeks to justify the present suffering for the sake of the end of history: the final triumph of the revolution. That is, these costs are something inevitable, a lesser evil, something provisional or exceptional due to the fact that the same progress will repair the damage caused.

\textsuperscript{210} Levinas, \textit{Beyond the Verse}, xviii.
\textsuperscript{211} Levinas, \textit{Totality and Infinity}, 23.
\textsuperscript{212} Levinas, \textit{Existence and Existents}, 91. Translation amended.
Levinas’s philosophy is the revitalisation of the moment and the individual experience of persecution and domination that aims for commitment. In a text from *Existence and Existents* with evident Bergsonian echoes, Levinas argues that time is not a succession of instants, it is ‘a time composed of separate instants’ that cannot provide a reason for the tears or offer hope for the present. Hope is not a promise of a better future that would attenuate present misfortunes. The disappearance of a single person, with his/her soundless pain, will not be compensated by a better future for those who come after him/her. In focusing on the instants, rather than on the final result of history, Levinas therefore seeks to break the solidity of the temporality conceived from knowledge and presence and rescues the value of single lives. In other words, by cutting off teleology from history, Levinas, as Catherine Chalier notes, intends to give weight “to the instant lived by every unique life” without awaiting the wider development of history.

For Levinas, the grand event of history “would be the apparition of the human which would signify the interruption of the pure perseverance of a being in its being.” The continuity of time therefore must be interrupted in order to ground the personal responsibility for the human pains and sufferings that spring from the unicity of each life. This responsibility is grounded in the “biblical humanity,” because Greek spirituality is always bound to knowledge and therefore to lucidity. From a Greek perspective, “[r]eason rises like a fantastic sun that makes the opacity of creatures transparent. Men have lost their shadows! Henceforth, nothing can absorb or reflect this light which abolishes even the interiority of beings.” The “biblical humanity”, on the contrary, will provide the frame to think responsibility for the suffering and death of the other. This is a “new reason” that,

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beyond lucidity, is able to hear the words of the marginal. This is a reason which opens to the new, to the stranger, to the exterior.

The apparition of the human is, for Levinas, the interruption of history. It is the novelty that breaks the inhuman time of progress. Against the Hegelian final judgment of history, Levinas discloses a judgment of God that occurs when “it looks at me and accuses me in the face of the other – whose very epiphany is brought about by this offense suffered, by this status of stranger, widow, and orphan.”  

In fact, responsibility can only occur in a time when the instants do not succeed one another in a mechanical form toward a final judgement of history, but are open to the new in every instant. In his early works, *Existence and Existents* and particularly *Time and the Other*, Levinas defines time as the ‘very relationship of the subject with the other.’ Time is not a reflexive experience of the solitary subject; rather, it happens in the intersubjective relationship. This conception of time remains solid in his most important works, *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. In the former, time appears in terms of the other who, being infinity, opens time; and in the latter, time is represented in the concept of diachronic time, a time that is not contemporaneous with the other. Messianic redemption, therefore, is accomplished in history and coincides with the moment when each man takes the other’s suffering as his own.

*The Time of the Messiah*

Returning to the above mentioned discussion regarding the nature of the messianic salvation between Rabbis Johanan and Samuel in the Tractate *b.Sanhedrin*, it is worth noting that the identity of the Messiah and the time when messianic salvation will be

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215 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 244.
accomplished remain central in Levinas’s conception of time. In fact, if messianic time is detached from the end of times and from the perspective of the world to come, the identity of the Messiah as someone who will come to provide consolation and to offer the promised reward to those who have remained loyal to God is unnecessary. Thus, who is the Messiah? And when will he come? Levinas’s comments on the Talmudic text demonstrate the tension among the Talmudic masters, particularly in relation to the conditions for the coming of the Messiah.

In fact, unlike Rabbi Johanan who points to a world-to-come in relation to the coming of the Messiah, Rabbi Samuel privileges the notion of a messianic era in which the political violence will cease, and therefore sociality and responsibility in relation to the other will not be suppressed. Sociality and responsibility are an essential part of messianism. In this regard, messianic times are part of history and coincide with the time in which each man takes seriously his relation with the other who is defined as poor, in need of help and the gift. From the same perspective, Levinas rejects the consideration of messianic times in terms of eternity or in terms of the mythical life to come. Real life occurs in the world of contradictions and dramatic reality, not in a perfect reality to which only perfectly righteous people have access. The attention of the other thus becomes the indispensable element to identify the notion of messianism and the way to make its salvific content precise. In defining the messianic era in terms of responsibility for the other, Levinas positively valuates the efforts of men who work concretely within the interior of history. History is in fact the scenario in which intersubjective relationships intertwine and conflicts arise. Therefore, the days of the Messiah are differentiated from
the world to come because the former needs the ‘fecundity of time’ and the ‘positive value of history.’

To this point, Levinas has challenged history for its connatural tendency to ignore the concrete experiences of single lives, especially those of the defeated, the weak, and the victims. However, a positive value is set forth in the commentary of the Talmud Sanhedrin. Levinas’s Talmudic perspective does not contradict his critique of historicism; instead, the redemption of history occurs through the irruption or epiphany of the other, who, with his presence, breaks the progressive historical development by claiming attention and solidarity. In this way, it is possible to understand Levinas’s claim, ‘[w]hen man truly approaches the other, he is uprooted from history.’

The presence of marginal figures in Levinas’s stance about messianism is directly related to the identification of the Messiah. As stated previously, Levinas rejects the mythical identification of the Messiah as a supernatural character who, displaying his powers at the end of time, judges men’s history. Levinas also criticises the political identity of the Messiah being tied to the figure of the King Messiah, who would release the entire population of Israel without the personal involvement of the interested. Indeed, in the Tractate b.Sanhedrin, 98b-99a, Levinas reflects on Rabbi Hillel’s apparently enigmatic dictum “[t]here shall be no Messiah for Israel, because they have already enjoyed him in the days of Hezekiah.” Rabbi Hillel’s refusal of Messianism involves a positive meaning. It is a rejection of the political messianism that belongs to the past, and is not therefore the supreme salvation. In this sense, Levinas quotes the book of Samuel in which the tension between the political and the religious remains vivid.

217 Ibid., 67.
218 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 52.
219 Levinas, Difficult Freedom, 82.
220 See 1 Samuel 8
reproaches any political mediation between God and the people, because Israel has God as the only King and the relation with Him is direct without any intermediation. Deliverance therefore is not carried out by a Messiah King who would accomplish the Universal in the history of the world. Judaism, in Levinas’s view, “does not therefore carry with it a doctrine of an end to History which dominates individual destiny. Salvation, in Levinas’s estimation, does not stand as an end of history or act as its conclusion. ‘It remains at every moment possible.’ If the coming of the Messiah is at every moment possible, why is this so, and who therefore is the Messiah?

To respond to these questions, Levinas starts his reflection by underscoring how the three first names with which the Messiah is identified in the Tractate b.Sanhedrin 98b represent the names of the respective rabbinic schools: Shiloh, Yinnon, and Haninah. In this sense, the encounter with the Messiah is thought of under the basis of the relationship between the teacher and the pupil, and therefore the content of the messianic salvation would be similar to the oral teachings given by the person who studies the Torah. The asymmetric relationship between the teacher and the pupil is an educational figure of the relationship to the other, particularly relevant in Totality and Infinity. In the Talmudic commentary, Levinas uses it to describe the messianic revelation. The Messiah, therefore, would not be an exceptional person endowed with superhuman individual characteristics, but the teacher transmitting through his teachings the messianic values of peace (Shiloh), Justice (Yinnon), and love (Haninah). These values do not belong to a particular persona exclusively, but it is more an event that combines this set of values.

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221 Levinas, Difficult Freedom, 84.
These three biblical names would therefore point to an impersonal figure of the Messiah. The fourth name, Menahem (the comforter), seems to emphasise the individual and personal accent of the messianic vocation. Levinas outlines how, in the messianic era, it is the individual who receives personal recognition ‘beyond the recognition he receives for belonging to humanity and the State. It is not within his rights that he is recognised, but within his person, his strict individuality. Persons do not disappear within the general nature of an entity.’

Therefore, individuals in the messianic era are not crushed by the weight of the history of progress; they are not the Hegelian innocent flowers trampled for the benefit of the whole. Individuals are taken into consideration and receive the Messiah’s personal attention. To know who the Messiah is, it is necessary to go ‘beyond the notion of a mythical Messiah appearing at the end of History and conceive of messianism as a personal vocation among men.’

This personal vocation appears for Levinas in two passages of the Talmudic text that were noted previously. The first unveils the essence of the identity of the Messiah. In fact, in reference to the well-known text of Isaiah 53, the Rabbis say: ‘His name is the leper scholar.’ This text is decisive for revealing the identity of the comforter. The Messiah is therefore the suffering man who takes upon himself the suffering of the others. The second passage concerns Rabbi Nahman’s words, which claim, ‘[i]f he [the Messiah] is of those living [today], it may be one like myself, as it is written, And their nobles shall be of themselves, and their governors shall proceed from the midst of them (Jeremiah 30, 21).’ Moving beyond the opinions of scholars who have tried to explain the meaning of Nahman’s estimation, Levinas points to a philosophical explanation of the text in relation to the structure of subjectivity. Nahman says that the Messiah ‘may be one like

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223 Levinas, Difficult Freedom, 87.
224 Ibid., 88.
225 Ibid.
226 Ibid.
myself,’ in relation to the King of Israel, who will be one of themselves. Levinas’s bold interpretation is a hermeneutical transposition in which the subject is the sovereign who commands himself to take on the suffering of others. Levinas wonders, ‘who finally takes on the suffering of others, if not the being who says “Me” [Moi]?’ This is why, ‘the Messiah is myself; to be myself is to be the Messiah.’ \(^{227}\) In Totality and Infinity, Levinas says something similar: ‘To utter ‘I,’ to affirm the irreducible singularity in which the apology is pursued, means to possess a privileged place with regard to responsibilities for which no one can replace me and from which no one can release me.’ \(^{228}\) Levinas adds in the Talmudic commentary, “the fact of not evading the burden imposed by the suffering of others defines ipseity itself. All persons are the Messiah.” \(^{229}\) This is why “[o]ne belongs to the Messianic order when one has been able to admit others among one’s own.” \(^{230}\) The Messiah is therefore:

one who has promised itself that it will carry the whole responsibility of the world...Messianism is no more than this apogee in being, a centralising, concentration or twisting back on itself [Moi]. And in concrete terms, this means each person acts as though he were the Messiah. Messianism is therefore not the certainty of the coming of a man who stops History. It is my Power to bear the suffering of all. It is the moment when I recognised this power and my universal responsibility. \(^{231}\)

Finally, it is worth mentioning some convergences between Levinas’s and Jacques Derrida’s messianic reading of time in which, by formulating a model of disjointed time, responsibility for the other emerges. In fact, for Derrida, as for Levinas, the messianic event is related to the interruption of the linear concept of time and therefore to justice, meaning the encounter with other beyond self-appropriation. Disjointed time, in Derrida’s estimation, by disrupting linear and chronological time, unfolds the possibility of

\(^{227}\) Ibid., 89.  
\(^{228}\) Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 245.  
\(^{229}\) Levinas, Difficult Freedom, 89.  
\(^{231}\) Ibid., 88-9.
“conceiving of an a-temporal event,” an event that always remains still to come. Only if time is heterogeneous can we establish a heterogeneous relation to the other, which is crucial for any responsible relation towards the other. For Derrida, in the time to come there is only one concern: consenting the event of the *tout autre* to come.

In Derrida’s view, the model of conjoined time rests upon the concept of presence, which fills the event with the content of particular messianic promises, those of religious messianisms. On the contrary, “messianicity” is for Derrida the form of the promise itself, the form of any promise of something to come. It is in no way a secularization of the determinate content of religious messianism, because the authentic nature of the messianic is undetermined, it has no content. As John Caputo points out:

> the very idea of the messianic, of messianicity, is to shatter horizons, to let the promise of something *tout autre* to shock the horizon of the same and the foreseeable. Messianicity is not a horizon but the disruption or opening up of the horizon.233

In this way, messianicity opens up justice as "respect for those others who are no longer or for those others who are not yet *there*, presently living, whether they are already dead or not yet born. “234 There is no justice without this responsibility which splits the present, no justice “[w]ithout this non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present.”235 Messianicity urges *here* and *now* to interrupt the ordinary course of things, time and history; it is inseparable from an affirmation of alterity and justice. In Derrida’s view, it is only if time is out of joint, unhinged from the gathering unity of the living present, disjointed and opened up to the spectre of what is not there, that justice is possible. The movement of justice is a movement beyond the hinges and fixed junctures of the law-like

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235 Ibid.
relation to the other. The other unhinges me from my fixity in the present, its coming before me comes over and dispossesses me of my self-possession, drawing me out into the excess of the dis-juncture. From this perspective it is also possible, as in Levinas, to speak of a messianic subjectivity in Derrida to the extent to which the subject claims an ontological self-presence and also is an affirmation of that impossibility. To this extent, Derrida’s ideas on messianicity, like Levinas’s messianism, allow no approximation to the ethical deceptions of subjective idealism, which risks epistemological solipsism.

**Conclusion: Responsibility in the Now of the Messianic Time.**

Levinas, who was profoundly marked by the catastrophes of the twentieth century, turned to biblical categories to rescue history from the devastating consequences of terror and death. This approach allows Levinas to grant justice to victims by interrupting continuous and eternal time via the presence of those who do not count in the official historiography. The interruption of time is a direct consequence of the claims of the other who suffer. In this sense, time is alterity’s resistance to the totalitarian subjectivity that stems from the occidental logos. To accomplish this purpose, Levinas gives weight to the present moment, and maintains that nothing justifies waiting for a last judgment at the end of time. Levinas’s messianic time is the *now* of the commitment, strongly rooted in a prophetic eschatology that places the messianic *now* at the centre of ethics. Levinas’s messianic eschatology is essentially the personal response of an individual’s conscience to the suffering of the other who asks that the individual assume responsibility. It is not a final judgment that matters; rather, it is the judgement of each moment ‘before the accomplishment of history, before the fullness of time, while there is still time.’

For Levinas, ‘[t]he invisible must manifest itself if history is to lose its right to the last word,

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necessarily unjust for the subjectivity, inevitably cruel.”\textsuperscript{237} In each moment, the subject can act as if he/she is the Messiah, and that moment coincides with a universal responsibility for the suffering of the other, when the voices of the invisible victims of history claim attention.

This responsibility in relation to suffering led Levinas to critique the concept of memory linked to historiography. In fact, the work of the historiographer is to recuperate the past from the present, and therefore to become the judge who decides what must be remembered. As Benso remarks; “[m]emory is an instrument through which the self anchors its present into the past: it appropriates the past which would otherwise remain other –unthinkable because unthought of- and puts an end to its alterity.”\textsuperscript{238} In this sense, memory is totalitarian and ontological. From the perspective of historiography, the past is “a retained present and the future a present to come.”\textsuperscript{239} That is, the past is defined as a topic on which one can talk about.

But just as history is saved via the rupture of time, memory can also be freed from its ontological burden resulting from its contact with Greek philosophy. In fact, from a messianic perspective a new consideration of memory emerges. Because this aspect will be developed further in the fifth chapter, suffice to say that this will be a memory in which the other from an immemorial past interrupts the present, and in doing so it forces the “I” to assume its responsibility for the victims. This is an individual responsibility because “the past of the other concerns me: it is not a representation for me.”\textsuperscript{240} In Totality and Infinity, Levinas remarks, “it comes to me across an absolute interval whose other shore the Other absolutely other…is alone capable of marking, and of connecting with the

\textsuperscript{237} Ibid. 243.
\textsuperscript{238} Benso, “A Politic of Witnessing,” 9.
\textsuperscript{239} Robbins and Levinas, \textit{Is it Righteous to Be?} 176.
\textsuperscript{240} Ibid.
past.” Levinas insists on the need to reflect ethically on the 'tearing' [*déchirement*] that produces the other in the Same, because this "tearing" is the time. Messianic time is – in relation to that of historicists- the only one which supports the radical novelty in the messianic now.

Furthermore, as will be shown in the next chapter, by overthrowing teleology through the concept of eschatology, Metz also highlights the present moment; this is the only scenario in which a political commitment of solidarity can arise. For Metz it is not necessary to wait for the end, but it is necessary to look at the present *from* the end to do justice to the past. The concept of eschatology allows Metz to contrast individual eschatology, which renders the concept of the *eschaton* ‘politically impotent through privatisation,’ with apocalyptic eschatology, in which ‘[i]t is impossible to privatise the eschatological promises of biblical tradition: liberty, peace, justice, reconciliation.’

Therefore, the concept of the end of history does *not* entail the oblivion of singularity or a fall into totality, but rather a scenario of the political commitment of the subject in favour of the innocent victims of history. In line with Benjamin, Metz shows an interest in the political consequences of theology. This view envisages political action based on a memory of mankind’s history of suffering: it offers inspiration for a new form of solidarity and responsibility toward those most distant from us. Metz’s political theology is a reaction against the privatisation of traditional and modern theologies, which take refuge in the privacy of the individual, with the purpose of placing political praxis on the horizon of theology.

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Chapter Four

METZ AND THE APOCALYPTIC-ORIENTED ESCHATOLOGY

Introduction

As has been established in the first and second chapters, Metz and Levinas share a preoccupation about the marginal role that Judaism has played in modern Western reason. Indeed, both Levinas and Metz recognise the Judaic heritage in Europe, and at the same time, the concealment of this heritage by the Hellenisation of philosophy and theology. In Metz’s estimation the corrective for such a theology is found in the memories of the injustices of history and is therefore grounded in a biblical conception of time from which a universal ethico-political commitment emerges. In becoming a theology, Christianity lost its sensitivity to suffering and also to time; or, rather, in losing its sensitivity to bounded time, it lost in parallel its sensitivity to suffering. Metz confronts biblical time (that is, time with a finale) with time without a finale, which is the time of the mythical eternal recurrence of the same resuscitated by Nietzsche, and the time of progress. In Metz’s view, apocalyptic biblical time is both a response to the post-modern man grounded in the Nietzschean endless temporality and also a stumbling block [Ärgernis] to the time of indefinite progress and the concept of history that stems from it.

Both Levinas and Metz also open up a new relationship with historical time by introducing the contingency of individual experiences, particularly the victims of history. Initially it appears that Levinas and Metz follow different paths to splice contingency and singularity into history: while Levinas criticises eschatologies that attempt to bestow meaning on particular instances of suffering from the perspective of a teleology visualizing the end of time, Metz views apocalyptically-directed eschatology as a vital lifeline that offers justice to victims and retrieves sensitivity towards suffering. The
divergence is less emphatic, however, when one bears in mind that apocalyptic eschatology, in Metz’s understanding, has nothing to do with teleology as it is normally understood. Eschatology, according to Metz, is living as though it is the end of time; it is a revelation (apocalypse) of suffering from the past in the present. As Stéphane Mosès remarks in reference to Kafka’s narrative of the Tower of Babel: “the end can be achieved ‘from today,’ in the very heart of history.” The differences between the two thinkers follow rather from the political emphasis Metz places on the concept of apocalypse, where the messianic understanding of time in Levinas, as has been demonstrated in the preceding chapter, points towards an ethical-messianic subjectivity.

In this chapter, I will show how by critiquing the universal idealistic conceptions of history Metz attempts to ground a political praxis of commitment with those forgotten in both transcendental theology and idealistic history. In fact, Metz’s account of apocalyptic eschatology seeks to do justice to the victims of history by turning to bounded time which allows that the contingent experiences of suffering and death are saved via memory and narrative. The chapter starts by showing Walter Benjamin’s and Jacob Taubes’s conceptions of historical time and their influence on Metz’s political theology. While Benjamin suggests a look into the past that interrupts the present framed in the ideology of progress as "always the same," at the expense of the victims, Taubes inspires Metz to turn his gaze to the biblical time with an end, meaning as apocalyptic. From this perspective, Metz aligns with Levinas in his interest in recovering the now of time and the response to human suffering. As for Levinas, in Metz the concepts of contingency and singularity become part of history.

Benjamin and the Responsibility for the Victims

Orietta Ombrosi has demonstrated how Benjamin and Levinas share a common critique of universal historicism in which the meaning of singular events and therefore the place of single individuals, and particularly that of the victims, are forgotten. In fact, Benjamin’s idea of catastrophe suggests a questioning of the hypothesis of a project of reason achieved in history (Hegel, Kant). Benjamin’s *Angelus Novus* brings a novelty to history which disarms the logic of the concatenation of events in a temporal series, whose significance would be reached in the last event, at the height of a linear progression of time. This novelty represents a different conception of temporality derived from the idea of messianism. From Ombrosi’s viewpoint, both thinkers critique “the traditional notion of time and more so, precisely of temporal continuity, in order to save the legacy of the losers before the court of history.” Benjamin’s and Levinas’s time takes its roots in a “messianic vision of time,” in which responsibility for what happens in history determines the present responsibility of the subject. While in Levinas this responsibility is fundamentally ethical and based on a messianic subjectivity, in Benjamin it is political and socially transformative, and in this way notably influences Metz’s political theology. A common characteristic of Benjamin, Levinas, and Metz is the critique of universal historicism which conceals the singular experiences of those who, not being interesting enough or being too weak, are forgotten in the plot of history based on the idea of progress. For Benjamin and Levinas, and also for Metz, new responsibilities arise in the present time in order to redeem the singular experiences of pain and suffering.

In relation to Benjamin, it is initially worth noting how in opposing historical materialism to historicism, Benjamin sets up a model of history based on two sources:

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244 Ombrosi, “History, Memory, Forgiveness,” 57
245 Ibid.
Jewish Messianism and Marx’s philosophy of history. Admittedly, Benjamin does not follow the canonical Marxist concept of historical materialism; rather, as Ronald Beiner demonstrates, he “redefines” it. What Beiner tries to show, contra Gershom Scholem in relation to the Theses on the Philosophy of History, is that Benjamin does not break with Marx’s historical materialism “to return to the metaphysical-theological concepts” as Scholem affirms, but rather attempts “to redefine those categories and to clarify the nature of his allegiance to them.” The core of this redefinition is, in Beiner’s viewpoint, a break with the Marxist future-oriented “revolutionary expectations” to look at the past in order to redeem it. Fortunately, one does not have to decide between Marxism and Judaism in Benjamin’s conception of history. As Michael Löwy asserts, Benjamin “reinterprets these conceptions [Marxist and Jewish], transforms them and situates them in a relation of reciprocal illumination that enables them to be articulated together in a coherent way.” For Löwy, Benjamin is therefore not only a Marxist or Jewish, but an unusual thinker in who “Marxism and messianism are simply two expressions […] of a single thought.”

Beyond the discussion concerning the influence of Marxism and Judaism on Benjamin’s Theses, Benjamin’s philosophy of history is the redefinition of history beyond the Hegelian concept of history as a rational process. From Benjamin’s viewpoint, the above mentioned historical materialism is apprehensive in relation to history rooted in a progressive continuity towards a telos. This apprehension appears, as several commentators on Benjamin have shown, in both the first lines of one of his first works,

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249 Ibid., 424.
251 Ibid.
the 1914 writing *The Life of Students*, and it also constitutes the central preoccupation of the *Theses*, Benjamin’s last work. Benjamin criticises the idea of progress which is founded on a linear, continuous and empty vision of historical time, and the consequent political attitude of resignation to the present. For Benjamin, this resignation was clear in the German Social Democratic Party which relied on a dogmatic conception of progress in which the logic of history necessarily moved toward the overcoming of capitalism and fascism. This deterministic interpretation of historical materialism was grounded upon a secularized version of the Protestant salvific concept of work. While in the religious version work assures believers of being in the way of salvation, in the Marxist version work assures the proletariats of being in the way of overcoming capitalism and constructing socialism. Benjamin voices the worry that progress could generate political passivity when the gaze is directed to the work based on the mechanism of deterministic progress, and not to the worker who is the victim of the social conditions of work.

