DISTURBING BOUNDARIES
Developing Jewish Feminist Ethics with Buber, Levinas and Fackenheim

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Abstract

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By applying feminist criticism to the thought of Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas and Emil Fackenheim, this project outlines the ways in which the disciplines of modern Jewish philosophy, feminist theory, and Jewish feminist ethics might be enhanced through a critical encounter with each other. This research has three complimentary objectives: First, to disrupt and challenge the disciplinary and discursive boundaries between modern Jewish thought, feminist ethics and Jewish feminism. Second, to develop the methodological and theoretical frameworks necessary to articulate a systematic feminist critique of modern Jewish philosophical thought. Finally, to develop alternative feminist and Jewish feminist ethical models that will fruitfully benefit from a dialogue with modern Jewish thought. The Jewish feminist ethical models proffered here are mutually grounded in Jewish feminist theory and activism, modern Jewish thought, feminist theory and ethics, and Jewish women's historical and contemporary experiences. Each model is voiced as an imperative and is framed as an example of a principle that is derived from the analysis of one thinker's ethics. The development of Jewish feminist ethics of relationship, alterity, and presence are respectively elicited through an interrogation of the thought of Buber, Levinas and Fackenheim. Although each of the three models is a response to a particular thinker, they are self-referential, interdependent and constructive. They are constructive in two senses. First, from a feminist perspective, although there are real problems with each thinker's ethics, there are also significant opportunities to be located in those ethics. Working towards taking the best advantage of those opportunities, the principles suggested here build on common questions and themes that avail themselves of the resources offered by each of the disciplines that participate in this conversation. Second, because these models are organized through an intentional integration of implicated disciplines and experiences, and result from the effort to pinpoint opportunities for the development of Jewish feminist ethical strategies, these responses necessarily move beyond the scope of the original modern Jewish philosophical texts that generate them.

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To Martin

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

The object of this project is to begin to redraw the relationships between modern Jewish philosophy, feminism and Jewish feminism by critically reflecting on the thought of three modern Jewish philosophers from a feminist perspective. In specifically focusing on the ethical dimensions of each of these disciplines, this analysis strategically targets ethics as the context for this discussion. This project emerges from the acknowledgement of feminism's historical exclusion from the development of mainstream modern Jewish philosophical thought, construes that exclusion as ethically significant, and highlights the need for the reconfiguration of its problematics. By applying feminist criticism to the thought of Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas and Emil Fackenheim, my purpose is not simply to interrogate these thinkers, but to promote the real integration of feminist concerns into modern Jewish philosophical discourses. Because the goal is to not only speak of ethics but to speak ethically, this kind of integration cannot merely rely on mining feminism and Jewish feminism for the methodological and theoretical resources necessary for such a task. It depends on an ethical attentiveness to feminist and Jewish feminist speech. Reciprocal attentiveness involves not only listening to the other but also responding. Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy recognized the transformative potential of response when he summarized, "I respond although I will be changed" (1970:10). As such, the model for this project is dialogical in nature. It is a dialogue that necessarily challenges, disturbs and disrupts boundaries; it also highlights how disturbing those boundaries are. A reciprocal attentiveness on the part of Jewish feminism and feminism is not only ethically indicated, it is pragmatically self-

interested: this project is also motivated by the anticipation that the disciplines of feminist ethics and Jewish feminism would be furthered through a critical encounter with the methods, concerns and insights of modern Jewish thought.

My goal is to voice a feminist response to modern Jewish philosophy, and in doing so, indicate the ways in which such a response can strategically contribute to the development of feminist and Jewish feminist ethics. With few notable exceptions, feminist concerns have inexorably permeated contemporary modern Jewish philosophical discourses. These concerns are reflected in the use of gender inclusive language, some recognition of gendered inequity in secular society, as well as a liberal "feminist-friendly" sensibility that quickly acknowledges *halakhic* (Jewish legal) injustices and inequities. But this sensibility has not resulted in a sustained critique of the essential androcentrism of the canon of modern Jewish philosophy. The problem is that the definition of the canon itself needs to be interrogated. As Michael Berubé argues, "canons are at once the location, the index and the record of the struggle for cultural representation; like any other hegemonic formation, they must be continually reproduced anew and are continually contested"(1992:4-5). Recasting the canon depends on a critical engagement with normative discursive narratives. To date, there has been no sustained feminist critique of modern Jewish philosophy. The apparent mainstreaming of feminist thought in the academy is belied by this important and troubling lacuna. Modern Jewish thought represents Judaism's philosophical and ethical response to modernity. The absence of a feminist critique of this response would seem to indicate that feminism has excluded itself from this dialogue.

What is so striking to me, as a Jewish feminist and as a Jewish philosopher, is that Jewish feminism has largely chosen to exclude itself from engaging in

conversation with modern Jewish philosophy. Why are my best resources for thinking about modern Jewish philosophy from a feminist perspective found in feminist theory and feminist philosophy rather than in Jewish feminism? Why does the term Jewish feminist philosopher (or feminist Jewish philosopher) seem as alien to Jewish feminism as to modern Jewish philosophy? I believe that a meaningful feminist response to modern Jewish philosophy must develop its own concerns, questions and solutions in order to claim an authentic space within this discourse and that this exploration of the disjunction between modern Jewish philosophy and Jewish feminism will result in a critical re-evaluation of the disciplinary boundaries of each discourse.

The engagement of modern Jewish philosophy with feminism is not arbitrary. Both Jewish thought and feminist thought proceed from, and are self-defined by, an original position of alterity. This position is not only epistemological; it is unequivocally ethical. Each discipline begins with the understanding of itself as having been historically imagined and positioned as Other; Jew as Other, Woman as Other. Each must address itself and its constituents within this overarching understanding but must also be able to speak to others outside its own constituency. Both disciplines make their own arguments for this capacity. Emmanuel Levinas for example, speaks of the need to speak in the universal mode —what he calls "Greek." Feminists like Hélène Cixous speak of the need to radically transform society, and the need for men to participate in that transformation. In both cases, what is desirable is that each discipline be able to develop ways of demonstrating, through their engendering principles, that they share common ground with others.

The connection between these two disciplines is not merely a matter of shared moral liberalism where "isms" such as racism, anti-Semitism, sexism,

heterosexism, and/or classism are condemned as multiple forms of the same hatred of the Other. It is a profound recognition of the elemental experience of alterity which structures at the most basic level each discipline's self-identity. This experience which shapes the language in which each must speak, the language of the Other that must assert its otherness even as it protests the unjust consequences of that alterity. It shapes concerns for justice and demands a careful and critical historical understanding of the injustices that arise when a group is targeted as different, inferior or less valuable. Perhaps more importantly, the questions posed by this research begin to respond to the larger question of how an ethical system that emerges from a particular group's interests and experiences (i.e. Judaism or feminism) successfully addresses the needs of that particularity while speaking to a larger audience? How do the engendering principles of such a system move beyond the internal debates into a dialogue with other interested persons?

In sum, this research has three complimentary objectives: First, to disrupt and challenge the disciplinary and discursive boundaries between modern Jewish thought, feminist ethics and Jewish feminism. Second, to develop the methodological and theoretical frameworks necessary to articulate a systematic feminist critique of modern Jewish philosophical thought. Finally, to develop alternative feminist and Jewish feminist ethical models that will fruitfully benefit from a dialogue with modern Jewish thought. In looking to canonical modern Jewish philosophical texts as a source for critical inspiration for the development of feminist and Jewish feminist ethics, this project suggests new movements that heretofore have remained unexplored.

The purpose of this introduction is to provide an overview of my theoretical and methodological framework and approach, as well as to provide the historical

and intellectual context for this project. I will first outline my methodological model, explaining the parameters of the project as well as detailing some of the key questions that this project will address. In order to clarify this project's context, I first discuss feminist theory's impact on philosophy in order to provide a background for the general ways in which feminist thought has impacted western philosophy. I then review some of the major thinkers and dominant themes in feminist ethics to illustrate where the specific discipline of feminist ethics is salient to a feminist critique of modern Jewish thought. My intent here is to broadly but concisely map out a selection of the major features and areas of feminist ethics in order to highlight and preview some of the influential thinkers and ethical models that are central to this endeavour. I then briefly examine some of the ways in which modern Jewish thought has been characterized and assess the impact of feminist thought on that discipline. Finally I offer some explanations for why Jewish feminist scholarship has historically failed to engage modern Jewish philosophy.

• METHOD •

This project is framed as an interdisciplinary conversation in which each discipline—modern Jewish philosophy, feminist theory and Jewish feminism—is asked to take up a critical position in relation to the others. I contend that taking up a critical position in relation to another discipline will be most insightful when that relation is explicit. I introduce the possibility of entering into critical relationship by first juxtaposing disciplinary discourses; identifying common ground as well as questions and concerns that are not shared. In this sense, the project is critically comparative in its method. However it goes beyond typical notions of a critical

comparison in allowing each discipline to interrogate the other. The primary direction of this questioning is oriented towards modern Jewish thought. Using intertextual techniques of reading feminist and Jewish feminist texts with and against the grain of modern Jewish philosophical texts, this encounter results in interrupting the claims of each. Intertext most commonly refers to the deconstructionist model of how context complicates and even deligitimates textual interpretation. By presenting a different discipline's text as an intertext, and one that is not already implicated in the primary text, I am enunciating an alternative context for reading the original text. More radically, this approach allows for the destabilization of the *intertexts'* narrative and context. This provocative method is uniquely effective in accomplishing the three complementary goals of this project announced above, namely to disturb and redraw disciplinary boundaries, to transform Jewish philosophical discourses, and finally to construct new feminist and Jewish feminist ethical models.

The choice of engaging modern Jewish philosophy with feminism as a basis for this project of developing feminist and Jewish feminist ethics is strategic. Feminist ethics have not adequately examined the resources of modern Jewish thought as an opportunity for the development of feminist ethics. If we think of feminism as representing a set of theoretical and methodological positions that concern themselves with issues relating to gendered forms of injustice and systems of dominance, we can see that feminism shares many common concerns with modern Jewish philosophy. When these disciplines are mutually engaged, their respective disciplinary questions have the potential to disrupt the other's theoretical and methodological assumptions and complicate and deepen the questions asked. For example, anti-Semitism is one of the topics that are addressed by modern

Jewish philosophy. Anti-Semitism is explored for a variety of reasons, including: its influence in Western philosophical views of Judaism, its role in the historical development of the conditions which permitted the Holocaust to happen, its links to anti-Judaism in terms of the theological root causes of the Holocaust, its impact *vis a vis* the abnormality of the Jewish context as part of certain Zionist arguments for the need for the normalization of the Jewish context and a Jewish state, and more universally, its place in modern and post-modern elaborations of ethics and social justice. For similar but distinct reasons, the question of anti-Semitism is one that is significant for feminist ethics. It is in fact a case study for providing insight into the dynamics of alterity; how prejudices function descriptively and prescriptively to create, define and perpetuate Otherness. One of the ways that Jewish feminists can additionally contribute to this analysis is by identifying the ways in which gender, both within and outside the Jewish tradition, is linked with anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitic tropes which appeal to both misogynistic and anti-Semitic impulses, such as the "ghetto girl" of the 1930s, the "Jewish mother," or the "Jewish American Princess," highlight the ways in which anti-Semitism and sexism jointly and severally depend upon or subvert both Jewish and non-Jewish cultural values, structures and processes. When feminism and Jewish feminism listen attentively to the questions posed by modern Jewish philosophy, each must hear that modern Jewish philosophy represents an intriguing correlate to the ethical problems of alterity, violence, marginalization, and particularism which feminism must address.

Defining the Parameters of the Project

This project is aimed at reframing disciplinary boundaries. Its scope is pragmatically limited to engagement with a select number of influential thinkers. In outlining the parameters of this research, it immediately became clear that if this project was to effectively challenge disciplinary boundaries it had to be based on choosing voices that were representative of the historical development and contemporary debates within each discipline. Identifying the most appropriate modern Jewish philosophers for this purpose required that I consider how modern Jewish philosophy defines itself as a discipline in relation to other disciplines. Although I will shortly discuss in more detail the (often contested) definitions of modern Jewish philosophy, at this point it is useful to provide an explanatory overview of this discipline in order justify my methodological choices. Generally beginning during the Enlightenment with Moses Mendelssohn, modern Jewish philosophy represents the Jewish intellectual engagement with modernity and modern thought. Modern Jewish philosophy is not merely a philosophical sub-discipline or particular parochial version of modern thought. Its specific questions and concerns accord it with its own disciplinary independence. This definition of modern Jewish philosophy, which is by no means universal, explicitly announces that the methods and questions posed by modern Jewish philosophy are significant to, and critically participates in, modern thought itself.

In choosing Buber, Levinas and Fackenheim as the targets of my analysis, I consciously identified thinkers who have contributed influential works to the modern Jewish philosophical canon, and who have explicitly seen their own work as both speaking to modern Jewish philosophy and modern thought. Individually and

collectively, each continues to shape the future direction of modern Jewish philosophy. While other thinkers such as Leo Baeck, Eugene Borowitz, Hermann Cohen, Irving Greenberg, Abraham Heschel, Mordecai Kaplan, Moses Mendelssohn, Franz Rosenzweig, Richard Rubenstein, Joseph Soleveitchik, and others have also contributed influential works, Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas and Emil Fackenheim quickly emerged as the most appropriate candidates for developing this conversation. In addition to their highly influential position within modern Jewish philosophy and the ways in which their lives and work illustrates key themes and experiences that have shaped modern Jewish philosophical discourses, my primary reason for working with this triad of philosophers is pragmatic—these are the thinkers, who, because of their methods, questions, or conclusions, are most amenable to a feminist engagement with their thought. They are the most promising prospects for initiating a conversation that has to potential to effect disciplinary transformations and are those who are most likely to provide strategic resources for developing feminist and Jewish feminist ethics.

Although these claims will be justified and explored in greater detail throughout this project, some general preliminary statements can be made. First and foremost, these three thinkers are the ones that have elicited my interest in engaging their work from a feminist ethical perspective. Each of these thinkers has an important ethical dimension to their thought. Each thinker explores the relationship between Jewish thought and ethics. Each thinker speaks to questions of interpersonal and communal ethical relationships. Their ethical accounts distinctively resonate with, and are sometimes dissonant with feminist analyses of the structure and meaning of obligation to the other, power dynamics in relations with vulnerable others, the connection between violence, oppression and totalitarian

thinking, the nature of communal justice and injustice, the ethical implications of historical memory, and the constitution of subjectivity. Secondly, these thinkers also represent a range of experiences and interests that span the continuum of modern Jewish philosophy. In terms of biographical experiences these three voices speak from North America, Europe and Israel. They speak before and after the Holocaust. They each, to a greater or lesser extent, explore the recurring themes of modern Jewish thought, reflecting on the Jewish encounter with modernity, the meaning and nature of ethical relationship, the role of Torah, religious law and tradition in Jewish thought, the relationship of Jewish thought to the western philosophical canon, and the impact of the Holocaust. Thirdly, the influence of these thinkers extends beyond modern Jewish philosophy itself. Each illustrates the relevance and significance of modern Jewish philosophical questions and methods. Buber's writings have occasioned an extensive body of secondary literature among Jewish and non-Jewish scholars who continue to respond to his thought. Since Levinas first introduced Husserl's phenomenology to Sartre, Levinas has slowly emerged as one of the most important figures in French intellectual circles, continental philosophy and post-modern thought. Fackenheim's impact on post-Holocaust thought is considerable. His central claims have permeated popular discourses about the Holocaust, contributed to framing Christian-Jewish post-Holocaust dialogue, and has provided a model for post-Holocaust thought that continues to provoke debate.

Key Questions

In order to develop and apply a systematic feminist critique to each thinker's ethics, my approach requires two major movements. First, to examine each philosopher's

ethical thought in terms of the problems or obstacles it poses for a feminist reading of their work. Second, to strategically identify those strengths and opportunities for the development of feminist and Jewish feminist ethics. The works of these thinkers are examined in light of their ability to provide key philosophical and ethical principles that address such issues as power, violence and injustice. Key areas which will be examined include: any overt references to gender and/or women, responses to, or lack of responses to feminism, the place of power, violence and injustice in their thought, the ethics of interpersonal relationships, and their understanding of the ethical implications of history and memory. In the interest of developing new feminist and Jewish feminist ethics, the final chapters will entail the identification of the strengths of each philosopher's thought as important and unique starting points for the development of alternative ethical approaches and models.

Several key questions structure this project. Many of these questions proceed from common feminist critiques of western philosophy and of the Jewish tradition. Others are developed in light of Jewish feminist thought and feminist theory. Basic to this project will be the question of how gender is rehearsed, performed and constructed in these texts. Before I can begin to apply a feminist critique to their thought it is necessary to provide a context for such inquiries. This is accomplished by surveying each thinker's ethical thought. Once an overview is established, we need to know what a particular thinker says about women. All of the thinkers considered in this project have something, even if sometimes very little, to say about women. More often than not, western philosophy has excluded women from its purview or, consciously or unconsciously, philosophized *about* women as object. How do these philosophers exhibit the influence of cultural narratives about women?

Gendered narratives take the form of different types of discursive practices: images of women, metaphors of woman, signifiers of the feminine, and real women.

Gendered cultural stereotypes are particularly problematic in that they are not only distortively descriptive; they are inevitably prescriptive. Even cultural stereotypes that overtly appear to be positive are, in many ways, as problematic as those that are negative. The articulation of the feminine as modest, domestic and private, as in the case of Levinas' thought, and even the romantic image of woman as wife in Buber's thought, are clearly presented as valuations of the feminine and the female. In exploring the implications of these images in each particular thinker's thought, it will become clear that there is sometimes a profound cost to these valuations.

If these thinkers appeal to western philosophical and cultural stereotypes, are they identical to those found in the Jewish tradition? Do they reify or problematize western and/or Jewish masculinist tendencies? Can we distinguish whether or not their view of women is specifically entering their thought through their engagement with Jewish culture? Deconstructing the effects of the refraction of gender through Jewish cultural discourses within the specific works of Buber, Levinas and Fackenheim is particularly urgent for Jewish feminists who are already struggling with this gendered genealogy. As such, the "Jewishness" of gender in these thinkers' works will closely correlate with the problems or opportunities that will confront a Jewish feminist attempt to generate ethical models in response to their thought.

Another gendered pattern that will influence the shape of feminist and Jewish feminist responses to these philosopher's works will be in terms of the absence, trivialization, or demonization of the body. Western philosophy has

consistently and cumulatively devalued bodies, and particularly women's bodies, throughout its history. Negative accounts of the body in philosophical thought often correlate closely with some of the most pernicious accounts of women and gender in philosophical discourses and often are accompanied by anti-sexual and ascetic rhetoric. Jewish accounts of the body are markedly different. Whereas there is certainly a tremendous amount of anxiety about uncontrolled bodies in general, and female bodies in particular, the Jewish tradition is much more likely to value the body *and* sexuality within the controlling context of marriage. From a feminist ethical perspective, bodies are the "very 'stuff' of subjectivity," to use Elizabeth Grosz's phrase in arguing for bringing together historical concreteness of specific bodies with the biological physicality of the body in feminist theory (1995:19). In the case of Buber and Levinas, their respective ability to place the body within the purview of their phenomenological descriptions and philosophical analysis will have significant ramifications for whether they will become mired in, or be able to elude, conventional western narratives about women and sexuality.

It may be that a philosopher does not explicitly discuss women and instead women are subsumed within the larger category of human beings. Whether or not a thinker specifies the inclusion of women, when the thinker is describing ethical agency, can that agency be fully ascribed to women? Or, following Luce Irigaray's arguments, should that agency be conceived of differently (1992:3)? In her influential essay, "Ethics and the Feminine," Catherine Chalier charges that Levinas' understanding of the feminine's relationship to ethics excludes the feminine (and she notes he often says "the woman") from the ethical dimension (1991:123). This essential problem is one of the most important obstacles to the feminist appropriation of his thought. While this will be discussed further in the

chapter on Levinas, the question of how a philosopher includes or excludes women from ethical agency is key.

From a feminist point of view, one of the most important questions which must be posed is whether or not a thinker's ethical model can provide an account of the multiplicity of ethical relationships which can in turn address specific concerns in terms of the marginalization or victimization of particular groups. In theory, modern Jewish philosophy, as a philosophical response to modernity generated by an all too often victimized minority (i.e. Jews), should provide ethical accounts that are congruent with such feminist interests. The question then will be whether these modern Jewish philosophical accounts are sufficiently comprehensive, or to transpose Clifford Geertz's anthropological terminology, sufficiently "thick," to adequately address feminist concerns (Geertz, 1973:3-30).

In terms of Jewish tradition and culture, it is important to question whether the thinker uses gendered or androcentric language which reifies traditional Jewish stereotypes about gender. Does the thinker have a critical relationship with Jewish law, particularly in light of negative images of women, suspicion about sexuality, and/or the silencing or marginalization of women? Does the thinker have a critical relationship to Jewish scripture and theology? Does the thinker replicate the Jewish tradition's anxiety about female sexuality? Does the thinker address the problem of the overwhelmingly normatively masculine model of Jewish communal relationship with God? The importance of these kinds of thinking should not be underestimated. Plaskow argues in her essay "The Right Question is Theological" that

> Our legal disabilities are a symptom of a pattern of projection that
> lies deep within Jewish thinking. They express and reflect a

> fundamental stance toward women that must be confronted,
> addressed and rooted out at its core. (1983:226)

Although Plaskow is talking about theological thinking, she uses the broader term "Jewish thinking" here. The inclusiveness of this term is important because it expresses the intradiological nature of the Jewish tradition. When I target my investigation within modern Jewish philosophy I am inevitably drawn into a broader Jewish discourse; that which includes scriptural and talmudic sources as well as contemporary *responsa* (rabbinic responses to legal questions) and popular interpretations of those traditional sources. How a thinker engages that tradition's "core stance" towards women will have important consequences for this project.