The concept of progress is not only responsible for a political passivity, but is also in Benjamin’s viewpoint indifferent to the victims of history and an accomplice of barbarism. In fact, by relying on the continuum of history, historicism does not allow interruption to look at the past, at the victims who lay prostrate. Benjamin’s angel of history for instance feels that the storm of progress “propels him into the future” not allowing him “to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed”. The inability to look at the past is based on a historical universalism in which history is built by adding facts in order “to fill the homogeneous, empty time”. Furthermore, in Benjamin’s stance, if history is telling facts, it should tell all the facts and everything.

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253 Ibid., 262.
about those facts. But historicism is unable to do so because its method is additive and therefore it lacks the “theoretical armature” to look at the monad. Benjamin uses Leibniz’s concept of monad to emphasise the essential character of the singular events of the past for history. Benjamin is particularly attracted by the idea that in the analysis of the minimum singular moment one can discover the meaning of the whole process. That is, Benjamin recognises in a minor occurrence the capacity to represent history.

These minor occurrences or monads are “the arrest of thinking” that breaks the flow of thoughts. Benjamin's constructive method stops the logic that animates the movement of history to open the way for revolutionary action. The monad appears to the materialist historian bringing something new. The monad jumps from the train of history to reveal the meaning of history. This is the novelty of history, the interruption of history. This is the possibility that the vanquished are not forgotten, and as Beiner affirms, “this means that one is never deterred by the idea of progress from continuing to wage ‘the fight for the oppressed past’.”\textsuperscript{255} Benjamin’s reflection on history tries to rescue the defeated in order to redeem humanity by doing justice to the victims of the past. The task of the materialist historian is therefore “to brush history against the grain.”\textsuperscript{256} Similar to Levinas, Benjamin is at odds with traditional philosophical universalism which from an historical perspective is unable “to consider the singularity of those who are subject to [its] course and progress.”\textsuperscript{257} In Benjamin’s view, as well as in Levinas’s \textit{Totality and Infinity}, the happiness of the grandchildren does not justify the tragedies of the grandparent. For both thinkers, Western universal reason has been the accomplice of barbarism and is intrinsically incapable of doing justice to the victims.

\textsuperscript{255} Beiner, “Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy of History,” 428
\textsuperscript{256} Benjamin, \textit{Illuminations}, 257.
\textsuperscript{257} Ombrosi, “History, Memory, Forgiveness,” 48.
Therefore, progress, the cornerstone of modernity, is for Benjamin the breeding ground of fascism. In the eighth thesis, he argues that “[o]ne reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm.”

For Reyes Mate the essential common characteristic of Fascism and progress is scorn “for the human and social costs” that both perspectives entail. This conception is also coupled with the idea that the unsuccessful is insignificant and therefore progress is the carrier of civilization. In this sense, the victims of history would be justified from the point of view of the general benefits of humanity.

Consequently, the novelty that the monad brings to light is the presence of the vanquished in history. That is, historical thinking “receives a ‘shock,’ and this shock stops it in its tracks.” The past is a novelty for the present; that is, the past has something to say to the present and this saying interrupts the continuity of time. This topicality of the past for the present is described by Benjamin using the concept of Jetztzeit, the now-time or actuality. In the debris of the past, with its injustices, death, and cries, there is still a now that claims for justice. Because history is a “time filled by the presence of the now,” the task of the historian is to point out the injustices that have taken place and are still demanding justice. Benjamin’s history is based on a different tradition from that of the Hegelian or Kantian history, which relies on a universal and rational process.

This tradition that Benjamin puts forward is Jewish messianism in which time is discontinuous and is therefore opposed to the continuity of progressive time. In messianic time, every second is the “strait gate through which the Messiah may enter.”

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259 See Reyes Mate, Medianoche en la historia. Comentarios a las tesis de Walter Benjamin sobre el “Concepto de Historia” (Madrid: Trotta, 2009), 41.
261 Benjamin, Illuminations, 261
262 Ibid., 264.
Agamben states, “[Messianic time] becomes the model for a conception of history ‘that avoids any complicity with the thinking to which politicians continue to adhere’.”263 In fact, Benjamin criticizes official Marxism, followed by the German Democratic Party, which considered revolution as the culmination of technical and economic progress. On the contrary, Benjamin considers revolution as the Messianic interruption of the course of history to snatch humanity from the disaster that threatens it constantly. The relation with the past is therefore redemptive and seeks justice for the forgotten and nameless. In using theological Jewish categories, Benjamin is interested in the human history that remains engraved in religion, and not in the concept of God. Furthermore, Benjamin’s religious categories are also a challenge to philosophy rooted in scientism and therefore in reason alone. In enlightened philosophy those experiences that had no scientific translation were expelled from the field of reason and thus from philosophy. For Benjamin, on the contrary, religion provides the scenario in which experiences beyond rationalism could find epistemological validity.

Furthermore, Benjamin's messianism is tied to the apocalypse from an immanent perspective. That is, the coming of the Messiah could happen at any moment in this world, and therefore there is no need to await a future world to receive consolation for misfortune. In this way, Benjamin seeks a “secularization of messianism,” meaning the realization on earth of the original liberating content of messianism. Benjamin’s secularization passes through the recovery of the messianic concept of full time, but a fullness in every moment, not at the end of time. Mosès has called this perspective “Messianism of the present time.”264 That is, the idea that an instant is not the result of

the previous instant but it has a full value. History is played in an instant, that of the *Jetztzeit*, in which the past is made present by breaking the linear conception of time. Benjamin’s messianism is that of political commitment in the present of history because salvation takes place in this world. Therefore, history is tinged with redemption because “the Messiah interrupts history; the Messiah does not come at the end of an evolution.”

This is why time in Benjamin’s terms is a fruit with “a precious but tasteless seed.”

That is, the past is not a dead past but a seed pregnant with possibilities.

As in Levinas, Benjamin's Messiah is not a powerful character who will appear at the end of time; he is rather the man who takes this historical responsibility for the misfortunes of the past. The individual, the materialist historian, will be covered with a "weak Messianic power" that allows him to see at any given moment the pending rights of the past. That past can then make clear the present as a lightning strike instantly illuminates the whole night. That unpredictable, instant messianic force which comes from the past to the present cannot be science, but a matter of memory. This is not a simple remembrance of the past but dangerous memories which come from the past as “ships of messianic time” and penetrate the present time.

The memory of the forgotten is one of the major preoccupations that Metz shares with Benjamin in his new political theology. As was pointed out in the first chapter, the encounter with the Frankfurt School was critical in Metz’s turn to a more practical theology in which singularity could count in history. Unlike Levinas, who assumes messianism from an ethical perspective, Benjamin’s influence on Metz led the German theologian to adopt a political horizon regarding the concept of Messianism which opens

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266 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 263.
up a space for a practical commitment with the victims of history. Benjamin’s influence on Metz is notable in looking at the past from the point of view of the victims through memory with a practical-political intention, and in the consideration of interrupted time to break the spell of progress.

**Taubes and the Time with an End**

If Benjamin’s conception of history was pivotal for Metz’s turn from transcendental to practical theology, Jacob Taubes inspires Metz to turn towards the biblical concept of time with an end, and to the concomitant role that Gnosticism has played in the modern conception of historical time. In Metz’s apocalyptic-directed eschatology, Taubes’s reading of the situation of the post-Second World War and his apocalypticism was influential. In fact, Taubes underlines how behind the apparent normal world of the second half of the twentieth century, something is changing: the man known thus far. That is, a man characterized by the Kantian questions: "What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope?" For Taubes, the crisis in modernity is the conception of man and the world linked to monotheism, which has survived under secularized forms. He who considers himself a philosopher who uses theological material for his reflections, responds to this change by using the apocalyptic-eschatological tools of the Bible.

In his doctoral dissertation, published under the title *Occidental Eschatology*, Taubes starts his reflection on history by considering that consciousness has to be liberated from the submission to the eternal return of natural existence, the “endless

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268 See Metz, *Memoria passionis*, 129.
repetition of the natural cycles.”\textsuperscript{270} In fact, consciousness finds itself confined in the myth of the “eternal return of the same,” in which “the same whence and whither coincide,” thus, forming “the center of the mythic world.”\textsuperscript{271} From Levinas’s perspective, history as totality is borne in this endless return as a paradigmatic example of a thought closed in itself. Levinas’s remedy to this conception of history is a rupture in which the subject takes messianic responsibility in relation to the other’s suffering. Taubes also seeks the way out of this subservience of history to consciousness, but unlike Levinas who seeks this way beyond freedom, he links history to freedom. As Jacob Robert Gold remarks, “[h]istory and freedom are intertwined because change results from the efforts of human beings to transform their world.” In other words, “history is the domain of freedom on account of the inherent \textit{negativity} of human activity, which alters the world instead of accepting it as is.”\textsuperscript{272} Taubes’s political-transformative backdrop is essentially Benjaminian and points to the revitalization of the Biblical categories of messianism and apocalypse to break the mythic endlessness of time as return. In line with Benjamin, Taubes in fact endeavours to release history from the idea that considers it a recurrence of past events, and therefore from the idea of an accumulative process of events as a result of scientific knowledge. In \textit{Occidental Eschatology} Taubes points out that the question that matters about history is the question of the essence of history. This essence is \textit{eschaton}, that is, history points towards an end.\textsuperscript{273} The myth of the eternal return is therefore broken by positing an end to time.

In pointing towards an end, Taubes agrees with Carl Schmitt’s eschatology. However, the difference between Taubes and Schmitt is substantial, as Taubes himself
manifests: “Carl Schmitt thinks apocalyptically, but from above, from the powers that be; I think from the bottom up.” While Schmitt’s *katechontic* view of eschatology seeks a divine legitimation of power, Taubes’s apocalyptic vision seeks the “theological *delegitimation* of political power as a whole.” Schmitt, in Taubes’s view, is interested in “only one thing: that the party, that the chaos not rise to the top, that the state remains.” Schmitt does this by linking the Pauline concept of *katechon* with the purpose of serving the State in its dealing with the threat of anarchy and dissolution. The Pauline *katechon* in Schmitt’s view is the power to restrain the present time and delay the end, “[t]he belief that a restrainer holds back the end of the world provides the only bridge between the notion of an eschatological paralysis of all human events and a tremendous historical monolith like that of the Christian empire of the Germanic kings.” In this sense, if originally the *katechon* is the strategy of historic Christianity, the law at the service of the State is the continuation of its historical realization. In fact, the Christian intention to postpone the end by preventing the triumph of the Antichrist, is continued by the law in the fight against the threat of chaos and dissolution of the state. Taubes responds to Schmitt: if history has an end any attempt to postpone its arrival creates a time determined by the will to power. In fact, the Roman Empire, Jewish antimessianism, the Catholic theocracy, the modern democratic forms more or less imbued with Caesarism, and also all theologies and philosophies of history that at different moments have supported such forms of power, are nothing more than postponements of the end, of the Messianic time.

Taubes thinks that Schmitt has misunderstood the Pauline eschatology. This is so because in Paul’s terms this is the time to see the first Adam from the coming of the second, that is, he invites us to think the finite existence from the end taking into account the coming of the kingdom. It is time therefore to live considering the end, but in advance. This eschatological perspective translates into a kind of existential life animated by the love of the neighbour, by otherness as a principle of coexistence. According to Taubes, love in Paul’s view means “that I am not centred in myself… but rather: I have a need.”\textsuperscript{278} The other is not someone who needs us, but someone from whom we access humanity. Paul, in Taubes’s estimation, is someone who provides the basis for a new and universal people which is not a theocracy but a body of Christ. The entrance to this people is opened up by love for the neighbour. This is a social body bound by pneumatic (πνεῦμα) ties. Therefore, while from Schmitt’s perspective the divine legitimation of politics leads to a question about the power in the political community which can tackle chaos and dissolution, Taubes’s horizontal consideration leads to a messianic experience of the constitution of the community, that of a reconciled community that comes.

Furthermore, Taubes’s apocalyptic eschatology advocates for a decision in the time of history. In fact, “[i]n the order of eternity, being is sublated as time. Endless infinity characterizes indifferent happening [das gleich-gültige Geschehen] that does not call for a decision. History separates itself from this indifferent happening by placing one into the decision for truth.”\textsuperscript{279} The urgency of action is animated, therefore, by the awareness of the end of time. Contrary to the endless repetition of the same, which lacks the urgency of decision, the apocalyptic gaze of history is revolutionary because “it beholds the turning point not in some indeterminate future but proximate.”\textsuperscript{280} Taubes’s

\textsuperscript{278} Taubes, \textit{The political Theology of Paul}, 55-6.
\textsuperscript{279} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{280} Ibid.
apocalypse implies a responsibility which acquires full sense from the subject’s historical existence itself. As will be shown in this chapter, this is a central point in Metz’s temporality which places an apocalyptic temporality with a finale driven by the urgency of a political action in the memory of victims’ suffering. Furthermore, Metz sees that Marcion’s Gnosticism, coupled with the epistemological categories of Neo-Platonism, is responsible for a de-historization of salvation, for an evasion from the question of theodicy and therefore the ignorance of the real suffering of men and women in history.

According to Taubes, the menace of the de-historization of thinking is present in Gnosticism. He considers that by pointing to the soul and therefore to the interiorization of the apocalypse, Gnosticism places salvation beyond history. Marcion is the most radical figure in showing the a-temporal and de-historized vision of Gnosticism. He points, in fact, to an interiorization of eschatology and therefore to an a-historical understanding of salvation. As Gold remarks, “[r]epudiating the world, Gnosticism repudiates history as well.” 281 Indeed, Gnosticism is neither nature nor history, but essentially man’s interiority: soul, spirit, pneuma. The Gnostic myth describes the path of the soul through the multiplicity and the bewilderment of the worlds and eons, the customs, checkpoints of the archons through which the soul has to pass in order to reach the transworldly, or more precisely the antiworldly god, that unity which precedes all division and fragmentation in worlds and eons. 282

Admittedly, for Taubes, Gnosticism could be a contra weight against both the risk of attempting salvation politically through force and also the risk of accepting the frustration of salvation due to the frustrated imminent coming of the Messiah. 283 However, the opposition that Gnosticism establishes between the divine and the world, and the

281 Gold, “Jacob Taubes,” 150.
282 Jacob Taubes, From Cult to Culture: Fragments Towards a Critique of Historical Reason, trans. Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 67
283 See Taubes, From Cult to Culture, 3-9.
consequent repudiation of history threatens the ethical decision of the subject in the world, because “[g]nosticism forecloses from the outset any possibility that human activity can influence the end of history.”

For Taubes, the influence of the myth of Gnosticism and its emphasis upon the soul was evident not only in the theology of early Christianity, under the influence of Origen and Marcion, but also in modernity. In opposition to Hans Blumenberg, Taubes considered that modernity did not signify the overcoming of the gnostic myth but the resurgence of the endless return of the same in the hearth of enlightened modernity. In fact, Blumenberg had argued, against Karl Lowith’s and Eric Voegelin’s thesis, that modernity signifies neither the secularization of religious categories (Lowith) nor the persistence of Gnosticism (Voegelin) but the substitution of one culture with its questions and answers for a totally different one, and therefore the definitive overcoming of Gnosticism by a preponderant scientific-technological culture. Taubes, for his part, wonders whether the “modern age” really represents a definitive overcoming of Gnosticism, particularly when the Enlightenment itself has fallen into mythology, taken apart the concept of revelation and turned a deaf ear “to the differentiation of epochs and of the forms of consciousness before and after Christ.”

Taking recourse to Schelling’s distinction between mythology and revelation, Taubes endeavours to trace the possibility of a demythologized concept of history that prevents the resurgence of the eternal return. By distinguishing between mythic time and Christian time, Schelling remarks on the possibility of history as the principal

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286 Taubes, From Cult to Culture, 309.
characteristic that differentiates Christianity from myth. This is why, according to Schelling, “Christianity does not merely belong to theologians; it belongs just as well to the genuine historians.”

For Taubes, historical scholarship “is ‘genuine’ only when it relates the change of consciousness of history to the change of being in history.” Therefore, history is not the register of reality that remains always the same, but the expectations of a new reality, a new world from the transformation of the old one. Therefore, reality for Christianity is something in transformation in which freedom is crucial. This is why history is the history of the eighth day of creation, the history of Adam’s fall; the account of creation prior to the fall “does not describe any event in time.”

History starts therefore from a transgression, and Adam experienced this transgression not as natural thing but as an offence and guilt. Evil in the biblical account is not a pre-historical divine struggle but Adam’s burden. All myth within biblical narration is subordinated to Adam’s history. Human history is the tension between Adam’s act and the response that overcomes it, that redeems it. It is worth noting how for Taubes in the Bible only Paul was interested in Adam. Paul’s messianic vision of history, that is, the importance of the second coming of the Messiah, allows him to give weight to the significance of the first Adam. The ur-history becomes significant eschatologically. In Taubes’s estimation, “[r]evelation in the strict sense occurs only at the beginning and end of history, which are interlocked in secret agreement.”

As stated above, Taubes’s apocalyptic vision of time was pivotal for Metz’s focus on the temporal limits of the Bible. Taubes’s concept of biblical time allows Metz to respond to Nietzsche’s “death of God” and the concomitant conception of endless or

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287 See, Ibid., 308
288 Ibid.
289 Ibid., 312.
290 Ibid., 312.
eternal time. In Metz’s estimation, this open temporality is guilty of the dissolution of human responsibility before the tragedies of history and the cultural amnesia that accompanies the triumphant.

**Metz and the Interruption of History**

According to Metz, the notion of interruption becomes a theological way of responding to the temporality driven by the ideology of progress. This is Metz’s idea expressed in his “Noncontemporaneous Theses on the Apocalyptic View” published in *Faith in History and Society*. In these theses, the concept of interruption allows for remembering “not only what has succeeded, but also what has been destroyed, not only what has been achieved, but also what has been lost and in this way is turned against the victory of what has become and already exists.”

In this vein, Metz’s questions are in line with Benjamin: “Who responds to the demand for freedom implicit in the sufferings and hopes of the past, who responds to the challenge of the dead, who sensitizes our consciousness about their unmet aspirations of justice, who practices solidarity with them?” From Metz’s perspective, the silent suffering of the inexpressible pain of the past, the suffering of the dead continues, for the greater freedom of future generations does not justify past sufferings nor does it render them free. From this viewpoint, no improvements in the conditions of freedom in the world are able to do justice to the dead or effect a transformation of the injustice and the non-sense of past suffering. For Metz, the abstract history of freedom turns out to be a history of success, triumph or victory and an endless hope in the eternal return of progress. Furthermore, when history is understood from a natural evolutionistic perspective, the suffering of the human subject is concealed under the abstract attempt of reconciling nature and man. This happens, for example, in

291 Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 171.
the scholastic concept of suffering as “a universal interplay between actio and passio in nature.” This kind of suffering is, for Metz, “no more than a scholasticism of suffering.”

For Metz evolutionary time is a model that can be used in the field of the natural sciences, but it cannot be universalized to the point of understanding the whole of reality from the perspective of evolution. If time and history are seen from the evolutionary perspective, “[n]o one can expect anything new, only the eternal return of the same.”

As Levinas has claimed, this is a model of thought enclosed within itself, and therefore the other has no possibilities of justice. Ashely confirms this assertion by pointing out that “if one has accepted the ‘evolutionistically tinged’ myth of homogenous empty time […] the remembrance of past suffering becomes unbearable, and hope for a future radical transformation ridiculous.” On the contrary, history as suffering resists any attempt to interpret history in the light of nature alone and calls for a full acknowledgment of the experience of suffering which is an essential part of the identity of the subject. The subject is therefore not only identified by the positive ontological persistence in time which is teleological, it is also identified by the historical negativities which claim an interruption of the historical time to do justice to the victims. In this sense, for Metz, the natural history of man is to some extent the history of human suffering. Furthermore, in the history of human suffering there is no goal, it is not teleological as in the evolutionary perspective. If history needs continuity, it is provided by the experience of suffering and not by the progress of science for the purpose of controlling nature. The history of suffering has however a future which is framed in the political responsibility of the subject. From this

293 Ibid., 107-108
294 Metz, Faith in History and Society, 108.
295 Ashley, Interruptions, 119.
296 Ashley, Interruptions, 165.
perspective, the dynamics of history “consist of the memory of suffering as a negative consciousness of future freedom and as a stimulus to overcome suffering.”

Adorno shares with Benjamin and Metz the conviction that a change of perspective in the consideration of history is necessary by adopting the perspective of the oppressed and the victims. For Adorno, it is not a matter of considering domination as the ontological and negative foundation of history, but to prevent the relativization of suffering in it. For Adorno, it is possible to recognize the unity of discontinuous and chaotically scattered moments of history as the continuity of destructive domination, since unjust suffering has not yet been eliminated in any of them. The latest figure of iniquity opens the eyes to the current suffering in every moment, and the persistence of unjust suffering is the proof of the persistence of destructive domination. From this perspective, Adorno does not attempt to formulate a new negative metaphysics of history, but seeks to force a change in perspective by looking at the negativities in history. He is not intending to ontologize discontinuity, “the state of emergency” or suffering, as if it were an essential determination of history, from which there would be no possibility of release. Rather, what is required here is to adopt the perspective of the oppressed and the victims of history.

As was mentioned above, Metz takes sides with Benjamin and Taubes in denouncing the attempt to reconcile nature and history, which would mean reconciliation with the “painful contradictions” of history. Unlike nature, which is based on the endless repetition of eternal natural cycles, human history is driven by the character of

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297 Ibid., 108.
299 Metz, Memoria passionis, 48.
interruption. This character prevents history from being reduced to the successful and triumphant. The “meaning of history,” is not therefore restricted to what evolutionistically has come to be, but also to what has been lost and destroyed. In this vein, evolutionary time needs to be confronted from a new perspective in which history would be sensitive to singularity and contingency. For the German theologian, the Biblical perspective provides this sensitivity to the extent that it is “impregnated with a pathos for the new (das Novum), for the new time and the new coming world, that is, for the new as that which never was.”

In his early book *Theology of the World*, Metz emphasizes how Revelation for the Israelites is neither a self-communication of God, nor words of information or appeal. They are words of promise [Verheissungswort], and therefore oriented to the future. In this sense, the world, for Metz, does not appear principally as a world of nature, a comprehensive framework into which man is placed as if as an afterthought, but as an historical world that is coming into being. Theologically, it is always seen within a framework of promise. It is not the fixed, pre-established surround within which "history" takes place in an ultimately indifferent return of what is constantly the same but a world that comes into being historically as a result of the "heavenly" promises of God, a process for which believers have an essential responsibility. This is why for Metz, apocalyptic-directed eschatology “is not fulfilment but promise. The history of man’s suffering has no goal, but it has a future.”

301 Ibid., 87-8.
of suffering as a negative consciousness of future freedom and as a stimulus to overcome suffering within the framework of that freedom.

Metz considers memory a “dangerous” category. This means that the past of the victims “is full of meaning because it is recognised as an injustice that questions the present. These are dangerous memories because they visit the present and question it.”

Moreover, memory in the sense of a dangerous memory, can be thought as of the expression of eschatological hope, elaborated in its social and historical mediation. Memory has a fundamental theological importance as what may be termed anamnestic solidarity or solidarity in memory with the dead and the conquered. This breaks the grip of history as a history of triumph and conquest interpreted dialectically or as evolution. Memory is also fundamental for the constitution of the subject. In fact, it is a category of salvation for a threatened subjectivity. According to Metz, it is not by chance that any totalitarian rule begins with the destruction of the memory. Amnesia is indeed the consequence of mechanisms that control the dominant consciousness which equates everything outside of the pragmatic reason with superstition. On the contrary, these memories take the form of liberating narratives; they are essentially practical, and not merely argumentative.

In relation to the character of interruption in history, Metz points out in the seventh thesis of his above mentioned Noncontemporaneous Theses that “[t]he first categories of interruption” are love and solidarity. Love is for Metz a category of responsibility and justice which allows seeing history as a history of passion (suffering), and the history of passion as compassio. The Latin word compassio allows Metz to go beyond


305 Metz, Faith in History and Society, 171.
sentimentalism towards a consideration of love as a perception and active remembrance of the others’ suffering. That is, the unconditional determination to bring justice, liberty, and peace to others. From this perspective, history is the history of suffering but also the history of progressive emancipation from subservience and discrimination. Thus understood, love, in Metz’s estimation, contains a socio-critical dynamism that can be viewed in two ways. First: love postulates a determined criticism of pure power. It does not allow thinking from the Schmittian categories of the "friend-enemy," for it is obliged to include the enemies within the universal orbit of hope. Second: the socio-critical dynamism of love points in yet another direction. If love is actualized as the unconditional determination to freedom and justice for others, there might be circumstances where love itself could demand actions of a revolutionary character.