These general questions about each thinker's thought fleshes out the problems posed by the development of feminist and Jewish ethics based on their thought. These questions also highlight the congruencies between feminist concerns and an individual thinker's ethical model. Additionally, they reveal pressure points at the intersections between feminism, philosophy, ethics, and Jewish thought and tradition. Because this project involves the engagement of these disciplines with each other, it will be helpful at this juncture to explore the intersections and interconnections between each discipline by focusing on certain key interdisciplinary and intradisciplinary relationships.

• LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR A CONVERSATION •

A foundation must be laid for the three-way conversation between modern Jewish philosophy, feminist thought and Jewish feminism that frames this project. My approach is analogous to the model proposed by Hava Tirosh-Rothchild in her essay "Dare to Know': Feminism and the Discipline of Jewish Philosophy." Tirosh-

Rothchild's ultimate goal is "to engage in a critical dialogue both to broaden the scope of Jewish philosophy and to help feminism (and especially Jewish feminism) avoid the trap of militant dogmatism" (1994:85). While this is an important first step, I believe that the logical consequence of such an argument is the understanding that maintaining rigid boundaries between these disciplines is not only inappropriate but is detrimental to each discipline's future development. My goal in using this model of interdisciplinary conversation is to advance my argument that modern Jewish philosophy and Jewish feminism must mutually engage each other, and most importantly, must be transformed by that engagement if they are to develop. In order to do so I must expand the grounds proposed by Tirosh-Rothchild and complicate her accounts of the disciplines of modern Jewish thought and feminism. I must first introduce feminism's engagement with philosophy. Second, outline the context in which feminist ethics emerge and outline the theoretical and methodological assumptions that frame feminist philosophical discourses. Third, outline the areas of feminist ethics that are relevant to this conversation. Fourth, suggest an explanation for feminism's limited impact on modern Jewish philosophy. Fifth, propose an explanation for Jewish feminism's inattention to modern Jewish philosophy, and finally highlight the common interests of each discipline. At each point, I will outline the implications for developing a dialogue between feminism and modern Jewish philosophy.

Feminism and Philosophy

> We can't even agree on what a 'Feminist' is, never mind what she
> would believe in and how she defines the principles that constitute
> honour among us. In key with the American capitalist obsession for
> individualism and anything goes so long as it gets you what you want,
> Feminism in America has come to mean anything you like, honey.
> There are as many definitions of Feminism as there are feminists,
> some of my sisters say, with a chuckle. I don't think it's funny.
> (1983:11)

The frustration Carmen Vasquez expressed in the above quotation is perhaps an odd place to begin a discussion of feminism and philosophy. In order to discuss the relationship between feminism and philosophy one would think that one would be able to define precisely what feminism is. In the last twenty years, Vasquez has been quoted again and again simply because a comprehensive definition of feminism is not possible. As I will show in my survey of feminist ethics, feminism has developed in sometimes divergent directions. Despite the variety of feminisms, it is possible to speak about common themes within feminism (and feminist philosophy) but one must speak in terms of the most general common denominators. For this reason I use bell hooks overarching definition of feminism as a "movement to end sexist oppression" (1997) as a starting point for my analysis. This definition will ultimately be insufficient to characterize the "principles that constitute honour" among feminists but it minimally reflects the historical development of those sometimes diverse principles.

If sexist oppression takes place within systems of dominance as bell hooks suggest, then the feminist encounter with philosophy begins with an evaluation of how philosophical discourses have contributed to prescribing and reifying those systems of dominance. In the opening of the "First Notebook" in *Hipparchia's*

Choice: An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy, Etc, French feminist Michèle

Le Doeuff muses:

> The desire to see philosophy continue: this is something that
> preoccupies us all. Yet have we thought ill enough of this discipline
> that we love? I do not exclude myself. On occasion I have maintained
> that this discourse which claims to understand everything better than
> any other is a mode of phantasmagorical hegemony; all the same, in it
> I saw my road to freedom. (1991:1)

Le Doeuff's struggle to balance the hope that philosophy is the road to freedom with

the recognition that western philosophy is deeply flawed, is one that many feminist

philosophers share. The history of western philosophy has not been kind to women.

Women have been excluded from the ranks of great philosophers. That exclusion

and the need for a reformulation of the canon can be understood broadly as

resulting from asymmetrical power relations in the construction of the canon, but

more pointedly, as Michael Berubé suggests the canon itself reflects "the struggle

for cultural representation" (1992:4-5). From the pre-Socratic philosophers, through

the medieval period and the Enlightenment, and well into the modern period,

western philosophy has consistently and cumulatively devalued women through its

overwhelmingly negative explicit statements and implicit assumptions about

women's nature and their intellectual and spiritual capacity. Alternately

demonizing women by characterizing them as misbegotten men incapable of

intellectual rigor or by romanticizing their emotional, gentle and domestic natures,

western philosophy has described and prescribed woman as radically Other. We

need to think about how the exclusion of female philosophers from this canon, and

the inscription of women as objects of philosophical inquiry, both speak of cultural

practices that have profound ethical significance.

Feminist responses to these problems of omission and misogyny have been

threefold: First, to reject philosophy as a misogynistic and hopelessly flawed

androcentric endeavour (e.g. Gatens' discussion of Solanas; 1992). Second, to argue for a feminist revision and reconstruction of the philosophical canon to include historical examples of female philosophers (e.g. Waithe, 1987; 1989; 1991). Third, to argue that although the content of philosophical discourses have been misogynistic, the philosophical models and modes of argument offered by philosophy were themselves gender-neutral and sound. As such, they can and should be reworked and appropriated by feminist philosophers. (e.g. Seigfried, 1996; Baier 1993; Homiak, 1993). While the first approach, or rather non-approach, is not helpful for the development of feminist philosophical thought in that it regards such a project as illegitimate, the second and third approaches have resulted in important contributions to feminist philosophy.

The second reconstructive approach reveals many of the tensions between feminist theory and philosophy. Such an approach identifies female philosophers in the revision of the philosophical canon. However, most of these newly identified philosophers did not write in a feminist or even feminine voice. Their contributions model, sometimes with as much intrinsic misogyny, the philosophical interests of their male counterparts. This is unsurprising when we consider contemporary feminist arguments about the difficulty of deconstructing female identity from male narratives about woman. More significantly, as Mary Warnock remarks in her introduction to *Women Philosophers*, "In the end, I have not found any clear 'voice' shared by women philosophers"(1996:xlvii). The second approach of expanding or revising the philosophical canon does address the problem of omission, however it does little to solve the problem of misogyny *or* androcentrism in the overwhelming body of "Great Works" which traditionally constitute the western philosophical canon. Androcentrism is the more insidious problem if one argues that the issue is

how women become the object of the male philosophical gaze and we don't have a historical example of an alternative female point of view. From the point of view of reconstructing the canon we must ask, what precisely is being reconstructed?

The third essentially additive approach of appropriating and sanitizing different philosophical models has undoubtedly resulted in significant contributions to feminist philosophy, however it begs the question of whether or not such philosophical systems and the assumptions they reflect are in fact gender neutral. This third response is often inadequate for those feminists who are suspicious of claims of gender neutrality. Their answer is that the systems and assumptions of western philosophy are androcentric and such systems can never be gender neutral, they are inevitably gendered. As Tirosh-Rothchild argues, "Seeking universality, philosophers have disregarded the particular circumstances of the knower, such as religion, ethnicity, political affiliation, and of course, sex and gender" (1994:87). Once one acknowledges that these circumstances are gendered, the next logical step is the recognition that gender has been historically constructed as a relational and hierarchical category. Where there is gender there is a hierarchy of values that result in the valuation of male/masculine and a devaluation of female/feminine.

> By self-consciously demonstrating that any philosophical paradigm is not neutral, these feminists make themselves, both as philosophers and as women, visible. By making themselves visible, they in turn throw into question the legitimacy of claims and assumptions in philosophy that have been taken as axiomatic. In so far as this approach questions the very foundation and status of philosophy it also reveals the investments and concerns of philosophy. It does this by demonstrating not only what is excluded from a particular philosophy but also why it is crucial, for the very existence of that philosophy, to exclude it. (Gatens, 1992:193)

From this point of view, western philosophy has indulged itself as an irredeemably androcentric hegemony which excluded women from its purview even as it claimed to describe the universal human condition.

Yet for those who choose to see the relationship between philosophy and feminism as something other than disjunctive, this history requires not rejection or a mere translation of philosophy but an evolution whereby philosophy must reframe itself as consciously targeting the distortions occasioned by gendered subject / object positions as both salient and illuminating. Such a project necessarily begins with a critical reading of the traditional canon. It certainly cannot accept the conclusions of the first approach whereby the canon is rejected as irredeemably androcentric. In her Preface to *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas*, it is unsurprising that Tina Chanter cites Berubé's formulation of the process of canon development when she asks rhetorically:

> Are we to dispense with the notion of a tradition of excellence
> embodied in a canon of authorized texts? Or rather than abandon the
> whole idea of canon, do we instead encourage a reconstruction of a
> canon of those texts that inform a common culture?(2001:xv)

Indeed Chanter's point is well taken, these canonical texts do inform a common culture and our culture is invested in these texts. That investiture must be rendered visible. A feminist engagement with philosophy that restricts itself to the additive third approach of appropriating and sanitizing a given thinker's thought renders that cultural and intellectual investiture invisible. Such an approach involves addressing the traditional canon in a new way. However, in order to fully appreciate the ramifications of that investiture, feminist philosophical responses need to begin with a reformulation of philosophy itself and this task is logically prior to a transformation of the philosophical canon. This priority must be established because the result of such a reformulation affects not only the metaphilosophical questions asked, but also a redrawing and reconfiguration of the relationships between the various philosophical disciplines (c.f. Alcoff, 2000). That being said, it is clear that in subjecting the canon to feminist critique, we are learning more about

how philosophy is gendered at its most basic structural levels. Feminists must therefore constantly return to these foundational questions as they move through canonical critiques and develop new philosophical discursive strategies that will not only benefit feminist thought, but also announce a corrective for philosophical thought in general.

Reflecting on how feminist thinkers have engaged western philosophy is extremely helpful in beginning to think about how feminist thought can enter into dialogue with modern Jewish philosophy. What feminist approaches will be fruitful? What methods and questions will effect a profound transformation of modern Jewish philosophy that would be commensurate with feminism's impact on other disciplines?

Like Le Doeuff, I begin with a commitment to the project of modern Jewish philosophy and a desire to see it continue. As I presented my research at conferences this commitment generated the most challenges. These challenges took precisely the form of the first two feminist responses[1] to philosophy: If modern Jewish philosophy is at best androcentric, and at worst patriarchal and misogynistic, why be committed to modern Jewish philosophy at all? In short, reject it. More pointedly, in light of Audre Lorde's now famous challenge that "the Master's tools will never dismantle the Master's house" (2001:112), how can these male thinkers, who I will demonstrate absolutely exhibit androcentrism in their thought, provide the methodological and theoretical tools to contribute to the

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[1] Interestingly no one has ever suggested the third, "sanitizing" approach, for me to apply to a modern Jewish philosopher. Perhaps this is because most of my work has been on Levinas whose description of the feminine Other is so central to his thought that one could not excise it without doing violence to this ethics. But many apologists for Levinas' use of gender respond to feminist critiques by arguing that feminists overstate the case, that Levinas' description of the feminine Other is phenomenological rather than prescriptive or ontological and thus his ethics are in effect, "gender neutral."

development of feminist and Jewish feminist ethics? Why not look to other areas of Jewish life and thought for resources for Jewish feminist ethics? Or, alternately, expand the philosophical canon to include other voices who have "done" philosophy—Judith Plaskow or Rachel Adler for example. While I am sympathetic to the second response and agree that it is necessary to expand the canon to acknowledge these thinkers existing contribution, and believe that the discourse is inevitably evolving to include such thinkers already, I cannot accept the rejection of the resources of modern Jewish philosophy itself. Minimally, I must argue that there is simply too much that is worthy and compelling within modern Jewish philosophy to dismiss it outright. More importantly, and more difficultly, although some argue that modern Jewish philosophy is not significantly relevant to modern Jewish life, I argue that modern Jewish philosophy is our intellectual legacy as modern Jews. Jewish feminists should no more cede our right to participate in and contribute to that legacy than we should withdraw from synagogue or yeshiva or *Bet Din* (Jewish court of law).

Feminist Ethics

Because this project is particularly interested in ethical questions, it is helpful at this point to turn to feminist ethics and investigate what forms and concerns feminist ethics might contribute to a dialogue with modern Jewish philosophy. Feminist ethics significantly differs on metaethical grounds from mainstream ethics. Feminist ethics begin with specifically feminist questions about the place of women in philosophical, political and social discourses. As an outgrowth of feminist theory and feminist praxis, feminist ethics is still only beginning to make inroads

into mainstream philosophical discourses. Feminist ethics question the consequences of androcentric and often misogynistic tendencies within popular and academic discourses while it explores alternative modes and models of thinking and being in relationship to others. As Carol S. Robb notes in her "Framework for Feminist Ethics," the tendency within feminist ethics to begin with a reflection upon concrete historical experiences in the definition of ethical problematics allows feminists to unmask dominant ideologies.

> For until the dominant ideology of a social structure can be exposed as manufactured instead of natural, the terms of an ethical problem will tend to reflect assumptions which support a dominant ideology. For this reason, the act of defining a problem is a political act; it is an exercise of power to have accepted one's terms of a problem. (1985:213)

In targeting gender as a primary subject and category of moral argument, feminist ethics often extends beyond gender to examine other categories (such as class, race and sexual orientation for example) that pose similar, interdependent and intradependent problematics within and between ethical discourses. Feminist ethics identify these categories as disclosing and illustrating the criteria for evaluating moral theories and systems. By introducing these types of criteria, feminist ethics inevitably reframe other philosophical discourses because moral theory is intrinsically connected with these other modes of philosophical thought. Epistemology, ontology, linguistic theory, hermeneutics, and political theory are only a few of the areas that are challenged by the questions posed by feminist theory and particularly feminist ethics.

The roots of feminist ethics (and feminism) can be found in Enlightenment thought and in the particular history of the women's movement. Questions about morality and gender (or morality and sex) can be found in the formative writings of 18th and 19th century thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Elizabeth Cady

Stanton, Catherine Beecher, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Harriet Taylor Mill and John Stuart Mill. Such thinkers questioned whether men's and women's moral capacity and forms of morality are the same, whether women have a specific "moral nature," whether there are different types of virtue for men and women (and whether men's or women's virtue was superior), whether such differences were "natural" or learned, and whether morality was affective, psychological or intellectual.

Since these beginnings, the variety of forms and approaches taken by feminist ethics reflect the diversity within feminism itself. Many feminist ethical approaches have their roots in different feminist ideologies, including radical feminism, liberal feminism, Marxist-Leninist and materialist feminism, socialist feminism, lesbian feminism, maternal feminism, existentialist feminism, psychoanalytic feminism, post-modern feminism and different developments within feminist critiques of particular religious traditions. Of these and other types of feminism, many (although not all) can be understood as participating in the broader category of feminist social ethics. Carol S. Robb persuasively argues that the particular interpretations of root causes of oppression used in differing social ethics approaches tend to reflect the ideological frameworks from which they emerge and further inform the methodological approaches used. Thus root causes of oppression can be understood as at least one significant ordering principle in the development of feminist social ethics. These root causes have "a direct bearing on the way we pose problems, gather data, commit our loyalties, rank values, engage in moral reasoning, justify claims, structure autonomy, and heighten motivation" (1985:231). With this political understanding of women's experience, feminist ethics attempt to critically deconstruct this dynamic and seeks to struggle against and eliminate the

subordination, oppression and marginalization of women such that women's full humanity is affirmed.[2]

Feminine and Maternal Ethics: Gilligan, Ruddick and Held

The Ethics of Care: CAROL GILLIGAN

Feminine ethics builds on the historical questions and assumptions about women's morality posed by 18th and 19th century thought in conjunction with liberal feminist theory and feminist critiques of traditional western philosophical ethics as androcentric. Locating *feminine* ethics in relationship to *feminist* ethics is problematic. On the one hand, feminine ethics can be understood as a branch of feminist ethics. However, many contemporary feminist thinkers distinguish between feminine and feminist ethics. Most feminine ethics are based on the idea of difference with the crucial critical assumption: that women are not accounted for in mainstream ethical theory because women are in some fundamental way *different* from men. Whether that difference is socially or biologically constructed is not at issue yet. In this mode of thinking about feminist ethics the essential point is *difference* and as such is often characterized as *difference feminism*. Difference feminism is characteristically contrasted with liberal feminism that asserts that differences between men and women are irrelevant or can be transcended through women's liberation and the transformation of patriarchal society into egalitarian society. The basic perspective of this position is that the oppression, subordination and marginalization of women evident in patriarchal societies is absolutely ethically untenable and feminism's project is to promote the equality of women. Feminine

ethics acknowledges the oppression of women in society but views this state of affairs as resulting from a combination of the preponderance of androcentric modes of moral reasoning and the corresponding devaluation of feminine or woman centred moral reasoning.

Feminine ethics base their ethical theories and principles on the assumption that women, as women, proceed from a different moral orientation than men do. This feminine moral orientation informs the ways in which women define moral problematics, confront moral problems, and argue for moral positions in a way that is distinctly different from men. The source or cause of this gendered moral orientation is not universally agreed upon. Some thinkers argue that the feminine moral orientation is socially constructed, others argue that there is a psychological basis for this difference, others contend that this difference is a product of women's biological experiences such as childbearing and mothering, still others argue that each of these factors contribute in greater or lesser ways to this difference.[3]

The distinction between feminine and feminist ethics is problematic. Feminine ethics are certainly evident in feminist ethics, but are all feminine ethics feminist? Even if we put aside certain feminist arguments which contend that if one does not agree with a particular advanced feminist principle one is not a feminist but a collaborator (c.f. Cornell's discussion of MacKinnon's view on pornography, 1995:82), we are still left with the problem that there is a strong tradition in western moral theory which asserts that women do have a different moral

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[2] I am indebted to Rosemary Radford Ruether's formulation of feminist goals in this instance. Ruether uses the concept "full humanity of women" in her articulation of feminist theology. cf. Ruether, 1983:18.

[3] While some theorists distinguish between feminine and feminist ethics, there is also an emphasis on difference in the distinction between difference feminism and liberal feminism. These two ways of categorizing feminist ethics are similar yet significantly different and should not be confused.

orientation which is seen as inferior to men's moral orientation (c.f. Osborne's discussion of Aquinas, Rousseau, Kant and Nietzsche, 1979). However, it is not the bare insistence that women have a different moral orientation than men do which would constitute inclusion in feminine ethics. Feminine ethics cannot accept that women's moral orientation is in any way inferior to men's moral orientation. Rather, feminine ethics insist that women's moral agency is at least as morally viable as men's and some argue that women's moral orientation is superior.

Carol Gilligan's care perspective is one of the most frequently cited theories in feminist ethics. While Gilligan's work is most useful for feminine ethics, Gilligan's research and critical analysis of her data is considered to be sufficiently significant that virtually all feminist ethics must respond to her work. Using Lawrence Kohlberg and Jean Piaget's developmental studies, Gilligan focused on how women's ethical orientation differed significantly from men's ethical orientation. Like the ambiguous figure of gestalt therapy, ethical situations can be framed in different ways through different perspectives. Using empirical studies of moral development Gilligan observes that justice and care form the two basic ethical orientations towards a situation/problem. Gilligan argues that like the gestalt image it is only possible to use one perspective at a time. Gilligan contends that the care or justice orientation is gender linked and that women most often exhibit the care orientation. While the justice orientation judges moral dilemmas in terms of standards of equality or equal respect, with the self existing against a background of social relationships, the care orientation makes relationship and mutuality the prior standard of moral decision making.

> As a framework for moral decision, care is grounded in the
> assumption that self and other are interdependent, an assumption

> reflected in a view of action as responsive and, therefore, as arising
> in relationship. (1987:24)

As such, the language and arguments used to explain moral decision-making is distinct in each orientation. While the justice orientation is likely to use rights language and arguments appealing to justice principles, the care orientation's language and argumentation is likely to appeal to principles of mutuality and relationship. Gilligan is at pains to point out that the justice orientation does include a care dimension as in the case where the principle of mercy is used to override justice considerations. Also, it is clear that while there is a strong tendency for women to have a care perspective and men to have a justice perspective, both genders are likely to use language and arguments of both orientations as supporting arguments.[4] Further, the link between gender and orientation is one of statistical probability, women may have justice orientations and men may have care orientations even though women exhibit care orientations more frequently than otherwise. Gilligan also only goes so far as to say that there are at least two orientations; there may indeed be other orientations. Despite these reservations, the observation that women seem to have an ethical orientation that is discernibly different from men is extremely significant for feminine ethics. In suggesting that women have a gender specific ethical orientation, Gilligan provides feminists with a justification for particularly feminist ethics.

The assertion of a gender specific ethical orientation indicates that ethics developed from an androcentric orientation cannot be universalized to account for women's ethical orientations and further, that it is necessary for women to

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[4] While Gilligan's early work made the gendered link between care and justice orientations virtually causal, her later work, including the text cited here, recognizes that the link between gender and moral orientation is not absolute.

articulate their own ethical theories. While such a justification of feminine ethics is empowering for many feminine/feminist ethical thinkers, many feminists view Gilligan's conclusions as a slippery slope that leads inevitably to biological essentialism. Susan Sherwin reminds us that focusing on care as a predominantly female orientation is a problematic ethical and political tactic.