To Metz, this universal responsibility is rooted in the biblical traditions, particularly the messianic ones. In fact, the biblical traditions and the New Testament accounts of Jesus know an inescapable form of universal responsibility driven by the universal suffering of humanity. Jesus looking first to the suffering and not to the sin is the grounding for the Christian perspective of the community of memory. The Christian community acts as a community of the *imitatio Christi*, that is, the community that follows the paths of Jesus. From a biblical perspective, even the suffering of enemies must be taken into account because it is not up to us to define clearly and to delimit the range of this responsibility or the breadth of this caring. The neighbour of the Parable of the Good Samaritan “is never only the one whom we ourselves regard and accept as such.”

Metz’s Catholic messianism is therefore described as *imitatio Christi*; that is, the imitation of the Christian Messiah, the son of God, who took the pain and suffering

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of the victims to redeem them. Levinas’s messianism on the contrary is a secular one and points to a messianic subjectivity to the extent that it responds to human suffering. The Messiah for Levinas indicates the accomplishment of the very humanity of the “I.”

**Time without a Finale**

While in his first works and particularly in *Faith in History and Society*, Metz confronts the ideology of progress with the concept of interruption, in his 2006 book, *Memoria passionis*, interruption is a response to Nietzsche’s eternal return. According to Metz, Nietzsche presents a rupture in the dominant consideration of time arising from the biblical tradition and being incorporated in Western culture; in this dominant tradition, time has an *eschaton*, that is, a finale. Indeed, by proclaiming the death of God, Nietzsche, according to Metz, is also sending a message about time: a time without a finale, that is, an eternal or endless time. It is a time that neither begins nor ends, a “time that knows no limits and no purposes, neither celestial nor earthly, whether purposes seen speculatively, as by Hegel, or carried out by political means, as with Marx.”

It is a time that wills nothing but itself, time as the last remaining monarch after all of the metaphysically built thrones have been ‘overthrown’; it is time as the only postmetaphysical fascination. In Metz’s view, the endless time is the time that is largely prevalent in the postmodern world. In this kind of temporality, human responsibility is diluted as a result of its inner “diffuse atmosphere of uprooting.” Thus, man is perceived as a sort of pilgrim without a goal and is characterised as a self-experiment rather than a memory. The Nietzschean man, that is, the man who strays “as through an infinite nothing” is accepted as having a

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308 Metz *Memoria passionis*, 126. Translation mine.
destiny that makes him deaf to the inexorable passing of time and happily places him in
the eternal return of time.

One of the consequences of this temporality is forgetting suffering in history. In
fact, Metz acknowledges Nietzsche as a paradigmatic example of the cultural amnesia
that has to reckon with the oblivion of the past to achieve happiness. In fact, Nietzsche
claims that “in the case of the smallest and the greatest happiness, it is always just one
thing alone that makes happiness: the ability to forget.” 310 In the same line of thinking,
he adds a few lines later, “anyone who cannot forget the past entirely and set himself on
the threshold of the moment, anyone who cannot stand, without dizziness or fear, on one
single point like a victory goddess, will never know what happiness is.” 311 From Metz’s
perspective, the Nietzschean death of God prevents human beings from finding happiness
other than in oblivion: ‘the prototype of happiness would be […] the amnesia of the
winner; its conditio sine qua non, the merciless forgetting of the victim.’ 312 For this
reason, Metz calls Nietzsche ‘the first postmodern prophet of the post-Christian age.’ 313

The modern and post-modern world is bent on maintaining a relationship with time that
is open to progress and cut off from the past, particularly from the past of the defeated. If
the past is remembered, it is only to celebrate the victories of the winners. It is also
understood from this perspective that progress has a human cost that is represented by the
inevitability of victims produced in the process of the amelioration of human society;
however, these consequences are inevitable and provisional to the extent that the same
progress will repair the damage caused.

311 Ibid., 127.
312 Metz, Memoria passionis, 75. Translation mine.
313 Ibid., 74.
According to Metz, the “enchantment of cultural amnesia”\footnote{Ibid., 123.} has a twofold consequence. In the first place, humans lose their humanity concurrently with their loss of history, meaning that they lose the moral motivation to resist unjust suffering, to inspire a more encompassing justice, and to attend to the suffering of others. Furthermore, the lack of a historical view of suffering affects humanity as a whole because it is associated with the loss of “the fundamental civilising trust” upon which humanity rests.\footnote{See Ibid., 76.} In drawing attention to this risk, Metz highlights memory as fundamental for the configuration of the civilising values that bind humans socially. While the time of the death of God is expressed as cultural amnesia, the biblical message of God as time with an end is expressed in the memory of human suffering. Time is continually interrupted by the other’s demands, to which the subject feels compelled to respond. The victims are not forgotten, and they claim justice from the margins of continuous and uninterrupted progress. Responsibility stems from a limited time during which “action grows more urgent, priorities emerge, and decisions become meaningful.” Conversely, “[w]hen time is unlimited, forever more of the same, then life too becomes a pointless trajectory.”\footnote{John K. Downey, “Introduction: Risking Memory: Political Theology as Interruption,” in \textit{Love’s Strategy: The Political Theology of Johann Baptist Metz}, ed. John K. Downey (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999). 5.} Furthermore, it is impossible, in Metz’s estimation, to privatize the eschatological promises of biblical tradition: liberty, peace, justice, and reconciliation. These promises are not an empty horizon of religious expectations; neither are they only a regulative idea. They are, rather, a critical liberating imperative for the present time. As Jürgen Moltmann points out,

The Christian salvation for which we hope is not only a personal salvation of one's soul or a mere rescuing of the individual from the evil world. Nor is it just a consolation for the personal conscience in temptation. It is also the achieving of
an eschatological order of justice, the humanizing of man and the establishing of a universal peace.\textsuperscript{317}

The risk of privatizing salvation comes from the de-temporalization of eschatology in Gnosticism. Metz warns against “the permanent gnostic temptation,”\textsuperscript{318} in the way Taubes had pointed out in his \textit{Occidental Eschatology}:

Redemption [\textit{Erlösung}] now means the release [\textit{Lösung}] of pneuma from the prison of matter. The path to salvation is signposted by mysteries and sacred rites. In place of the early Christian expectation of the Kingdom comes the destiny of the soul. The events of the End of time fade into parables depicting the journey of the soul. Ascension into heaven, once conceived as a future event, becomes the ascent of the soul through the aeons.\textsuperscript{319}

Such gnosis is therefore blind to alterity and alien to history and politics. In the apocalyptic vision, on the contrary, what keeps the consciousness of the individual lifetime awakened is not the private time of life, but especially the public consciousness of the others’ time; not the anticipatory march towards one’s own death, but the experience of the others’ death. Hence, the contents of the apocalyptic message (resurrection of the dead, last judgment) are aimed at remembering the others’ suffering. For Metz, the experience of crisis that give rise to the message of the universal resurrection of the dead is not the individual experience of mortality but, in particular, the disturbing question of salvation for those innocents who suffer unjustly. As Ashley comments “for Metz, it is the death of the other which is for him the root source of the theodicy question.”\textsuperscript{320} In the apocalyptic traditions, in fact, the hope in the resurrection of the dead is an expression of a longing for universal justice that will be dispensed by the power of God. The apocalyptic message about the final judgement opposes the way man

\textsuperscript{317} Jurgen Moltmann, \textit{Theology der Hoffnung} (Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1964), 304.
\textsuperscript{318} Metz, \textit{Memoria passionis}, 151.
\textsuperscript{319} Taubes, \textit{Occidental Eschatology}, 72.
\textsuperscript{320} Ashley, \textit{Interruptions}, 139.
tends to reconcile with past suffering, that is, by trying to ease the conscience in relation to suffering through oblivion.

**The Demystification of the Eschaton**

Metz proclaims that it is necessary for theology to take the path of apocalyptic eschatology, which in historical terms points to time with a finale or an end. This is the central message of the Bible, in which God appears ‘not as that which transcends time, but as the end which is pressing upon it.’

According to Metz, Israel thinks about God not as beyond time but as the limiting end of time. Time has a limit, and within this limitation, God is coming; time indicates the placement of God in the world. The Abrahamic traditions in which God promises, ‘I will be with you’ are a clear example of this experience of God. The words of revelation in the Bible “are not primarily words of statement or of information, nor are they mainly words of appeal; or of personal self-communication by God, but they are words of promise.”

These are promises related to the end of the world, the Kingdom of God, and finally, the coming of the Messiah.

Within this view of time, Metz tries to strip the *eschaton* of both its common understanding as the final catastrophe and of the concept of teleology to which eschatological history points. In fact, despite the bad reputation of apocalypticism, which is usually related to annihilation and catastrophes, according to Metz, it is essentially a message about time. Metz’s *eschaton* is apocalyptic, meaning time with a limit, with an end. Apocalyptic literature has been a ‘pictorial commentary on the ultimate nature of the world’s time itself’ that emerged during a period of crisis for Israel. The apocalypse has nothing to do with speculation about the exact point in time of such catastrophes. In

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322 Exodus 3,12
this sense, the *eschaton* does not point to the course of history, “but gets at the sources of our fears.”\(^{325}\) For Metz, human fears are not only about the end of the world or the fear of annihilation, as is commonly believed; rather, they are more radically about the endlessness of the world, the view that nothing comes to an end anymore and “that everything is sucked into the swell of a faceless evolution that finally rolls over everything from behind, like the sea rolls over grains of sand.”\(^{326}\)

Furthermore, apocalypse, as the name signifies, is a revelation. More precisely, it is a revelation of the faces of the victims against the amnesia of the victors, against the mysticism that is hidden in the history of human suffering, and against the metaphysical covering up of the misfortunes in the world. These strategies of concealment aim to make “invisible and inaudible the cries of the victims.”\(^{327}\) Thus, apocalyptic views look for the trace of God in the faces of those who suffer to keep their cry in memory and to put a dateline to their time. Apocalyptic time stands for a biblical vision of time with a finale, in which the praxis in favour of the other takes root and allows one to encounter God in the faces of the victims. Thus, Metz’s contention is that the apocalyptic concepts of resurrection and last judgment allow humans to overcome the individualistic accounts of subjectivity. In fact, the hope for the resurrection of the dead and the power of God that is recognised in the concept of the last judgement expresses the longing for a universal justice in which the victims’ pasts and presents do not remain untouched. Therefore, it is the time of the other and no more the time of the individual and the isolated subject; it is time that leads the subject toward the other’s suffering and death. This approach is the only way to know and communicate what is understood about God. For Metz, the memory of suffering finds its place in a bounded time in which human beings anchor their ethical

\(^{325}\) Ibid., 131.
\(^{326}\) Ibid.
\(^{327}\) Ibid., 138.
commitments to the weak. The remembrance of God takes place in the remembrance of
the suffering of human beings.

In relation to teleology, to which eschatology has usually been linked, Metz
believes, in line with Benjamin and Taubes, that eschaton, the Kingdom of God, is an end
and not a telos, or goal.\textsuperscript{328} The eschaton as a goal or telos is typical of the history of
progress. In Metz’s apocalyptic time, however, the eschaton is discontinuity and
rupture.\textsuperscript{329} As a limitation of time, the apocalypse introduces the pressure of time and
activity into life. In Metz’s stance, eschatology is an imminent expectation of the second
coming, and this expectation creates an urgency of action. This expectation is not a
continual expectation that has lost social and political power by making the subject
indifferent; on the contrary, apocalyptic expectations “avert the danger of an ineffectual
state of permanent reflection.”\textsuperscript{330} Metz exemplifies this idea with the biblical text on the
last judgement discourse of Matthew 25, which is “thoroughly apocalyptic in character,”
to the extent that the end and judgement are closely related to the need to act in favour
of others, particularly the weak and marginalised.\textsuperscript{331} In fact, in this text, the King separates
the just from the unjust according to the following criterion: “as you did it to one of the
least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”\textsuperscript{332} From Metz’s
perspective, the expectation of the second coming does not result in sacrificing current
social and political responsibilities, “but the reverse: injecting the urgency imposed by


\textsuperscript{330} Downey and Metz, Love’s Strategy, 152.

\textsuperscript{331} Ibid., 153.

\textsuperscript{332} Matthew 25, 40. New Revised Standard Version.
time and the need to act into a responsibility that has been robbed of its tension by extending the expectation of the second coming to infinity.”

This horizon of active commitment to the present in the eschatological view of time is also clear, according to Metz, in Paul. The apostle, in Metz’s view, valorises the present, and the now can only be uttered against the background of limited time. He is “in no way a fanatic of the end of the world.” This perspective has also been highlighted by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who indicates that Paul is concerned not with “the last day…but [with] the time that contracts itself and begins to end.”

This contracted time, in Agamben’s view, is the time of the now, which chronologically “spans from creation to the Messianic event.” Thus, as Gideon Baker points out, “[Paul’s] messianic vocation, as far as Agamben is concerned, does not give us a viewpoint on another, redeemed, world.” However, there is a difference between Metz and Agamben when naming this “present” in relation to eschatology in Paul. While Paul’s time is called messianic time by Agamben, in contrast with eschatological time, for Metz, Paul’s time is essentially eschatological. For Agamben eschatological time points to the last day, the “Day of the Wrath,” without connecting it to the present. In Agamben’s view, this connection to the present is clear in the messianic time, not in the eschatological. However, as Ostovich has rightly claimed, when “Agamben describes messianic time as a ‘particular conjunction of memory and hope, past and present, plenitude and lack, origin and end,’ he is also describing Pauline eschatology.”

334 Metz, Memoria passionis, 130. Translation mine.
336 Ibid., p. 63.
Therefore, eschatological time, that is, time that has an end or a limit does not mean emptying and devaluing the present. On the contrary, for Metz, eschatological time is the authentic foundation of responsibility. In fact, man plays with his fate at every moment. There is no recourse to indefinite evolution or eternal recurrence, that is, to the mythical forms of time in which there is always time because basically there is none. Within the evolutionary concept of time, there is a devaluation of the problems of this world (poverty, death, war) because it is understood that everything is resolved with the passing of time. The eschaton of progress, as Giancarlo Gaeta affirms, is an asymptotic ideal “whose realisation recedes indefinitely as we advance.”

The optimism of progress implies an evolutionary mentality, that of the indefinite time. In the Bible, conversely, a limited conception of time is necessary to intervene, decide, and interrupt because everything is played in the now of time.

By grounding responsibility in eschatological-apocalyptic time, Metz counters critics who have arisen in relation to limited time. In fact, the problem with limited time, as Levinas has demonstrated, is that this temporality points to the universal and to totality, and it lacks a sense of individual and contingent experiences. However, the risk of totality and the ignorance of individuality are rejected by Metz, who considers that the logos of theology must be affected by and even forced to review the singularity and contingency of historical catastrophes. The eschaton of the apocalypse is the eschaton that allows us to see existence from the end, that is, living time taking its end into account. In fact, for Taubes, “the apocalypticist conceives the entire course of history from beginning to end – he describes the history of election from its end retrospectively. His vision has the

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340 See Memoria passionis, 44.
character of a preemptive eschatological disclosure.” This expiration (limited time) involves an active commitment to the other.

The commitment to singularity and contingency in history requires a new valuation of singularity above the traditional primacy of the universal. In contrast to the Greek views of being and identity, philosophy and theology will have to develop a rationality that is sensitive to contingency. The influence of Greek thought in early Christianity led to a theologisation and dogmatisation of its contents of faith. In temporal terms, this dogmatisation signified a lack of sensitivity to the suffering of the world. The absence of any mention of Auschwitz in Christian theology is just the consequence of this loss caused by the idealism that has plagued theological thinking. From this perspective, Metz looks for a second nominalism that, much like the first one in medieval theology, takes into consideration particulars instead of universals. Metz mentions Jürgen Goldstein’s work about nominalism, highlighting how William of Occam opposes the idealistic subordination of the singular, contingent, and concrete being within metaphysical universality without denying the possibility of metaphysics. This perspective of nominalism, which has been normally viewed as a story of the failure and decadence of the ‘great’ medieval systems, is therefore more positive.

Theology therefore must say goodbye to a de-subjectivised historical universalism that is alien to particular situations and disinterested in the unhappiness of others in relation to the disasters and catastrophes of history. The logos of theology cannot suppress, forget, or idealistically sublimate the history of human suffering. This challenge of making the suffering of victims unforgettable is assumed by political and liberation

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341 Jacob Taubes, *From cult to Culture*, 73-4.
theologies. These are steps in theology’s farewell to historical idealism without human faces.

**Conclusion: Political Responsibility in the Now of the Eschatological Time**

This chapter has shown how Metz, influenced by Benjamin and Taubes, turns to singularity in history as a way to grant justice to the victims. The responsibility for those who have been historically ignored obliges us to take contingency and singularity seriously as a category of history. In this way, Metz shares with Levinas the critique of universal *logos* and the necessity that this *logos* be affected and revised by the singularity of historical catastrophes. The supremacy of the universal over the singular needs to be revised in order to propose a new intellectual valuation of singularity. Philosophy and theology, according to Metz, need to develop a sensibility toward contingency in contraposition to the thought of being and identity of Greek metaphysics.

This sensibility is offered to philosophy and theology by the biblical traditions which provide a notion of time in which suffering and memory take root. This is the apocalyptic-eschatological time with an end which breaks the coincidence between history and nature in order to interrupt history. In Metz and Levinas, the eschatological fissure in time introduces personal responsibility. Levinas rejects the traditional religious eschatology which stresses the concept of the end of history and the concept of the end of time to stress the messianic *now* of the ethical commitment with suffering people. Metz’s conception of time is the response to Levinas’s apprehension in relation to the concept of the end of time. In Metz, eschatology does not signify the ignorance of the present situation, but the commitment with the victims of history. In fact, Metz had learnt from Benjamin and Taubes that Messianic hope does not consist in feeding a utopia to be accomplished at the end of time, but in the capacity to discern at each moment the
'revolutionary force' of the new against the grain of the dominant dynamics of history. Taubes sees himself as an apocalypticist in the spirit of Jewish and Pauline messianism, reclaiming the temporal core of the idea of history. In *Occidental Eschatology* Taubes alludes to Israel as "the historical place of revolutionary apocalypticism," in which the question of the meaning of history, as a question of the end of suffering and violence, is raised for the first time. In that revolution the purpose is to make an interruption of the catastrophic course of history in a messianic horizon. Hence, Taubes argues, from a Jewish background, that the eschatological interpellation be addressed to God in view of the history of suffering and injustice in a political way, or what is the same, as an interpellation that enables a culture of resistance and commitment against unjust suffering.

Although Metz argues for political action in response to the suffering of the victims of history, this action is nonetheless ethically and anthropologically founded. In fact, as Michael Purcell demonstrates, “[fundamental] theology is theological anthropology.” What Purcell tries to prove is that theology primarily concerns “the person who is able to ask the question of God.” Purcell’s principle is applicable to Metz’s political theologising, which is explicitly manifested in *Faith in History and Society*; that is, it is imperative that political theology starts with the concrete person in his historical situation and not with a “conflict between ideas.” When asked about the reception of his philosophy in Latin America, Levinas answered that liberation theologians and liberation philosophers “have also seen ‘the same thing’.” Levinas refers to the liberation theologians and philosophers who use religious categories to think

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344 Michael Purcell, “Is theology Fundamental?” 125.
345 Metz, *Faith in History*, p. 10.
philosophically, particularly Enrique Dussel and Juan Carlos Scannone. Levinas’s “same thing” is essentially personal responsibility for the suffering other, in which, Dussel and Scannone, as well as Metz, call for a political commitment involving social transformation. Purcell remembers Levinas’s claim that the ‘primordial bond of responsibility “for the other” is “[a]n original ethical event that is also primary theology.” 347 For this reason, Purcell claims that “the human person is the point of departure not only for phenomenology but also for theology.” 348

347 Emmanuel Levinas, *Unforeseen History*, 130.
348 Purcell, ‘Is Theology Fundamental?’ 125.
PART III: THEODICY
Chapter Five

LEVINAS’S ETHICAL THEODICY

Introduction

From the previous chapters, it has become clear that by overcoming the totalitarian model of historical time which conceals the particular experiences of pain and suffering, Levinas and Metz have recovered singularity and individuality in history. It has been an attempt to go “beyond the universal judgments of history, that offense of the offended which is inevitably produced in the very judgment issued from universal principles.”\(^{349}\) This novelty in history places philosophy and theology before the tremendous misery that these individuals have experienced particularly during the years of the Nazi attempt to exterminate the entire population of European Jews.

Furthermore, since the Bible, according to Levinas, the prospect of an era of peace, justice, and liberty accustomed people to thinking that time was going somewhere and the present misfortune would have a final, happy ending. Therefore, the justification of suffering from the perspective of God has raised the hope that these sufferings are inserted into an “overall plan.” According to Levinas, this theodicy is a *temptation* of man, which helps to maintain a certain tranquillity despite the helplessness of life, and saves people from dealing with the abyss of suffering by justifying the unjustifiable. This theodicy has persisted in the theory of the progress of the Enlightenment generally, and in historical materialism in particular, which has assumed that the ideas of justice and goodness will someday defeat injustice and evil, through the mere development of natural and historical laws. For Levinas, on the contrary, the misfortunes of the twentieth century

\(^{349}\) Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 247.
do not allow thinking to continue this way. Suffering and the experience of Auschwitz challenge enlightened reason, confident in its ability to lead human society towards paths of progress, solidarity and progressive humanization. Therefore, very close to the rejection of continuous time, and its replacement by messianic time, is the consideration of memory and theodicy.

As in Metz’s theologizing, the problem of evil is also critical in Levinas’s approach to philosophy. While for Metz theodicy is fundamental, Levinas, in line with Kant, is reluctant to rationalize the pain and cries of the victims and for this reason he claims a theology without theodicy. Metz, however, points to a theodicy as a disturbing question and not as a comforting answer and in this sense he would be responding to Levinas’s preoccupation with the untold pain. By applying Levinas’s perspective, this chapter will develop a critical analysis of the consequences of the concept of theodicy in relation to death and suffering, the myths of consolation in relation to suffering, and finally the concrete response to evil through ethics. I will show how Levinas initially rejects the concepts of memory and theodicy to the extent to which they stem from a temporality linked to ontology, and are therefore ignorant of human suffering. Theodicy as an attempt to explain suffering is meaningless, and in Levinas’s estimation, a source of immorality. Suffering is linked to evil and therefore useless, it is unjustifiable by nature. However, suffering, and therefore theodicy, can find a meaning in ethics. Suffering has meaning as a subject taking upon itself the suffering of the other human. The human encounter is opened up by the other’s suffering. From this perspective, a fundamental asymmetry in human relationships derives. Asymmetry in Metz acquires the connotation of the authority of suffering, and in Levinas the appearance of the helpless other commands a responsibility concretized in the commandment “Thou shall not kill.”
Memory and suffering

Memory and the narration of past events, particularly the Exodus and the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, are essential elements of present Jewish identity which is celebrated in the quotidian liturgy and prayer. Metz has rescued this characteristic of Jewish psyche for Christian theology by pointing out that this memory is the basic category not only for a detachment of theology from idealistic philosophy but also for a political redemption of the past suffering in history. However, the concept of memory in history is criticized by Levinas, particularly in his 1974 book *Otherwise than Being*. In fact, in this work Levinas presents memory as the vehicle of representation through which the past is made present. In this sense, memory is totalitarian and ontological. As Benso remarks; “Memory is an instrument through which the self anchors its present into the past: it appropriates the past which would otherwise remain other – unthinkable because unthought of- and puts an end to its alterity”\(^350\)

However, is memory always ontological for Levinas? Levinas, in fact, refers to memory in various parts of his work, particularly when referring to the horror of the holocaust. The same book *Otherwise than Being*, for example, is dedicated “to the memory of those who were closest among the six millions assassinated by the National Socialists, and of the millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism.” Furthermore, in *Signature*, Levinas claims that his biography “is dominated by the presentiment and the memory of the Nazi.”\(^351\) The same idea is repeated in the interviews with Francois Poirié, and Pablo

\(^351\) Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 291
In another interview, when questioned by Bertrand Révillon about the Klaus Barbie trial, Levinas responds that “it is in the register of the dreadful. A horror that can never be repaired or forgotten.” And about his experience of the concentrations camps, Levinas defines it as a “tumour in the memory.” In this vein, “the presentiment of these terrible years, the unforgettable remembering of those years” has been “a fundamental experience of my life and my thought.” Furthermore, the denial and forgetting of the holocaust, Levinas complains, is “[t]he final act of this destruction” being accomplished today “by the would-be ‘revisionists of history’.”