> Within the existing patterns of sexism, there is a clear danger that
> women will understand the prescriptions of feminine ethics to be
> directing them to pursue the virtues of caring, while men continue to
> focus on abstractions that protect their rights and autonomy...
> Because the world is still filled with vulnerable, dependent persons
> who need care, if men do not assume the responsibilities of caring,
> then the burden for doing so remains with women. (1993:17)

In appealing to and appropriating a gendered mode of being and relationality, feminists using Gilligan's work run the risk of reifying gendered social patterns which have been historically used to oppress, subordinate and marginalize women. Feminists are in danger of identifying themselves in precisely the way that patriarchal systems have traditionally identified women. In making this argument, one should consider that naming a women's mode of moral orientation could be empowering. Either one is reifying this view of women, which could be disempowering for women, or one is appropriating this view *for* women (and men) in order to empower women. While both interpretations are viable, both present strategic and ethical difficulties for feminist ethics. Minimally, feminists should be suspicious about a theory of gendered moral orientation that seeks to define the moral orientation of all women as if all women are alike. In viewing women as being universally similar moral agents, are we not in danger of silencing the diversity of women and appealing to a dangerous form of essentialism? The importance of Gilligan's thought within feminist discourses is testified to not only by the number

of thinkers who have incorporated her thought but also by the number of feminists who have responded to and critiqued her work.

Maternal Ethics: VIRGINIA HELD AND SARA RUDDICK

Similarly to feminine ethics, maternal ethics affirm and value social traits which have traditionally been associated with women. Thinkers like Virginia Held and Sara Ruddick critique traditional western philosophical contract-based ethics in the understanding that most actual relationships do not resemble a contract between equals, but rather occur between persons with unequal power and knowledge. The maternal model acknowledges the inequality of everyday relationships and reflects an ethical dynamic familiar to most persons in every day life. Maternal feminists such as Held tend to critique western philosophy's emphasis on paradigms which reflect privileged public male experiences at the expense of female and children's private experiences (e.g. Held, 1993). Held argues that women spend a considerable amount of time mothering in society, and while she would reject the assertion that women naturally have a set of experiences which encourage mothering and nurturing she does understand that there are considerable differences between the moral experiences of men and women. As such, women should develop moral theories that are congruent with their experience in the private sphere as opposed to modeling androcentric moral theories better suited to the public sphere. Held is particularly adept in arguing that moral theory is not gender neutral in pointing to the predominance in western philosophy of contract theory as a particular strategy that is best suited to the normatively masculine public sphere. It is important to note that Held acknowledges that all mother/child, parent/child relationships are not ideal and that the parental relationship can be even as oppressive or more oppressive than contract relationships. Still, Held argues passionately that society

would look very different if the model for human relationships were based on mother/child relationships rather than contract relationships between two equal persons. Like Held, Sara Ruddick argues in *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace* that maternal thinking provides a corrective model for androcentric ethical thinking. She states that her goal is "not [to] reject Reason, [but to] honour Reason differently" (1990:9). Ruddick engages in a description of the "activity of mothering" as a specific type of rationality that is non-biological and appropriate ideally to both women and men. Ruddick's idealized description of what mothers are trying to do as mothers, and her pragmatic description of what mothers actually do, is, she argues, different than traditional romantic moralizing about the beauty of motherhood. The work of mothering involves three particular demands for Ruddick: preservation, growth, and social acceptability (1990:17). In mothering, these demands are met non-violently despite the asymmetrical power relations inherent in day-to-day life. Mothering, or parenting, is the appropriate model for dealing ethically and peacefully with the realities of inequal power and authority in both the private and public world. While maternal theorists often invoke some form of idealistic vision of mothering and parenting, maternal ethics tends to be pragmatic in its description of how society operates. Distinctions between public and private and gendered moral experiences are taken as givens that must be practically addressed in the development of moral theory.

As I reflect on feminine and maternal ethics as resources for this project, it is perhaps surprising that there are opportunities here. Although I am troubled by feminine and maternal ethics because of the ways in which women have been so closely associated with reproduction, I must recognize that the Jewish tradition does have important things to say about women's responsibilities and strengths

within the Jewish home and Jewish community. Such valuations of women within the private sphere must not be discounted because they are most often private rather than public. Jewish feminists have ably demonstrated that part of the problem that Judaism poses is that the public expression of Judaism is described as normative. When we define Judaism as the public expression of tradition in synagogues and *yeshivot* (plural of *yeshiva*, traditional study houses where Jewish men study Talmud and Torah), traditionally performed only by men, we exclude from our purview what Jews—men and women—do in the private sphere. If Reform and Conservative and Reconstructionist Jewish women have become active as rabbis and in partaking in many of the same ritual, legal and communal roles that were traditionally practiced by men, and if Orthodox Jewish women have become increasingly active in halakhic scholarship—those public roles do not diminish the importance of private roles.

Additionally the images of women found in both the Torah and the Talmud that are traditionally used to illustrate model female behaviour need to be evaluated as potential models for human behaviour. If modern Jewish philosophy can look to the binding of Isaac, or the story of Sinai as intertexts that allow us to reflect philosophically about Jewish ethical models, why not stories about Ruth and Naomi, Tamar or Hannah? Let us consider how the wives of rabbis were often used rhetorically in talmudic accounts to curb or rebuke their husbands. Their tears, suffering and sometimes even their deaths illustrate the consequences of uncontrolled lust, overzealous piety or asceticism. As Ruddick would argue, let us "reason differently." How are these images of women human images? Can we reason differently about the ethical nature of friendship and family responsibility? Can we think about these stories in terms of the primacy of ethical relationship? How do

these stories teach us about suffering and relationship with God? How do these stories and others resonate when we read them against Levinas' face-to-face relationship, Buber's I-Thou, or Fackenheim's Midrashic thinking?

Finally, how can we use feminine ethics to critically engage ethics that are articulated in similarly gendered ways? Specifically, if we consider Levinas' description of various features of ethical phenomena such as the feminine, maternity, paternity, *jouissance* etc. and appraise these as a phenomenological description that proceed from Levinas' own gendered experience and which is in turn voiced by Levinas as a male philosopher, how does such an understanding clarify or problematize the content of his phenomenological and ethical claims? Does such recognition vitiate feminist discomfort with Levinas' highly gendered, and often stereotypic, model? This becomes as much a theoretical problem as a methodological one. Should feminist ethicists embrace gendered ethical models or struggle to develop models that are more inclusive? Might feminine ethics provide the theoretical tools for developing the radical ethics that Sarah Lucia Hoagland argues must "challenge not only the masculine but also the feminine"? If so, feminist ethics must respond to her charge that this challenge must apply to the masculine because "the feminine is born of a masculine framework and so does not, at a deep level, represent any change" (1991: 259).

Existentialist Feminist Ethics: Beauvoir

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (first published 1949) is arguably the foundational theoretical text of modern feminist thought. Beauvoir offers an existentialist description and explanation of "woman's" situation, arguing that women's oppression is rooted in her alterity. Beauvoir explains how that alterity is

constructed in her famous statement, "One is not born a woman, one becomes a woman." Her Otherness is a function of her status and existence as not-man (c.f. Tong, 1989:6). Man defines himself as self and woman as Other. The Other is a threat to the self and as such, man must simultaneously and cumulatively subordinate women economically, socially, and sexually, and cause women to internalize and accept that subordination and alterity. The subordination of the Other is characteristic of human relations for Beauvoir:

> Thus it is that no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself. If three travellers chance to occupy the same compartment, that is enough to make vaguely hostile 'others' out of all the rest of the passengers on the train. In small-town eyes all persons not belonging to the village are 'strangers' and suspect; to the native of a country all who inhabit other countries are 'foreigners'; Jews are 'different' for the anti-Semite, Negroes are 'inferior' for American racists, aborigines are 'natives' for colonists, proletarians are the 'lower class' for the privileged. (1989:xxiii)

Beauvoir specifies that woman's Otherness is distinct from man's and unique among all other forms of oppression. Rigidly constructed gendered social roles are the primary mechanisms that inscribe, describe and prescribe woman's Otherness. The institutions of marriage and motherhood are particularly powerful factors in the reification of female alterity. Marriage limits women's freedom and development, motherhood is even more debilitating in constraining her freedom. Woman must overcome her immanence through three particular albeit difficult strategies: through work, woman regains her transcendence where she "concretely affirms her status as subject" (1965:291-292). By becoming an intellectual woman transcends her passivity and immanence and becomes the active subject who thinks, gazes, and defines. Finally and most importantly, by working towards the socialist transformation of society, woman contributes to the eradication of

conflicting dualisms such as subject/object and self/other which are embedded in the flawed social systems which continue to posit and position woman as Other.

In *Ethics of Ambiguity*, Simone de Beauvoir argues passionately against Sartre's subjective relativism. While she acknowledges the absurdity of existence as argued by Sartre and other existentialists, Beauvoir attempts to envision a ground for moral reasoning based on existentialist principles. Sartre denies the possibility of relying on God or moral rules for coming to moral conclusions (and this is the reason why freedom poses such a problem for Sartre). Beauvoir agrees that there is nothing, "no outside appeal, no objective necessity" to justify a person's passionate values, "[b]ut this does not mean that it can not justify itself, that it can not *give itself* reasons for being that it does not *have*" (1976:12). Beauvoir argues that a person can give oneself such reasons in the orientation and yearning towards freedom itself.

> The failure is not surpassed, but assumed. Existence asserts itself as an absolute which must seek its justification within itself and not suppress itself, even though it may be lost by preserving itself. To attain his truth, man must not attempt to dispel the ambiguity of his being, but on the contrary, accept the task of realizing it. (1976:13)

In that endeavour one uncovers a moral ground that, if not always stable, is compelling. She explains that it is in the recognition that freedom denies any external ground for moral values that moral values appear. "Value is this lacking-being of which freedom makes itself a lack; and it is because the latter makes itself a lack that value appears" (1976:156). Beauvoir recognizes that this ground can be misunderstood as leading to "the anarchy of personal whim" but insists that an essential element of finding meaning in life is not only choosing freedom for oneself, but making choices which allow all persons to choose freedom (1976:156). "An ethics of ambiguity will be one which will refuse to deny *a priori* that separate existents

can, at the same time, be bound to each other, that their individual freedoms can forge laws valid for all"(1976:18). We cannot expect an ethical philosophy to provide us with exact prescriptions for ethical behaviour. "Ethics does not furnish recipes any more that do science and art"(1976:134). But we can expect an ethical philosophy to provide us with method. For Beauvoir, the method of ethics proposed involves an intentional consciousness of the human condition as ambiguous (i.e. that humans exist in the world as both subjects and objects) and that through this consciousness we choose, in our freedom, ethical actions that choose others' freedom. "[T]he good of an individual or a group of individuals requires that it be taken as an absolute end in our action, but we are not authorized to decide upon this end *a priori*" 1976:142). These choices occur not at the level of abstract principles but in concrete situations where we must each evaluate the ethical implications of our choices. In one situation a choice might be ethical and in another, given other factors, the same choice might be unethical. Referring to Kierkegaard's treatment of Abraham that "morality resides in the painfulness of an indefinite questioning," Beauvoir acknowledges the difficulty of such a method but this difficulty does not invalidate the method, it bears witness to the difficulty of existence itself (1976:133).

Simone de Beauvoir provides essential theoretical underpinnings for any engagement between feminism and modern Jewish philosophy. Beginning with the understanding of Woman as Other, Beauvoir invites us to consider how that position of alterity is reinforced and inscribed not only within the Jewish tradition but also more specifically within modern Jewish philosophical discourses. When we consider how the trope of Jew as Other is already a major area of questioning within these discourses, the question needs to be asked how the construction of Jew

as Other inadvertently reinscribes Woman as Other. Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity asks us to focus on the tension between subject and object.[5] When are women subjects in modern Jewish philosophical discourses? How can modern Jewish philosophy speak to Jewish women's experience as being doubly Other, Other as women, Other as Jews? More pointedly can modern Jewish philosophy *and* Jewish feminism speak to being *multiply* Other—Other as physically disabled, as a person of colour, as a lesbian or gay man, etc. In terms of Jewish feminism, Beauvoir reminds us that the underlying motivation for Jewish feminist reflections and activism is the concrete affirmation of Jewish women as subjects within the Jewish tradition and within the world. How Jewish feminism constructs definitions of "subject" within that discourse requires an analysis of how active subjects, persons, are defined and prescribed within Jewish tradition. By simultaneously reflecting on Judaism through the dual lenses of feminism and the modern Jewish philosophical discourses that are already engaging questions about ethical subjectivity, Jewish feminism can complicate and deepen its own account of normative subjectivity.

French Feminist Thought: Irigaray, Cixous

French feminist theory is a vibrant and dynamic discipline that is only now, through the wide dissemination of English-translated texts, becoming available to English-speaking audiences. Its increasingly ascendant position in feminist theory and post-modern discourses cannot be overestimated. What ties these thinkers

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[5] Along this vein, Beauvoir also offers us the earliest feminist critique of any modern Jewish philosopher in her now infamous footnote in *The Second Sex* where she chastises Levinas for not recognizing the reciprocity of Woman in the subject / object relation (1989:xxiii) in his description of the feminine Other. See Levinas chapter for an in depth analysis of this critique.

together, in addition to their common cultural intellectual history and engagement with each other, is their placing of psychoanalysis at the centre of their analysis. The thinkers represented here, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous are two examples of French feminists who have already had the most significant impact on English-speaking (third wave) feminist thought.

I have chosen to consider the French feminist movement separately from Beauvoir and feminine and maternal ethics because the French feminist thinkers that I am addressing represent a critique of Beauvoir's earliest position as expressed in the *Second Sex* and *The Ethics of Ambiguity* where Beauvoir argues that woman is constructed as the object Other by the masculine subject. Further, the history of French feminist thought is marked by the transformations of French intellectual life occasioned by the events of May of 1968, a historical juncture which postdates the two texts that I focus on in regards to Beauvoir.[6] Similarly, although there are some important correlations between feminine and maternal ethics and the French feminist philosophers considered here, I am considering these French thinkers independently because their projects have strikingly different origins and their goals are sufficiently distinct as to warrant a separate appraisal. Feminine and maternal ethics have their roots in 18th and 19th century first wave feminism and are marked by an interest in female-centred theory that critique the

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[6] May of 1968 is remembered as a turning point in the political and intellectual history of modern France and of particular significance for the French women's movement. The crisis began when French students went on strike after confrontations with administrations and police. The de Gaulle government provoked further uprisings after attempting to quell the disturbances through police actions. Street brawls in the Latin Quarter ensued and soon almost 10 million French workers joined the students (almost 2/3 of the total French workforce) in a general strike. Although some did agitate on behalf of right-wing causes, the revolution of 1968 brought together left-wing activists from a variety of movements calling for reform: anarchists, communists, peace activists, as well as the nascent women's movement. Before the end of the crisis, the country would be paralysed, theatres and universities would be occupied by students, hundreds of protesters would be wounded, hundreds more would be arrested, an attempt at burning down the Bourse (stock exchange) would be essayed. Ultimately, de Gaulle created a military operations headquarters to deal with the crisis, dissolved the National Assembly and called for new parliamentary elections.

intellectual traditions of patriarchal thought and contest its claims. In contrast,

French feminist thought's origins are linked with the French women's movement

that grew after the uprising of May 1968. Although highly critical of androcentric

patriarchal thinking and desirous of enacting wide sweeping theoretical and social

transformation, French feminism is characterized by seeing itself as participating in

intellectual and political life. As Toril Moi observes in her introduction to *French

Feminist Thought: A Reader*, although the French women's movement was similar

to the women's movements in other parts of Europe and the US in terms of activist

practice (i.e. demonstrations, consciousness-raising groups, lobbying for changes in

political life and public opinion), the "primacy of theory over politics" as exemplified

by the "acrimonious theoretical debate" that was unleashed by the "very first

meeting of a handful of would-be feminist activists in 1970...would seem to mark

the situation as typically 'French'" (1995:3). Another distinction between French and

other types of feminist thought is the use of the terms feminist and feminism. These

terms are less likely to be used in French feminist thought because their meaning

has historically been highly contested in French intellectual circles. Moi describes

how the intellectual group, "Psychanalyse et Politique" (commonly referred to as

Psych et Po),

> was generally considered by other feminists to be sectarian or
> counter-revolutionary. Early on, for instance, Psych et Po decided to
> define 'feminism' narrowly and negatively as a 'reformist movement of
> women wanting power within the patriarchal system', and
> accordingly descended onto the streets on International Women's Day
> carrying placards reading 'Down with feminism!' (1995:3)[7]

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[7] Although French "feminists" may often disdain the appellation, I (like other North-American feminists who wish
to engage their work), must resort to the term feminist to highlight their common interest in feminist analysis and
activism because there is simply no other adequate terminology.

Despite the rejection of the terms feminist and feminism, French 'feminist' thinkers share with other feminists an interest in articulating the ways in which women have been marginalized and oppressed in patriarchal cultures and advancing strategies for their liberation. The key opposition in French feminist thought, as in other feminist discourses, is the question of whether or not it is sufficient to correct androcentrism at the theoretical and social level or whether or not the problems are so deeply entrenched as to demand a radical transformation of theory and society. This debate plays out in the key theoretical themes that have emerged in the past three decades and which have particular significance for this project: sexual difference (particularly as articulated by Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous) and the bringing together of philosophy and psychoanalysis (as exemplified in the writings of Michèle Le Doeuff, Irigaray, and Kristeva).

Luce Irigaray

Irigaray begins with the assertion that mothers have historically been associated with matter and nature. Through them, all women (whether they are mothers or not) are similarly associated with these features that are at once contrasted with male subjectivity and culture. Although women are excluded from these phenomena, they, in their maternal, material and natural role in which they are not full subjects or full participants in culture, are necessary to sustain these masculine privileges. As such, Irigaray concludes that western culture is grounded in the primary sacrifice of the mother, and through her, all mothers.

> Women's sole function has been reproducing: family and social
> nurturing and mothering. Animals fulfill this role as well as humans
> sometimes with more equitable task sharing and more aesthetic
> sexual parading. Yet human female identity is either unknown or no

longer known. Society and culture operate according to male
models—genealogical and sexual. (1994:8)

The absence of any real female subjectivity leads Irigaray to argue that there is in fact no real sexual difference. Sexual difference would assume that both men and women are subjects. Instead, we are left with a system whereby the male is the subject and the female supports his subjectivity by being Other to his self.

The major avenue of investigation of this project is her focus on rethinking the question of sexual difference. Although she is focused on both psychoanalytic theory and philosophy, in that they both exclude women from culture as full mature subjects and continue to associate women with nature and matter, Irigaray points to western philosophy as the master discourse. Western philosophical discourses have set up an opposition between the normative masculine and the abnormal and automatically inferior feminine. The traditional feminist solution to this inequality has been to use the resources of western philosophical liberalism whereby the woman is re-established as equal to or equivalent to the masculine. But this strategy does not challenge the systems that undergird the system; her status, identity and being are always refer back to and are measured against the masculine norm. Irigaray explains:

> Because she still subsists, otherwise and elsewhere than there where
> she mimes so well what is asked of her. Because her own "self"
> remains foreign to the whole staging. But she doubtless needs to
> reenact it in order to remember what that staging has probably
> metabolized so thoroughly that she has forgotten it: her own sex. Her
> sex is heterogeneous to this whole economy of representation, but it is
> capable of interpreting that economy precisely because it has
> remained "outside." Because it does not postulate oneness, or
> sameness, or reproduction or even representation. Because it remains
> somewhere else than in that general repetition where it is taken up
> only as the otherness of sameness. (1985:152)

The Otherness of woman is a problem, but the solution is not, as many liberal feminists starting with Beauvoir argue, a resolution or eradication of that alterity.

Irigaray also disagrees with those who argue that one should celebrate woman's Otherness as a particularity that has merely been devalued in opposition to normative masculinity. Each of these approaches is a reaction to the masculine, merely reifying the feminine as always in reference to the masculine. In *Elemental Passions*, Irigaray argues that a new way of thinking about sexual difference and gender is necessary which allows woman to develop her own "linguistic, religious and political values" and to be "situated and valued, to be she in relation to her self" (1992:3). In *Ethics of Eros: Irigaray's Rewriting of the Philosophers*, Tina Chanter explains how Irigaray's interest in thinking about sexual difference in terms of alterity is informed by Levinas' critique of the claims of metaphysics whereby the Other is reduced to the same (1995:173). Irigaray's answer is an ethics of sexual difference that no longer reinscribes patriarchal forms of domination. This is a radical project because it calls for the joint reorientation of philosophy, politics and culture.

Irigaray argues that the exploitation of women "is based on sexual difference, and can only be resolved through sexual difference"(1991:32). Consequently she does not only describe the problem of the female subject in western culture, she also offers suggestions for transforming that position. For Irigaray, the goal is not merely to substitute gynocentric power structures to replace androcentric structures, because this would constitute merely a "phallic 'seizure of power'" (1985:130). When women seek to escape their exploitation "the entire order of dominant values" is disrupted. Women thus "challenge *the very foundation of our social and cultural order*, whose organization has been prescribed by the patriarchal system" (1985:165).

Because philosophy, psychoanalysis, and cultural practices are essential to the problem of female subjectivity, Irigaray enters into dialogue with these discourses. In *This Sex Which is Not One*, Irigaray suggests that her project is conceived of as "interrogation" rather than in providing answers. She describes her method as "going through the dominant discourse" and "interrogating men's 'mastery'" (1985:119). Ideally, her interrogation of these master narratives will not replicate the dominant discourses but challenge, subvert and disrupt them. Highly critical of feminist activisms that fail to address the philosophical, political and cultural systems that undergird female oppression, Irigaray proposes several methodological approaches including, mimesis, the radical use of subversive and disruptive language, strategic essentialism, and utopian models, as strategies for the transformation of western culture.

Hélène Cixous

Hélène Cixous is best known among English-speaking readers for her work on women's writing. She begins with a basic question: Why is there such a paucity of women's writing in the canon of texts that represents western thought? Have women been excluded or is it that women speak and think in ways that hinder their participation in these discourses? Cixous explores this question in "Laugh of the Medusa."