Therefore, Levinas criticizes the concept of memory in the same way as he criticizes history, and at the same time voices the worry about the possibility of forgetting the suffering of the victims due to the “virile” account of history. In Levinas’s estimation “the past of the other concern me,” but “it is not a representation for me.” Therefore, there would be a different way from that of the Platonic reminiscence to approach the past. This means that the past of the other is not an essence represented by consciousness, but it has its “own signification.” This signification, in Levinas’s estimation, can only be unveiled by the witness, by the other who suffers, as he says: “other shore the Other absolutely other… is alone capable of marking, and of connecting with the past.” As James Hatley affirms “[f]or Levinas, memory of the other ultimately engages me in a past

353 Levinas, Unforseen History, 129. Italics mine.
354 Emmanuel Levinas, Proper Names, 120. Italics mine.
356 Levinas, Entre Nous, 98.
357 Ibid., 115
358 Ibid.
359 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 283.
that could never have been mine." Memory is therefore not an action of the subject’s consciousness (representation), but a testimony of the victim. Victims carry their memory. In this sense memory is less the work of representation than a movement provoked by exteriority, by other who is not strictly subject to ideation of to the mournful survivors’ perception. In Joseph Rose’s words, “testimony would bear witness to the alterity that is previous to the memory of the self.”

In this way the face would be protected from the objetivations of the mnemic or historic representations. This is a memory of the immemorial in the sense that it is my hearing of infinity’s call that occurs in the encounter with the vulnerable and suffering face of the other. Levinas himself is an eyewitness and a victim, he is the other who testifies how it is “difficult to communicate…this kind of interrupted despair which was the Hitlerian period in Europe.” In communicating his own memory, Levinas is loyal to his affirmation that “[t]he survivor of the “Hitlerian massacres... is Other in relation to martyrs. He is consequently responsible and unable to remain silent. It is impossible to remain silent.”

There is an obligation to speak. As Sandor Goodhart remarks “[t]he truth of testimony if not the truth of representation.” That is, the testimony of the victim is the voice of the other denying any attempt to explain or justify such suffering.

It is worth noting how Levinas appeals to the literature to describe the testimony of the innocents and the appeal to the humanity of consciousness to respond to the cries

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361 Joseph Rosen, “From a Memory beyond Memory to a State beyond the State,” in Difficult Justice: Commentaries on Levinas and Politics, ed. Asher Horowitz and Gad Horowitz (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 289
363 Levinas, Difficult Freedom, 132. Italics his.
that “continue to resound and reverberate down the centuries.” From these comments, it is also clear that Levinas rejects any attempt to look for an explanation of suffering. Simply the testimony, the cry of the victims, could wake up sleeping rationality to interrupt the perseverance of being in its being. This interruption of the conatus essendi is possible when consciousness loses its first place and responsibility arises in subjectivity. That is, Levinas is claiming that consciousness plays a secondary role in the plot of history so that consciousness awakens to humanity. In Levinas words, “[t]he humanity of consciousness is definitely not in its powers, but in its responsibility,” and the grand event of history, as was commented in the third chapter of this thesis, is the apparition of the human. Therefore it is the attention to the other which, across the cruelties of the twentieth century “can be affirmed as the very nexus of human subjectivity.” In other words: “[t]o be I and not only an incarnation of a reason is precisely to be capable of seeing the offense of the offended, or the face.”

The first literary reference appears in the 1955 talk titled “Loving the Torah more than God,” published in Difficult Freedom, in which Levinas comments on Zvi Kolitz's text “Yossel, son of Yossel Rakover from Tarnopol, speaks to God.” This text, being fiction, is nonetheless “both beautiful and true,” because it is “a fiction in which every one of us who survived recognizes his own life in astonishment.” It is a testimony of a witness who offers his final thoughts after losing his entire family in the final hours of the Warsaw Ghetto resistance. Even though this story is ignored and forgotten, Levinas prefers not to recount it to avoid turning the pain of the victims into a spectacle “or these

365 Levinas, Difficult Freedom, 112.
366 Levinas, Entre Nous, 173.
367 Ibid., 94.
368 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 247.
369 Levinas, Difficult Freedom, 142-45.
370 Ibid., 142.
inhuman cries into the vanity of an author or director.”\textsuperscript{371} He prefers to reflect on the meaning of the suffering of the innocents that is reflected in the text. The first reaction would be the affirmation of a world without God. In this world, the suffering of the innocents would be proof that only man measures good and evil. On the contrary, for Yossel, the protagonist of the story, in this suffering God is experienced with a “new force.” It is the force of the adult’s God rather than the child’s God who gives prizes and punishments. The adult’s God in the moment of suffering of the innocents hides his face in order for the subject to take responsibility. In Levinas words, God “renounces all aids to manifestation, and appeals instead to the full maturity of the responsible man.”\textsuperscript{372} The suffering innocent cannot find consolation or protection neither in institutions nor in the God of infantile religious feelings. He rather finds himself/herself alone in a disordered world in which the condition of the victims is that of suffering. God hides his face and man has to rely on the Torah, on the Law which teaches “thou shalt not kill,” that is, responsibility for the suffering other.

The other text Levinas praises as fundamental to understanding responsibility in history beyond memory is Vassily Grossman’s novel \textit{Life and Fate}. Grossman’s work was suppressed for twenty years in Russia and, according to Levinas, it “has to be understood in the context of an official ‘forgetting’ of the holocaust in Soviet history at the time.” Grossman himself is also a witness of the crisis of hope in Europe when he tells of all the horrors of Hitlerism and Stalinism in a world in which people have been degraded, stricken in their dignity, delivered to humiliation, suffering, and death. After reading the book, Levinas remarks: “[t]his book is absolutely desperate and in it I see no horizon, no salvation for the human race.”\textsuperscript{373} In the book, however, there is something

\textsuperscript{371} Ibid. 142-3. 
\textsuperscript{372} Ibid., 143. 
\textsuperscript{373} Robbins and Levinas, \textit{Is it Righteous to Be?}, 217.
positive: “the human overwhelms the inhuman in being, always preoccupied with itself.” The only thing that was still human, despite all the discouragement caused by disasters and all human disappointments, was what one of the characters of the novel, Ikonnikov, called “little goodness.” This little goodness goes from one person to the other, outside all redemptive institutions, political or religious. The scenes of goodness are disseminated in the book, and particularly significant for Levinas is the story of the Russian woman who gives the last piece of bread to a German soldier rather than using the rock in her hand to kill him. In line with Levinas’s claim, it is worth remembering Hannah Arendt’s Eichmann in Jerusalem in which she reports the story of a German sergeant called Anton Schmidt who saved Jewish lives by providing forged papers and military trucks until he was uncovered and executed. Two minutes of silence were observed spontaneously by the crowd present in the room, “[a]nd in those two minutes,” Arendt comments,

which were like a sudden burst of light in the midst of impenetrable, unfathomable darkness, a single thought stood clearly, irrefutably, beyond question –how utterly different everything would be today in this courtroom, in Israel, in Germany, in all Europe, and perhaps in all countries of the world, if only more such stories could have been told. From Levinas’s perspective, this goodness is little because it cannot vanquish evil, but evil cannot vanquish goodness either. Furthermore, this little goodness allows the visualization of a positive view of history. Time, Levinas affirms in God, Death and Time, is pure hope, it is even the birthplace of hope.

The openness of time to hope is also the message of the Talmudic Commentary “Beyond Memory,” from the Tractate Berakhot 12a-13b. In the Talmudic text, Levinas

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374 Ibid., 106.
376 See Levinas, God, Death, and Time, 96.
377 Levinas, In the Time of the Nations, 76-91.
attempts to challenge the meaning of memory in Jewish life by looking for a new meaning of historical time. Past events continue to play a role in the Jewish psyche, that is, the Exodus cannot be forgotten. However, memory, in spite of the historical events experienced by Israel, particularly in the twentieth century, needs to be open to the new, to hope. In the *Gemara*, in fact, something new is announced:

Does it not say in *Isaiah 43:18*, "Remember former things no more, nor consider the things of old?" "Remember former things no more," is [the emancipation] from subservience to the empires; "Nor consider the things of old" is the exodus from Egypt. And what is the meaning of [*Isaiah 43:19*]: "Behold, I will do new things—See, they are already unfolding"? Rav Yosef taught…

Levinas wonders “[w]hat are these new things” beyond memory? The answer is given in the text by Rav Joseph: "It is the war of Gog and Magog." This war is described in Ezekiel 38-39 as a final end-times attack on Israel, a total war, the war “[b]eyond any memory.” This final war ends up with Gog’s defeat by God himself. However, eschatology in Levinas’s estimation, as has been stated in the third chapter of this thesis, is not the end of history, but the opening to the call of infinity in the vulnerability of the face. Openness to the face of the other is evident in the figure of Abraham. Having as a background the discussion between Bar Kapra and Rav Eliezer about the use of the new name Abraham instead of Abram, Levinas interprets the prohibition to use the old name Abram as a message about time. It is a time open, as Abraham's tent, to the arrival of the other, always unpredictable, trusting “new things and even the miracle required for universal peace.” It is a time when goodness hopefully rises facing the depths of despair, as Levinas affirms: "The ‘I’ of men, forced by suffering back into the shackles of the self, breaks forth, in its misery, into mercy.”

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378 Ibid., 83.
379 Ibid.
380 Ibid.
381 Ibid., 86.
382 Ibid., 89.
Therefore, memory as a tentative appropriation of suffering gives way to the memory of the immemorial from which the responsibility for human suffering stems. In fact, memory stemming from consciousness is unable to contain the pain of suffering. On the contrary, in the encounter with the suffering face of the other the subject feels itself subJECTED to respond instead of trying to comprehend or systematize suffering. In Levinas’s view:

The misery that calls out for our pity, our justice, our freedom and our work, is replaced by an ambiguous passion in which grief is transformed into ritual and sacrament, and unfolds like a scenario. It is as if its human meaning were not sufficiently full, as if another mysterious nigh enveloped the night of human suffering, as if some celestial salvation could triumph without ridding it of visible misery. 383 This is why Levinas tries “to think time in the devotion of a theology without theodicy.” 384

**The Holocaust and the end of Theodicy**

Richard Bernstein has emphasized the central role that the experiences of evil had for Levinas’s philosophizing. For him “Levinas’s entire philosophic project can best be understood as an ethical response to evil.” 385 Bernstein endeavours to prove that the primary stimulus of Levinas’s thought is to be understood as his response to the evil that flared up in the twentieth century. Unlike Bernstein, Fagenblat considers that the “primary stimulus” is the Judaic tradition itself, and therefore “Levinas’s philosophical works are midrashically determined from beginning to end.” 386 Ethics in Fagenblat’s contention is “best understood as a secularized and generalized account of the Jewish covenant of faith.” 387 Fagenblat however accepts that the holocaust “touched Levinas personally,

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383 Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 104.
387 Ibid., xxv.
vocationally and intellectually.” Bernstein’s thesis is insufficient to explain Levinas’s entire philosophical project, toning down for example his encounter with Husserl and Heidegger and also the influence of Russian literature and the Bible. However, it is true that the experience of the holocaust provides Levinas with existential and essential stimulus to think about suffering and evil in history. This is why after remembering Levinas’s dedication of Otherwise than Being, Maurice Blanchot, one of Levinas’s closest friends, wondered “how to philosophize, how to write, in memory of Auschwitz, about those who said to us, oftentimes in notes buried near the crematoria: ‘know what has happened, do not forget, and at the same time, you will not be able to’,” and he adds “this is the thought that traverses, that bears, the whole of Levinas’s philosophy.”

In relation with the experience of the holocaust, it is worth noting that Levinas admits in a conversation with Philippe Nemo that his critique of totality has derived from the political experience of a twentieth century “not yet forgotten.” This affirmation is in direct relation with another similar statement which appears in the philosophical notes of the Carnets de captivité in which Levinas affirms that the “‘I” as responsibility is inevitable for an anti-fascist and anti-totalitarian philosophy.” In this sense, Levinas affirms: “[i]f there is an explicitly Jewish moment in my thought, it is the reference to Auschwitz, where God let the Nazis do what they wanted.”

Levinas’s experience of the holocaust led him to criticize any attempt to intellectualize the experience of suffering of the victims. In the essay “Useless Suffering” Levinas describes the phenomenological condition of suffering to conclude that suffering

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388 Ibid., xiii.
390 Levinas, Ethics and Infinity, 78-9
391 Levinas, Carnets de captivité, 251. Translation mine.
is meaningless and therefore a-systematic and beyond any intellectual comprehension. Agamben has expressed something similar when he affirms that “the aporia of Auschwitz is, indeed, the very aporia of historical knowledge: a non-coincidence between facts and truth, between verification and comprehension.”\textsuperscript{393} Phenomenologically, suffering is an excess with a sensorial content. This means a \textit{datum} in consciousness which, however, surpasses it as the unassumable. It is, in Levinas’s words, “the ache of pain – evil.”\textsuperscript{394} This is why suffering is refractory to knowledge, to any synthesis of the transcendental subject, to the unification in a horizon of meaning. This suffering cannot be comprehended, systematized, or explained. It is the suffering of the innocents which “is very difficult to communicate.”\textsuperscript{395}

Suffering is, in fact, the meaninglessness: what shies away from rational comprehension. It is a denial of meaning which, in Levinas’s terms, is “thrusting itself forward as a sensible quality.”\textsuperscript{396} Therefore, Levinas rejects any attempt to give an ultimate meaning to suffering being understood as a way to conquer an end. It cannot be understood, for instance, as a deserved punishment for individual acts, or as a path towards a spiritual refinement and a strengthening of character. Nor as a way used by the state to maintain social cohesion and stability. None of these teleologies, individually or collectively, may account for the meaninglessness of suffering: neither history nor divine providence, that teleologically expect a happy end which is achieved after the necessary suffering. The attempt to explain the suffering of the innocents, and particularly the attempt to come to terms with the omnipotence and goodness of God is \textit{per se} “the source

\textsuperscript{394} Levinas, \textit{Entre Nous}, 92. Translation modified.
\textsuperscript{395} Levinas, “Interview with Francois Poirié,” 39
\textsuperscript{396} Ibid.
of all immorality,” the unjustifiable par excellence. Levinas’s reading of suffering (gnoseologically never properly captured) would lead to thinking that it has a boomerang effect in Levinas’s critique, to the extent to which he ends up glorifying the same suffering he declares meaningless. However, as will be shown later on, Levinas’s intention is to move from the intellectual comprehension of suffering to an ethical response, meaning from a traditional theodicy to an ethical theodicy. In this way, if suffering cannot be explained and intellectualized it is because it compels a response before there is any attempt to explain it. It is only in this way that suffering has a meaning because it cries out for concrete commitment.

This is the purpose of theodicy: to find meaning in human suffering, either from religious faith or from the idea of progress. From a religious perspective theodicy is the seductive temptation “in making God innocent, or in saving morality in the name of faith, or in making suffering – and this is the true intention of the thought that has recourse to theodicy – bearable.” The basic question of religious theodicy is, as Bernstein says, “how we can reconcile the existence of evil with a faith in a God who is omniscient, omnipotent and beneficent – a God who is the creator of the universe and all living beings.”

This question has been part of the European conscience, whose origins can refer to the Bible and its attempt to explain pain and suffering by way of sin. However, the twentieth century constituted a challenge to theodicy. The prevailing evil came to unimaginable proportions:

This is the century that in thirty years has known two world wars, the totalitarianisms of right and left, Hitlerism and Stalinism, Hiroshima, the Gulag, and the genocides of Auschwitz and Cambodia. This is the century that is drawing to a close in the obsessive fear of the return of everything these barbaric names stood for: suffering and evil inflicted deliberately, but in a manner no reason set

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397 Levinas, Entre Nous, 99
398 Ibid., 96
399 Bernstein, “Evil and the temptation of theodicy,” 255.
limits to, in the exasperation of a reason become political and detached from all ethics.400

In this panorama, the holocaust is particularly “the paradigm of gratuitous human suffering, in which evil appears in its diabolical horror.”401 The disproportion between suffering and theodicy is manifested in Auschwitz with blinding clarity. In this assessment Levinas is certainly very close to the theologian Metz who believes that Auschwitz is a horror situated beyond any known theology, a horror that makes all talk about God seem empty and blind. In relation to this “diabolical horror,” Levinas recalls Emil Fackenheim’s consideration of the uniqueness of the Nazi genocide of the Jewish people. This uniqueness is based on the consideration that “[t]he more than one million Jewish children murdered in the Nazi holocaust died neither because of their faith, nor despite their faith, nor for reasons unrelated to the Jewish faith [but] because of the Jewish faith of their great-grandparents” who brought up “Jewish children.”402 The Holocaust in Fackenheim’s viewpoint is an incomparable example of evil committed for the sake of doing evil – unparalleled, as he sees it, either in Jewish or in world history. This suffering of those innocent victims could not be explained or justified. This is why for Levinas “[i]t was not a question of the number of people; it was the way, the way…”403 It is also worth noting that Levinas’s and Fackenheim’s reflection on Jewish suffering receives a universal meaning, not circumscribed only to Jewish people. In this direction Levinas states:

“[w]hat I mean is that the death of the other can constitute a central experience for me, whatever be the resources of our perseverance in our own being. For me, for example… the Holocaust is an event whose meaning remains inexhaustible. But in every mortal, the resonances of this extraordinary unknown are heard.”404

400 Levinas, Entre Nous, 97
401 Ibid.
404 Robbins and Levinas, Is it Righteous to Be? 126.
In the passion of the Holocaust and in the suffering of Israel, the suffering of the world is echoed.

In the same vein, Hannah Arendt points to a radical evil present in the concentration and extermination camps that has to do with making human beings superfluous. In this sense, the singularity of Auschwitz lies not in the number of victims but in the new way of mass murder that turns human beings into mere copies devoid of individuality and the spontaneity of thinking and acting. The horror of radical evil is the meaninglessness of being human and the way in which the human and personal character of death is eliminated for a bureaucratic and industrialized process of administration of death. This is why for Arendt in the extermination camps “murder is as impersonal as the squashing of a gnat.”

Arendt sets forth the connection in the concentration camps between murder and bureaucratic logic. The purpose of the bureaucratic administration of death was not only the murder but the “production” of corpses and the process of making them disappear. The elimination of the remnants was the last step resulting from the denial of any sense of the existence of the annihilated. Levinas says something similar: “the flesh…of the murdered people transported on the lorries… it was referred to in neutral terms –die Scheiss- they weren’t human bodies.”

In Levinas’s estimation there is a direct relationship between evil and suffering. Suffering derives from evil and from it receives its more profound articulation as absurdity: “[s]uffering, extreme passivity, the foolish par excellence, absurdity, loneliness - misery and neglect. Solitude and confinement.” This is why suffering is useless; it is “for nothing.” In this vein, Arthur Cohen calls Jewish suffering in the concentration camps the tremendum, “for it is the monument of a meaningless inversion of life to an

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406 Mortley, French Philosophers in Conversation, 21.
orgiastic celebration of death.”⁴⁰⁸ To Cohen this is a suffering beyond comprehension. Levinas exemplifies this uselessness of suffering in some physical maladies in which abandonment and anguish are part of the cruelty of the suffering. It is a request for aid, for curative help, in which the immanence of psychism is ruptured to open to transcendence. This means that this phenomenological absurdity finds a possibility of meaning in ethics:

must not humanity now, in a faith more difficult than before, in a faith without theodicy, continue to live out Sacred History; a history that now demands even more from the resources of the I in each one of us, and from its suffering inspired by the suffering of the other, from its compassion which is a non-useless suffering (or love), which is no longer suffering "for nothing," and immediately has meaning."⁴⁰⁹

From an ethical point of view, there is therefore a distinction between the suffering in the other and the suffering in me. The suffering in the other “solicits me and calls me.”⁴¹⁰ This is why the useless suffering in the other only has a meaning “which is not possible to contest,” that is, “the suffering of suffering, the suffering for the useless suffering of the other, the just suffering in me for the unjustifiable suffering of the other, opens suffering to the ethical perspective of the inter-human.”⁴¹¹ This suffering for the suffering of the other is the very bond of human subjectivity. According to Levinas this is the supreme principle of ethics. It is the very concreteness of the ‘horror of evil’ that calls forth the ethical response that ruptures the persistence in being. The conatus essendi is ruptured by the messianic subject who takes the suffering of the other and offers to him/her help and comfort. This is the case for instance of the Russian woman who gives the bread to the German soldier in Grossman’s novel or the German soldier who risks his

⁴⁰⁹ Levinas, Entre Nous, 100
⁴¹⁰ Ibid., 94.
⁴¹¹ Ibid.
life to save Jewish people as recalled by Arendt in her *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Furthermore, it is only by ethically responding to the evil inflicted on my fellow human beings that I become fully human. Levinas elsewhere states that “to be human is to suffer for the other.” In Levinas’s estimation the constitution of the unicity of the “I” is established through the subject’s irreplaceability in relation to the responsibility for the other.

In fact, it is worth remembering how for Levinas the principle of individuation is not of the order of Being, and therefore is not of the order of first principles. A subject cannot be justified in its individuality by the principle of identity (A=A). This principle includes Being and ends up reducing the subject to system. The principle of non-contradiction is also invalid (A ≠ A because it is distinct from B), because it would be the negative formulation of the principle of identity itself; that is, the non-being ends up being reduced to Being as its dialectical opposition. Therefore, in Levinas’s view the individuation of the subject cannot be established in relation to the subject itself or in opposition to the other. The individuation happens in the relation with the other, not in opposition but as responsibility prior to election. The subject is neither the one, nor the non-other, but the one-for-the-other or the other-in-the-Same. This model is the concern of the Same concerned by the other.

In relation to the problem of theodicy, Levinas derives from the failure of theodicy as traditionally understood, an ethical account of theodicy in which the discourse about evil and pain claims for an ethical commitment of the subject. This ethical account therefore replaces the attempt to negotiate the goodness and power of God with the pain of human beings. The idea of the failure of theodicy and its conversion into ethics has

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412 Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 188.
distant roots in Kant. In his essay *On the Miscarriage of all Philosophical Trials in Theodicy*, Kant notes that from the concept of God there is no possible justification of moral evil. Kant moves away from Leibniz’s confidence in speculative reason when seeking to make sense of the cosmological order and defending God’s goodness and power. To explain true theodicy, Kant interprets the biblical book of Job in which by recognizing the limits of reason, Job presents salvation as acting in an exemplary manner. In this way, Kant reiterates that the problem of evil is not a problem of speculative reason, but of practical reason; and therein consists the error of doctrinal theodicies abundant in the medieval tradition. For Kant, the problem of evil is not a problem that can be resolved with theories, but depends on the correct moral action. Thus, by formulating an authentic or true theodicy, Kant shifts the problem of evil from God to man; that is, he moves from the previous theodicies to create an anthropodicy. In this new Kantian formulation, it is man and not God who has to justify himself before the existence of evil. Levinas would agree with Kant that there is no room for positively explaining why God has allowed evil, but it is possible to maintain that the acceptance of the existence of a morally good author of the world is not incompatible with the existence of evil in creation. This compatibility of the supreme wisdom with the existence of evil is not a thing of knowing and, therefore, of logical arguments, but only a thing of rational faith that engenders in man the consideration of the moral law. Thus, what was true in relation to the whole rational theology, and even with respect to all metaphysics, is also true for theodicy. For just as a speculative theology was impossible and only a practical theology could be postulated, a doctrinal or speculative theodicy is also impossible and there is room only for a practical or authentic theodicy. As Thompson remarks “[f]or Kant, religion and theodicy can only
authentically be grounded in practical (action-guiding, moral) reason, not in speculative, theoretical reason.”