Like Irigaray, Cixous is deeply influenced by Marxist theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis. She follows Jacques Lacan's understanding of how persons enter into the symbolic order in taking up a subject position. In Lacan's understanding, the child separates from the mother's body (or the Real as he terms it) in order to enter into the Symbolic. Cixous extends this analysis by arguing that the female body is unrepresentable in language. It cannot be spoken by the phallogocentric

symbolic order. Consequently when Cixous, like Irigaray, points to mothers as the normative model of the feminine in society, she is able to claim that female sexuality —as correlated with the maternal body —is also unrepresentable. Female sexuality, as constructed by the masculinist symbolic order must follow Freud's (and Lacan's) monological definition of sexuality: heterosexual, maternal/reproductive, passive and fulfill their role as the "executants of [men's] virile needs" (1983:282).

For Cixous, sexuality and language are inexorably linked. Liberating female sexuality, and female subjectivity, requires writing from the body. What is needed is *L'Écriture Feminine*, writing not only by women, but of women. Only feminine writing can address the problems and effects of sexual difference, exclusion and the ambiguity of woman's subject position.

> If woman has always functioned "within" the discourse of man, a
> signifier that has always referred back to the opposite signifier which
> annihilates it specific energy and diminishes or stifles its very
> different sounds, it is time for her to dislocate this "within," to explode
> it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it
> in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to
> invent for herself a language to get inside of. (1983:291)

Feminine writing is distinguished from masculine writing in several ways. Masculine writing is bound up in the phallogocentric binary oppositions that structure western thought—i.e. good/evil, presence/absence, nature/culture, male/female, order/chaos, language/silence, and speech/writing. In each of these oppositions, one term is always valued over the other, and that differential is what constitutes its meaning. As enacting the oppositional structure of western discourse protects the privileged male position, masculine writing naturalizes hierarchical relationships. Feminine writing takes place in the between of these binary oppositions, without preference or valuation for either term. In much closer

proximity to voice, Cixous maintains that feminine writing has the capacity to explode the binary differentials that structure our socio-political life.

Irigaray and Cixous will be most helpful for this project in terms of three theoretical areas that contribute to the description and designation of women's subject position, sexual difference, the body, and gendered writing. Each of these issues is of explicit significance for the development of feminist and Jewish feminist ethics. How do Buber, Levinas and Fackenheim construe the subject position of women? For both feminist and Jewish feminist ethics, the answer will map out the obstacles that each thinker's model might pose for a feminist engagement with their thought. Correspondingly, whether one argues that sexual difference is constructed (as in Beauvoir's understanding) or that it occurs at the level of phenomena (as Irigaray, Cixous and Levinas suggest), will have important methodological ramifications for the types of questions that feminist ethics will need to address. Irigaray is very much influenced by Levinas' analysis of alterity and responds to them in two seminal essays "Fecundity of the Caress" and "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas: On the Divinity of Love" and her interrogation of Levinas' understanding of the feminine Other frames many of the feminist debates in Levinas' secondary literature. Both Cixous and Irigaray place the body at the centre of their analysis. In doing so, they invite an investigation of how other thinkers account for the body in their thought. Finally, Cixous' understanding of writing itself as gendered suggests avenues for exploring how Buber, Levinas and Fackenheim, as male thinkers, are able to speak ethically to and about women. In terms of Jewish feminist responses, how does their engagement with the Jewish tradition continue to privilege the masculine position in their thought?

Rethinking Systems of Dominance, Power and Diversity: hooks, Spelman, Lorde, Rich, Bannerji, Bunch

There is a growing body of feminist theory which critiques feminism's failure to address the diversity of women and which challenges feminism to radically re-evaluate its theoretical and methodological frameworks. Initially primarily advocated by women of colour, this critical perspective has become one of the most emblematic themes of "third wave" feminism as it radically questions feminism's complicity in perpetuating and rendering invisible issues of diversity, race, class, and power in its promotion of a univocal and homologous description of universal "woman's experiences." Feminism's inherent racism in developing spurious universal claims about women's experience as well as in privileging sex over race within its discourse has been attributed alternately to: feminism's ethnocentric "tunnel vision" (Rich), unconscious (Spelman), and reflecting white supremacist societal values (hooks). Formative feminist thinkers such as Betty Friedan and Mary Daly have both been subject to particular criticism because of their respective tendencies to generalize white, middle class women's experience as extending to all women (i.e. hook's critique of Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique,* 2000) and the distortion and trivialization of the experiences of third world women and women of colour by solely selecting negative examples of these women in positions of oppression and subordination and contrasting those experiences with white privileged female models (i.e. Lorde's critique of Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology*).

In this view, feminist accounts parallel western philosophical accounts in that they both reinscribe hegemonic practices and substitute one normative experience for all experiences. Western philosophy substitutes white, heterosexual male experience for all human experiences. Feminism replicates this distortion by

substituting white middle class female experiences for all women's experiences.

Thus Spelman has effectively argued that western feminism has indulged in the same type of sloppy spurious logic in articulating a homogenous definition of "woman's condition" as western philosophy has done so in describing the "human condition" (1988:9). Spelman attributes this kind of thinking to feminism and philosophy's mutual "discomfort with manyness" (1988:2). Such a critique demands that feminism acknowledge its own failures, its own ethnocentrism, racism and classism in being voiced largely by middle-class, white, western women.

Arguing against a false sense of sisterhood among liberal feminists and resisting a definition of the feminist project as one which reifies sexist ideologies of woman as the victim of oppression, bell hooks accuses early mainstream white feminists of ignoring their own complicity in social systems of dominance by focusing exclusively on sexism and androcentrism as the problem.

> Identifying as "victims," they [white feminists] could abdicate
> responsibility for their role in the maintenance and perpetuation of
> sexism, racism and classism which they did by insisting that men
> were the enemy. They did not confront the enemy within. (hooks,
> 2000:46)

Himani Bannerji argues that this obfuscation led to a downplaying of class and race relations within feminist discourses in order to create an all-encompassing definition of 'woman' that resulted in gender oppression being removed from its societal context and given superiority over other forms of oppression:

> What this does is to empty out gender relations of their general social
> context, content and dynamism. This along with the primacy that
> gender gains (since the primary social determinant is perceived as
> patriarchy) subsumes all other social relations, indeed renders them
> often invisible. (1995:49)

Rendering these social relations visible and using that analysis to radically transform society must be the basis for redefining feminism.

> When feminism is defined in such a way that it calls attention
> to the diversity of women's social and political reality, it
> centralises the experiences of all women, especially the women
> whose social conditions have been least written about, studied,
> or changed by political movements. (hooks 1997:68)

In effect, hooks and other feminists who focus on this problem are holding feminism

to its own avowed standards. If the goal is to end sexist oppression through such

strategies as highlighting the ways in which patriarchal societies marginalize and

silence women, then feminism needs to develop theoretical models that are panoptic

and which do not give preference to perceiving certain groups of women while

ignoring others.

It follows that we must be vigilant in identifying and recognizing the

ethnocentrism that informs our analyses of the "common" dynamics of sexist

oppression. Sexism cannot be understood apart from the particular oppressive

matrices that produce it. Precision is necessary when we try to articulate

experiences of oppression. Elizabeth Spelman explains:

> it is crucial to sustain a lively regard for the variety of women's
> experiences. On the one hand, what unifies women and justifies us in
> talking about the oppression of women is the overwhelming evidence
> of the worldwide and historical subordination of women to men. On
> the other, while it may be possible for us to speak about women in a
> general way, it also is inevitable that any statement we make about
> women in some particular place at some particular time is bound to
> suffer from ethnocentrism if we try to claim for it more generality
> than it has. So, for example, to say that the image of woman as frail
> and dependent is oppressive is certainly true. But it is oppressive to
> white women in the United States in quite a different way than it is
> oppressive to Black women, for the sexism Black women experience is
> in the context of their experience of racism. (1988:131-132)

The danger here is that the feminist rallying cry of "the personal is political" can

focus our attention to such an extent on our own experiences that we fail to

recognize that others often have radically different experiences. As such, the charge

of ethnocentrism against feminism applies equally to the exclusion of immigrant

and third world women when it focuses on (usually white) North-American-born (non-Native) women. This kind of insularity creates an insider and outsider dichotomy whereby feminist goals become defined by a privileged "insider" core. Charlotte Bunch emphasizes in "A Global Perspective on Feminist Ethics and Diversity," the importance of learning from the experiences of 'outsiders'—those who (because they are immigrants or are from the third world) are able to offer a different perspective on the politics and culture of the U.S. and Canada. "While feminism begins with our own lives, we need to see how our personal experiences have been shaped and perspectives distorted by society, by the limitations and biases of our families, our race, our class, our culture, and our professions" (1992:176).

These types of feminist critiques challenge feminism to acknowledge and develop accounts of multiple, layered, and cumulative experiences of marginalization based on gender, class, race and/or ethnicity without conflating or distorting those experiences. Correspondingly, feminists have also sharply critiqued western feminism's implicit and explicit cultural imperialism in addressing issues such as genital mutilation in Islamic and African countries, foot binding in China, dowry systems in India and Pakistan and the sex trade in Thailand. Lillian Robinson and Ryan Bishop summarize the problem, "First World feminists are frequently criticized for culturebound insensitivity to differences in the values, needs, and desires of women in other parts of the world. Warnings against cultural blindness—not to say arrogance- are never misplaced"(1998:11). Discussing the way that the justification of the sex tourism industry is made in language that neatly dovetails with the language of the "enlightened relativist position," Robinson and Bishop point to the problem of developing a balanced feminist critique.

In light of this intellectual history of feminism, feminist theorists like hooks, Bannerji, Lorde, Rich, Spelman and Bunch have called for a redefinition of the project of feminism and a rejection of liberal feminist tactics that have failed to understand, expose and overthrow the systems of dominance that oppress women (and men) in multiple ways. These thinkers have been instrumental in the integration of the critical need for the current theoretical and methodological standard of inclusion of multiple voices and the attention to race, class, ethnicity and diversity in the development of contemporary feminism. However, as Spelman argues, the very act of including diversity implies a particular power relationship. "Welcoming someone into one's home doesn't represent an attempt to undermine privilege; it expresses it" (1988:163). Spelman recognizes the problem posed by this criticism. On the one hand, any invitation to inclusion offered by privileged members of the feminist movement can reasonably be understood as paternalistic. On the other hand, dominant feminisms cannot risk failing to make that invitation explicit. The ethical crisis explicit in this problem (and others posed by voices of protest within feminist discourses) must be accounted for and embodied in feminist ethics lest feminist ethics reify these ethical failures.

Perhaps the most important insight these voices of protest hold for modern Jewish philosophy is their urgent call for recognition not only of diversity but of the expression of power that such a recognition entails. When modern Jewish philosophy assumes a normative description of Judaism as not only androcentric, but middle-class, heterosexual, and *Ashkenazi*, how is such a description excluding

and rendering invisible other stakeholders in these communities?[8] How has modern Jewish thought preferred to indulge in a homogenous description of Jewish experience and identity? The resistance to feminist responses to the Holocaust and feminist critiques of modern Jewish philosophy suggest a discomfort with manyness. At the same time, Jewish feminism needs to account for its own hegemonic impulses. In what ways do Ashkenazic Jewish feminists exclude Sephardic women from their purview? How do Sephardic Jews become Other in normative popular discourses? How do definitions of the goals of Jewish feminism that break down along ideological and denominational lines create insiders and outsiders?

Postmodernism and Feminist Ethics: Benhabib and Cornell

Linda J. Nicholson observes in her excellent introduction to *Feminism/Postmodernism* that a large part of the problem of the false universalization of the feminist position from the late 1960s to the mid 1980s was:

> the failure, common to many forms of academic scholarship, to
> recognize the embeddedness of its own assumptions within a specific
> historical context. Like many other modern Western scholars,
> feminists were not used to acknowledging the premises from which
> they were working possessed a specific location. (1990:1-2)

The specific location that postmodern thought identifies as the source of this and many other problems is modern thought itself. Postmodernism has engaged in critiquing such wide ranging themes and master-narratives as: the objectivity of knowledge claims, the political power of the academy and its claimed objectivity, the

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[8] Ashkenazi refers here to Ashkenazic Jews who trace their cultural heritage from Eastern Europe and is contrasted with Sephardic Jews who trace their cultural heritage from Spain, Portugal and the Middle East. Ashkenazic Jews share many common traditions with Sephardic Jews but there are significant cultural and legal differences as well. Ashkenazic culture is overwhelmingly normative in North American, western European and

self and subjectivity, the linearity and evolutionary character of history, notions of progress and development, the objectivity of reason, the role of science and the construction of authority, the normative character of morality, and universal claims which transcend boundaries or region and culture.

The natural congruencies between feminism and post-modernism are evident. Feminism has generally argued against the objectivity of knowledge claims, has insisted on rendering visible the power, authority and bias of the academy and the problems of universal claims which render invisible issues of gender, class and race, questioned the gender bias inherent in the construction of ideas of objectivity, reason, and the autonomous moral agent as self. Yet the feminist assumption of the postmodern project is sometimes problematized by the conflicting desire to respond to modern claims on its own terms, as Jane Flax observes:

> The relation of feminist theorizing to the postmodern project of deconstruction is necessarily ambivalent...it is not unreasonable for persons who have been defined as incapable of self-emancipation to insist that concepts such as the autonomy of reason, object truth, and beneficial progress through scientific discovery ought to include and be applicable to the capacities and experiences of women as well as men. It is also appealing, for those who have been excluded to believe that reason will triumph—that those who proclaim such ideas as objectivity will respond to rational arguments. If there is no objective basis for distinguishing between true and false beliefs, then it seems that power alone will determine the outcome of competing truth claims. This is a frightening prospect for those who lack (or are oppressed by) the power of others. (1990a:42)

Despite the understandable ambivalence about discarding modern methods, Nicholson notes that "for some feminists, postmodernism is not only a natural ally but also provides a basis for avoiding the tendency to construct theory that generalizes from the experiences of Western, white, middle-class women" (1990:5).

Israeli Jewish discourses and has resulted in the real marginalization of Sephardic culture and communal concerns.

Feminists have also participated in postmodernism's critique of feminism, especially in regards to feminism's lapses into biological essentialism and frequent and often lax cross-cultural attempts to articulate historical root causes of women's oppression. Feminist thinkers have also challenged postmodernism in terms of the consequences of postmodern methods and claims. For example, feminists are concerned with the loss of particularity, subjectivity and agency, and the categories of gender and body.

The tendency to argue that women have different moral concerns, as well as ways of moral reasoning, is common to feminist ethics that are grounded in modern philosophical discourses. This argument takes on a particular form in postmodern feminist ethics where there is a clear articulation of the way that modern categories shape ethical discourses surrounding "woman." Sherwin reflects on this dynamic:

> Although blatant misogyny has finally become rare in ethical theory,
> the specific experiences and interests of women are still wholly
> excluded from the conceptual framework of philosophical ethics.
> Women are assumed to fall under the generic rubric of "agent," but
> the moral concerns that are examined are always those most salient
> from the male perspective. (1993: 11)

Postmodern feminists critique the ways in which women have been subsumed into the general masculinized category of moral agents in mainstream ethical theories. As such, postmodern feminists have devoted much critical analysis to traditional moral theories and principles. One major concern in these analyses is how women are understood as moral agents.

An example of a postmodern form of difference feminism is Seyla Benhabib's response to Carol Gilligan. Benhabib articulates two important theoretical principles in feminist critical theory. First, Benhabib insists that the gender/sex system, indicated by Carol Gilligan's research, is "not a contingent but an essential way in which social reality is organized, symbolically divided and experienced"

(1989:157). Human identity emerges and is formed in this matrix. Second, the gender/sex system has contributed to the oppression, marginalization and victimization of women. The gender/sex system differs in different socio-historical contexts but is universally normative as a dynamic found in socio-historical contexts. While the first principle is served by research such as Gilligan's which examines empirical evidence of sex/gender systemic features, it is the second principle which requires a philosophical and ethical response in exploring the relationship of the sex/gender system to moral and political principles at both the meta-ethical level and the normative level.

In response to Gilligan's findings, Benhabib contends that traditional western ethical theories are grounded in a distinction between justice and the good life. Benhabib argues cogently that the universalistic moral theories that proceed from the western ethical tradition are grounded in principles, such as the definition of the moral domain and the ideal of moral autonomy, which marginalize women's experience. Universalistic theories extend a paradigmatic model of human to account for all humans. She argues that since the paradigmatic model is typically male, white and socio-economically privileged, the experiences and perspectives of those who do not fit this model are alienated and privatized. Benhabib argues that such theories are substitutive, substituting this model for all persons.

Benhabib advocates a form of interactive universalism that acknowledges diversity and plurality among persons without initially making moral claims of validity about these pluralities. She develops a critical model of what she calls "a communicative ethic of need interpretations," where the ethical self is not the generalized autonomous and substitutable self posited in justice/good life ethics but is a self which is concrete, particular and in relation to other persons. The self is in

relation to a concrete Other, where relations are private and non-institutional and are concerned with "love, care, friendship and intimacy"(1989:168).[9] Benhabib is most helpful in her insight into the problem of the generalized other:

> Indeed the recognition of the dignity and worthiness of the generalized other is a *necessary*, albeit *insufficient*, condition to define the moral standpoint in modern societies. In this sense, the concrete other is a critical concept that designates the *ideological* limits of universalistic discourse. It signifies the *unthought*, the *unseen*, and the *unheard* in such theories. (1989:168)

Universalistic moral theories depend on the generalized other in order to extend their principles outwards to account for diverse and pluralistic societies. In modern ethical theory, the generalized other has been the linchpin which allows these substitutionalist universalistic theories to avoid accusations of racism, sexism and cultural relativism. However, as Benhabib argues, the generalized Other is not a sufficient guarantee that these theories do not become discriminatory.

Benhabib contends that a model of the concrete other underlines the realization that all generalized others are also concrete others. An ethic founded on this model does not assume immediacy between concrete others. Rather, the moral agent recognizes her/his own concrete identity in relation to a generalized other. The moral agent respects the dignity of the generalized other by acknowledging the moral identity of the concrete other. Implicit in this dynamic is an integration of both the care and the justice orientations where needs, rights and responsibilities are accounted for.

Within the context of advocating what she terms "ethical feminism," Drucilla Cornell's thought reflects many postmodernist concerns. Cornell uses the term

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[9] This view does not take into account that relations are also antagonistic, aggressive, hostile, characterized by fear, etc.

'ethical' in this context to indicate an orientation to and yearning towards, non-violent relationship to the Other and otherness. The ethical relationship involves a commitment of responsibility to the Other where one actively repudiates any attempt to subsume the particularity and singularity of the Other into a monological system that denies that particularity and singularity. In terms of feminism, Cornell sees the ethical relationship as necessitating a rethinking and re-imaging of what it means to be *Woman*. Cornell warns against re-appropriating stereotypic, essentialist meanings of *Woman* where *Woman* is a "psychic fantasy" who is understood only dichotomously as either good or bad, tamed or wild, sexual or asexual. Feminist repudiations of these dualisms are as problematic and dangerous as accommodation of these dualisms when they are repudiated without deconstructing the system that produces them. Cornell argues that an orientation of *fallibilism* and *musement* are essential to confronting and re-imagining the constraints of stereotypic femininity such that one is continuously focused on these strictures (musement) and one understands this "consciousness raising" is a process not an end that can be ultimately attained (fallibilism). *Fallibilism* and *musement* are essential to the establishment of trust and solidarity necessary for consciousness-raising. Cornell's understanding of the project of feminism as an exploration of the space between images of Woman and the lives and experiences of women, relies heavily on Lacan's analysis of the symbolic construction of femininity. In his theory it is impossible to find an actual ground for *Woman* within the symbolic order since Woman is constructed in reference to the masculine. Cornell's discussion of ethical feminism is very much at the level of critical theory and is not exclusively or even largely directed at ethics. However, her analysis is important for feminist ethics in general. Feminism is clearly an ethical project for Cornell with

important ethical implications for human relations. The need for trust and solidarity in consciousness-raising extend to all persons not only to women. The symbolic construction of Woman is one pressure point that reveals violent tendencies which reinforce alterity and silence the particularity and singularity of persons as ethical agents.

> As the meaning of woman is challenged as a limited set of fantasy constructions imposed upon rich and complex lives, we widen the gap between ourselves and our representations and by doing so give birth to new modes of expression of feminine sexual difference, we also challenge the boundaries that have set masculinity and the parameters of normalized heterosexuality. We destabilize the foundations of man if we create further disruptions in the setting of ourselves as women. (1995:98)

Both Cornell and Benhabib offer us important insights into how gender impacts on moral agency and how an understanding of the self as moral agent is integral to feminist ethics by underscoring the problem of the normative universalizable other as object—rather than subject—of masculinist philosophical discourses.

Postmodern feminism provides perhaps the most fruitful resources for the integration of feminist concerns into modern Jewish philosophical discourses as well as for the development of Jewish feminist ethical theory. Each discipline needs to continually re-evaluate how the "premises from which they [are] working [possess] a specific location" (Nicholson, 1990:1-2). The question then is how do the principles that emerge within these contexts continue to construct and reify a generalized Other that is substituted for all others. When modern Jewish philosophy fails to specifically include women in its discussions, how does that "alienate and privatize" women? How do "phenomenological" description of women rely on substitutive accounts? How might a concretized description of the Other solve not only the problems of the marginalization of women with these discourses but reveal those other alienated persons that have similarly been effaced through the substitution of

the generalized Other? How do both Jewish feminism and modern Jewish philosophy rely on fantasy constructions of Woman and Jew?