In relation to this conversion of theodicy into ethics, Levinas, as Saint Cheron manifests, was quite impressed with Fackenheim’s 614th mitzvot. This commandment refers to the traditional Jewish law which contains 613 mitzvot (commandments). Fackenheim affirmed that tradition could not anticipate the Holocaust, so one more law, a 614th Commandment, became necessary. For Fackenheim the 614th commandment is a moral obligation for the authentic Jew who “is forbidden to hand Hitler yet another, posthumous victory.” Hitler “failed to murder all Jews, for he lost the war,” so Fackenheim wonders “[h]as he succeeded in destroying the Jewish faith for us who have escaped?” This commandant therefore requires a new moral obligation to the Jews who have to resist the temptation to abandon the practices and the ancient traditions of Judaism that the Nazis wanted to eradicate. In other words, Auschwitz is an ethical commitment of loyalty to the absent God in the concentration camps. This moral exigency is based on the idea that the purpose of national-socialism is not only the annihilation of Israel but also the forgetting of the ethical message of the Bible, “which Judaism bears, and whose multimillennial history is concretely prolonged by Israel's existence as a people.” The challenge for Judaism is therefore to remain loyal to the Jewishness of the ethical commitment.

413 Janice Allison Thompson, “Theodicy in a Political Key: God and Suffering in the Post-Shoah Theology of Johann Baptist Metz” (PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, 2004), 37, accessed January 3, 2015, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.
414 De Saint Cheron, Entretiens avec Emmanuel Levinas, 150.
416 Emil Fackenheim, God’s Presence in History, 71.
417 Levinas, Entre Nous, 99
For Levinas, this fidelity to the biblical ethics has also to do with surviving the advent of Christianity. The cultural world in which Judaism has survived is essentially Christian and, in Levinas’s estimation, plagued with idealism. The temptation of temptation, the temptation of logos in which “[m]orality, social action, concern for justice - all that would be … only morality!” That is, only abstractions. This is the temptation of forgetting biblical ethics, Jewish life as ethics, in order to embrace the Christian numinous values. In spite of Levinas’s recognition of some Christians for what they did in favour of the Jewish people during the Holocaust, the Christian and philosophical civilization showed, for him, in the Hitlerian adventure, “the fragility of their works.” That is, the fragility of their logos to convince their wills, the inability of the logos to defeat evil. This inability is showed in the phenomenon of Auschwitz which “was carried out by men who all knew the catechism,” and this “still did not prevent them from doing what they did.”

**Death in the Face of the Other**

The experience of the holocaust also led Levinas to think about death, and the relation between one’s own dead and the death of the other. Levinas’s reflection on death stems initially from the experience of the Holocaust, in relation to which Levinas feels himself “like a guilty survivor.” Phenomenologically, death for Levinas represents “the nothingness of knowledge,” “the unassumable,” “the event without a project.” All these descriptions point to the consideration of death beyond human comprehension. Death is refractory to knowledge not because of ignorance, but because “death shall never

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418 Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 4
419 Ibid., 5.
420 Robbins and Levinas, *Is it Righteous to Be?* 137.
421 Ibid., 256.
422 Ibid., 126; see Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, 12.
be able to be known.” If for Heidegger death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility, for Levinas it is the possibility of impossibility. That is, death has to be thought beyond the exclusion between Being and nothingness, beyond the tertium non datur, towards a concrete comprehension of death. In fact, Heidegger thinks time from death and death from the anguish of nothingness, the end of the finite being. The authentic interpretation of being-towards-death does not avoid the anxiety of death which is present at every moment. It is in the anxiety that dasein encounters itself before “the possibility of the impossibility of any existence at all.” Levinas proposes an inversion: to think death from time. This is why he renounces the idea of Being and therefore that of nothingness. In renouncing the idea of tertium non datur in relation to death, Levinas refutes Heidegger’s preliminary starting point, that is, the anguish over one’s death in order to start from the encounter of the death of the other.

Levinas and Heidegger adhere to second-hand knowledge about death: death as unanswered, as leave-taking, as grief. The rupture with the German philosopher happens when identifying what Heidegger considers to be the most authentic experience: the anxiety before death. This experience is, according to Levinas, an intentionality oriented towards nothingness. The question about “to be or not to be” is not “the ultimate alternative and, in any case, not the ultimate nor the most urgent question.” This alternative related to man’s own death does not provide any thinkable signification. On the contrary, the first access to death is my affection -my being affected- by the death of the other who is confided to my responsibility.

424 Ibid., 123.
In turn, Levinas’s idea of affection is an experience of time that owes nothing to death, which would signal finitude. Time is not to be understood, as in Heidegger, from death but, on the contrary, death from time, the time of patience. Levinas certainly accepts Heidegger’s intention of overcoming the traditional Aristotelian concept of time, but Heideggerian time is still in the domain of Being “despite what Heidegger would wish [time and death] are subordinated to the study of being.”427 This is why Heidegger’s concept of death is governed by the idea that the importance of death lies in my own death. As Chanter poses it: “He [Levinas] departs from Heidegger not to return to the traditional separation of time from death, but in answering the question of whose death matters most: mine or the other’s.”428 Levinas’s experience of time in relation to death is that of the very duration of time, the "durance" of time I "endure" in the mode of an unparalleled passivity that he calls "patience." As Ricouer points out, “[t]his patience intends nothing; it is without intentionality. We can intend contents within time, not time, not the duration of time. Patience therefore does not contain anything like anticipation, and a fortiori anything like the anticipation of nothingness.”429 It is not death, as it is for Heidegger, that individuates Dasein, but "[t]he other individuates me in the responsibility I have for him. The death of the other who dies affects me in my very identity as a responsible ‘me’ [moi]."430 The infinite responsibility for the other, the impossibility of fulfilling it, is patience.

Therefore, in thinking about death the point of departure is not the frightening and feared nothing, but the affection by the death of the other. This affection does not involve any primary anxiety, rather it awakens the wounded link of responsibility ethical

428 Ibid., 405.
430 Levinas, God, Death, and Time, 12.
relationship par excellence. This relationship is entirely positive: the negativity of death has to be sought, in Levinas’s estimation, “in hatred or the desire of murder.”431 Fear more precisely is the fear of violence. Levinas makes this clear in the penultimate lesson of the above mentioned course at the Sorbonne: "Death opens to the face of an Other [d'Autrui], which expresses the command ‘thou shalt not kill.’ We shall have to attempt to start from murder as suggesting the complete meaning of death."432 Assimilating death with nothing would be the murderer’s bet, like Cain, for example, who according to Levinas “should have possessed this knowledge of death.”433 Furthermore, because the concept of time is associated with messianic subjectivity, nothing could follow from questioning about my own death. The messianic subject owes everything to the other. Ricouer has questioned whether the very insistent question, imposed upon him by his draining confrontation with Heidegger, ever was a real concern for him. A troubling but legitimate question if it is true that Levinas was not the thinker of either care or anxiety, but of the responsibility that only inspired one ultimate fear in him, that of putting—or allowing— the other person to be put to death. 434

Levinas’s view of responsible (messianic) subjectivity is philosophically connected with the Cartesian idea of infinite invoked in Totality and Infinity: infinite is the presence in a container of a content exceeding its capacity, the more in the less. The characteristic of this idea is that it always exceeds the capacity of the subject, which is inadequate. Levinas’s view of responsible (messianic) subjectivity is philosophically connected with the Cartesian idea of the infinite invoked in Totality and Infinity: the infinite is the presence in a container of a content exceeding its capacity, the more in the less. The characteristic of this idea is that it always exceeds the capacity of the subject, which is inadequate. In fact, it is possible to do an archaeology for every idea. That is, it is possible to think (logos) what is its origin (arche). According to this, the idea of the

431 Ibid., 8-9.
432 Ibid., 106.
433 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 232.
infinite is anarchic; it is out of reach of the subject investigating its origin and giving an account of it. It is an idea that signifies importance prior to presence, prior to any origin in consciousness. Regarding the idea of the infinite, the coincidence of being and appearing, in which, according to Levinas, lies the sense or rationality for all Western philosophy, breaks. In this way, the idea of the infinite allows Levinas to express the impossibility of finding an intermediate term, a concept that can soften the alterity of the other. This means the waking up of consciousness by the idea of the infinite, as if this idea were demanding and significant in the sense that, in the demand, an order is meant. Therefore, the idea of the infinite is presented as an antidote to the tranquillity of a consciousness installed in the domain of its own powers. Levinas says, "[t]he in of the infinite is not a simple negation, but rather time and humanity."435

“An Overabundance of Blessing”

In temporal terms, Levinas describes the above mentioned idea of infinite (the more working in the heart of the less) in the commentary of the Talmudic text extracted from the Tractate Menahoth 99b-100a.436 One of Levinas’s purposes in commenting on the Talmudic texts is to take advantage of their polysemy in order to extract from them the meaning for the particular topic he is interested in reflecting upon. This text presents the description of how the Shewbread, the holy bread, is presented to God in the Sanctuary during the liturgy. In the comment, Levinas tries to establish the difference between the values of the West and those present in the Jewish tradition, to establish how Israel attaches itself to an “always,” to a permanence in time in which every moment is considered holy, and therefore meaningful. These are the moments in which the subject

435 Levinas, Of God Who Comes to Mind, 51.
436 Levinas, Beyond the Verse, 13-33.
feels itself in debt towards the other whose suffering does not await for a final reward but claims for a commitment in the now of time.

This consideration of time was clear in the third chapter, and what matters in the final part of this chapter is to underline how the other in his/her weakness is the master whose authority demands that the subject takes seriously the commandment “thou shall not kill.” To reach this conclusion, Levinas starts from the meaning of the two of the sacred objects present in the sanctuary: the table of bread and the table of study, the Torah. The table of bread, placed in the altar and used to present the Shewbread to God, has a golden frame, or crown, meaning the political sovereignty committed to satisfy men’s hunger. Levinas endorses the Talmudic masters Rashi’s and Ibn Ezra’s explanation of the word Shewbread: the bread has two faces, Rashi says; the bread is before the eye of God, Ibn Ezra says; and therefore, Levinas adds, if it is before the eye of God, it is also before the hunger of men.

The biblical text in which the presentation of the bread in the Sanctuary is based is Ex 25: 23-30. In this text God orders “and you shall set the bread of the presence on the table before me continually.” This bread is set down permanently within the sanctuary on a table of gold, but when the bread is brought in, it is put on a table of marble at the entrance of the sanctuary. The permanence is manifested in both the fact that the table is never empty, day and night the table has the bread, and in the collaboration among priests in order for the liturgy to be performed. For Levinas this liturgical performance has a message about time and therefore an ethical meaning. The permanence of the Shewbread means the permanence of the values of the Bible. The changes are those of elevation, from marble to gold, they do not fall in value. Furthermore, it is the confrontation between the relativity of values of the West and the permanence of the values of the Bible. For Levinas, “[t]he West professes the historical relativity of values and their questioning …
and leaves this history the right both to judge the values and to sink into relativity.” In the biblical temporality it is man who judges history and not history that judges human actions. This means that the hunger and suffering of men is the rule to judge what has to be considered meaningful, and not the visible actions of the heroes. Levinas calls this temporality “holiness.”

In the conversation with Michaël de Saint Cheron, Levinas remarks that “accepting holiness is certainly to accomplish something positive, but on the other hand, this positive accomplishment ends up in nothing, in the sense that it has nothing to gain.” That is, this temporality of holiness, this holiness as life, is on the occasion of the bread of men and not in connection with some ethereal spirituality, with what is called 'spirit'. The bread of the altar is eaten by the priests, this is the final elevation of the values, from marble, to gold, and finally to the men’s mouths. Satisfying human hunger is the fulfilment of the bread, the maximum elevation of the biblical values. The permanence of biblical values takes root in the now of the response to human hunger. The moment of the claim and the response is holy because “God… is in men's sacrifice, in the mercy men show for one another. Heaven is empty but men's mercy is filled with God.” From this perspective, Levinas is akin to Taubes’s reading of Paul’s Law. In fact, Taubes’s Paul radicalizes the dual commandment of love for God and for the neighbour by reducing it to just one: “love your neighbour as yourself.” In Taubes’s view this is a polemical text in which the attention is focused on the son, on man; there is already no longer any question of the father in this commandment.

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437 Ibid., 21.
438 Ibid.
440 Ibid., 28.
441 See Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 52.
From the table of bread, Levinas moves to the table of study, the Torah. If the table of bread is permanence, the table of study is also permanence. This is the permanence of time needed for the study of the Torah, day and night, in daily regularity. In this way the study of the Torah becomes liturgy, the regularity of liturgy, the daily reading of the Torah is prayer, and “this prayer expresses the acceptance of the ‘celestial yoke’, the submission to the Law.”  

It is through daily ritual and truth regularly repeated, a ritual rooted in truth, that the somniferous course of natural life is shaken up. Israel does not sleep, it is always awakened. It is through the regular return of these sovereign moments - the crown of the Torah being added to the crown of the liturgy - that the dispersion of time is brought back together and reunified into a permanence. However, this permanence of the study of the Torah does not have to be understood as a temporal continuity from the traditional model of time, which Levinas rejects. Two characteristics of this permanence are, first, that the totality of a life is covered by the Torah as an “overabundance” of blessing and, second, the Torah is “beyond duty.” As a blessing the Torah means that the words of the Torah have a meaning open to humanity. It is not just for the people of Israel.

What is this message? Levinas takes the teaching of the School of Rabi Ishmael; which says: “[t]he words of the Torah should not be unto thee as a debt, neither art thou at liberty to desist from it.”  

The Torah is also “beyond duty” which means that “it is a debt that cannot be paid. The more you have paid your debt the more in debt you become; in other words, the better you see the extent of what remains to be discovered and done.”  

This category is transposed by Levinas into the relation with the other man: the closer you get to the other, the greater your responsibility towards him becomes.

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442 Levinas, Beyond the Verse, 25.
443 Ibid., 29-30.
444 Ibid.
Bible for Levinas signifies through the expression of the face of the other man that it illuminates. This means that “at no time can one say: I have done all my duty.” Furthermore, the infinite revealed in the face of the suffering human beings does not allow the delimitation of the commitment with his/her particular situation. The subject’s only possible answer from an ethical perspective is that of the Prophet Isaiah: “Here, I am!” This response is not a judgement, it is a commitment beyond comprehension or knowledge, beyond the noesis-noema model of human relationships.

**Asymmetry: The Authority of the Other**

In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas differentiates between the judgement of history and the judgement of God. As was established in the second chapter, by silencing individuality under universal forms the judgement of history is “cruel.” The judgement of God, on the other hand, “takes into account the invisible and essential offense to a singularity that results from judgement.” This judgement of God has nothing to do with a final judgement of the times in which a personal and transcendental God would give rewards and punishments. It rather happens “when it looks at me and accuses me in the face of the other –whose very epiphany is brought about by the offense suffered, by this status of being stranger, widow, and orphan.” This affirmation is in line with Levinas’s consideration that God can only be found in the ethical relation with the other person. Thus, instead of keeping the *fear and trembling* of the imminence of a final judgment, the simplicity of service to the suffering face gives the deeper sense to the instant that passes.

Furthermore, the face in Levinas’s estimation is more than the material reality of nose, eyes and mouth. In fact, the face is not just what materially appears to the vision of

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446 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 244.
447 Ibid.
the subject and would give to the subject the opportunity to take a phenomenological look at it. The face is rather the finite human reality of the possibility of death, and, even more, the real possibility for the subject to commit murder. The paradox about the face is that it is at the same time appealing and imperative. The face of the other faces the subject in its exposure and defencelessness and makes a demand. As Levinas says in the interview with Philippe Nemo: “[t]he face is exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an act of violence. At the same time, the face is what forbids us to kill.” It is a command, the word of God. In fact, the Torah has taught “thou shall not kill.” This commandment, this order, is the first word that a subject hears from the other. It is worth remembering how the commandment “thou shall not kill,” is opened by Levinas to a more positive and dynamic significance to the extent to which it is also the commitment with his/her misery and suffering. In Levinas’s version this order becomes “you will make me to live.” In Bloechl’s words, “t]he first and only statement of our responsibility is thus to be found in the Decalogue: ‘Thou shall not kill’.”

The subject’s commitment with the suffering of the other leads to asymmetrical and non-reciprocal responsibility. This is the messianic moment of the human “I”. The moment in which “the Messiah assumes the face of the one who hears the call of the other who suffers and allows to be involved and disturbed by his/her suffering.” In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas presents this encounter as an interruption of the subject’s continuity of time by the other knocking on the door. The face of the other is his/her nakedness which interrupts the subjectivity dwelling peacefully at home, enjoying his/her

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448 Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 86.
452 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 147-51
possessions, and isolated from the outside; and forces him/her to open the door and answer. This means that the other is not constituted primarily by a consciousness, he/she is found, becomes present, bursts in, he/she is there and looks. Levinas uses the theological expression “epiphany” to describe this encounter with the other person in order to emphasize his/her non-apprehensibility. That is, the relation with the other does not follow the Buberian Ich und Du model, nor the Husserlian cognitive model or the Heideggerian Miteinandersein. These are symmetrical models. The other is on the contrary an authority. This is an authority without force, as Roger Burggraeve says “[t]he authority that reaches me from the face as a prohibition against murder is an ‘unarmed authority’.”453 In Metz’s words the authority of the suffering “is the only authority in which the authority of the sovereign is manifested.”454

The authority of the other is therefore an ethical authority, which means that the possibility of ignoring the commandment and therefore the possibility of violence is real and permanent. However, the responsibility for the other is a utopia that remains possible. Indeed, the condition of the hostage makes possible the existence of “pity, compassion, and solidarity” in the world.455 In this sense, Levinas recalls his encounter with a group of South American students at the University of Louvain in Belgium. According to Levinas,

[they questioned me, not without irony: where would I have encountered the Same, preoccupied by the other to the point of undergoing a fissioning of itself? I replied: At least here. Here in this group of students, a group of intellectuals who might very well have been occupied with their internal perfection and who nevertheless have no other subject of conversation than the crisis of the Latin American masses. Were they not hostages? This utopia of conscience found itself

454 Metz, A Passion for God, 4.
455 See de Saint Cheron, Entretiens avec Emmanuel Levinas, 38.
historically fulfilled in the room I found myself. That history should be concerned by these utopias of conscience, I believe seriously.\textsuperscript{456}

**Conclusion: A Responsible Subject**

This chapter has moved from the concept of memory to that of responsibility, articulated by a critique of any attempt to explain suffering from religious or historical perspectives. In this way, the inadequacy and insufficiency of any theoretical attempt to justify or explain suffering has emerged, and therefore an ethical commitment in relation to the victims has also arisen. This commitment is shaped by a response to the cry of the victims which summons the subject to understand freedom as limited and subordinated to ethical responsibility. This commitment stems both from Levinas’s historical experience of persecution and from Levinas’s biblical commitment from which he has learned that the responsibility for a fellow human is a reasonable way to think and live.

Levinas's declaration of the end of theodicy shows that beyond the subject of the intentional acts (Husserl) or that of the comprehension (Heidegger), a subject in anticipation exposed to the interpellation of the other is *awake*. Traditional theodicy is a scandalous attempt to ignore the cry of the victims of history via a theoretical explanation of evil and human suffering. This theoretical perspective is based on an idealism in which freedom is the quintessence of the constitution of the subject. On the contrary, in the responsible subject, in messianic subjectivity, freedom is limited by the cries of the victims, and the subject is therefore “subjected to the other.” Furthermore, the other of the asymmetrical relation is a victim and therefore comes from above and appears as ethically superior to the subject due to his or her suffering. It is the asymmetry of the relation with the victim that obligates the subject. As Ombrosi mentions “this is why [the

\textsuperscript{456} Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 81-2.
messianic subject] can take upon itself all the suffering of everyone: it can say "I" only to
the extent to which it has already taken upon itself such suffering."\(^4\)\(^5\)

From this perspective, the event of the Holocaust is a call to vigilance, a call to transform memory into responsibility. This is the premise of Fackenheim’s 614th Commandment. In fact, for Levinas and Fackenheim Hitler’s purpose was not only the physical elimination of the Jews, but also to wipe out Israel and to cancel its message; that is, to forget the Bible, the Torah, and mercy through which Law is given to men. In Levinas’s estimation memory is the memory of the immemorial, that is, of the trace of the Infinity that is present in the face of the victims. Because the victims are ethically beyond the subject’s powers this memory is brought by the victims themselves. The victims whose epiphany is the trace of God invokes ethical commitment. As Fagenblat has suggested “Levinas’s secular prophetic appeal decries the modern moral idolatry of somnolent individualism that leaves one deaf to the suffering of the other.”\(^4\)\(^5\)

Metz for his part proclaims that the impassivity of the logos has to be substituted by the compassion of memory. As will be shown in the next chapter, the role that memory plays in Metz’s thinking is central in his attempt to do justice to the victims. What Metz argues is that memory is not a thinking, is not a work of collecting information, but is rather a voice crying out. In relation to memory both Metz and Levinas attempt to get rid of a memory understood as anamnesis, that is, as an act of comprehension, an act of recollection. Levinas and Metz’s perspectives of memory distance themselves from public memories in which the cultural industry and the politics of memory converge. The proliferation of memorials, the multiplication of commemorative monuments, the media transformation of traumatic occurrences into banal events and their sensationalist

\(^4\)\(^5\) Ombrosi, L’umano ritrovato, 130. Translation mine.
\(^4\)\(^5\) Fagenblat, A Covenant of Creatures, 178.
exploitation, rather than a culture of memory, seem to expunge from memory and facilitate oblivion.

Levinas is emphatic in proclaiming the end of theodicy; Metz for his part considers the theodicy question the core of his political theology. However, Metz’s theodicy is unorthodox from the catholic perspective. It is rather an anti-theodicy as long as he considers “blasphemy” to be an attempt to justify God in relation to human suffering. Both Levinas’s and Metz’s rejection of traditional theodicy stems from the experience of Auschwitz as the paradigm of gratuitous suffering. As Sarah K. Pinnock states “[f]rom the position of the victim, according to Metz, the suffering symbolized by Auschwitz remain surd to theodicy justification.”\(^{459}\) For Levinas, the response to Auschwitz is an ethical responsibility able to become hostage of the other’s suffering, which for Metz is a political resistance transformed into compassion.

Chapter six

Metz’s Theodicy as a Disturbing Question

Introduction

In the second chapter, it was made clear how the idealism of the Greek logos present in the philosophical and theological modes of thinking leads to an indifference to the singular and the concrete reality of suffering. Metz rejects the logos of theology that was capable of such indifference in relation to Auschwitz and endeavors to set out a theology sensitive to suffering and contingency. The fourth chapter then endeavoured to redeem this singularity by developing a conception of time with an end which allows Metz to see the now as a place of political responsibility for injustice.

In this chapter, I advance towards the problematization of Metz’s concepts of dangerous memory and theodicy. From this discussion will emerge a subjectivity essentially bound to the other’s death and suffering, and therefore a solidary and compassionate subject. From this perspective some confluences will be found in relation to Levinas’s ethical theodicy. For Metz, the memory of the suffering of others, the story of the passion of men, is the only macro narrative that continues to be valid. Therefore, this memory does not refer to a memory that helps to assert and strengthen identity, but a memory that questions firm and secure identities. This questioning opens a fissure in subjectivity, compelling a response to the other’s claim. In this way the suffering other becomes the authority that cannot be avoided, and also calls everyone to political compassion.

Furthermore, for Metz, theodicy is critical to political theologizing, but is understood as an open question that can never be fully responded to. Traditional theodicies attempt to defend God’s goodness and omnipotency in relation to human suffering, whereas Metz
understands theodicy as a troubling questioning unto God for the suffering in the world. For Metz, this questioning discourse is the cry for the salvation of others, of those who suffer unjustly, of the victims and vanquished in our history. Metz, like Levinas, engages in the theodicy problem as a way to respond to Auschwitz.

**The Memory that Perturbs the Present**

Similar to Levinas, Metz’s consideration of memory has initially a biographical content. His memory of the experience of the war in 1945 profoundly marked his theologizing, particularly from the sixties onward. In fact, he confesses:

The first event occurred when I was sixteen years old, at the end of the Second World War. I was taken out of school and pressed into military service. It was in 1945. With barely any military training I was sent to the front, and at that time the Americans had already crossed the Rhine River. My whole company was made up of young soldiers of about the same age. One evening my company commander sent me back to the battalion headquarters with a message. Throughout the night I strayed through burning farms and villages. When I returned to my company the next morning, I found all my comrades dead. The company had been attacked by planes and tanks and was completely wiped out. I saw only the lifeless faces of my comrades, those same comrades with whom I had but days before shared my childhood fears and my youthful laughter. I remember nothing but a soundless cry. I strayed for hours alone in the forest. Over and over again, just this silent cry! And up until today I see myself so. Behind this memory all my childhood dreams have vanished.460

From this biographical background, Metz expresses how memory plays a central role in his theologizing. For him, memory is a powerful tool that allows the logos of theology and philosophy to overcome idealism and to be critical towards the prevailing modes of logic of domination which gnoseologically, as Ostovich states, equate “knowing with control,”461 and historically ignore the presence of the vanquished. Memory “breaks through the magic circle of the prevailing consciousness,”462 in order for the oppressed to

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460 Downey and Metz, *Love’s Strategy*, 137.
462 Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 90
be regarded. That is, memory prevents us from interpreting history “simply as a history of success, triumph and victory.” Furthermore, Metz considers “common biblical thinking as memory,” to be the core of Israel’s heritage to Western culture. This heritage belongs to the “European history of spirit” and therefore to the “history of the constitution of a reason which intends to be practical as subjective and solidary freedom.”

In spite of belonging to reason, Metz wonders whether memory can be regarded in philosophy as a fundamental concept rather than only a regional or derived one. The response to this question, in Metz’s view, depends on the extent to which philosophy is able to deal with the relation, present in the concept of memory, between reason and history. That is, to the extent to which the original question of truth is placed under the umbrella of practical critical reason or, on the contrary, follows the idealism of traditional historiography. Memory is in fact indispensable for a philosophy that wants to become practical and not merely theoretical. For Metz, “[t]he essential dynamics of history consists of the memory of suffering as a negative consciousness of future freedom and as a stimulus to overcome suffering within the framework of that freedom.”

From a philosophical perspective, Metz analyses the above mentioned connection between reason and history in both the tradition of the Platonic anamnesis and that of the critical use of reason in line with Kantian practical reason and the Marxist critique of ideology. From the first perspective, in Plato’s Meno, anamnesis is the basis for rational knowledge, and therefore constitutive of reason itself. Rational knowledge is rooted in a previously known truth, remembered through the Socratic maieutic. Metz recalls how

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463 Ibid., 126.
464 Metz, Por una cultura de la memoria, 92. Translation mine
465 Ibid.
466 Metz, Faith in History and Society, 59.
Plato’s remembering of a priori knowledge originates in the Homeric poets inspired by the muses. That is, ‘the basis of anamnesis is … attributed by Plato to divine inspiration.’\textsuperscript{467} The basic Platonic idea, that is, knowledge based on a previously known divine truth, persists not only in Neoplatonism but also in dissimilar traditions such as those of Thomas Aquinas’s a priori light of reason, Descartes’s innate idea of God and Leibniz’s defence of a priori knowledge against the Aristotelian concept of memory defended by sensualism. Furthermore, the connection between reason and history is also present in both the hermeneutical and the critical-practical traditions that stem from the Hegelian system. The hermeneutical tradition was important particularly for the fight against historicism and the concomitant “destruction of the relationship between life and history.”\textsuperscript{468} From Metz’s perspective, the distinction made by historicism between memory and history ends up depriving history of memory and tradition, and therefore privileging the dominant knowledge of science in history. For Wilhelm Dilthey, for example, the key differentiation between human and natural sciences concerns history. In fact, the purpose of the human sciences is to grasp human and historical life which requires “an inner articulation of the temporal structures our own experience and the interpretation of the external objectivations of others.”\textsuperscript{469} From this perspective, memory is rooted in the concept of experience and therefore “unable to free it from the suspicion of historical psychologism.”\textsuperscript{470}

The other movement in which memory plays a relevant role and from which Metz received a crucial influence is what he describes as “a critical and practical philosophy of

\textsuperscript{467} Ibid., 187
\textsuperscript{468} Ibid., 189.
\textsuperscript{470} Metz, Faith in History and Society, 191.
This critique is not just theoretical, rather it deals with the problem of theory and praxis in practical reason, “that is, in its realization, always situated within certain social and historical relationships of foundation and reference.” In this sense, history is and remains immanent in reason, which becomes practical in its liberating task of criticism. This practical task of liberating criticism, established initially by the Enlightenment, recognizes “that memory was not simply an object, but an inner aspect of all critical consciousness.” This critical use of memory as the constitutive problem of practical reason is found in some members of the Frankfurt School, particularly Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno. Metz highlights the Jewish background of these thinkers, which would allow them to seek a different source for truth, a different form of knowledge, and particularly to extract from the experience of persecution and suffering a different perspective on history.

In fact, in relation to memory, Metz recognises Benjamin’s memory of suffering in the world as a way of realizing reason and freedom against the banal and unreflected “idea of a non-dialectical progress of reason.” This idea is developed by Benjamin in the Thesis containing a new theory of knowledge in which the concept of reality is both facticity and possibility. Knowledge contains life in the frustrated past and as a consequence opens the possibility of the exigency of justice, because the victims of history remain alive thanks to memory. As has been shown in the third chapter of this thesis, for Benjamin, memory is not an instrument for exploring the past, but the scenario in which the historian has to dig to rescue lost fragments of history that allow the present to be unravelled as a constellation of dangers. This is what comes to expression in the

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471 Ibid., 192.
472 Ibid.
473 Ibid., 193.
474 Ibid.
Benjaminian concept of "arrested dialectic" [Dialektik im Stillstand]. This is to break the usual patterns of perception and interpretation of time that degrade people to mere elements of an objective process that is but the manifestation of the system of domination that subdues singularities. This masking that celebrates itself as evolution can only be contested by breaking the spell involved in the representation of progress, a representation that dominates both the philosophies of history and the historicist positivism.

In Herbert Marcuse, the critical aspect of memory is initially exposed in a psychoanalytic context in which the discovery of the capacity to remember “goes hand in hand with the restoration of the knowing content of the imagination and in this way, the recherche du temps perdu becomes a vehicle of liberation.”475 Then, in the context of the theory of history and society, the restoration of memory to its rightful place as a means of liberation becomes fundamental: it is “one the noblest tasks of philosophy.”476 Metz agrees with Marcuse in retaining Heidegger’s fundamental insight “that something extraordinarily important had been forgotten in the modern world.”477 However, unlike Heidegger, Metz and Marcuse consider that the purpose of memory is not the restoration of the consciousness of Being, but the rise of dangerous messages from the past to the present. In fact, Marcuse is the one who uses the adjective “dangerous” in relation to memories, which is so important for Metz’s Faith and History and Society and for the later works. In fact, Marcuse says: “[r]emembrance of the past may give rise to dangerous insights, and the established society seems to be apprehensive of the subversive contents of memory.”478 In this way, both thinkers stress the emancipatory potential of memory, because the messages of the past brought by memory break the power of the given facts

475 Ibid. 193.
476 Ibid.
(the naturalization of history) in order to place the suffering of men as a critical impulse of present and future transformations.

This use of memory in practical reason is also present in Theodor Adorno. For Adorno, the purpose of memory is "to make eloquent the suffering" of the victims as the condition of truth.479 This truth is not that of the metaphysical knowledge that seeks a transcendent reality, but the concrete human experience of victimization. Auschwitz as Ombrosi remarks “destroyed and burned, with its victims, the possibility of a reconciliation between the ‘speculative metaphysical faculty’ surrounding transcendent truth, and the concrete experience of the destruction of millions of human beings.”480 Therefore, the object of knowledge is connected with the real situation of human beings, with their suffering and pain. In this way, memory serves as a carrier of truth for knowledge. Adorno emphasizes the subversive dimension of tradition understood as the memory of suffering, and its value as mediation, because "if all tradition is extinguished, the advance towards inhumanity will begin.”481

Metz takes sides with the Frankfurt School in considering the memory of suffering as a central category of practical critical reason. He also endorses the idea inherited from the Enlightenment that the processes of emancipation are the noblest task of critical reason. In this sense, the memory of critical-anamnestic reason must be none other than the memory of freedom. However, as already noted, Metz is at odds with the Enlightenment’s interpretation of the history of freedom as a history of progressive mastery over nature and, in this sense, as a dominative praxis that springs from the same

480 Ombrosi, The Twilight of Reason, 125.
history understood as totality. This way of understanding freedom ends up destroying memory, forgetting in the process the pain that produces the cry of the victims, and destroying also the feeling of guilt. In Metz’s view the evocation of freedom must emphasize the memory of suffering. This suffering becomes the history of freedom in a "dangerous tradition" that cannot be overcome or assumed by any interpretation or later review. It is the "dangerous tradition" that does not historicize itself, but maintains the vigour of the cry of the victims. In this way, reason is sensitized by suffering to the point that freedom can only be expressed in reference to suffering and not as the a priori of reason. The a priori of reason is now the victims of history. This subversive memory opposes what Metz calls “false consciousness.” This type of consciousness is an idealized and superficial mode of relation with the past, hiding the danger and pain through harmless clichés. False consciousness means that any past seems better. It is also the glorious memory of war and its heroes, forgetting the dead in the process. For Metz, memory is dangerous precisely because it does not allow reconciliation with the past of pain,

[...]hey [memories] illuminate for a few moments and with a harsh steady light the questionable nature of things we have apparently come to terms with, and show up the banality of our supposed ‘realism’. They break through the canon of all that is taken as self-evident, and unmask as deception the certainty of those “whose hour is always there” (John 7.6). They seem to subvert our structures of plausibility. Such memories are like dangerous and incalculable visitants from the past.482

Metz shares with Kant an appreciation of practical reason’s capacity to exceed the confines of speculative reason. This appreciation is also shared by Levinas in his concern for an ethics that is not founded on any ontology, however Metz and Levinas distance themselves from Kant’s idea that freedom is primary and foundational. Metz and Levinas consider that the meaning of freedom depends on a more primordial responsibility for the

482 Johann Baptist Metz, Faith in History and Society, 109-10.
other’s suffering. For both thinkers the response to an appeal gives man the sense of freedom. As R. Clifton Spargo points out in relation to Levinas’s ethics: “the victim is not just a scandal against knowledge. Rather, she denotes responsibility.” ⁴⁸³ For Metz, responsibility is a key category of political theology to the extent to which the memories of suffering bring “dangerous insights for the present” because they “make demands on us.” ⁴⁸⁴ Furthermore, this praxis in favour of the suffering other is, in Levinas and Metz, essentially pathic, meaning the memory of suffering provokes a suffering in the subject who feels himself compelled to respond. For Metz, “[t]he Jewish-Christian memoria passionis articulates itself as a memory that makes one free to suffer from the sufferings of others, and to respect the prophetic witness of others’ suffering.” ⁴⁸⁵

In bringing Levinas and Metz into relation, I am not trying to make equivalent or homogenise their complex philosophical and theological projects. Rather, as was said from the start, I have sought to take advantage of their similar perspective in relation to history in order to explore responsibility for the victims of history and their suffering. Admittedly, when thinking about time and history Metz’s and Levinas’s interlocutors are initially different from each other: in the case of Metz, Rahner and the Frankfurt School; for Levinas the critical approach and the influence of Bergson, Husserl and Heidegger. However, both thinkers agree that the biblical spirit provides essential categories to deal with suffering, death and justice. Furthermore, they share the same memories: the memories of the Holocaust which shape their views on suffering and death. From this perspective, both thinker challenges the Western idealism of philosophy and theology by

⁴⁸⁴ Metz, Faith in History and Society, 109.
giving voice to the victims of history, acknowledging the concrete reality of suffering and death.

In this way, Metz and Levinas are interested in interrupting the progressive flow of knowledge that springs from traditional historiography by positing memory as a challenging category for history. Levinas’s immemorial memory and Metz’s dangerous memory operate as redemptive categories which prevent history from obtaining its meaning from victors and survivors while simultaneously neglecting the cry of the other who suffers. Furthermore, for both thinkers the concept of memory allows the relation between history and nature to be broken, thereby overcoming the naturalised reading of past events as something irretrievably done. In this way the past is not closed and it cannot be captured in representation. The meaning of the past rather, is produced by exteriority in which memory is attentive to the other’s death. This exteriority appears greater than any historiographical or philosophical order of knowledge and compels subjectivity to react. In other words, the suffering and death of the other makes claims on subjectivity and has a normative importance for praxis. As Levinas and Metz identify, suffering is the authority to which all must respond: having an awareness of history and attempting to live out of this awareness means, above all, not evading history’s disasters. It also means there is at least one authority that we should never reject or despise - the authority of those who suffer.

It is worth noting Nietzsche’s antagonistic view to the Judaeo-Christian worldview, in which the suffering that matters is not the suffering of the poor or the powerless, whom Christianity praise as ‘blessed.” Rather, it is the suffering linked to the Übermensch (Overman) and the Ewige Wiederkehr (Eternal recurrence). Zarathustra advocates for life, which includes and culminates in the Overman, and for the eternal circularity of time. Moreover, Zarathustra also advocates for suffering which is held between these two
polarities and given expression by the progression of life to its highest form. Suffering is intertwined with the ideas of the Overman and the Eternal recurrence, and becomes a link between them. It is only through suffering that the new world order, conceived by Nietzsche and expressed by Zarathustra, can be accomplished. Suffering nurtures a strong personality which reflects the ideal of the hero. Nietzsche refers to a type with very strong characteristics, a class of warrior men, and cunningly silent, who are constantly fighting against unfavourable conditions.

Turning to Metz’s memory, it worth noting how dangerous memory is coupled with the concepts of narrative and solidarity. In this regard, Metz recognises that memory is primarily a narration rather than an argumentation. This is because memory has to do with human experiences. For Metz, this is particularly true in the Bible, which is fundamentally a narration of the experiences of the people of Israel in their relation with God. Christianity also acts as a community, although not “primarily a community interpreting and arguing, but a community remembering and narrating with a practical intention – a narrative and evocative memory of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus.” But along with the Bible, history is also made of the experiences of non-identity through violence and segregation, injustice and inequality. If Levinas accentuates that the memory of the tragedies can only be revealed by those who suffer, Metz points to a memory narrated “by those who experience them” which cannot be systematized in arguments. From Metz’s perspective, “these stories break through the spell of a total reconstruction based on abstract reason, to disrupt the present. The practical intention

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486 Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 212
487 Ibid., 123
488 Ibid., 214.
of memory and narrative is possible via solidarity with those who have been defeated and killed.

Before discussing Metz’s account of theodicy and suffering, it is worth turning to Habermas’s critique of Metz’s anamnestic rationality. Habermas questions Metz’s pretension to make anamnestic rationality a basic requirement for Western reason and also Metz’s criticism regarding the lack of categories in philosophy to deal with human aspirations to justice and the hope for a universal justice. This discussion shall help us to clarify the philosophical perspective of Metz’s theologizing, and to confirm Habermas’s recognition of the limitations of philosophy in dealing with the aspiration to a universal justice.

The Anamnestic Spirit of Reason, a Debate with Habermas

As has already been shown, Metz recognises that the Jewish (biblical) spirit provides theology and Western thinking with a rationality able to hear the suffering of the victims. For him, it is not by accident that in contemporary philosophy Jewish voices are the ones to draw attention to this basic anamnestic constitution of reason. This rationality is based upon the categories of limited time, the covenant as memory, and the anamnetic condition of the spirit. In Metz’s words “Israel brings something new and original,” that is, “meditative thought (Angedenken) qua historical mindfulness or remembrance (Eingedenken).” This is the anamnestic rationality, the expression that appears in the debate with the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas “on the relationship and origins of memory and reason.” Habermas acknowledges the attraction he felt to “Metz’s way

of thinking,” and to the “common intentions” he shares with the theologian. Taking into account Habermas’s defence of “methodical atheism” in philosophy, this is certainly recognition of the philosophical background of Metz’s theological work. However, Habermas discusses Metz’s intention to base communicative reason on anamnestic reason, and criticizes theology having the last word over philosophy. Habermas is also at odds with Metz’s affirmation that anamnestic reason is absolutely absent in Western philosophy. For Habermas, philosophy is not only Platonism or Idealism, but there is also a philosophical protest against idealism.

As stated in the first chapter, Metz believes that by losing the Jewish spirit (meaning the anamnestic rationality) due to the Hellenization of its rationality, Christianity and Western thinking lose sensibility to suffering. Anamnestic reason is on the contrary a reason in which universalizing capacity rests upon the capacity of remembering, and, according to Metz, is a fundamental part of the constitution of reason. From a philosophical point of view, Habermas considers that Metz’s intention to bring together all the contents of the Jewish tradition in Eingedenkens or memory is unsustainable because it would have to recognize the subordination of philosophy to theology. That is, “the philosophy with Greek roots appears as the administrator of Ratio, of the forces of understanding that is made to reason only through the linkage with the memory that remits us to Moses and his promise.”

Habermas nevertheless recognizes the semantic potential inherited from the biblical tradition that has been systematically discarded by idealism. The heir of this semantic potential, what is universally significant in it, is the human language created to make humans understand each other and therefore

http://etd.nd.edu/ETD-db/theses/available/etd-04052012-155905/unrestricted/McLeanCK042012D.pdf

491 Jürgen Habermas, “Israel and Athens, or to Whom Does Anamnestic Reason Belong?” In Mendieta, The Frankfurt School on Religion, 293.

492 Habermas, “Israel and Athens,” 295.
achieve a common understanding. Communicative reason has been enriched by the model of the alliance of the people of God, particularly by the idea of justice drawn from the experience of suffering, and by the concepts of freedom and solidarity which project themselves towards an understanding among men. These ideas have brought about specifically modern concepts which have penetrated Greek philosophy. Habermas states:

> I mean the concept of subjective freedom and the demand for equal respect for all, including and precisely for the foreign in its particularity and difference. I mean the concept of autonomy, of a self-constraint of the will by virtue of a moral reasoning that is contingent on relations of reciprocal acknowledgement. I mean the concept of a socialized subject that is individualized in the course of its life and that as an unsubstitutable individual is at the same time member of a community, who can only carry out an authentic life in solidarity with others. I mean the concept of liberation, as much in the sense of emancipation from denigrating conditions as in the sense of a utopian project of a fulfilling life-form. The irruption of historical thinking into philosophy has finally encouraged the understanding of the “deferred” character of vital time; it has made us aware of the narrative structure of the history in which we find ourselves involved and of the contingent character of all that happens to us.\(^493\)

Therefore, according to Habermas, there have been universalizable Jewish and Christian thoughts which, by infiltrating the Greek tradition, have given birth to these specifically modern concepts that lead into the concept of communicative reason. For Habermas, however, a healthy scepticism needs to be practiced in relation, for example, to "a mystical causality of an act of remembrance inspired in salvific terms" that would have the effect of saving the lost. From a philosophical point of view, neither of these views can be granted any rational credit to a "promise of restitution."\(^494\)

According to Metz, one of Habermas’s main problems is the secondary role that time plays in his philosophizing. In fact, in reducing the biblical concept of time to the emergence of historical thinking in philosophy, Habermas can meet the minimum standards of post-metaphysical thinking, but does not exhaust the semantic potential of

\(^{493}\) Ibid., 296.  
\(^{494}\) Ibid.
time. As shown in the fourth chapter, Metz emphasizes a fundamental aspect of this time: its limitation (befristet). Time has a deadline (is not eternal) and a place (it occurs in a given hic). Thanks to its limited character, time becomes a regulative principle of human action. In the absence of indefinite time, every moment becomes an absolute moment. At every moment everything is at stake. This perspective of time is not found in Habermas’s universal pragmatics or in *The Theory of Communicative Action*. The same applies to memory, which Metz elevates to a universal category. According to Metz, there is no concept or idea in the Enlightenment that can question memory because its authority, which is the authority of those who suffer, cannot be revoked. However, by integrating the negative as a moment of the positive, philosophy has created an antidote to that authority. To Metz, this was the fateful invention of idealism, to which Habermas is not immune. In fact, Habermas degrades the significance of memory for that of post-metaphysical responsibility, which for Metz is insufficient to respond to the injustices of history. Furthermore, all those concepts that Habermas recognizes as coming from Jewish thought neither find fulfilment in a symmetrical intersubjectivity nor create universality from mutual recognition. That would be possible if individual freedom or the principle of self-determination were primary, but for Metz, as also for Levinas, responsibility is prior to freedom. This primacy of responsibility alters the relationship with others and the construction of universality. In fact, man does not face the other from a pure freedom, but is required to take responsibility even before taking the first step. As Benjamin highlights, we are expected on earth.

Habermas also confronts Metz’s theodicy problem. The German philosopher recognises that “[t]he question of the salvation of those who suffer unjustly is perhaps the most important in maintaining the discourse about God.” As will be discussed later in

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495 Ibid., 297.
this chapter, for Metz, the problem of suffering and the challenges it presents to God can never be fully responded to, and therefore the only way to deal with it is through a culture of remembrance “that keeps alive, without a false need of consolation, the existential restlessness proper to the vehement interpellation to God, stimulating with that an eschatologically fuelled hope in a future that, although in stasis, almost reaches reality.”

In relation to this culture of remembrance, Habermas notes a parallelism between, on the one hand, the transformation of the eschatological experience of suffering in Judaism and, on the other, the anti-Platonic consciousness that stresses the positivity of the negative. This philosophical conscience has transformed “the experience of negativity of the existing into the propelling dialectical force of a reflection that must break with the dominion of the past over the future.”

However, for Habermas, philosophy cannot follow the culture of remembrance based on the theodicy question. That is, looking for a universal justice thanks to a just and omnipotent God exceeds philosophical pretensions. The task of philosophy is rather the attempt to translate that tradition into the context of a world dull and indifferent to the normative. Put another way: claims to universality belonging to the culture of remembrance cannot have a transcendental foundation, but all pretension of validity starts from the contingent, that is, from the historical space and time. This is the way of communicative reason which, however, values the force of memory. That is, communicative reason remembers, but not from a theological or metaphysical perspective but from a philosophical one. This means digging into “the deepest layers of its pragmatic presuppositions, disclos[ing] the conditions for the appellation of an unconditional sense and, with that, maintain[ing] open the dimension of the validity claims that transcend the

496 Ibid.
497 Ibid.
social spaces and historical time.”\textsuperscript{498} However, Habermas recognises the limitation of philosophy which, by incorporating the idea of the alliance in the concept of a historically situated communicative reason, cannot offer any firm hope. Rather, philosophy, “finds itself under the sign of a transcendence from within and must content itself with the grounded exhortation to a sceptical resistance, not defeatist, but rather, ‘against the idols and demons of a world that scorns the human being’.\textsuperscript{499}

\textbf{Auschwitz and the Theodicy Question.}

Metz shares Levinas’s insight in relation to the failure of any attempt to explain suffering and the concomitant problem that suffering poses to the concept of God. Both thinkers reject theodicy as an attempt to make God innocent, which can lead to a trivialization of human pain. Metz affirms that history exists as “the brittle and devastating histories of human suffering narrated by those experiencing them,” and therefore he realizes “how they cannot be systematized in argument.”\textsuperscript{500} This affirmation recalls Levinas’s rejection of memory as an ontological attempt to bring the past into the present via interpretation and his rejection of theodicy as intellectualization of the experience of suffering. Metz’s and Levinas’s insights mean that traditional theodicy needs to be reconsidered. Yet, there is certainly an essential difference between Levinas and Metz. The latter is a theologian and from this perspective he is essentially thinking of the challenges that the phenomenon of suffering implies for theology and for the praxis of the Catholic Church. The former is a Jewish philosopher who is interested in translating the ethical message of the Bible to a broader audience, meaning translating Hebrew (the Bible) into Greek (Philosophy). Suffering is therefore, from Levinas’s perspective, an

\textsuperscript{498} Ibid., 298.
\textsuperscript{499} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{500} Metz, \textit{Faith in History and Society}, 123.
ethical challenge for human beings, having as a background the biblical categories framed in an anarchical responsibility.