Feminist Ethics: particularism, essentialism & diversity

Feminist ethics struggle with two critical analytical principles which are in constant tension: Feminist ethical theory needs to posit itself as being able to generally address women and women's experiences in order to legitimize women as a category of analysis. Yet in doing so, feminist ethics are constantly in danger of appealing to a type of essentialism that generalizes (or substitutes) all women to account for individual women. Feminist ethics necessarily focuses on the particular; the particular woman, the particular experience of oppression, subordination and marginalization. In her discussion of gender and political philosophy, Iris Marion Young describes the political version of this theoretical dilemma:

> On the one hand, without some sense in which "woman' is the name of
> a social collective, there is nothing specific to feminist politics. On the
> other hand, any effort to identify the attributes of that collective
> appears to undermine feminist politics by leaving out some whom
> feminists ought to include. (1997:13)

If feminist ethics is to justify its focus on women as women, feminist ethics must continually struggle to acknowledge and account for the diversity which women experience. In critiquing androcentric moral theory and patriarchal socio-ethical systems, feminist ethics must be subject to the same criticisms that they attach to mainstream moral theory. If feminist ethics charges mainstream moral theory with silencing the individual, internalizing racist, bigoted, classist, elitist, sexist, and heterosexist values, feminist ethics must be vigilant that it does not perpetuate these same abuses.

Feminist ethics have not offered a comprehensive moral theory that adequately avoids these moral problems or which sufficiently addresses the ways in which these abuses can be eradicated at either the theoretical or practical level. It may be that such a goal is ill conceived and reflects vestigial attempts to model traditional philosophical structures. Referring to the effort on the part of feminist philosophers to render visible the gender biases of philosophical models and assumptions in the development of feminist philosophy, Moira Gatens argues that feminist philosophers must be wary of replicating those structures that it critiques:

> In so far as this approach to philosophy has involved itself extensively in a critique of universal and totalizing forms of knowledge it is evident that it is not going to involve itself with a repetition of theory-building which aims at the formation of unilateral predictive propositions. This isn't to say that this ... approach of feminists to philosophy is anti-theoretical. Rather, it indicates a commitment to a conception of theory, practice, and strategy which refutes the traditional theory/practice split. The feminist challenge to dominant philosophical pronouncements—concerning the equality of 'man', the lauding of a universal and singular rationality, and so on—is offered from an acknowledged necessary embeddedness in lived experience and is the result of the exploration of the contradictions manifest in that experience. (1992:194)

A reconfiguration of the traditional theory/practice split reflects and enacts feminism's advocacy orientation at the most basic level.

Underlining the importance of such a reformulation is essential to the development of feminist philosophy. Its consequences are far reaching. Maintaining the tension between theory and practice is difficult, especially when our training as scholars seems to depend on precisely the dichotomization feminists seek to transcend. As Gatens suggests, such an emphasis reinforces the importance of particular lived experiences as the basis of feminist philosophy. As such, it allows us to critically challenge the phantasmagorical hegemony of androcentric philosophical privilege that Le Doeuff describes (1991:1). It also represents one effective

foundational strategy for the development of feminist ethics. It undergirds and complements Benhabib's argument against the generalized substitutable other. Similarly, maintenance of this tension is essential for Cornell's ethical feminism that relies on the conjunction of theory and practice in order to prevent the subsumation of the particular and individualized other into a monological ethical system. As we shall see, the importance of this tension is equally urgent in Jewish feminism where the delineation between theory and practice is still inadequately examined in terms of Jewish feminism's relationship to modern Jewish philosophy.

Modern Jewish Philosophy and Feminism

The impact of feminism on modern Jewish philosophy needs to be understood as operating within a particular disciplinary, intellectual and cultural history. Feminism's burgeoning influence on modern Jewish philosophy as a particular discipline which bridges both Jewish studies and modern philosophy should be contextualized in terms of feminism's integration into mainstream western philosophy and Jewish feminism's general inattention to modern Jewish philosophy as a cultural and intellectual discourse.

Modern Jewish Philosophy

Before discussing the ways in which a deeper dialogue might be enacted between feminism and modern Jewish philosophy, it will be useful, albeit difficult, to define the discipline or field of modern Jewish philosophy. Tirosh-Rothchild asks the following questions in her attempt to define Jewish philosophy in general. She asks how modern Jewish philosophy can be described as philosophy? How should we

understand modern Jewish philosophy as "philosophical" in light of the philosophical objective of identifying and articulating universal statements about human nature and the world and modern Jewish philosophy's preoccupation with the particularly Jewish? If it is philosophy, what kind is it? Is it Jewish philosophizing, philosophy for and about Jews? Is it distinct from theology? Are there multiple philosophies or one normative Jewish philosophy? Finally, "How could there be Jewish philosophy if Jews have never agreed on the nature of Judaism?" (1994:97). Tirosh-answers her own question a few pages later:

> [The] discourse of Jewish philosophy is philosophical because it looks
> at Judaism through the prism of philosophy, and it is Jewish because
> the Jewish tradition itself (its beliefs, canonic texts, exegetical modes,
> legal norms, and ethical ideals) provides the subject matter for
> reflection. 1994:99)

But if these questions apply equally well to the sub-set of modern Jewish philosophy in particular, the definition has to be more specific and go beyond a description of the subject matter. A definition of modern Jewish philosophy must speak to the linked question of formative context, method, audience, and purview. Understanding that there is little consensus on what modern Jewish philosophy is, my statements are necessarily general.

I would argue that modern Jewish philosophy does indeed seek and articulate universal truths, but it does so as emerging from the particular historical experiences of the Jewish people. The collective memory of the history of the Jewish people and the normative communal understanding of that memory, is modern Jewish philosophy's intertext. As a feminist, my reading of the effects of that intertext on modern Jewish philosophical discourses is ambivalent. Without that historical memory, modern Jewish philosophy loses an essential element of its "Jewish" character. But, as I shall emphasize again and again throughout this

project, that history is very much the memory of men. From a feminist point of view, one of the "pillars" of modern Jewish thought is unstable.

In terms of method, modern Jewish philosophy is distinct from other forms of Jewish thought. If Fackenheim describes modern Jewish philosophy as "the critical inquiry into the modern destiny of the Jewish people and its faith," that inquiry is clearly philosophical rather than theological in character (1973:3). Certainly modern Jewish philosophy, as modern, inquires into those modern philosophical axiomatic categories of being, reason, the good and the just, the autonomous self etc. However, 20th century developments of modern Jewish philosophy also include postmodern critiques of those categories. Finally and most urgently, modern Jewish philosophy is not merely philosophy by or for Jews and it is not merely a subsection or separate branch of philosophy as a whole. *It is a philosophy in itself*, with its own methods, questions and rubrics. To construe it in any other way is to relegate modern Jewish thought to a misbegotten subset of western philosophy as though western philosophy was the platonic form of philosophy itself and all other philosophies (including Islamic, Chinese, Hindu and Buddhist philosophies) must be viewed as either religious thought or culturally biased philosophy. In terms of audience and purview, the particular interests of modern Jewish philosophy make it relevant to a Jewish audience. But construing modern Jewish philosophy in such narrow terms is deeply flawed. Modern Jewish philosophy *is philosophical*, and at its best it contributes its particular historical experience and intellectual history as one among many in the broader human philosophical discourses that speaks to the

widest possible audience.[10] A feminist engagement with modern Jewish philosophy must then ask, in what ways does modern Jewish philosophical method replicate, reconstitute, or forge anew the types of androcentric and masculinist thinking that so problematize western philosophy in general. In what ways does modern Jewish philosophy exclude women from its intended audience? In what ways does Jewish philosophy exclude women from its purview?

The Impact of Feminism

In 1994 Hava Tirosh-Rothchild wrote:

> To date, feminism has made no impact on the discipline of Jewish philosophy. Scholars of Jewish philosophy have virtually ignored the presence of feminism in the academy, the feminist critique of Western philosophy, and the feminist attempt to articulate an alternative to traditional philosophy. (1994:85)

Almost a decade later, the situation has not wholly changed but there is strong evidence that feminism is in the early stages of having a significant effect on modern Jewish philosophy. Some very important Jewish thinkers are demonstrating interest and sensitivity to feminist concerns. Among scholars (who

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[10] Many scholars argue that there is a distinction between modern Jewish philosophy and Jewish theology, however that distinction is predicated on a classical Christian definition of theology as speaking about God's nature. More precisely theology represents a mode of thinking and speaking about how God should be understood or explained. As such Christian theology has traditionally focused on the interpretation of symbols. Implicit in the theological approach is the notion of the orthodoxy and heresy binary that in turn discursively constructs Christian identity. The point ultimately of Christian theology is an articulation of Christian faith. Modern Jewish philosophers, like the rabbinic sages, reflect on God's nature only insofar as that nature is implicit in accounts that reveal what is expected of humans to live good, righteous, just, moral lives. The most significant question will always be how is one meant to live? This in a strange way is the difference, Jewish identity is wrapped up in historical relationship with God and community, but it is not defined by God's nature. Jewish identity is constructed, at least in this sense, in the ethical and cultic expectations that are articulated by traditional narratives. I am left with the conclusion that when the term theology is used very loosely, it can certainly be applied to many modern Jewish thinkers. Indeed this is how Emil Fackenheim seems to be using the term when he describes himself as a theologian; since he is talking about God and revelation as part of his inquiry into modern Jewish life, he refers to himself as a theologian. My question is whether or not the term is actually helpful. This question is not central to this project, therefore for the purposes of this project, I use the categories of Jewish thought, modern Jewish philosophy and theology to reflect the self-identification of the particular author. Modern Jewish thought is the broadest term and is used to refer to works that are philosophical and/or theological. I use the term modern Jewish philosophy or theology when the thinkers self identifies their own work as philosophical or theological. Levinas,

do not identify themselves as primarily feminist scholars) working in the area of modern Jewish philosophy, Peter Ochs, Robert Gibbs, Michael Oppenheim, and Irving Greenberg, are directly engaging Jewish feminism and feminist thought in their work. However, it is important to note that the influence of feminism on this discipline can be more clearly traced to the impact of feminism on the academy as a whole than it is from feminist scholars working in this area. While recent books such as *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas*, edited by Tina Chanter, point to a growing interest in feminist readings of at least one modern Jewish philosopher, it is interesting to note that Chanter doesn't mention Levinas' status in modern Jewish philosophy at all in her introduction. Modern Jewish philosophy is still an area that has, comparatively, largely been ignored by feminist thinkers (and western philosophy). Although the study of women in Jewish history, culture, and scripture has produced some of the most dynamic scholarship in current Jewish Studies, they have focused on re-placing women within Jewish history and Jewish life.[11] In contrast with these efforts, Jewish feminism has had comparatively little to

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Buber and Fackenheim each self-identify as philosophers but Fackenheim also describes himself as engaging in theology.

[11] In addition to the feminist theological analysis that focuses on the place of women in Jewish theology, like Judith Plaskow's *Standing Again At Sinai* (1991) and "Towards a New Theology of Sexuality," in *Twice Blessed: On Being Lesbian, Gay and Jewish* (1989), Ellen Umansky's "Creating a Feminist Jewish Theology," in *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality* (1989), and Rachel Adler's *Engendering Judaism* (1999), some of the examples of scholarship that provides resources for this strategy of recovering women's place in Judaism include: Re-reading rabbinic texts, Judith Hauptman's *Rereading the Rabbis: A Woman's Voice* (1998), and Judith Baskin's *Midrashic Women: Formations of the Feminine in Rabbinic Literature* (2002); retrieving and re-valuing women's prayers, Chava Weisler, *Voices of the Matriarchs: Listening to the Prayers of Early Modern Jewish Women* (1998); developing new egalitarian or woman-centred prayers and rituals, Marcia Falk, *The Book of Blessings* (1996); re-voicing, recreating traditional narratives as in the case of feminist Midrash, Ellen Frankel, *The Five Books of Miriam: A Woman's Commentary on the Torah* (1998), and Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer, *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story* (1994); Jewish feminist theological responses to the Holocaust, Rachel Adler, "Pour Out Your Heart Like Water: Toward a Jewish Feminist Theology of the Holocaust," in *Humanity at the Limit: The Impact on the Holocaust Experience on Jews and Christians* (2000); Susan E.. Nowak, "In a World Shorn of Color: Toward a Feminist Theology of Holocaust Testimonies," in *Women and the Holocaust: Narrative and Representation* (1999), Melissa Raphael, *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz: A Jewish Feminist Theology of the Holocaust* (2003). The compendium, *Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Spirituality*, edited by Ellen Umansky and Dianne Ashton, also includes a range of different types of texts that speak to women's religious lives from the 16th to the 20th centuries (1992).

say about modern Jewish philosophy. Tirosh-Rothchild noted in 1994 that the most important female contributors to modern Jewish philosophical scholarship "have done so neither as women nor as feminists"(1994:97). Even if they do not always identify their research as feminist, more women are working in modern Jewish philosophy than ever before. As a critical mass of female scholars engage this discipline, it is clear that feminist theory is becoming more expected if not accepted.

The assertion that Jewish feminists have for the most part been inattentive to modern Jewish philosophy refers to their lack of engagement with the modern Jewish philosophical canon as it is and has been defined by scholars of modern Jewish philosophy in the development of their thought. Jewish feminists have instead turned to sources such as feminist theory, scriptural and rabbinic texts, western philosophical thought, post-modern theory, women's contemporary and historical experiences, literature, and feminist activism. Their focus on sources other than those found in the modern Jewish philosophical canon begs the question of why Jewish feminists have largely been uninterested in addressing such sources.

Jewish feminist scholars are writing and thinking in ways that are clearly philosophical. Scholars like Rachel Adler, Laura Levitt and Judith Plaskow, among many others, are "doing philosophy" and they are addressing topics which modern Jewish philosophy addresses (i.e. the Holocaust, personal and communal ethics, and Zionism). What is interesting is that in doing so, they are not necessarily engaging the traditional modern Jewish philosophical canon. Instead, such scholars are drawing on other sources. To be fair, until fairly recently, few modern Jewish philosophers seemed to draw on previous contributors to the discipline, and were more likely to respond (as in the case of Levinas for example) to their

contemporaries. Thus, my argument is not that Jewish feminists should reflect on these sources because of any tradition within modern Jewish thought, but rather that these sources represent opportunities for the furthering of Jewish feminist thought and that modern Jewish philosophy would be similarly enhanced through an encounter with Jewish feminism. This project illustrates these opportunities in detail by focusing on the theoretical models and methodological tools that might be strategically applied.

The Jewish feminist lack of engagement with modern Jewish thought should be understood in terms of developments within the history of Jewish feminism. In order to survey the evolution of Jewish feminism, it will be helpful to review the history of feminism and note the ways in which Jewish feminism has emerged from within that history.

The "Waves" of Feminist History

Feminist scholarship currently identifies three "waves" in the history of feminism. Although this model is being complicated by contemporary feminist analysis, its organization is helpful in establishing a timeline that corresponds to the history of Jewish feminism.

During the "first wave" of feminism, egalitarian feminists were interested in establishing equal rights with men. In terms of the critical application of feminist thought, this wave targeted biblical scripture and the natural and social sciences in the interest of identifying distortive misogynistic tendencies. This wave was particularly interested in repudiating assertions about women's nature and bodies as being different from, and thus inferior to, those of men. The "natural" dichotomy between the sexes asserted by and supporting patriarchy was condemned as

spurious and self-serving. Thus early feminists argued for equal rights for women on the grounds that they were not meaningfully different from men.

The "second wave" of feminists, emerging in the late 1960s, rejected the previous equality model and emphasized and celebrated women's difference from men. This second wave targeted the social sciences and humanities (including philosophy) in critiquing the ways in which androcentric thinking not only excluded and demonized women but also established the masculine as normative. Second wave feminists, with the beginnings of the women's health movement in the late 60's and early 70's, insisted on women's difference and promoted that difference as offering models that could expand or even replace androcentric models with gynocentric or more inclusive approaches (cf. Gilligan and Noddings versions of care based ethics).

Many scholars who look to the history of feminist thought as a way of understanding where feminism is going, have identified a "third wave" of feminism beginning in the 1980s. Third wave feminism claims to represent the feminism of young women born in the 1960's and 1970's who distinguish their formative feminist experiences from those of second wave feminists (Findlen, 1995:xi). For example, whereas second wave feminists fought for economic equality, the right to work outside the home, reproductive rights, etc., third wave feminists grew up benefiting from many of the efforts of second wave feminist. Third wave feminism is characterized by an effort to articulate feminist identity and goals that build upon and complicate those claims announced by second wave feminists. One effect is that this most recent wave tries to balance the competing claims of equality and difference feminism. If equality feminism seems to silence women's difference, and difference feminism is often in danger of asserting the biological essentialism that

many view as so problematic, third wave feminism has tried to understand the interactions and complexities between biological and cultural explanations of gender. More importantly third wave feminism recognizes its own implication in the definition of the feminist project and perceives the need to acknowledge the ambiguity that arises from multiple, unstable positions and identities. Rebecca Walker explains that third wave thought is characterized by "including more than excluding, exploring more than defining, searching more than arriving" (1995:xxxiii). Linda Martin Alcoff underlines the problem of difference for third wave feminism where she distinguishes the first sort of difference faced by feminism as the difference between genders (second wave feminism) and the second sort as the differences among women (third wave feminism):

> Difference feminism of the first sort gave rise to powerful new work in
> feminist ethics, feminist epistemology, and feminist political
> philosophy, using models based on women's lives to reveal
> weaknesses in existing dominant theories and then to reconstruct
> them. This work was immediately beset by challenges from the second
> sense of difference: there is no coherent characterization of
> experience, social position, or standpoint that can encompass the
> differences among women. (2000:842-843)

Questions about differences of race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, reflect the diversity among women and pose real problems for any unified feminist perspective or agenda. The initial solution is recognition that there is no one feminism; there is a multiplicity of feminisms.

History of Jewish Feminism

Although we can look to western Europe and the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries for the origins of feminist critiques of Judaism, those voices were virtually unknown to the (now to be understood as) second wave Jewish feminists that emerged within the Women's Movement in the late 1960s and early

1970s. These first wave voices are only now being recovered (Levitt and Peskowitz, 1997:5).

During the phase beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, described by Susannah Heschel as the struggle "to become full members" of Jewish community, Jewish feminists were primarily interested in identifying patriarchal tendencies within the tradition which served as obstacles to women's full participation in Jewish life and culture (1983:xv). Many Jewish women had been active (in fact many were leaders) in the Women's Liberation Movement. Paula Hyman explains in her article on Jewish feminism how two essays, by Trude Weiss-Rosmarin and Rachel Adler, proved to be watersheds:

> Two articles pioneered in the feminist analysis of the status of Jewish women. In the fall of 1970, Trude Weiss-Rosmarin criticized the liabilities of women in Jewish law in her "The Unfreedom of Jewish Women," which appeared in the *Jewish Spectator*, the journal she edited. Several months later, Rachel Adler, then an Orthodox Jew, published a blistering indictment of the status of women in Jewish tradition in *Davka,* a countercultural journal. Adler's piece was particularly influential for young women active in the Jewish counterculture of the time. (1997:694)

In retrospect it seems as if overnight North American Jewish women who had been active in the Women's Liberation Movement and other activist movements turned their eyes to their own tradition and initiated immensely successful conferences and began consciousness raising groups (akin to those that had developed with the Women's Movement) to reflect upon the gender inequities within Judaism itself.

When in 1972, the New York feminist Jewish study group *Ezrat Nashim* (referring to the women's section or "place" of the Temple, but also as a homonym links the ideas of "help" and woman as helpmate), raised the issue of women's equality at the convention of the Conservative Rabbinical Assembly, Jewish feminism changed from a private, individual, and virtually underground movement,

to a vocally public force to be reckoned with. The women of *Ezrat Nashim*, participating in meetings with rabbis and their wives, presented the soon to be widely circulated "A Call for Change." An early manifesto for North American Jewish feminism, "A Call For Change," called for the resolution of systematic gender inequity in Jewish law and custom at every level of Jewish life including: communal leadership, halakhic interpretation, and practice. The ordination of female rabbis and cantors, reform of marriage and divorce laws that subordinated women, recognition of women as legitimate participants in the minyan (quorum required for most Jewish public rituals, traditionally ten men), and the obligation of women for all mitzvot (legal obligations, women are not obligated to positive or prescriptive time-bound commandments under traditional Jewish law) were only some of the more important changes that the group identified as necessary (Hyman, 1997:694).

During the period that followed, and continuing to the present day, much attention was devoted to biblical sources and to Jewish law. Mid to late 20th century Jewish feminism was, in addition to the issues raised by *Ezrat Nashim*, also interested in the problem of the *agunah* (literally "chained woman" who is unable to initiate or complete a Jewish religious divorce without her husband's consent), sexist language in scriptural and liturgical sources, the absence of access to rituals which had traditionally been reserved for men, negative images and stereotypes of Jewish women within the tradition and in larger western culture. Each of these required that women be equivalent to men in order to be equal. As Plaskow explains in her 1983 article refuting Cynthia Ozick's argument that the question facing Jewish feminists is not theological,

> The Jewish women's movement of the past decade has been and
> remains a civil-rights movement rather than a movement for
> "women's liberation." It has been a movement concerned with the

> images and status of women in Jewish religious and communal life, and with *halakhic* and institutional change. It has been less concerned with analysis of the origins and bases of women's oppression that render change necessary. It has focused on getting women a piece of the Jewish pie; it has not wanted to bake a new one! (1983:223)

In the last 20 years since this article was written, we see that interest in these issues has intensified but the goal is not necessarily a "civil rights" type of equivalence. Jewish women are celebrating their difference as Jewish women. For example, today there is great interest in developing not only gender-neutral liturgy but specifically female-centred liturgy. Instead of opening up *b'nai mitzvah*[12] to include *bat mitzvah* for girls there is interest in developing rituals that reflect women's embodiment such as menarche, miscarriage, and breast cancer survival rituals. Through both stages, Jewish feminists have been adept at identifying male normative and misogynistic tendencies within the tradition that affect how women participate in the tradition. They have been greatly inspired by the progress made by feminist theory in terms of the social scientific disciplines of history, literature, anthropology and sociology. But they have not yet turned to modern Jewish philosophy as a relevant discourse. I would argue that modern Jewish philosophy has largely been irrelevant to Jewish feminism during the period from the 1960s to the 1980s because it had not significantly impacted the actual practice of Judaism within the synagogue or within the home.[13] Even Jewish feminism's interest in theology is most clearly focussed on how that theology is expressed in actual practice and affects women's roles and status within the community.