Admittedly, Metz is convinced that theological categories are philosophically worthy of consideration, and therefore he is prone to dialogue with philosophy. Furthermore, he considers this dialogue a kind of testimony to the hope in the liberating power of redemption carried out by Jesus. It is worth noting that Metz’s messianism is a weak messianism, meaning Metz emphasizes the suffering testimony of Jesus rather than his power or mystery as the son of God. Metz underlines the social responsibility of Jesus’s followers rather than man’s transcendental salvation or the place of miracles in Jesus’s life. This is why for Metz memory is accomplished as memoria passionis, mortis et resurrectionis Jesu Christi. This memory is liberating to the extent to which it remembers

the testament of Christ’s love, in which the kingdom of God appeared among men by initially establishing that kingdom between men, by Jesus’s confession of himself as the one who was on the side of the oppressed and rejected and by his proclamation of the coming kingdom of God as the liberating power of unconditional love.\textsuperscript{501}

While Levinas talks about “theology without theodicy,” Metz considers theodicy the central problem of political theology. However, by looking more closely at Metz’s and Levinas’s considerations we realize that both thinkers follow the path of Kantian theodicy as a rejection of any attempt to explain suffering. In fact Levinas’s end of theodicy transforms into an ethical theodicy, and Metz’s anti-theodicy becomes theodicy as a disturbing question to God rather than the defence of God for the suffering of the world. By being on the Kantian path, each thinker places himself against the Hegelian philosophy of history as a theodicy in which suffering is justified in the dialectic of the

\textsuperscript{501} Downey and Metz, Love’s Strategy, 94.
progress of Spirit. Furthermore, in speaking about suffering and death each thinker is looking at the Holocaust. Auschwitz, as Metz declares, became crucial for his theologizing from 1973 when writing the first draft of the document *Our Hope* for the German bishop’s conference. Metz confesses with regret that too slowly he realized how this concrete situation of suffering challenges the way in which theology had been done. From this year onward, his memory of the Second World War becomes meaningful and the theodicy question arises with greater force. Theology is from now on a theology “after Auschwitz,” and therefore theology cannot remain “untouched after such a catastrophe.”

For Metz “the theodicy question, the basic theological question... is not ‘who saves me?’ but rather ‘who saves you?’”, and immediately he adds “I begin not with the question, ‘What happens to me when I suffer, when I die,’ but rather with, ‘what happens to me when you suffer, when you die’”. Therefore, the theodicy question becomes a cry for those who suffer unjustly, for the victims and defeated in history. For Metz, the discourse about God is about the salvation of those who suffer in history. This means that suffering cannot be idealistically explained; in Metz’s terms, “[t]o confront Auschwitz is in no way to comprehend it. Anyone wishing to comprehend in this area will have comprehended nothing.” This is why Metz says: “I consider as blasphemy every Christian theodicy (i.e., every attempt at a so-called justification of God) and all language about meaning when these are initiated outside this catastrophe or on some level above it.” Metz’s statement recalls Fackenheim’s words: “I won’t even consider finding a

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503 Downey and Metz, *Love’s Strategy*, 137.
504 Ibid., 41.
505 Ibid.
purpose in Auschwitz because the very attempt to find it is blasphemous.”\textsuperscript{506} These words belong to a lecture Fackenheim delivered at the University of California in 1968 during a symposium on “The Future of Hope.” On this occasion, the Canadian philosopher reflected on the challenges Auschwitz posed to Jews and to humanity. For him, this challenge is as unique as this event: Auschwitz cannot be explained and cannot be forgotten. The response to the despair and evil felt by the Jewish community is the commandant of hope: “testify against evil by our very existence.”\textsuperscript{507} For Fackenheim, to exist as a Jew is to be committed to hope that a second Auschwitz will not happen.

From the perspective of the “theodicy question,” Metz criticises how theology disposed of the disturbing problem of justice for those who suffer unjustly, transforming it directly into a problem about the redemption of the guilty. For Metz, there was a shift from the biblical concern with human suffering to a concern for individual sins. In this shift, according to Metz, Augustine played an important role.

**The Standstill of the Theodicy Question.**

In Metz, a theology sensitive to theodicy means that theology needs to look at the concrete reality of human suffering in order to be practical. In this purpose, theology has to overcome classical theodicy, which seeks to defend God for the suffering in the world. In spite of the term “theodicy” being coined by Leibniz in the seventeenth century, the problem posed by evil in relation to the goodness and power of God can be traced back earlier, particularly in the writings of Augustine. While for Levinas evil is the excess of being, for Augustine it is lack or deficiency of being. This is the way Augustine takes in order to respond to the problem posed by dualistic Manichaeism in relation to the double


\textsuperscript{507} Ibid., 89.
principle operative in the world: good and evil, and also to Marcion’s dualism of the wrathful Hebrew God and the redeemer God of the New Testament. For Manichean dualism, evil and sin are not the result of free will, but the result of a universal and eternal principle of evil which fights with the principle of goodness in the human soul. As William E. Mann argues, “Manichaeism thus offered a straightforward solution for the problem of evil: God is doing the best he can against evil, but finds himself facing an independent opponent as formidable as he.”

As stated above, Augustine responds to these dualisms by following the Plotinian solution and considering evil as a privation and not as a substance. For Augustine the primary problem is not the origin of evil, as the Manichean wrongly believes, but the nature of evil. In questioning this nature, Augustin concludes that evil is the lack of goodness [privatio boni] and therefore, from a metaphysical perspective, evil does not exist as an entity, but rather what exist are lower and higher grades of being in relation to God, the Supreme Being. Moral evil springs from a deficiency in the election of human will which can choose lower beings instead of higher ones. That is, free will is a good which can be used wrongly by humans and, therefore, evil in Augustine’s consideration has a defective cause and not an efficient cause. In the Libero Arbitrio, according to Metz, Augustine attributes responsibility for the evil and suffering in the world only to humanity and its history of guilt which stems from the rejection of God.

What bothered Metz most in relation with Augustine’s perspective is the appeasement of the questioning directed to God, questioning that demands an explanation in view of the history of suffering in the world. In other words, Augustine’s emphasis in relation to sin and guilt attenuates primordial attention to the suffering of man. According

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to Metz, by emphasizing salvation as the redemption of sin and blame, Augustine forgot
the eschatological promise of universal justice, which also included past suffering. From
Metz’s perspective, the biblical view of salvation, the promise of salvation in God's name,
refers not only to salvation from sin and guilt, but to the liberation of human beings from
the inscrutable situations of human suffering. In this way in classical theodicies, in line
with Augustine, the victims of history are forgotten and the possibility to respond to the
cry of justice that arises from their suffering is missed.

While in classical theodicies human suffering is forgotten by emphasising sin and
guilt in the history of redemption, in the modern theories of emancipation concrete human
suffering is hidden in a transcendental or universal subject of history. In these theories,
like Marxism for example, suffering is integrated into a universal perspective, which for
Hegel is termed “world spirit,” and for Schelling “nature.” Furthermore, by making God
the unique subject of history, the classic theodicies end up expelling God from history in
the modern, secularized theories of emancipation. From Marx’s perspective, for example,
the Deus Salvator is replaced by the Homo emancipator. As Thompson expresses it, “if
God is the one in charge, and yet is evidently doing so little to make the human world
better, then it is time to put human beings in charge in God’s place.”

However, both perspectives share the same failure: “[i]n Metz’s analysis, both classical theories of
redemption and modern theories of emancipation have tried to shield themselves from
responsibility towards those who suffer in history.” From both perspectives the
question of freedom remains tied to the question: “who is to blame” for this suffering?
And consequently “who is to bear the responsibility?” Both perspectives fall into a

509 Thompson, “Theodicy in a Political Key: God and Suffering in the Post-Shoah Theology of Johann
Dissertations & Theses.
510 Ibid., 112.
mechanism of exoneration from responsibility. In fact, while the classical theodicies blame human beings for evil in order to preserve the omnipotent and loving God, the theories of emancipation understand suffering as part of a whole project of liberation in which progress towards a final liberation is the driving force of history. Furthermore, the theories of emancipation exonerate themselves for history’s failures by blaming others, the enemy, for the oppression and totalitarian repression.

From Metz’s perspective, on the contrary, by assuming responsibility for history’s failures, for the suffering of other human beings, the subject becomes a “true homo emancipator.”\(^{511}\) This responsibility is a praxis of solidarity in which the memory of past suffering becomes the cornerstone of such responsibility. The biblical perspective offers, according to Metz, a perspective of redemption in which the eschatological promises of justice for the living and death can be considered. The solidarity based on the memory of suffering “is a practical solidarity of memory which looks from the standpoint of the conquered and the victims sacrificed in the world theatre of history.”\(^{512}\)

**Troubling Questions**

Against the traditional theodicies, Bloch sets in motion the biblical narratives towards a conception of theodicy respectful of human suffering. In fact, against the traditional Hegelian approach inherited by Marxism that suffering finds justification in the *telos* of history, Ernst Bloch, himself an atheist Marxist thinker, considers that any attempt to find justification for suffering is both “wicked and feebleminded.”\(^{513}\) Bloch discards both the Hegelian and the orthodox Marxist theodicies which, by resting on

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\(^{511}\) Ibid., 114.

\(^{512}\) Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 130.

dialectical logic, “are insensitive to the moral scandal of suffering.”

As Sara K. Pinnock expresses it, “Bloch considers it [a utopian end of history] an offense to victims to place their suffering in a dialectical scheme, which is the antithesis of recognizing and lamenting the horrible and wasteful suffering of the past.” From this perspective, it is inevitable to consider a convergence with Metz’s theodicy. Certainly, Bloch’s theodicy and the philosophy of hope had an initial influence in Metz’s political theologizing during the sixties. They met for the first time in 1963 in the Academy of Weingarten, where they were invited to reflect on the theme “The Future of Man.” After this first meeting, they participated in different academic encounters in Germany. Regarding these encounters Metz confesses: “Bloch was, I think, taken with the way I asked questions, although people were surprised at the way in which Metz ‘went after’ Bloch.”

However, this convergence runs parallel to an essential difference: Metz reacts against Bloch’s transcending without transcendence, which Metz considers equivalent to an anonymous evolution.

In his last book *Atheism and Christianity*, Bloch considers that the biblical narratives have a social and political meaning with a potential liberating power for the alleviation of suffering in the world. Admittedly, for Bloch the Bible could be read from a conservative perspective, particularly in religious institutions, and the Bible even served to support the “pastoral letters under the Nazis.” However, “over and against all this stand sentiments no other religious book contains: suffering that will suffer no longer.”

In fact, for the German philosopher, the monotheistic faith is fundamentally concerned

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515 Ibid., 67.
516 Schuster and Bochert-Kimmig, *Hope against Hope*, 19
518 Ibid., 26.
with suffering and injustice. This is particularly true in biblical figures like Moses, Job and Jesus who are Promethean models that defy God to bring hope to humankind, offering models of resistance and utopic possibilities for history. As Bloch states in *The Principle of Hope*, Moses was “the first name-giving originator of a religion, of a religion of opposition.”519 This religion of the god of Sinai is open to suffering and rebellion and close to traditional gods. The god of Sinai is now “the spirit of the exodus,” which alludes to hope for the enslaved people and resistance to the conditions of tyranny. This perspective of hope is eschatological to the extent to which it involves a future expectation of the Kingdom of God. However, this expectation does not mean inactivity and instead it involves a real interest in a change in the conditions of slavery and oppression.

In terms of theodicy, the figure of Job is also significant. For Bloch, Job represents the strife with God, “an exodus from the Yahweh himself.”520 In fact, Job suffers and accuses Yahweh for his suffering; that is, that God does nothing to withstand evil. The Book of Job, in Bloch’s view, is counter to the traditional theodicies which try to defend God. This book represents “the discovery of Utopian potency within the religious sphere: that a man can be better, and behave better than his God.”521 In this way, Bloch rejects the theodicies of the three friends of Job who, as Yahweh’s defenders, have nothing to offer except the dogma of atonement for guilt in its most rigid form. Bloch blames the Church for confusing Job with his friends by reducing him “to the banal level of Eliphaz, or at least to that of the victor over temptations, the hero of the popular story.”522 The Church converts Job into a “model of patient under trial,” when Job called Yahweh a murderer, and when the world Job envisions is a world that “will rise above the dust.”523

520 Ibid., 1235
522 Ibid., 117.
523 Ibid., 118.
This is not a supernatural or after-life world, but one in which justice and the praxis of hope are possible.

For Bloch, Job’s cry challenges traditional theodicies, like that of Augustine’s *privatio boni*. Job’s questions arise against all these “whitewashing theodicies.” In fact, “real goodness and almighty power would never grow so tired and indifferent. Not even to the sinner, let alone, as Job in his realism so constantly pointed out, to the just.” In Bloch’s view, “against the rigor of his questioning [Job’s], no theodicy can still stand up as honest.” The answer to Job’s questions is not just atheism, as it was in the French Enlightenment. With the dethronement of God, Job’s suffering and the questions he raised still persist. Instead, the best way to deal with this suffering is

a hope, which is connected with rebellion – a hope founded in the concrete given possibility for new being. As a handhold to the future, a process which, though by no means achieved, is yet by no means in vain, thanks to the never-abating pregnancy of its solution, our solution. Hope in a better world and in its real possibility is a force that has however no guarantee of success. This is why the permanent questioning about suffering is concretized in political resistance to suffering. A definite response to suffering is not possible, but “we can and do react with searching questions.”

As stated above, Bloch’s anti-theodicy as questioning is central in Metz’s political theologizing. Each thinker not only rejects theodicy as a defence of God but also considers theodicy as an act of *questioning* God. However, the significance of this questioning varies in both thinkers: Metz questions God with a view to God himself as grounds for hope. Bloch’s questioning, meanwhile, is an act of liberation from God in order to raise human power as grounds for a better world. As Thompson puts it: “Bloch argued that the

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524 Ibid, 120.
525 Ibid.
526 Ibid., 122.
527 Ibid., 121.
power to bring a better world—the “Utopian potency”—is a human power, even though it can be found within the religious longing and questioning of human beings, and God is thus rejected as neither the ground nor the goal of human hope.”\textsuperscript{528} Furthermore, Metz thinks that Bloch is right in acknowledging the liberating power of religion, that is, as Pinnock remarks “[l]ike Bloch, he [Metz] reads the Bible as centrally concerned with resistance to socially caused suffering and as eschatological in impulse.”\textsuperscript{529} However, Metz is at odds with Bloch’s transcending without transcendence in which hope remains blind before God. From Metz’s perspective, the best way to deal with suffering is to follow the biblical traditions in which Israel does not allow itself to be consoled by myths or by arguments. On the contrary, questioning God is turning to God “full of complaint, crying out, expecting a response.”\textsuperscript{530} That is, Israel expresses itself as a questioning arising out of suffering, as an incessant turning of its questions back to Yahweh.

**Theodicy as the Questioning of God**

The central problem of theology is “the cry for the salvation of others, of those who suffer unjustly, of the victims and the vanquished in our history.”\textsuperscript{531} The discourse about God is first and foremost a question about this salvation and the truth that guides this discourse is a resistance against every form of injustice that creates suffering. In Metz’s claim for resistance against injustice and the hope for a better world, the influence of Bloch is evident. However, Benjamin provides Metz with a vision of the past that moderates Bloch’s future-oriented perspective of hope. From this perspective, the theodicy question is eschatological in the way in which it is a hope of universal salvation, including for those who have died. Theology does not develop its answers by reconciling

\textsuperscript{528} Thompson, “Theodicy as a Political Key,” 108.
\textsuperscript{529} Pinnock, *Beyond Theodicy*, 81
\textsuperscript{530} Ashley, *Interruptions*, 128.
\textsuperscript{531} Metz, *A Passion for God*, 55.
everything, but rather directs its questioning incessantly back toward God. As in Bloch’s anti-theodicy, Metz’s theodicy question can “never be answered conclusively,” and the main task of theology is to seek "a new language that prevents [the question] to be forgotten."532

Furthermore, Metz not only criticizes traditional theodicies, but also the theologies and philosophies that posit suffering in God, particularly the theologies of Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jürgen Moltmann and Urs Von Balthasar. Levinas himself expresses it in this way: “[i]n our suffering God suffers with us… It is God who suffers most in human suffering.”533 In Metz’s opinion, by positing a suffering God, or God participating in our sufferings, these theologies minimize the negativity of suffering. The idea of a suffering God is just speculative and risks ignoring the human history of suffering. Furthermore, it seems also a duplication of human suffering and a projection of the discourse of solidarity in human society. Metz also wonders how the concept of a suffering God can avoid an eternalization of suffering and can present a real fight against the causes of suffering and the hope for liberation. The perspective of a suffering God finally falls within the Hegelian self-movement of the Spirit and therefore it loses its force, domesticated by its conceptualization.

Against the above framing, Metz proposes a Leiden an Gott. The translation of this expression into English poses some problems as James Matthew Ashley, Metz’s translator, underlines

[i]n German Leiden an translates to suffering from, as in "suffering from a cold." What cannot be rendered into English is Metz’s correlation of Leiden an Gott with Rückfragen an Gott [to re-inquire or ask again of God]. In the light of this wordplay, I have chosen "suffering unto God" in order to express (a) that this is a

532 Metz, Memoria passionis, 113
533 Levinas, Alterity and Transcendence, 182.
form of relationship to God and (b) that it is an active, dynamic state and not just a passive enduring.\textsuperscript{534}

Suffering \textit{unto} God is the disturbing question which addresses God with the meaningless suffering of others. It is understood from Israel’s poverty of spirit, which means Israel’s inability to be consoled by strategies of evasion, by ahistorical myths, in the face of suffering “which cover[s] over the fragmented, endangered character of human being.”\textsuperscript{535}

To Metz the most appropriate linguistic form for this type of experience of God and speaking about God is the language of prayer. This language of prayer is itself “a language of suffering, a language of crisis, a language of doubt and of radical danger, a language of complaint and accusation, a language of crying out.”\textsuperscript{536} This is a language more dramatic and rebellious, more radical and disturbing, less harmonious and less likely to conform than academic or discursive language. It is the language of the complaint, protest, and cry. The language of prayer has a long biblical tradition (from Job to Jesus) and, even more, a long tradition throughout the history of mankind "as the most impressive and moving document of human language of suffering.” The language of prayer consists of passionate questions addressed to God, demanding explanation. Therefore, the language of suffering \textit{unto} god is not primarily one of consoling answers to experiences of suffering; rather, it is much more a language of passionate re-questioning that arises out of suffering, a re-questioning of God, full of highly charged expectation.

\textsuperscript{535} Ashley, \textit{Interruptions}, 160.
\textsuperscript{536} Metz, “Suffering Unto God,” 620-1.
This suffering *unto* God is experienced against a mystical backdrop which Metz terms “mysticism of open eyes.”\(^{537}\) That is, a mysticism in which there is a "growing perception of others' suffering," and therefore compassion and responsibility. From Metz’s perspective, Christianity is a religion of crisis and combative hope rather than one of a friendly God. As Martinez says, it is a religion “that disquiets, interrupts, contradicts, endangers, and forces one to have hope against all hope in an unending praxis of universal justice, solidarity and peace that is always suspended by the catastrophes of history.”\(^{538}\)

From the perspective of the “mystic of open eyes,” the structure of the “I” is transformed into compassion, which means the disposition to be interrupted by the suffering of others and parallely to recognise the authority of those who suffer. From Metz’s perspective, compassion is the specific legacy of the Bible for Europe.

Metz’s mysticism of open eyes leads primarily towards an encounter with faces. In fact, Metz clarifies that Christian hope cannot be spoken about in a general way, but must remain grounded in the concrete historical-social situation in which subjects find themselves: their experiences, suffering, struggles, and obstacles. As shown in the fourth chapter, Levinas also points out that responsibility stems from the encounter with the other who “has the face of the poor, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan.”\(^{539}\) However, Levinas insists that the concept of face goes beyond the material contours and even “the best way of encountering the other is not even to notice the colour of his eyes!”\(^{540}\) Metz coincides with Levinas about the significance of face as a hermeutical tool to approach the other’s suffering and therefore responsibility. However, for him, the material reality of face has something to say: it reflects struggles, suffering, and hope. In fact, when visiting Latin America in 1988, Metz had the opportunity to find concrete faces of

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\(^{537}\) Metz, *Memoria passionis*, 105.

\(^{538}\) Martinez, *Confronting the Mystery of God*, 86.

\(^{539}\) Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 251.

\(^{540}\) Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 85.
suffering. He discovered the faces of men, women and children reflecting poverty and sorrow, and particularly found the face of the indios: “short faces, black faces…and in their eyes, dreams, desires, or even tears were seen.”\textsuperscript{541} However, not only was suffering and sadness reflected in these faces, resistance was also found. That is, resistance against the accelerating time of modernity, and against the mechanism of evasion, as well as strategies for the immunization of post-modern mentalities in relation to universal responsibility. In fact, according to Metz, by thinking on a small scale, in varied fragments, postmodernity ends up in a privatization of life and therefore in an attitude of a spectator before the situations of crises and suffering in the world.

In spite of being only a partial vision of Latin American society, Metz’s encounter with concrete faces gave him the opportunity to materialize his conviction that the logos of theology must be interrupted by the face of the other. Furthermore, in the encounter with the face of the other, Metz and Levinas discover a face which summons the subject as an authority and a victim at the same time; that is, this encounter discloses an asymmetrical relationship in which the one summoned to respond feels him/herself compelled to respond without mitigating circumstances.

\textbf{The Asymmetrical Relationship}

In \textit{Memoria Passionis}, Metz speaks in similar words to Levinas in relation to interhuman relationships: the relationship with the other must be non-symmetrical. For Metz, the symmetrical relationships of recognition, typical of modern advanced societies, do not go beyond the logic of market relations, trade and competition. Only the non-symmetric relations, that is, the concern for the others excluded and forgotten, breaks the

\textsuperscript{541} Metz, \textit{Zum Begriff}, 129.
power of this logic. For both Levinas and Metz, the suffering other interrupts the time in which the subject feels comfortable by requesting a response. This is also why Metz and Levinas criticize the Buberian I-Thou relationship. For Metz, this relationship is too private to reach social meaning, for Levinas it is too symmetrical. For Metz, it is apolitical, for Levinas it is ethically insufficient. Both Metz and Levinas are thinking how to do justice to the victims so far irremediably laid aside by history.

In this asymmetry, Levinas emphasizes the interhuman relationship as a concern for the other without reciprocity. In this sense, Levinas manifests: “I am responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity, were I to die for it. Reciprocity is his affair.” This is so because the responsibility for the other, which is the fundamental ethical obligation, is not imposed as an imperative of an existing consciousness, but is prior to self and its principle of individuation. In being ethical, this asymmetry derives from a fundamental inequality between the subject and the other. For Levinas, in the ethical horizon, the other always takes precedence. This means that before meeting the other and grasping its qualities, the subject is called upon to respond to the other’s fate, even to the other’s own responsibility. That is, the interhuman is primarily an ethical face-to-face relationship and derivatively political. In the political order the fundamental non-symmetry is an excess because the political is the order of the citizens, of the equals. Therefore, Levinas does not reject the equality of human beings, but this equality is derived, non-original. In the ethical order,

the interhuman lies also in the recourse that people have to one another for help, before the marvellous alterity of the Other has been banalized or dimmed in a simple exchange of courtesies which become established as an ‘interpersonal commerce’ of customs.