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[12] *B'nai mitzvah* is the plural form that includes *bar mitzvah* (for males) and *bat mitzvah* (for females).

[13] With perhaps the exception of Mordecai Kaplan's contribution to the emergence of Reconstructionist Judaism.

In 1983, Susannah Heschel wrote in her Introduction to *On Being A Jewish Feminist: A Reader*, that "just as Jews became the crucible of modern political thought, so too, feminism is the crucible of modern Judaism. Today's confrontation with feminism exposes the failure of Jewish religious movements to cope with modernity's challenges to theology and to respond effectively to them" (1983:xxiii). As Jewish feminists become more interested in the theoretical underpinnings of not only practice but of ethics and other philosophical questions, it will become more important for Jewish feminism to engage the modern Jewish philosophical tradition. Both modern Jewish philosophy and Jewish feminist scholarship are already on parallel tracks in terms of certain areas of investigation. The Holocaust, Jewish identity, the relationship between religious thought and practice, the state of Israel and Zionism are only some of the areas which are already being simultaneously being discussed in both disciplines.

As with western philosophy, we can discern the impact of the different waves of feminism on modern Jewish philosophy. While the "first" wave of the 1970s, which had such an impact on the development of Jewish feminism and Jewish culture, had little impact on modern Jewish philosophy, and the second wave's impact was mostly in noting the absence of women within Jewish philosophical discourses, one could argue that it is with the third wave (in conjunction with the enormous influence of postmodern thought) that we are really able to sense that feminism is beginning to be integrated into modern Jewish philosophical discourses.

Modern Jewish Philosophy, the Holocaust, and Feminist Theology: Adler

As an example of the ambivalent relationship between modern Jewish philosophy and Jewish feminism, I would like to consider Rachel Adler's suggestions for the

development of a Jewish feminist theology of the Holocaust in "Pour Out Your Heart Like Water: Towards a Jewish Feminist Theology of the Holocaust." Adler proposes an explanation for why Jewish feminists have not contributed a theology of the Holocaust:

> When, after twenty years of silence, Holocaust theology began in the late sixties and seventies, it was an elite conversation among exclusively male rabbis and professors of Jewish philosophy. At that same time, feminist Judaism emerged, intent not upon questions of the divine nature and the evils of the Jewish past but upon Jewish women's pressing concerns with the structures of Jewish community, law, and text. It is because we succeeded both in developing basic theological tools and in becoming full participants in the Jewish conversation that feminist theologians can now turn to confront the Shoah. (2000:161)

It is interesting that Adler characterizes this work as the work of Jewish feminist theology rather than Jewish feminist philosophy. From the point of view of modern Jewish philosophy, this is a philosophical endeavour in the same way that Fackenheim's theological questions in *To Mend The World* are philosophical. Yet Adler declines to include herself and future Jewish feminists in that community of scholarship not only through the categories she chooses to use but in her choice of not entering into conversation with any modern Jewish philosopher. Instead, aside from noting a brief theological question by Greenberg and quickly dismissing a theological biblical image from Rubenstein, Adler enacts her conversation with everyone except modern Jewish philosophers: feminist theory, feminist theology, history, women's Holocaust literature and ethnography, biblical literature, feminist literary criticism and talmudic sources. Since Adler is well versed in modern Jewish thought, we must view the constitution of this conversation as absolutely intentional.

Adler explicitly explains that feminist theology has intrinsic reasons (in addition to the abovementioned extrinsic reasons) for avoiding the Holocaust

(2000:163). Adler's point is well taken when she argues that feminism, like other modern Jewish liberal theologies, is overwhelmingly optimistic, is fundamentally not interested in theodicy, and basically conceives of humanity as being at least potentially perfectible living in a world that is essentially whole and harmonious except when humans corrupt it (2000:163). She asks,

> How do theologies that emphasize the need for woman to become full contractors of the covenant justify covenanting with a God who did not save? Having learned how easily normal people can murder and how easily starvation, pain, and terror can dehumanize their victims, can we be so confident of human and social perfectibility? How do we account for disorder, rupture, atrocity? (2000:163)

She adds that the Holocaust invites the further problem of challenging

> the latent essentialism of the feminine God language feminist Judaisms have worked so hard to establish, in which God is depicted as peacefully imminent in an idealized, harmonious nature... But the God who is implicated in the Shoah is no nurturing mother, no Lady Wisdom. What language will we use in situations where we experience God as violent, abandoning, enigmatic? (2000:163)

Despite these real problems for feminism, she argues:

> The Shoah demands to be assimilated into the collective memory of the Jewish people, into forms and norms, rituals, stories, interpretations. This time, for the first time, women and men bear equally Judaism's ancient obligation to shape memory and to let ourselves be shaped by what we remember. For the first time, feminist theologians are both equipped and invited to ask the questions about theodicy, sociodicy, and anthropodicy that the Shoah arouses, to ask what resonances these new stories and images haunting our consciousness impart to sacred texts and words of prayer. (2000:163)

Adler is correct that the Shoah poses particular problems for feminism. However there is a sense, in at least the early part of her argument, that feminist Judaism is distinct from Judaism as a whole. If the solutions to women's disabilities within Judaism have been the theological developments articulated by the feminist positions Adler describes, they must be valuable for the Jewish people because Jewish women are the Jewish people. If these strategies fail to address the real

problems of the Jewish people after the Holocaust, then they are inadequate for any version of feminist Judaism. Adler's description of the particular problem the Shoah poses for feminine God language as revealing the latent essentialism of that God language is absolutely correct.[14] Whether Adler intends it or not, she demonstrates that the Shoah is, to paraphrase Heschel, a crucible for feminist Judaisms in the same way it is a crucible for modern Jewish philosophy. Both feminist Judaism and modern Jewish philosophy fail when they do not, or cannot, respond to the Holocaust.

• DISTURBING BOUNDARIES •

Throughout this introduction I have returned again and again to the problems of disciplinary boundaries and the opportunities inherent in disturbing those boundaries. What is the capacity of each to extend the application of their initial theoretical and methodological frameworks beyond the original particular focus? How can each discipline benefit from engaging in dialogue with other disciplines? In engaging the disciplines of feminist thought, Jewish feminism and modern Jewish thought, one needs to address the specificity of each discipline's orientation and their respective capacity to move beyond their particularism towards an engagement with a larger audience. By particularism, I refer to each discipline's original and continuing focus on a particular group. The importance for each discipline of entering into a broader discourse cannot be sufficiently stressed. At

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[14] This question of undermining feminist God talk and the Shoah suggests that the God language of post-Holocaust philosophy / theology fails to rise to the standard of feminist God talk. See Raphael, 2003 for her analysis of patriarchal divine imagery in post-Holocaust thought.

stake is not only their relevance and ability to speak to others, it is clear that each discipline's integrity depends on this ability to speak to others.

Clearly there are voices within feminist discourses that so privilege women and women's experiences that their particularism is in itself self-constitutive. For example, Rosemarie Tong makes a strong statement about the primacy of women's particular experiences in the formulation of feminist ethics:

> Only women -or groups oppressed like women- can understand the flaws of Tradition. Only those who have been the victims of domination and subordination can have the moral vision to create an ethics that transcends such abuse. (1993:228)

While other groups' experiences of this abusive dynamic are related to women's experience at some structural experiential level, similar experiences of this dynamic are not identical. In Tong's argument, feminists should continue a dialogue with such groups, but must recall that feminism is inevitably connected at a basic level to women and their experience as gendered human beings. The subject of feminist ethics must always have at its heart women's experiences even if other subjects and experiences are also considered as well.

I would argue that Tong's emphasis is problematic. I agree that feminism does begin with women's experiences, however I insist that feminism must include other subjects and experiences as well. A feminism that only speaks to women is mute. It is basic to speak about women's experiences when discussing feminism, and it is equally basic that all women cannot possibly share the same experiences. Women live in different cultures, exist in differing socio-economic contexts, have different experiences of racism and religious bigotry, have different sexual orientations, have different bodies and bodily experiences; in short women's experiences as women are impacted by a variety of factors which are not solely determined by their gender. These factors complicate their experience as gendered

beings at the same time that gender complicates their experience of these factors. Feminism must address the particularities of gender, but it is equally important that feminism be able to address those injustices that transcend gender boundaries.

The different feminisms described collectively as third wave feminism make explicit the connection between oppression based on gender with other forms of oppression. In this view it is systems of dominance, first identified as those that target gender, which prompts the need to broaden the community of stakeholders which feminism addresses. In recognizing that gender oppression is linked to other forms of oppression, third wave feminists are not claiming that all types of oppression can be conflated into one overarching dynamic of oppression. It is the specific diversity of experiences that requires an analysis of the different ways that persons oppressed.

The tension between the necessary focus of particularism versus the moral and political interests of universalism is one that has been addressed repeatedly by modern Jewish philosophy. Undoubtedly there are specific interests which modern Jewish philosophy must address which are particular and are not meaningful concerns to those who are outside the Jewish tradition. Internal debates about Jewish continuity and Jewish unity are only two examples of debates that are clearly internal. Even these debates, I suspect, have important resonances for other minority communities and for feminists.

Still, many more questions posed by modern Jewish philosophy implicate a larger audience. In particular, modern Jewish philosophy's interest in ethics (before and after the Holocaust) raises many issues which are of concern to both Jews and non-Jews. While this is evident to those of us who work within this discipline, the relative isolation of much of this material within Jewish studies requires that this

orientation be made explicit. For example, many non-Jewish philosophers have engaged Levinas' philosophical work as a premiere example of Continental philosophy, but they have often done so without critically addressing Levinas' Jewish thought. Similarly, many Christian theologians are familiar with Buber's *I and Thou* but most have largely ignored his Zionist thought. Fackenheim is not commonly discussed outside of post-Holocaust discourses. Yet, each of these thinkers have important contributions to make to contemporary philosophical thought and ethics. Modern Jewish philosophy at its best is not merely a colloquial branch of philosophy limited to Jewish interests. When it is most compelling, modern Jewish philosophy engages the full spectrum of modern and post-modern philosophical questions. It does so with a Jewish sensibility, resonating through a particular continuum of historical, philosophical, theological and cultural experiences. It speaks beyond itself, but always as itself. Its ability, or its failure, to address the questions of feminism is one indication of its ability to transcend the colloquial and fully participate in post-modern philosophical discourses. In *To Mend the World: Foundations of Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought* Fackenheim argues "Jewish thought may not dissolve its native exigencies in a spurious universality. But a Jewish thought devoid of universal significance, or cut off from it, would not deserve the name of thought at all. The problematics of modern Jewish thought are intertwined with the problematics of modernity as a whole"(1994:101). As each discipline listens to the Other, one can distinguish not only common themes and interests. When heard by the other, the particular interests of each is broadened and deepened as particular foci resonate through each discourse. Many other common themes will emerge as we move through each thinker's thought, identifying

those opportunities and pitfalls each thinker poses for the development of feminist ethics.

In the following chapters I will return repeatedly to the themes and questions outlined in this introduction. As I move through the works of Buber, Levinas, and Fackenheim, and critically evaluate their work in terms of feminist theory, my goal is not only to identify the problems in these texts that a feminist reading can raise but also to listen attentively to them. My hope is that through a feminist analysis of their ethics, it will become clear that each of these thinkers present important opportunities for the development of feminist and Jewish feminist ethics. Although I will rarely be able to rely on feminist or Jewish feminist readings of these works, I will be able to draw on the rich traditions of feminist theory, feminist ethics and Jewish feminism in articulating that critique. In thinking about this project as contributing to an evolving history of an interdisciplinary conversation, I do so through my multiple identities as a Jewish woman, a liberal Jew, a Jewish feminist, a feminist, and as a philosopher. My responses to these thinkers are constructive—constructed through, from and on behalf of my multiple identities. As I work with their texts, I am reminded of Ricoeur's statement that a written text

> enlarges the circle of communication and properly initiates new
> modes of communication. To that extent, the recognition of the work
> by the audience created by the work is an unpredictable event ... It is
> part of the meaning of a text to be open to an indefinite number of
> readers and, therefore, of interpretations. (1976:11)

These authors did certainly not anticipate feminist critiques of most of these texts. But it is appropriate that the "the circle of communication" expands as new audiences recognize additional insights into the nature of ethical relationship. This task becomes a type of translation in reception, where in listening attentively to

these thinkers we hear opportunities for our own concerns. To do so is not to do violence to their thought, instead it is open up the boundaries of how those texts can be heard and respoken.

CHAPTER TWO
MARTIN BUBER

• OVERVIEW •

Of the three thinkers examined in this project, Martin Buber is probably the most familiar to modern readers. His classic work, *I and Thou*, is considered essential reading not only for modern Jewish philosophy, but also for those interested in 20th century philosophy, religious philosophy and religious ethics. He is certainly the Jewish thinker most studied in Christian theological seminaries and most cited in Christian theological and ethical thought.

Although Buber was interested in a variety of subjects and issues, one of Buber's most important contributions to western philosophical thought and modern Jewish philosophy is his understanding of existence as relational.[15] All human life is relational; persons are in relationship with the world they inhabit, the persons they encounter, and with God. Buber contrasts mutual and reciprocal personal relationships (which he described as I-Thou relationships) with utilitarian relationships where the other can be objectified (which he describes as I-It) relationships. This model of interpersonal relationships, as most clearly articulated in *I and Thou*, is the central ethical insight of Buber's philosophy of dialogue.

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[15] Positioning Buber's work in terms of theology is problematic. Walter Kaufman argues that Buber did not wish to be considered a theologian and that in *I and Thou* Buber "ruled out all religious discourses about God, including all theology." In that Buber does not articulate, in the classical sense, a theology of God's attributes and motives, and more centrally, that Buber argues that the I-Thou relationship in which God participates cannot be treated as an object of speech, Buber's work is not theological (Walter Kaufman, 1984:17). However, it is fair to say as Lori Krafte-Jacobs argues, that his "repudiation of theology was never successfully executed." As much as Buber rejects the possibility of speech about God, Buber does make theological statements and includes relationship with God within his purview (1996: 91).

This exposition is aimed at surveying the issues that are most relevant to an interdisciplinary conversation between modern Jewish philosophy, feminist theory and Jewish feminism, and which will in turn lead towards the development of feminist and Jewish feminist ethics. My focus is on his dialogical ethical model as pointing towards a feminist ethic of relationship. The details of that model raise questions about how his arguments provide strategic opportunities, or raise problems, for the development of such an ethic. Buber's accounts of human existence as relational and embodied suggest promising avenues of investigation for feminist and Jewish feminist ethics. However, a Jewish feminist reading of his work will need to interrogate his claims about relationship with God and the ways in which he problematizes religious law as a normative model for ethical behaviour in terms of their implications for Jewish feminist ethics.

Buber's Life and Work

Martin Buber was born in 1878 to upper class Jewish parents in Vienna. After his parents' divorce when he was three years old he moved to Lemberg (Polish Ukraine) to live with his grandparents. His grandfather, Salomon Buber, was a propertied banker and scientific editor of Hebrew Midrash literature. His grandmother, Adele Buber, was well versed in the German classics and was responsible for the family's properties. Buber spoke many languages, Yiddish, German (at his grandparents' home), Hebrew and French (as a child), and Polish (at secondary school).

Buber pursued varied academic studies including philosophy, art history, German studies, philology at university in Vienna, and then later in Leipzig, Berlin and Zurich. He was active as a young man in the Zionist movement (joining the

movement in 1896) and various Jewish cultural, intellectual and educational groups and projects. While studying in Zurich, Buber met Paula Winkler, a non-Jewish Zionist writer from Munich (she later converted to Judaism) who wrote under the pseudonym Georg Munk. They married in 1899.

Buber's interest in Zionism and contemporary Jewish issues shaped his early activism as well as his professional pursuits. As a university student Buber formed a Jewish student club as well as a local Zionist group. Strongly influenced by Ahad HaAm, Buber was a leader of the cultural Zionist movement that argued that a merely political Zionist solution was inadequate. He believed that what was needed was a renaissance of Jewish culture. Because of this view, Buber was involved in a controversy with Theodor Hertzl over the political and cultural direction of the Zionist movement. He participated in both the Third and Fifth Zionist conferences (1899, 1901), became the editor of the Zionist journal *Die Welt* ("The World," 1901), and wrote and published various essays and speeches on Jewish culture and Zionism. In 1904 Buber withdrew from his involvement with Zionist organizations and completed his dissertation *"Beiträge zur Geschichte des Individuationsproblems."*

Buber began to study Hasidism in 1903 and his first well received publications were interpretive retellings of Hasidic legends and stories collected in *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman* (1907) and *The Legend of the Baal-Shem* (1908). Buber published his comparative study of mysticism, *Ecstatic Confessions* in 1909, which expanded his study of mysticism to include other world religions traditions. From 1910 to 1914 Buber largely focused on studies relating to cultural myths, publishing studies and editions of myths from Chinese, Finnish and Celtic cultures. His

abiding interest in cultural mythology, mysticism, and particularly Hasidic mystical thought can be traced throughout his career.

During the First World War, Buber participated in the establishment of the Jewish National Commission that was aimed at helping Eastern European Jews. From 1916 to 1924, Buber managed the monthly magazine *Der Jude* ("The Jew") that became the pre-eminent voice for German-speaking Jewry in representing the new "consciousness" of German Jews. Buber's commitment to the importance of Jewish education and culture led to teaching at Franz Rosenzweig's *Freiem Jüdischem Lehrhaus* (House of Jewish Learning) in 1922.

His best-known work, *I and Thou* (*Ich und Du*), was published in 1923 and focused on ethical "dialogue." During that same year, due to Franz Rosenzweig's illness, Buber was appointed to the only teaching position in Germany for Theology and Jewish Ethics at the University in Frankfurt. (He would hold this position until 1930 when he would become honorary professor of the history of religions.) In 1925 Buber began a collaboration with Franz Rosenzweig to translate the Bible into German which he continued to work on alone after Rosenzweig's death and which was ultimately completed in 1961. Between 1926-28 Buber was the co-editor of the quarterly *Die Kreatur* ('The creature').

Buber resigned his professorship in 1933 after the National Socialist party gained control of the German government and he was deprived of the permission to give lectures (Oct 4, 1933). Unable to hold a university faculty position, Buber focused his attentions on Jewish education. He participated in the creation of the *Mittelstelle für jüdische Erwachsenenbildung* (Centre for Jewish Adult Education) under the auspices of the Federal Jewish Agency. The Centre became increasingly important as a means for Jewish education as Jews were forbidden by Nazi edict

from attending public schools. Buber was later prohibited from all public teaching in 1935.

Buber emigrated from Germany to Jerusalem in March 1938 (several months before *Kristalnacht*) where he was professor of Sociology at Hebrew University until 1951. In 1949 Buber founded the Institute for Adult Education that trained teachers. He was director of the Institute until 1953. He was also a leading member of the *Ichud* ("Union") Association, a moderate group seeking reconciliation of the Jews and Arabs and which advocated a bi-national state. After the war, Buber published *Paths in Utopia* (1946) and began giving lectures and tours in Europe and the USA. From the 1950's until his death in the early 1960s, Buber's work was recognized with several prestigious awards. In 1951 Buber received the Goethe award of the University of Hamburg and in 1953 the Peace Prize of the German Booktrade. Five years later, in the same year that his wife Paula died, he was awarded the Israel Prize. In 1963 Buber was awarded the Erasmus Award in Amsterdam. Buber died at home in Talbiyeh, Jerusalem on the 13th of June in 1965.

Buber published on a wide variety of topics including philosophy, philosophy of religion, world religions, Judaism (especially Biblical interpretation, Hasidism and Zionism), education, sociology, psychology and art. Among Buber's works, in addition to those already cited, are *Between Man and Man* (1947, containing essays from 1928-1938), *The Prophetic Faith* (1950), *Good and Evil* (1952), *Paths of Utopia* (1949), *The Knowledge of Man* (1965), *A Believing Humanism: My Testament, 1902-1965* (Translated 1967), and *On Judaism* (Translated in 1967, with more than half of the material being from 1909-1918 and the remainder from 1939-1951).

Existence As Relational

Buber's characterization of life as relational is a powerful response to the existential understanding of the absurdity of human existence. The absurdity of existence—the ambiguity of being, occasioned primarily in what Laurence J. Silberstein describes as "alienating modes of interaction...grounded in a mistaken concept of personhood"(1989:10)—urgently demands a way through ambiguity and absurdity into meaning. As William Kaufman demonstrates, for Buber philosophical argument and inquiry are not "sterile intellectual problems" but expose the vital need to resolve the crisis of being occasioned by the absurdity of existence (1992:58). The philosophical questions concerning space and time which preoccupy Buber in his early work (and continued to be worked out throughout his life), do not result in a systematic philosophy; they are part of Buber's ongoing conversation concerning the nature of humanity's relation to ultimate reality. These questions are the prolegomena to Buber's development of a general theory of relationship and point towards his overwhelming interest in understanding relation as constitutive (c.f. 1992:57-61).

Rejecting modern objectivist discursive frameworks, Buber critically repudiates any discourse "which privileges detachment, objectification, and rational analysis, [and which is] grounded in and simultaneously legitimates modes of social relationship that impede human growth and actualization," in favour of a relational model (Silberstein, 1989:106). As early as 1918 when Buber delivers the lecture "The Holy Way," we see Buber's understanding of the critical importance of

relationship.[16] This insight into the nature of relationship is strongly influenced

by Ludwig Feuerbach's thought, whom Buber quotes in his 1938 essay "What is

Man":

> The individual man for himself does not have man's being in himself,
> either as a moral being or a thinking being. Man's being is contained
> only in community, in the unity of man with man—a unity which
> rests, however, only on the reality of the difference between I and
> Thou. (1974:182)

The core perception that the truth of human existence can only be understood in

terms of relationship, and that relationship can further only be explicated in terms

of the existential encounter between I and Thou. This powerful and particular

language parallels both the subject and the title of Buber's chef d'oeuvre, *I and

Thou*.