542 See Metz, Memoria passionis, 170.
543 Levinas, Ethics and Infinity, 98.
544 Levinas, “Useless Suffering,” 165.
However, unlike Levinas’s derived equality, Metz is thinking of the fundamental equality among human beings. Under this equality, paradoxically, the victims emerge as an authority to the extent to which their suffering concerns us. Put in other words, for Metz, the authority of the suffering other emerges because human beings are essentially equal and therefore the victims are not in unequal conditions in relation to the traditional protagonists of history. On the contrary, the victims claim a privileged consideration due to their vulnerable condition. This authority of those who suffer compels a political response which Metz terms *compassio*. In Levinas’s and Metz’s consideration, a gap is produced between the other who suffers and those who respond. While Levinas’s ethical relation of face-to-face encounters brings to light an essential difference of the self and the Other, Metz is primarily contemplating a subject among other subjects as part of a community. In fact, “the word subject does not refer to the isolated individual, the monad who only afterwards made sure of his coexistence with other subjects. Experiences of solidarity with, antagonism towards, liberation from, and anxiety about other subjects form an essential part of the constitution of the religious subject.”

This difference between Levinas’s prioritisation of ethics and Metz’s prioritization of politics leads Thompson to affirm that their responses were shaped “by different commitments: Levinas stressed the duty to respond to the other who is always other, whereas Metz focused more on the human community that he sees as the ultimate goal of such an encounter.” And therefore, “for Levinas, unlike for Metz, this authority also produces a kind of unbridgeable difference between the other who suffers and those who are duty-bound to respond.” In spite of Thompson catching the essential difference between each thinker, her conclusion about Levinas’s “unbridgeable difference” lacks

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545 Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 61.
546 Thompson, “*Theodicy as a Political Key*,” 154.
full consideration of the political equality of human beings, as emphasized above. Levinas’s interest is ethical because ethics is for him primordial, but political equality is a reality that Levinas does not ignore, even if he does not develop a political theory or political consequences for his ethical approach.

Turning to Metz’s response to suffering, it should be noted that for the German theologian *compassio* is not a religious romanticism but a practical response in which hatred and violence have been removed. This authority signifies that the response to those who suffer is fundamental as a source of meaning for ethics. In fact, the obedience to this authority tests the righteousness of any ethics that do not want to become “ethics of accommodation” or justification, meaning an ethics “that seeks to reconcile human actions with the ever changing practical circumstances.”

Furthermore, this authority obliges all human beings prior to any agreement and therefore cannot be sidestepped by any culture or religion, for example in terms of cultural and religious understanding. The authority of those who suffer is weak because it stems from the margins, but is at the same time strong because it cannot be evaded by ethics, politics, culture or religion. Beyond the above-mentioned difference in relation to the priority of ethics or politics, both Metz and Levinas have the same interest: the non-identity of the experience of a victim’s suffering. They see the suffering other as an authority, both a weak and strong authority because it is vulnerable and also makes demands. From this perspective, the unjustifiable suffering of the other opens up the ethical and political perspectives of the interhuman.

Moreover, Metz is in accord with Levinas in considering that the primordial relationship between meaningless suffering and death calls into question “our sealed-up identities.” For Metz, the identity of the subject is always threatened and at the same

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547 Johann Baptist Metz “In the Pluralism of Religious and cultural Worlds,” 232.
548 Metz, *Hope against Hope*, 33-34
time opened to full disclosure depending on the position adopted in relation to the other’s death and suffering. Despite that the subject can adopt a mechanism of evasion in relation to responsibility, for Metz, subjectivity is essentially tied to the suppressed or repressed other. From Metz’s perspective, as well as from Levinas’s, it is the death of the other which “radically destabilizes our attempts to find and create meaning in our present.”

In this way, both Levinas and Metz are at odds with the Heideggerian claim that the anticipation of death is a call of the authentic self whose own death offers the authentic meaning of death. On the contrary, because death is the call of the other’s suffering it affects subjectivity and becomes the authority to which we have to respond.

Regarding the relation between suffering and reason, Candace Mac Lean affirms that the former “has the power to direct practical reason, as freedom.” In fact, the autonomy of reason is dialectically anchored here in an act of recognition, the recognition of the authority of those who suffer undeserved and unjustly. In Metz’s view, this recognition protects reason from any instrumentalization or functionalization, and justifies a non-ideological claim of universality because it is able to generate consent in circumstances which are strictly pluralist. Furthermore, in the dialectical nature of Metz’s perspective, the inappropriateness of both the previous hermeneutic explanation and the subsequent discursive strengthening of the authority of those who suffer, is highlighted. If the explanation and discourse were the case, obedience would lead to intellection. On the contrary, the first thing is not to discuss suffering, but to respond to it. In this regard, the encounter with the suffering of others is a "state of exception" that interrupts normal life guided by forgetfulness.

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550 Mac Lean, “Do This in Memory of Me,” 62-3.
Conclusion: Theodicy as a Political Resistance

This chapter showed how the logos of theology and philosophy must be interrupted by the face of the other who speaks from his/her historical experiences of destitution and neglect. In a strikingly similar way Levinas and Metz want to show that everything "about truth," is in its origin an answer to the problem posed by the unjust pain of the victim. Indeed, this makes it clear that memory is a voice crying out, rather than recollection of information about the past. Metz states that the impassivity of the logos has to be substituted by the compassion of memory. For him, remembering and telling (memory and narrative) are Jewish legacies that can be obscured by an ahistorical dualism stemming from the Hellenistic legacy.

From memory, Metz moves towards the theodicy question which he considers central for his political theologizing. However, theodicy is rather an anti-theodicy as long as he considers “blasphemy” any justification for suffering from God’s perspective. Theodicy is a disturbing questioning unto God which allows the dignity of the human against the justificatory tendencies of suffering which philosophy and theology maintain. Metz’s rejection of traditional theodicy is intellectually rooted in Bloch’s philosophy, and existentially stems from the experience of Auschwitz, which is the paradigm of gratuitous suffering. The core of the experience of suffering cannot be integrated into the economy of a time that follows the continuing and sequential order that governs memory in the usual sense. The past of the testimonies is always present, a past that lasts. It has a disturbing and resistant power against all attempts to confirm its convictions, to reach results or to achieve certainties. Therefore, against the appearance of the synchrony that the narrative produces, in trauma we find ourselves in a non-sequential time, in which the present is past and the past is present.
The memory that takes over the memories of the witness of the disaster is a dangerous memory, since the order in which the horror was possible and happened breaks down. This memory disrupts the normal course of time, contradicts progress based on accumulated injustices, claims the right of the possible, of what was not done versus what was finally imposed in history, and denounces what has been constituted, revealing its costs. It is important to note here that the subject constituted by the memory of Auschwitz does not emerge as a totality identical with itself, but as a responsible subject. In fact, after Auschwitz, responsibility for the other is shaped by the needs inherent in suffering. The other's demand upon me emerges out of that desperate condition of suffering. Out of its condition as a victim, the being that expresses itself imposes itself, but does so precisely by appealing to me with its destitution and nudity, without my being able to be deaf to that appeal. To Metz, the response to Auschwitz is political resistance transformed into compassion.

CONCLUSION

This work has been a contribution to the attempt to save victims from the irrelevance to which European philosophy and theology have consigned them. It has also sought to shed light on how philosophy and theology can meet. To do this, the thesis has followed the paths of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas and the theologian Johann
Baptist Metz in articulating three categories intimately linked with each other: reason, time, and theodicy. Levinas and Metz conclude that rationality needs to be saved from its indifference to singularity and contingency by returning to the biblical roots present in western history. From this rationality it would be possible to instantiate a temporality in which suffering interrupts the time of the ideology of progress and the time of the eternal return of the same. Levinas’s messianic time and Metz’s closed time represent an effort to articulate a temporality in which the subject feels compelled to respond because at every moment it is venturing its destiny. Furthermore, the rejection of the intellectual attempt to explain suffering unveils a subject linked to the other by way of ethical and political responsibility.

The individual and the social

Levinas’s ethical responsibility and Metz’s political compassion seek a way through historical injustices and particularly the tragedy of the twentieth century by turning to the margins of history. The pain of the victims of history nurtures Levinas’s ethics and Metz’s political theology. For both thinkers, what is at stake is not just theory but fundamentally a claim about praxis. In spite of each perspective seeming to emphasize one aspect of responsibility (the individual face-to-face in Levinas’s ethics, and the public and social in Metz’s political theology), both Levinas and Metz focus on the concrete historical circumstances of the marginalization of active responsibility. Furthermore, both thinkers see subjectivity as being essentially tied to the other’s suffering and rely on the public meaning of biblical categories.

Levinas’s face-to-face encounter is frequently criticised for an allegedly a-social and therefore a-political approach to the other person. Indeed, in several interviews,
Levinas mentions that political consequences are outside of his philosophical project.\textsuperscript{551} This means, as Robert Bernasconi points out, “[t]hat Levinas lacked a proper recognition of institutions, of politics, of culture and of customs.”\textsuperscript{552} Similarly, Enrique Dussel feels impressed by Levinas’s acknowledgement of the poor and oppressed, but at the same time criticizes Levinas’s incapacity to formulate a positive vision of politics. Dussel focuses on \textit{Totality and Infinity} to underline the opposition Levinas establishes between the ethical and the political.\textsuperscript{553} This, according to Dussel, hinders Levinas’s ability “to articulate a positive architectonic of the mediations in favour of the Other.”\textsuperscript{554} For Levinas, Dussel asserts, “war is nothing but the pure face of politics.”\textsuperscript{555} However, Bernasconi himself convincingly contested this kind of criticism by affirming that Levinas “did not attempt to write an ontology of the social world,” because for him the responsibility for the other and the singular encounter with the other entails from the outset the presence of the “third party” as an inherent aspect of the face-to-face encounter. This is the political scenario, the reality of the community from which the ethical makes sense. In Bernasconi’s estimation

[although] the direction of Levinas’s thought appears always to be in favour of ethics over politics… it is never to the exclusion of the second form, because the terms are not set in opposition to the other. There is no ethics without politics, no desire without need and no saying without said.\textsuperscript{556}

To Bernasconi the transition from the ethical to the political has always already taken place because

\textsuperscript{551} See Levinas and Sudar, “La filosofía,” 70.
\textsuperscript{554} Ibid., 81
\textsuperscript{555} Ibid., 79.
\textsuperscript{556} Bernasconi, “The Third Party,” 86.
we inhabit a world permeated by violence, and so are called to pass judgements, to make decisions, and to take sides. This is because we do not live in a closed society. There is more than one Other in the world. In fact, for Levinas man cannot live in society on the basis of one-to-one responsibility alone. The political order is real and necessary, and in the real world the human being is a political animal. It is worth emphasizing that Levinas, like Metz, is not interested in political theory, but as Ostovich mentions in relation to Metz’s political theology, he is concerned rather with the “principles of social order.”

Furthermore, the concrete reality, meaning the historical and incarnate situations of human beings, is also emphasised by Levinas. Indeed, in the text “Death in the Thought of Ernest Bloch,” Levinas affirms that

I think an event of unlimited responsibility for another is something other than a vocative, a summons of no consequence; it certainly has a historic meaning, it bears witness to our age and marks it… I do think that the unlimited responsibility for another, as enucleation of oneself, could have a translation into history’s concreteness.

What happens in the real world serves as a lynchpin in this interaction between ethics as a face-to-face encounter and politics as social order. It is because the human being is incarnate in a concrete reality that he/she is responsible, and, as Purcell points out, “it is that responsibility that opens on to justice.” In this regard, two complementary aspects need to be emphasized: ethical politics is born in the other’s memory of violence and therefore suffering plays a central role in the conjunction of ethics and politics. In relation to memory, it was clear from the fifth chapter of this thesis that Levinas praised memory as the other’s memory of violence, and not as a subject’s representation. This memory of violence points to a past in which the particularity of this memory is transformed into a

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559 Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 81.
560 Purcell, “Is Theology Fundamental?” 127
responsibility for suffering in the present. To put it in other words, the possibility of facing present suffering in the political community would require opening memory to past suffering. That is, the particular memory of the past opens onto new dimensions of suffering, “onto present violence that is beyond the past of a particular nation.”

To Levinas, the memory of the colonial wars, for instance, contests the aspiration of European consciousness to base peace on Greek truth. We know from the first chapter of this dissertation that this is a truth “of a knowledge where, instead of opposing itself, the diverse agrees with itself and unites; where the stranger is assimilated; where the other is reconciled with the identity of the identical in everyone.” From this perspective, Levinas detects a contradiction between the aspiration of Europe for peace and the historical reality of the attempt of domination that Europe has exercised over the world. For Levinas, the victims of the colonial wars, the so-called savages, contest the centrality of Europe from Europe itself; that is, from the outcomes of a “civilized world.” In fact the modernity of Europe and its “long indifference to the sorrows of an entire world,” probably


does not recognize itself in its millennia of fratricidal, political and bloody struggles, of imperialism, of human hatred and exploitation, up to our century of world wars, genocides, the Holocaust, and terrorism; of unemployment, the continuing poverty of the Third World; of the pitiless doctrines and cruelties of Fascism and National Socialism, up to the supreme paradox where the defence of the human and its rights is inverted into Stalinism.

To Levinas, this is the result of pursuing a peace of closed doors, the peace of the State, which would be a gathering of humans around the same ideal truths. This idea is in line with Totality and Infinity in which Levinas argues that “the peace of empires issued

561 Joseph Rosen, “From Memory beyond Memory to a State beyond State,” in Difficult Justice, 300.
562 Levinas, “Peace and Proximity,” in Peperzak, Critchley, and Bernasconi, Basic Philosophical Writings, 162.
563 Ibid., 163
from wars rests on wars.”

Levinas and Metz blame Plotinus’s Neoplatonic thought for the domination exercised by the thought of the One over philosophy and theology. Politically this means, as Chalier has put it, that “most people have been trying to achieve peace according to a truth that might be shared by human beings in spite of their divergences and their antagonisms.” The problem with this perspective in Chalier’s view is that “it also means it is forgetful of the vulnerability of singular persons, at least it subordinates it to the harmonious order it is supposed to achieve.”

From Levinas perspective, this is the thought of identity which tends to reduce peace to a return of the multiple to unity, and therefore this is “peace as tranquillity and repose.” Historically this ideal is a frustrated hope. Levinas wonders if there is no more urgent a call than that of a truth which is inseparable from technology and from the notion of politics. This urgency is driven by the scandal of the indifference to the cries of the others, of a “project indifferent to wars, murders and suffering.” This scandal entails a peace more urgent than that of truth. Peace of responsibility before suffering and death, and not peace as an exercise of an unfettered freedom in tranquillity and repose, with doors and windows closed before the other, in which everyone, individuals and peoples, are at home and at peace. From this perspective, Levinas deduces “the affirmation and valorisation of particular cultures at all corners of the world.” Metz also sees in the faces of sorrow of the Indios in Latino America, a questioning about the ability of Western civilization to appreciate differences and alterity. Against the Platonic and Plotinian well known dictum that “the similar knows the similar,” Metz underlines that “only what is

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564 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 22.
567 Levinas, “Peace and Proximity,” 162.
568 Levinas, “Peace and Proximity,” 162.
569 Ibid.,
different from (to) each other can know each other from recognition.”

Because Western civilization remains tied to the Plotinian dictum, the so-called underdeveloped, the Latin-American Indios, “bear our civilization badly.”

To Levinas, Hellenic peace is necessary but insufficient to respond to the challenge of living together. This heritage needs to be supplemented by the biblical tradition, which also belongs to the spirit of the West. The essence of Judaeo-Christian spirituality is a peace built through responsibility for the other’s suffering. From the perspective of the other’s suffering, ethical politics needs also to take into account those who are not present, who have died; as Annabel Herzog says, “who are not represented.” Therefore, “the legitimacy of politics should not consist in its relation to its participants but, on the contrary, in its responsibility for its interruption, its holes, its absentees.” A just polity needs Athens, but no less Jerusalem. Thinking of the Europe of 1990, Levinas says, “[i]n the Europe that is being forged, the new concept of the State that looms behind the attempt to supress the borders however limited, what I call this subordination of justice and State to the idea of charity has, to my mind, a place.” For Levinas this means a new politics of peace where politics becomes a search for a communicative cultural and economic relationship through “considering the difficulties and problems of hunger and misery of those who are in front of us.”

Metz shares with Levinas the preoccupation with this unidirectional attachment to a Greek heritage. The Judaeo-Christian tradition, meaning the biblical spirit, is the

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570 Metz, Memoria passionis, 152. Translation mine.
571 Metz, Zum Begriff, 210. Translation mine
573 Ibid, 249. Italicics her.
575 Ibid., 8. Translation mine.
source from which philosophy and theology can overcome idealism and the lack of sensibility for the real world. The real world is political, that is, it is the world of “concrete social circumstances.” Therefore, from Metz’s view philosophy and theology have to face this political world equipped with categories that allow it to take responsibility in relation to the suffering of the world. For both Levinas and Metz, the interaction between the ethical and the political is the responsibility for the other. For both thinkers, politics makes sense as a response to human suffering, and ethics and politics meet each other under the premises of responsibility and compassion due to the ethical authority of the victims of history over the present. The other’s memory of violence is an essential element of ethical responsibility and also makes the interaction between ethics and politics possible. Ethics and politics in Levinas and Metz have to do with the other who suffers, with the victim to whom subjectivity cannot remain indifferent.

Metz uses the adjective new in his political theology to differentiate his perspective from Carl Schmitt’s. While for Schmitt political theology refers to the theological concepts secularized by politics, Met’s political theology is confident in the social and universal meaning of the biblical categories that were fenced off by the Enlightenment in the private conscience of individuals. Schmitt is interested in theology as a model for the absolutization of politics. Metz on the contrary is interested in claiming justice in relation to suffering using the biblical categories of eschatology (time with an end) and memory, which for him belongs to the Western tradition of thinking. This means that theology “must place itself in communication with the prevailing political, social and technical utopias and with the contemporary maturing promises of a universal peace and justice.” Theology is confident in carrying out this communication because the

577 Downey and Metz, Love’s Strategy, 24.
European world is heir to the Judaeo-Christian heritage. In particular, eschatology and memory place the hope of the victims for a universal justice and peace at the centre of the political world. Metz takes sides with Habermas when acknowledging the contribution of religion towards a rational construction of ethics and politics.

The German theologian is, however, at odds with Habermas’s communicative rationality to the extent to which this rationality does not recognize the voices of the marginal in its dialogical proceduralism. According to Metz, this communicative reason is not enough to universalize justice and solidarity. This is because communicative reason only accepts what is metabolizable in a shared rationality and fails to take into account the weak, the victims and those who cannot argue or are not present. Levinas is also concerned that this “logic of the Greeks” founded the possibility for “harmony between men,” but only conditionally: “our interlocutor must agree to speak, and be brought into discourse.”

That is, when facing questions from victims who have suffered unjust violence, consensus or horizontal communication is worth very little; what matters is to respond to their suffering and injustice. The reason of the defeated is a cry, a denunciation, a demand for justice, and its strength comes from the experience of injustice and not from communication or persuasive power. This is the anamnestic rationality, akin to Benjamin’s Eingedenken, that is the memory of the victims (die Leidensgeschichte) rather than the winners. The universality of responsibility arises from this memory and becomes the greatest asset of monotheism. Additionally, as Levinas says,

Monotheism is not an arithmetics of the Divine. It is the perhaps supernatural gift of seeing that one man is absolutely like another man beneath the variety of historical traditions kept alive in each case. It is a school of xenophilia and anti-racism.”

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578 Levinas, Difficult Freedom, 178.
579 Ibid.
The Motivational deficit of Democracy

According to the German legal philosopher Ernest-Wolfgang Böckenförde, the motivational deficit of democracy means that the modern liberal and secularized state lives by assumptions which cannot produce or guarantee themselves.\textsuperscript{580} Metz is convinced that democracy needs to constantly reflect on this basic motivational deficit in modernity and to accept the value of a rationality which is led by the \textit{a priori} of the suffering of others and not by the \textit{a priori} of understanding. To Metz, the \textit{a priori} of suffering guides political discourse in times of uncertainty and becomes the criterion of politics when political proceduralism is insufficient. Furthermore, from Metz’s perspective, there are permanent risks of converting politics into technological administration, which Metz terms “computer-politics,” and of reducing politics to mere decisionism. Political problems cannot be reduced to problems of technical-rational planning. Rather, the process of the rationalization of political action is determined by a horizon of utopic interest which cannot be eliminated by the pragmatism of the decisions for which politics need to take responsibility.

From this line of thinking, Levinas believes that a State that complies with ethical responsibility needs to constantly review its law and its justice. For Levinas, this concern for amelioration is possible in a democratic State in which law requires constant improvement, in which law is constantly questioned and therefore “open to the better.”\textsuperscript{581} In concrete terms, Levinas points out that justice, if the State considered it from the assumption of responsibility for the other, is a justice that, even once the verdict is pronounced, does not prevent charity. Levinas in fact affirms that in a State that complies “with the ethics of which I speak, it is possible to protect or care about who has been

\textsuperscript{581} Robbins and Levinas, \textit{Is it Righteous to Be??} 206
found guilty.”

Behind justice there is therefore an appeal to mercy: in Levinas’s estimation, this appeal shows the necessity for the State not to exclude charity. In Levinas’s words,

> It is very important... that justice flow or issue from the pre-eminence of the other. It is necessary that the institutions required by justice be overseen by charity, from which justice itself issues. The justice that is inseparable from institutions, and thus from politics, risks causing us to misrecognize the face of the other man.

This relation between religion and politics in Metz’s discourse does not lead to a politicization of religion, where religion would operate as a myth of legitimization of the political. To the contrary, Metz sees the modern critique of religion as a possible source of legitimization of a pre-democratic thought of sovereignty, as enemy of the division of powers and as promoter of a political fundamentalism. Metz deals with this risk by placing a universal or universalizing principle based on biblical traditions at the centre of politics: hunger and thirst for justice, justice for all, for the living and for the dead, for the past and present sufferings. In fact, the eschatological promises of the biblical tradition: freedom, peace, and justice, cannot be privatized. On the contrary, they always oblige a social responsibility, that is, a political response. From this perspective, the question of truth and the question of justice are interrelated. The interest in a strictly universal justice belongs to the premise of the search for truth. On this premise, knowledge of the truth has a practical basis. The respect of the others’ suffering is a condition for any political culture.

Two aspects deserve to be underlined in this horizon of utopic interest. The first is the eschatological dimension of politics in which freedom is freed from the dominion of an absolute or totalitarian power. History or the mere political game does not guarantee

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583 Robbins and Levinas, *Is it Righteous to Be?* 223.
the existence of the values of freedom and justice within democracy. For Metz, history is inseparable from the messianic proclamation of the kingdom. This kingdom that contains the promise of the end of time was internalized and spiritualized by understanding its nature as something beyond the present time. To the contrary, as demonstrated in the fourth chapter of this thesis, eschatology for Metz has to do with the present in which the responsibility for the other takes root. From this perspective, the hope of this kingdom is the beginning of the secularization and relativisation of any existing power. The political cannot be understood as a mere tactical exercise of power in society, or as a strategy and technique of the administration of power. This initial emphasis on freedom, first relevant in the works of the late sixties and seventies, leads to the consideration of memory and suffering.

The second aspect that Metz considers in relation to the horizon of utopic interest is memory, which puts at the centre of the political the hopes of the victims. As stated above, the memory of the suffering of others is the cornerstone of political universality. This memory rethinks the relationship between ethics and politics. For Metz, ethical politics is not equality when it is understood in liberal terms as the recognition of equal rights for all. Instead equality should be ethically raised from inequality, that is, from asymmetry. This inequality includes, as Levinas suggests, the dead and the victims of history. For Levinas and Metz, what underlies biblical monotheism is responsibility for the suffering of man. From the Christian perspective, according to Metz, this is the memoria passionis, mortis et resurrectionis Jesu Christi. That is, Christians remember Jesus’ love, whereby the Kingdom of God among men was palpable precisely because, from the outset, domination among men was overcome. By recognizing himself as one of the insignificant, marginalized and oppressed, Metz insists, Jesus announced the coming Kingdom of God as the liberating power of an unreserved love.
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