Dialogue

> The life of dialogue is not limited to men's traffic with one another; it
> is, it has shown itself to be, a relation of men to one another that is
> only represented in their traffic. (1974:25)

Before turning to the specific elements of *I and Thou*, it will be helpful to review

Buber's understanding of dialogue as the mode of relationship. The best source for

this appraisal is his 1929 essay "Dialogue" which clarifies Buber's statements about

dialogical relationship in *I and Thou*. In the foreword to *Between Man and Man*,

which includes "Dialogue," Buber explains that the essays contained therein were

chosen as "filling out and applying what was said there [in I and Thou]."

Buber reflects on the root metaphor of dialogue as an entry point into his

exploration of human relationship as dialogical. Although Buber recognizes that

dialogue is most commonly associated with the language and the sign, he wants to

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[16] "The Holy Way" was first delivered in 1918 and published in 1919.

challenge and expand our understanding of dialogue to include the notion that communication can occur silently. The possibility that dialogue can occur without a sign, even without "objectively comprehensible form," allows Buber to make his most significant observation, that is, that dialogue, "in its highest moments," exceeds the boundaries of content and reveals the other's dialogical nature (1974:20-21). Put more simply, even when there is no linguistic communication, we can recognize that dialogue has occurred because dialogue discloses the other's dialogical nature. Buber's point is neither tautological nor mystical. The dialogical is characterized by the transformation of those who participate in the meeting. This transformation occurs as "a genuine change from communication to communion" (1974:21). Human dialogical nature is that capacity for covenant, communion, and openness to the other. Far from being a mystical claim, by identifying body language as one example of how dialogical communion is signalled, Buber explicitly locates this phenomenon in the everyday world. One can observe the transformation of the other in the cast of their features, their gestures, and their bodily orientation towards the other.

Buber is keenly aware that not all human encounters are dialogical; some encounters do not rise to the level where either person is transformed. Still, the potential of real dialogue is evidence that humans are themselves dialogical in nature. Human interaction either orients itself towards the other in dialogue or away from it and towards the self in monologue. Buber allows for gradation in these orientations, particularly in the act of orienting away from the other and towards the self that Buber refers to as reflexion. Reflexion is "when a man withdraws from accepting with his essential being another person in his particularity" (1974:42). Reflexion is the absence of true dialogue, where "dialogue becomes a fiction, the

mysterious intercourse between two human worlds only a game, and in the rejection of the real life confronting him the essence of all reality begins to disintegrate" (1974:42). Orientations towards the other, or away from the other and towards the self, are both ethical choices for which we are responsible. Buber is clear that the act of choosing is already informing and informed by our orientation and our orientation is informed and will inform our choices.

Buber's interest in dialogue is closely tied to his philosophical and political critique of totalitarianism. As such, the question of dialogue moves beyond a model between two persons towards an account of community where persons are ideally entering into dialogical relation with many others. For Buber, community is contrasted with mere collectivity. Whereas community is transformative, collectivity

> is not a binding but bundling together: individuals packed together, armed and equipped in common, with only as much life from man to man as will inflame the marching step. But community, growing community (which is all we have known so far) is the being no longer side by side but with one another of a multitude of persons. And this multitude, though it also moves towards one goal, yet experiences everywhere a turning to, a dynamic facing of, the others, a flowing from *I* to *Thou*. (1974:51)

Note the imagery of the marching step that recalls both fascist parades and mob protest marches. Buber is critical of the dehumanizing practices that occur among both the political right and left. These practices are the result of the total absence of the dialogical. In such collectivities,

> [d]ialogue and monologue are silenced. Bundled together, men march without *Thou* and without I, those of the left who want to abolish memory, and those of the right who want to regulate it: hostile and separated hosts, they march into the common abyss. (1974:52)

The distinction between collectivity and community is very much the distinction between I-It relations and I-Thou relations. The contrasts between I-It and I-Thou can best be appreciated by examining Buber's central arguments in *I and Thou*.

Two Types of Relations: I-It, I-Thou

In *I and Thou* Buber presents us with a detailed explication of the archetypal ethical relationship he identifies as the I-Thou relation. In order to illuminate the I-Thou relation, Buber begins to explain the differences between I-Thou and I-It. His description of the I-It relation is grounded in his philosophical and social critique of those modes of thinking, speaking and acting which constitute what he describes as the basic relation between persons. Occurring in the "It" world, this political relation supports and reproduces the dominant alienating and utilitarian discourses and activities that pervades public and private relationships (Buber, 1967a:99). Silberstein concisely summarizes Buber's conception:

> The common-sense everyday world was designated by Buber as the
> "It" world. We experience this world as an object to be manipulated,
> used, and controlled. Our relationship to it is instrumental and is
> rooted in our need to possess, control, and dominate. (1989:120)

Buber describes how the realm of the I-It is characterized by goal-directed verbs: "I perceive something. I feel something. I imagine something. I want something. I sense something. I think something. The life of a human does not consist of all this and its like. All this and its like is the basis of the realm of It" (1970:54). Whenever one characterizes existence in terms of experience rather than relation, one is operating in the world of I-It (1970:56). In the I-It relation the Other remains Other as object rather than subject. It is important to specify that I-It encounters are not preliminary to, lower than, or evil, in comparison with I-Thou encounters. They are partial and different from I-Thou relations but because one cannot sustain the I-Thou continuously, I-It relations are necessarily a feature of human existence.

In order to delineate and explicate the profound difference between I-It and I-Thou relations in *I and Thou*, Buber uses the example of encountering a tree as an It and then as a Thou. This choice of the tree is particularly effective because it

destabilizes the reader's predisposition to privilege relations with persons and God and subverts the assumptions a reader might bring to thinking about interpersonal relationships. It is an example of what Richard Rorty describes as Buber's effort to "take us out of our old selves by the power of strangeness, to aid us in becoming new human beings"(1979: 360). Buber explains how one's initial encounter with the tree is prone to operate in the "It" world by listing all of the ways one can contemplate a tree as an object of knowledge. He then contrasts this encounter with the possibility of encountering the tree as a Thou: "But it can happen, if will and grace are joined, that as I contemplate the tree I am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to be an It. The power of exclusiveness has seized me"(1970:58). The radical distinction between I-Thou and I-It is predicated on the distinction between dialogue and knowledge. If the I-It relation is primarily an instrumental epistemological relation, the I-Thou relation occurs without prior epistemological content. In the I-Thou relation, Buber contends that it is the combination of will and grace joined that are co-conditions of the encounter. By grace, Buber refers to effortlessness, an opportunity, and the sense that things are beyond our control, luck, fate, as well as God's grace. Most importantly, grace suggests a lack of inhibitions against the I-Thou relationship and openness to that relationship. "Grace concerns us insofar as we proceed toward it and await its presence; it is not our object"(1970:124). By will, Buber refers not to a "willing towards" relationship in the sense of causing the relationship to happen, but a willingness to contribute to the relationship as an open and free response.

Throughout *I and Thou* Buber continues to deepen his exposition of the I-Thou relationship in the interest of developing an alternative to philosophical, political and social discourses that fail to display and enact the "noncompetitive,

noncontrolling, nonpurposeful and nonutilitarian" modes of relation that Buber hopes to model (Silberstein, 1989:117). After using the tree model to subvert our assumptions about the I-Thou relation, Buber moves towards a description of interpersonal relations in order to more fully develop his exegesis of the I-Thou. In addition to the three characteristics mentioned above, that the I-Thou relationship is effortless, exclusive and involves a person's whole being, William Kaufman outlines three other characteristics: The I-Thou relation "takes place in the present," "is direct [and] free of deception," and, perhaps most importantly, takes place in the *between* (1992:65-66). The unmediated, immediate I-Thou relation precludes the instrumental and utilitarian modes that characterize the I-It relation. It is a *sui generis* encounter that resists temporal or spatial categorization as well as analysis. The *between* character of the I-Thou is essential in that the relation terminates the ambiguity of immanence and transcendence. Prior to thematization, prohibiting totalization and irreducible to its parts; the I-Thou occurs in that bursting forth of the meeting.

Three Spheres

Relationality occurs in what Buber describes as the "spheres of relations." In Part I of *I and Thou* Buber asserts that there are three spheres of relations: life with nature, life with persons, and life with artistic creations. The turn of phrase "life with" which Buber uses in his description of each of the spheres, underscores his understanding that human existence is relational. Relationality in the three spheres may take the form of the I-It relation or the I-Thou relation. Each of the spheres involves relations with that which is other from the self. Each of the spheres affords us insight into how human existence is constituted by relationality. Buber says

clearly that there is no initial individual ontological position that is prior to relation: "I require a You to become, becoming I, I say You" (1970:62). I-Thou relations in each of these spheres are dialogical. Because life with nature is prior to language, that dialogue occurs in a way that is foreign to our experience and limits the possibility of objective comprehension. "The creatures stir across from us, but they are unable to come to us, and the You we say to them sticks in the threshold of language"(1970:57). Life with persons may occur in silence or in language and is constituted by a shared experience of communion in encounter; we hear the Thou, and we give and receive in ways that are experientially comprehensible. As such, I-Thou relations are not only reciprocal but also mutual. Life with artistic creations is less simply articulated. Buber tells us,

> Here the relation is wrapped in a cloud but reveals itself, it lacks but creates language. We hear no You and yet feel addressed; we answer—creating, thinking, acting: with out being we speak the basic word, unable to say You with our mouth. (1970:57)

Buber clarifies the dialogical nature of the encounter with artistic creations in "Dialogue" where he underlines how artistic creations like music, sculpture, and architecture each speak not so much to author who creates the art, but to the person that encounters the art and "receives" the experience that is communicated through the art (1974:44).

Language

It is significant that Buber opens his *I and Thou* with statements about the role of language. In arguing that existence is relational, Buber directs his attention to language's ontological characteristics. For Buber, I-Thou and I-It are equal examples of a *grundwort*, a fundamental word which is the opening condition of all language (Levinas, 1994b:41). On the opening page of *I and Thou*, Buber explains

that "basic words do not state something that might exist outside them; by being spoken they establish a mode of existence" (1970:53). The relation of I and Thou is constituted by the language of I-Thou. The I-Thou occurs in the between; and the relation of the between is spirit. He defines spirit in its human expression as "man's response to his You" (1970:89). Enacted in the language of relation, spirit exists only through the engaged moment; it is manifest in the I-Thou encounter. As Levinas argues, this relation through language "is conceived as a transcendence irreducible to immanence. And the 'ontology' (for it remains ontology nonetheless) that is thus formed derives all its significance from that irreducible transcendence" (1994b:25). Language is the concrete mode in which the primordial relation is accomplished; and spirit, as the relation of the between, is language's primal deed (1970:143).

In terms which mirror Genesis' description of God's creation through speech, Buber describes two primordial word pairs, I-It and I-Thou which, "by being spoken ... establish a mode of existence" (1970:53). By establishing a mode of existence through speech, Buber is causing speech, as in Genesis 1:1 "In the beginning God created the heaven and earth," to be endowed with creative power. Speech need not be understood literally as sounds emanating from the larynx but should rather be understood as dialogical engagement. It has been seen that the I-Thou encounter, as initiated here with speech, is a creative, transformative engagement. Buber is employing a pattern of language (used in the biblical creation story where speech is used creatively), which in describing the foundation of interpersonal relations is suggesting a model of relationship that parallels the relationship between God and creation. But in asserting that speech or dialogue establishes the particular dialogical relation Buber does not mean to suggest that human persons are self-imbued with the capacity for relationship. He has already announced that the I-

Thou relation is only possible through will *and* grace. Again evoking language that echoes Genesis, Buber states "In the beginning is the relation"(1970:54). Thus relation is primordial to human existence, and constitutes human nature, but humans have the capacity to at least partly determine the type of (or lack of) dialogue that is enacted through their openness to the relation.

It is important to note that although both I-It and I-Thou are basic words which structure existence, Buber distinguishes between these two fundamental words in terms of language by specifying that I-It can never be spoken with one's whole being and I-Thou "can only be spoken with one's whole being" (1970:54). This distinction is a function of how each word/relation operates and emerges. Buber contends that the I-Thou word/relation emerges from "natural association" while the I-It word/relation emerges from "natural discreteness" (1970:76). Using the example of the child, Buber outlines how in the prenatal life of the child, the child is in a "pure natural association" with the mother in an embodied biological way. As the child moves from the prenatal state to be born, the child "detaches itself to enter a personal life" (1970:76). Humans innately long for the original relation they experienced in the womb. Once born, the human suffers the existential alienation that occurs through the trauma of the realization of ipseity. Only through relationships can that ipseity begin to be resolved such that the child can become a fully actualized being (1970:79). Dialogical relationship is the solution to the perceived ethical and existential problem of the ambiguity and alienation occasioned by the isolated self.

I-Thou with God

Beginning with "The Holy Way" and fully developed in *I and Thou*, Buber refines and moves beyond his earlier construction of an extremely individualized faith (as articulated in the earliest collected writings included in *On Judaism* and his Hassidic writings) to speak of human divine relations and religion in terms of religious community and interpersonal relations. With *I and Thou*, Buber is explicit in articulating a correspondence between interpersonal relationships and the relationship between God and person. Human relationships have the paradigmatic pedagogical function of modeling the relationship one is to have with God. As such, Buber's understanding of the I-Thou relationship between persons is the prolegomena to his formulation of the dialogical relation between person and God. This close association is developed with increasing precision through the course of *I and Thou* and represents a crucial evolution in his thought *vis a vis* religion and relationship with God. In Buber's later thought this relationship will also be explored in terms of dialogue where Buber invokes and extends the formulation of the correlation between interpersonal relations and relations with God articulated in *I and Thou*: "The word of him who wishes to speak with men without speaking with God is not fulfilled; but the word of him who wishes to speak with God without speaking with men goes astray" (1974:33).

It is the linkages between human relationships and relationships with the divine that preoccupies Buber. In the 1957 "Afterword" of *I and Thou*, Buber explains that his "most essential concern" is with the "close association of the relation to God with the relation to one's fellow-men" (1970:171). As noted earlier, inspired by Feuerbach, dialogical relationship with others is at the heart of Buber's thought. However, Buber makes an important departure from Feuerbach's

conception in including life with God as one of the key relations. While Feuerbach restricted his understanding of relationship to human relationality and saw God as the outward projection of the human's inner nature, Buber expands his notion of relationship beyond human community to include relations with the world and objects in the world (I-It) and most importantly, to include relations with God (cf. William Kaufman, 1992:61). In *I and Thou* he initially elaborates the possible relations a person might have with the world and with other persons. Buber refers to relations with God throughout his work, but becomes most explicit at the close of *I and Thou*. Methodologically, Buber initially emphasizes the interpersonal relation in order to establish a sound foundation for his formulation of the person/God relation.

Language is particularly important for Buber's understanding of the relation with God. Although Heidegger argued that the sacred allows us to move towards dialogue, Buber argues that dialogue allows us to move toward the sacred (Levinas, 1994b:18). Despite this capacity of dialogue, our nature limits our ability to speak *with* the divine and we are often led instead to speak only *of* the divine. Buber regretfully notes that while "The eternal You is You by its very nature, only our nature forces us to draw it into the It-world and It-speech" (1970:148). The limitations of human speech are potentially problematic. Buber declares, "If to believe in God means to be able to talk about him in the third person, then I do not believe in God. If to believe in him means to be able to talk to him, then I believe in God" (1967b:24). Speaking in the first person requires engagement. Talking about God in the third person would limit one's relationship with God to an I-It relationship. An I-Thou relationship requires entering into dialogue with the other and being committed to that dialogue. By entering into that dialogue, a person is

transformed. The I-Thou encounter with God is permeated with meaning that is confirmed. "Nothing, nothing can henceforth be meaningless" (1970:158). This then is revelation, the meaning that emerges after the fullness of the I-Thou encounter. The revelation manifest in the I-Thou encounter cannot be willed to happen, it is a passive action where one chooses to approach the other silently —both will and grace are necessary. Both the relation with God and the relation with other persons are characterized by this dialogue, which transforms through meaning both the beholder and the beheld.

Every I-Thou encounter relates to the paradigmatic encounter with God (the eternal Thou) but what is so striking about Buber's analysis is that while one might expect relation with God to be the model for relation with humans, the inverse is true; it is interpersonal relation that provide the pattern and insights to being open to relation with God. Remarkably, every relation, even if it is "violence against a being one really confronts" is "a path which leads to God" (1970:75). It is dialogical encounter, even if manifest in a negative form, which occasions a threshold to the encounter with God. I-Thou relations with other persons are revealed as the potential avenue to relation with God. I-Thou encounters with persons are conduits to an I-Thou relation with God; the eternal Thou of God is glimpsed in the Thou of another person. Throughout Buber's work it is clear that the I-Thou relation is reciprocal and transformative. Reciprocity is also elemental to the I-Thou relation with God. Mutuality with God however requires the resolution and internalization of the paradoxical simultaneous absolute immanence and transcendence, and absolute inclusiveness and exclusiveness of God. In order to ascribe mutuality to the I-Thou relationship, one must attribute to God a form of personhood that can engage with a person.

> This contradiction is met by the paradoxical designation of God as
> the absolute person, that is one that cannot be relativized. It is as the
> absolute person that God enters into the direct relationship to us. The
> contradiction must give way to this higher insight... The existence of
> mutuality between God and man cannot be proved any more than the
> existence of God. Anyone who dares nevertheless to speak of it bears
> witness and invokes the witness of those who he address—present or
> future witness. (1970:181-182)

If God has the quality of "person-likeness"(1970:181), a type of mutuality becomes

possible. While a human person is ultimately dependent on God, it is clear that God

is in need of persons in order to engage in a reciprocal I-Thou encounter with

persons. Each participant in the I-Thou moment needs the other in creation. Here

the relations between the spheres ultimately becomes clear:

> The demanding silence of forms, the loving speech of human beings,
> the eloquent muteness of creatures—all of these are gateways into
> the presence of the word.
>
> But when the perfect encounter is to occur, the gates are unified into
> the one gate of actual life, and you no longer know through which one
> you have entered. (1970:150)

While the sphere of life with persons is the proper metaphor for the I/eternal Thou

relation (1970:151), all three spheres of relation lead to the I/eternal Thou relation

simply because the relation with God is the absolute, universal relation and is the

ground for all other relations.

The reciprocal relation of the self with another person, and the I-Thou

relation with God, can potentially extend into community. Buber explains that in

community persons must "stand in a living reciprocal relationship to a single living

centre, and they have to stand in a living, reciprocal relationship to one another"

(1970:151). The "single living centre" of community is God. It is not enough to live in

common or to exist in society, without a single living centre and without standing in

relation to each other, the group exists as a "severed I," a "golem" (1970:93).

Community then is much more than social relations; it is "both social context and

existential situation between persons" (Silberstein, 1989:179). Appropriate

communal relations are modeled on genuine interpersonal relations.

Ethics, Judaism and the Law

Buber's critical approach to questions about relationality, responsibility and justice

as not only moral questions but also religious questions, place his thought firmly in

the realm of modern Jewish philosophy. Levinas describes Buber's contribution to

Judaism and modern Jewish thought:

> The relation between persons and the priority of justice that this
> implies, justice elevated to the status not only of the moral, but also of
> the religious experience; morality receiving as an indirect
> consequence of the heteronomy of the meeting its supreme dignity;
> intelligence springing from the heteronomy which is the very relation
> between I and Other; philosophy as the very life of intelligence, the
> basis of which is not the adequate idea: all these traits bring Buber's
> thought close to a certain aspect of Judaism. And I will never go
> beyond this statement because I do not know how to summarize
> Judaism. Because I cannot—one cannot—summarize Judaism.
> (1994b:16-17)

Although this description is clearly coloured by Levinas' own analysis, this

statement is helpful in that it highlights Buber's tendency to express ideal ethical

relations in religious, and specifically Jewish, terms. In contrast with other modern

Jewish philosophers like Levinas, Fackenheim, and Rosenzweig, who also identify

strong correlations between Judaism and the ethical, Buber is most explicit in

disengaging ethics, even religious ethics, from the Jewish legal tradition. He does so

because of his deep concern that observance of religious law can come to substitute

reciprocal relation with God. Because Jewish ethics are normatively framed by

Jewish legal discourses, the question of how Buber distances or even disconnects

the traditionally close linkages between ethics, Judaism, and religious law, is very much at issue.

In order to flesh out this question, it is important to review how Buber arrives at his conclusions regarding how religious law may inhibit relation with God. Buber's antinomian position is well known but needs to be placed within the context of his engagement with Jewish mysticism because Buber's early mystical approach continues to influence his understanding of ethical relationship throughout his work. Buber's primary encounter with Jewish mysticism is specifically through his study of Hasidism. In Buber's account of Hasidism humans are radically responsible for their actions in the world. Rémi Brague notes that Buber often identifies Hasidism as "an attempt at 'worldly piety'" in that "Hasidism underlines the responsibility of every individual for part of the world with which he is charged" (2002:137). Humans can nurture divine sparks through their actions and come closer to God. In light of this understanding, Buber places enormous emphasis on the mystical paradigm of the transformative, effortless, spontaneous encounter with the divine. Buber is highly suspicious of any practice that might interrupt or impede that spontaneity. As we shall see, Buber views "Jewish Law, the *mitzvoth*, as a heteronymous imposition that shackles the Jew's spontaneous relationship to God" (Mendes-Flohr, 1982:24).

Buber's comprehensive vision of human responsibility in the world, and the need for immediacy and intimacy with the divine, is bound up with his social critique. It is "a correlate of his concern with the putative decline of man's spiritual and aesthetic sensibilities attendant to the rise of bourgeois *Zivilisation*" (Mendes-Flohr, 1989:49). In the same way that modern objectivist philosophical and social discourses lead to the objectification of other persons, the anxieties that underlie

these discourses can lead, in religious discourses, to the types of instrumental thinking and speaking that reduce God to an It. Additionally, modern dichotomizations of the secular and the sacred contributes to our being mired in the It world. As enacted by institutional religion, this separation of the sacred and the mundane fails to accomplish the only legitimate task of religion—that of bridging the abyss between humans and the divine—and further contribute to humanity's alienation. As such, institutional religion, by its very nature, poses a real danger of alienating humans from God in replacing real communion with dogmatism (c.f. Buber, 1960:94).

Buber's antinomian position depends at least in part on his understanding of revelation. Buber describes revelation as "man's emerging from the moment of the supreme encounter, being no longer the same as he was when entering into it"(1970:157). In his view, religious law is an expression of the human desire for comprehensive system. Because of this desire, humans attempt to institutionalize experience of the I-Thou in order to sustain that transformative event. Unfortunately, law is unable, in and of itself, to sustain the immediate, intimate, transformative effects of dialogical relationship with God. Law and doctrines, as modes of religious thinking, can only speak *of* God. In this way, God becomes a cult object. Buber explains this process:

> ...the cult, too, gradually becomes a substitute, as the personal prayer
> is no longer supported but rather pushed aside by communal prayer;
> and as the essential deed simply does not permit any rules, it is
> supplanted by devotions that follow rules. (1970:162)

Thus Buber denies the institutional authority of Jewish law as it is systematized in Halakha but would not deny the authority of the divine imperatives recorded in Halakha as long as those imperatives are personally heard in immediate dialogical relationship with the divine. More seriously for Buber, the legislation that emerges

in response to the theophany may distort the representation of the dialogical relation to such a degree that it risks foreclosing the possibility of being open to future divine addresses. Buber intuits that religious observance, through dogmatism, may replace, or worse preclude, spontaneous relation with God. When religious practice and observance fails to contribute to our ability to relate to God, that practice is without meaning and may in fact inhibit our ability to encounter God. This radical antinomian position is best expressed in a 1924 letter to Franz Rosenzweig, where Buber writes,

> I do not believe that revelation is ever a formulation of the law. It is only through man in his self-contradiction that revelation becomes legislation ... I cannot admit the law transformed by man into the realm of my will, if I am to hold myself ready as well for the unmediated word of God directed to a specific hour of life... though man is a law-receiver, God is not a law giver, and therefore the Law has no universal validity for me, but only a personal one. I accept, therefore, only what I think is being spoken to me..."(1991:315)

Buber's intention here is clarified by his explanation in the essay "Religion and Ethics"[17] where he explains the explicit connection between the ethical and the religious in the commands given at Sinai. "All the prescriptions of this body of rules, both the ritual and the ethical, are intended to lead people beyond themselves into the sphere of the 'holy'" (1957:104). Revelation is not law giving but teaching. Buber's emphasis on the ways in which the divine speech at Sinai is intended to "raise...the human people, to the sphere where the ethical merges into the religious, or rather where the difference between the ethical and the religious is suspended in the breathing-space of the divine" (1957:104) establishes a distinction that might seem foreign to many Jews. Jewish teaching emphatically describes God as a

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[17] "Religion and Ethics" is based at least in part on a lecture given in 1929 in Frankfurt and was published in *Eclipse of God* in 1952.

lawgiver. God gives not only the written law of Torah at Sinai, but traditional Jews also assert that God gave the Oral law there as well. Even liberal Jews who understand that law is based on a human interpretation of revelation still understand that authentic religious imperatives can be heard in the law. The point for Buber is that the imperative is not legal but spiritual. Buber explains the formal difference between the two in his discussion of revelation in *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*:

> God speaks to man in the things and beings that He sends him in life;
> and man answers through his action in relation to just these things
> and beings. All specific service of God has its meaning only in the ever
> renewed preparation and hallowing for this communion with God in
> the world. (1960:94)

This statement begs the question of what in Jewish tradition and law does *not* prepare and sanctify us for communion with God in the world? For both traditional and liberal Jews alike, observance of the law is precisely the type of service that Buber describes. Buber would clearly agree that observance of the law *can* be legitimated if it is engendered through the I-Thou encounter for the individual autonomous person. He would disagree in that he would argue that no legal obligation is authoritative unless it is heard in the dialogical relation—and in fact slavish observance of the law may impede the I-Thou relation.

It follows that Buber absolutely validates the option to dissent from religious law. He categorically rejects the power of law to obligate individual persons. His understanding of the I-Thou relationship wholly informs his interpretation of the role of law in Judaism. Buber argues that law cannot compel observance. Heteronymous commandment cannot obligate the person as if the I were an It because meaning can only be manifest in the specific personal I-Thou encounter. While the I-Thou encounter can continue to inform one's existence even after it has

passed, the original I-Thou encounter must occur for that individual person for

it to have any power. As Buber states in treatment of revelation in *I and Thou*:

> the meaning itself cannot be transferred or expressed as a universally
> valid and generally acceptable piece of knowledge, putting it to the
> proof in action cannot be handed on as a valid ought... no prescription
> can lead us to the encounter and none leads from it. (1970:159)

Law cannot initiate or provide a foundation for the I-Thou encounter, and further

the I-Thou encounter cannot initiate or justify law.

This position has profound ethical implications. This understanding implies

that universal ethics, such as Kant's, cannot compel the individual. In "Dialogue,"

his clearest articulation of responsibility, Buber demands that

> The idea of responsibility is to be brought back from the province of
> specialized ethics, of an "ought" that swings free in the air, into that
> of lived life. Genuine responsibility exists only where there is real
> responding. (1974:34-35)

Real response happens as speech in the dialogical relation. "Responsibility which

does not respond to a word is a metaphor of morality"(1974:35). Genuine dialogue,

where the self is transformed and continues to be transformed long after the

encounter has passed; where in that dialogue one hears not only the other, but

where one also hears God in that encounter; this is the genuine dialogue which

engenders ethical responsibility. Love is active, it is the transformative

"responsibility of an I for a You" (1970:66). In entering into the I-Thou relationship

one recognizes this responsibility for another in that one learns the specific and

particular worth of the other we apprehend only in genuine mutual relation. The

profoundly transformative effect of the I-Thou relation continues to influence us

even after the I-Thou moment has passed. Ethical responsibility retains its ability

to compel us even after the transformative I-Thou moment has passed. Ethically,

this understanding places the onus of ethical choice and responsibility firmly with the person; it cannot be founded on law.

• FEMINIST CRITIQUE•

Of all the thinkers considered in this project, it is in the thought of Martin Buber that we find some of the most natural congruencies between a posited ethical model and the aims of feminist and Jewish feminist ethics. Buber's thought provides tremendous opportunities for the development of feminist and Jewish feminist ethics particularly in light of his interest in relationship as the location of the ethical. Feminists since the time of Simone Beauvoir's *Second Sex* have been concerned with the positioning of woman as Other in society, political culture and philosophical discourses. Feminists have long argued that the ascription of alterity to woman has served to describe and prescribe the marginalization of women. Ethical models that either overtly or subvertly reify that alterity discursively participate in the perpetuation of that marginalization. An ethical philosophy that values the Other as an essential participant in ethical praxis, such as Buber presents, might very well be the *sine qua non* of a feminist ethic. Additionally, Buber's extension of interpersonal ethics to community-based understandings of justice can be correlated with the models proposed by many feminists in terms of social justice theory (e.g. Young, 1997). Additionally, there are very few overt problems with a feminist or Jewish feminist appropriation of Buber's thought. With few exceptions, despite misleading English translations of the original German, Buber's use of language is rarely androcentric and is in fact, generally notably

inclusive of women.[18] His position on Jewish law is remarkably amenable to Jewish feminist critiques. Finally, he consistently reflects the most positive attitudes of the Jewish tradition towards marriage and sexuality. Each of these factors, suggest Buber as a powerful inspiration for the development of feminist and Jewish feminist ethics.

Although feminist thinkers have devoted relatively little attention to Buber, Buber's thought provides important opportunities for the development of feminist ethics and feminist theology. As in the thought of other modern Jewish philosophers such as Levinas and Fackenheim, an understanding of human relationship to God is intertwined with ethics in Buber's thought. In light of this inviolate connection, it is impossible to meaningfully address Buber's ethics without respecting the theological connections between relationship with the divine and human ethical behaviour. This theological dimension does pose a problem for the development of feminist ethics in that feminist ethics, like western philosophical ethics, does not necessarily depend on a theological justification or worldview.[19] In contrast with feminist ethics, Jewish feminist ethics does proceed from a theological model where ethics cannot meaningfully be separated from the tradition's understanding of humanity's relationship with God. As such, feminist ethics will hear Buber's ethical voice in a very different way than Jewish feminist ethics will. Despite these important

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[18] Laurence J. Silberstein notes the problem of misleading translations of both the texts and the titles of Buber's work in the translation of *mensch* to man. *Mensch*, as Silberstein correctly notes, is better translated as human or person. However in most cases, *mensch* is translated as "man," giving rise to such erroneously translated titles as *Between Man and Man, The Way of Man, Hasidism and Modern Man, The Knowledge of Man.* Silberstein concludes optimistically "In future translations these problems should be corrected and the titles changed to Between Person and Person, The Human Way, and Hassidism and the Modern Person. This, I am convinced, would be fully consistent with Buber's thought, which is devoted to helping all persons —male and female—to actualize their unique potential." (1989:xvii-xviii)

[19] Buber's emphasis on God within his ethics may be one of the reasons that feminists have so rarely engaged his thought.

epistemological and teleological differences, both feminist ethics in general, and Jewish feminist ethics in particular, should avail themselves of the opportunities found within Buber's thought.

Women in Buber's Thought

Buber's writing rarely evinces androcentric tendencies and it would be difficult to point to an example of overt misogyny in his thought. Although he clearly writes as a masculine subject, his language is surprisingly inclusive and he often takes pains to specify that he is speaking not only of humans or persons in general, but that he is also speaking about women as well as men. For this reason, it is particularly unfortunate that Buber's thought, which is often so refreshingly precisely inclusive of gender, has been so poorly translated as to artificially introduce androcentric language into English translations of his work. For most English readers, this error has obfuscated Buber's real interest in speaking about persons.

Although it is important for a feminist critical reading of a philosophical text to read what a philosopher actually says about women as women, reading for gender involves much more than looking for female representations. As Susan E. Shapiro notes in "A Matter for Discipline: Reading for Gender in Jewish Philosophy,"

> To read for metaphors of "woman," "body," "gender relations," or
> sexuality" is not to read for some actual woman or women that the
> text, somehow, represents. Nor does reading for gender mean reading
> as an "essentialized" woman reader who, as a woman, can
> (supposedly) locate the "feminine" stratum of the text. Rather to read
> for gender is to read for constructions and performances of gender in

> these texts with an interest in their consequences, both within
> these texts and for readers today. That is, the work performed by
> these gendered tropes will be found to be philosophical, requiring a
> rethinking of what we understand philosophical texts to be and how
> they, therefore, may best be read. (1997:158-159)

Preliminary questions about the representations of women in Buber's thought in terms of embodiedness, marriage and sexuality demonstrate that how these themes are developed do not occur in isolation from the rest of Buber's thought. How gendered tropes emerge in these texts is inevitably bound up with philosophical questions about the nature of human existence, interpersonal relations, and relationship with God, and of course, ethics. Because these tropes intersect and ground foundational philosophical statements about the nature of human existence, gender can be used as an internal litmus test for philosophical and ethical consistency.

Embodiedness

I have pointed to the body and embodiment as an area that is of particular interest for this project. Feminists are interested in the ways in which the body is rehearsed in normative cultural narratives because women have traditionally been associated with the body in ways that are dialectically opposed to the ways in which men have associated themselves with the mind and/or the spirit. Further, attitudes towards embodiedness within western philosophical thought are often a first indication of embedded misogyny and androcentrism within a particular philosophical model. Elizabeth Spelman outlines this dynamic as a potentially vicious circle:

> For when one recalls that the Western philosophical tradition has not
> been noted for its celebration of the body, and that women's nature
> and women's lives have long been associated with the body and bodily
> functions, then a question is suggested. What connections might there

be between attitudes toward the body and attitudes towards
women? (1999:33)

Spelman continues to argue that what a philosopher says about the mind/body
distinction reverberates throughout their thought; it informs the thinker's
metaphysical, political and ethical views and these views are themselves
inextricably linked with the thinker's understanding of women. Spelman's thesis is
unquestionably confirmed when applied to Buber's work. There is a profound
connection between Buber's understanding of the relationship between mind and
body and the development of his metaphysical, political and ethical thought because
each of these areas of his thought are shaped by his understanding of the I-Thou
relationship. In turn, Buber's positive view of women can be linked to his rejection
of mind/body dualism in his conception of human existence as embodied.

Buber's characterization of human existence as embodied is notable. For
Buber, the physicality of the self is an essential feature of the human being's
existential encounter with the world. In his discussion of the impact of the Moon as
a "motor stimulus" upon the "primitive" self he explains that the embodied self
encounters the world relationally, "Only then does it become possible for the You
that originally could not be an object of experience, being simply endured, to be
reified and become a He or a She" (1970:71). The primordial bodily experience is one
that is "naturally" relational; the experience of embodiedness is prior to the
experience of self.

> The original drive for "self"-preservation is no more accompanied by
> any I-consciousness than any other drive. What wants to propagate
> itself is not the I but the body that does not yet know of any I. Not the
> I but the body wants to make things, tools, toys, wants to be
> "inventive." (1970:73)

The body is not merely an animalistic shell shaping human instincts and desires.
Whereas the body may be prior to self-consciousness, our experience of being a self

is inextricably bound up with our lived experience as embodied persons. I would assert that this understanding of human existence as embodied is essential to the development of any feminist ethic that is interested in articulating a theory of justice that accounts for gender.

In light of Buber's elucidation of human existence as embodied, it is unsurprising that he is explicit that the ethical meeting between I and Thou occurs between an embodied self and another Thou. As such, the meeting between the I and Thou is not merely intellectual, cognitive or spiritual. The Thou one encounters might be found in nature, be an object of art, it might be God (the eternal Thou), or it might be another embodied person. In describing how an encounter with an artistic creation might become an I-Thou encounter, Buber contrasts experiencing the creation as an object with a bodily confrontation: "The created work is a thing among things and can be experienced and described as an aggregate of qualities. But the receptive beholder may be bodily confronted now and again" (1970:61). Buber's emphasis on bodily encounter is a way for him to stress several important elements including immediacy, presence, and most importantly, human experience. Buber's philosophy draws on that experience to require that we understand the meeting in the most concrete terms. By insisting on embodiedness, Buber's writing subverts an understanding of the meeting as mere metaphor and emphasizes the necessity of presence and immediacy in the encounter. The bodily experience of beholding the creation, or as being physically impacted by the encounter with the creation is clearly aligned with I-Thou relation. "But the It-humanity that some imagine, postulate, and advertise has nothing in common with the bodily humanity to which a human being can truly say You" (1970:65). Again and again, Buber contrasts a bodily encounter with the Thou with I-It. "The I of the basic world I-It,

the I that is not bodily confronted by a You but surrounded by a multitude of 'contents', has only a past and no presence" (1970:63). We encounter the world through our bodily senses and Buber clearly states that the bodily encounter is prerequisite in the movement from I-It, to I-Thou and to I-It again. Emphasizing embodiedness is not only a matter of stressing immediacy, but is a clear enunciation of embodiedness as an essential element of human existence that is inseparable from the human's dialogical nature. This point is also strategically important for the development of feminist ethics. Linking existence as embodied with the assertion that humans are relational challenges at the deepest level androcentric accounts of the solitary thinking moral subject.

Since Buber is clear in stressing that the I-Thou encounter is embodied, it is interesting that noticing embodiedness, that is, noticing the particular features of the other's body, signifies that one is no longer in the moment of the meeting:

> The human being who but now was unique and devoid of qualities,
> not at hand but only present, not experienceable, only touchable, has
> again become a He or She, an aggregate of qualities, a quantum with
> a shape. Now I can again abstract from him the colour of his hair, of
> his speech, of his graciousness; but as long as I can do that he is my
> You no longer and not yet again.
>
> Every You in the world is doomed by its nature to become a thing or
> at least to enter into thinghood again and again. (1970:69)

Buber is not suggesting that it is embodiedness that prevents the sustainability of the I-Thou encounter; the nature of the Thou to "enter into thinghood" is not triggered by embodiment. Rather, this predisposition for the I-Thou relation to recede into an I-It relation is a function of the impossibility of sustaining the intense, exclusive immediacy that constitutes the meeting. Still, this question of noticing embodiment is important. One of the insights that feminist theorists offer about discursive practices that surround the female body is the lack of "due

recognition of the specificity of women's bodies, sexual difference as lived"
(Riley, 1999:220). In light of this practice—which is manifest not only in popular
discourses but also particularly in philosophical discourses—how should we
understand Buber's move here? On one level I read Buber on his own terms. That is,
that the noticing of specificity here is the distraction caused by abstracting a person
into parts. From a feminist point of view this might imply a philosophical claim
about the objectification of persons' bodies—clearly a sensibility that is congruent
with feminist aims. However, because this move is seemingly incongruous given
Buber's repeated claims about the embodied nature of human existence, I also can't
help but read this as signalling an extremely subtle discomfort with embodiment
that may point to a residual disconnection between self and body. A human woman
has particular eyes, and breasts, and hips that are essential to her specific self-
identity. Buber is correct that the I-Thou is necessarily interrupted when one
notices these physical features as part of an aggregate of qualities. What is missing,
in terms of the development of a feminist ethic that understands embodiment as an
essential category of ethical analysis, is the explicit affirmation that one encounters
the Thou as a fleshly and particular embodied person whose specificity is marked by
the body.

Buber's bodies are rarely carnal or voluptuous. They are most often virtually
androgynous. He speaks of body parts that are common to both sexes like hair and
eyes. He discusses physical phenomena almost always without reference to
gendered experiences of physicality. The details of biological distinctions between
the sexes are largely unnoticed and unspecified. In his effort to articulate
embodiment, the particular body slips away from view; specific bodies become
bodies in general, bodies without sex or gender. Read in light of feminist body

theory, this generalized body is highly troubling because it assumes a relatively static, uncontextualized, essentialized body. In "Bodies and Biology," Lynda Birke investigates how thinking of the body as transformative can enhance our understanding of the body. She argues, "Living the body means experiencing it as transformable, not only as cultural meanings/readings, but also within itself"(1999:45). She questions how the experience of physiological embodiedness shifts and transforms according to cultural norms and expectations. Similarly Grosz reminds us of the importance of thinking about the body in terms of its particularity because there is no generalized body, "there is no body as such: there are only bodies —male and female, black, brown, white, large or small and gradations in between" (1995:19). But there is a problem with these assertions. Bibi Bakare-Yusuf criticizes the way that feminist theorists pay "attention to the body" in ways that are "mere flirtations with the idea of the lived body where the experience of lived bodies is constituted as a metaphor that is 'good to think with' (1999:312). In light of these observations that emerge from the social scientific study of the body, I would argue that they lead to a conclusion that is ethically compelling: We need to go beyond "flirting" and "thinking" with the body if we are to develop feminist ethics that include the body as a serious category of ethical analysis. Accounts of the universal body, especially when they are made in philosophical discourses, should be interrogated for the same reasons that feminists resist accounts of the universal knowing subject—namely that these accounts are substitutive and distortive.

My interpretation of this relative silence about gendered bodies in Buber's writings is also framed by the insights provided by Denise Riley in her discussion of the challenges posed by a historical sociological description of the body:

> A chain of unease remains: that anyone's body is—the
> classifications of anatomy apart—only periodically either lived or
> treated as sexed, therefore the gendered division of human life into
> bodily life cannot be adequate or absolute. Only at times will the body
> impose itself or be arranged as that of a woman or a man. So that if
> we set out to track the bodies of women in history, we would assume
> in advance that which we really needed to catch, instead, on the
> wings of its formulation ... For the impress of history as well as of
> individual temporality is to establish the body itself as lightly or
> heavily gendered, or as indifferent, and for that to run in and out of
> the eye of 'the social.' (1999:222)

The problem of describing the body philosophically mirrors the problems described by Riley. I would also add that the gendered embodiment of the subject in philosophical discourses can elide analysis because how bodies perform (or fail to exhibit) gender operates along a continuum of gendered bodily experiences. Even if we could have a historical or philosophical account of the body that focused on cataloguing the sex and gender differences of bodies, we can end up with essentialized depictions that are no more helpful than the absence of bodies. As readers, we are also faced with the problem that it is the gaze of the philosopher who frames our view of gendered embodiment in their thought. It is Buber the philosopher who selectively turns his gaze towards differently gendered examples of the body or turns his gaze completely away. But if the experience of the body is highly conditioned by cultural meanings and is further transformable within itself (as Riley suggests), and the body is the site of the ethical encounter (as Buber insists), then despite the difficulties that such accounts pose our narrative about that corporeal ethical encounter must develop and proceed from a hermeneutic of embodiment that is nuanced, flexible, and thick.

Buber's relative silence about particularly gendered bodies does not mean that Buber does not incorporate androcentric or ethnocentric tropes in his depiction of actual women and men. Buber's appreciation of such potential pitfalls is difficult

to ascertain. In his discussion of the "primitive" experience, he does seem to be conscious of the cultural construction of bodily experiences. However, his choice of "primitive" culture as the site of a *different* experience, as well as his suggestion that women can be described as envoys of elemental life, suggests an uncritical internalization of a universal masculine culturally specific subject. As much as Buber wants to speak of the specific and particular self and Thou in egalitarian terms, Buber seems to inadvertently slip into normative descriptions, which reinforce the alterity of the Other. It is ironic that this appears to happen when Buber is trying to be most inclusive in his descriptions of a variety of experiences and a multiplicity of experiences of the meeting. As we shall shortly see, he is most likely to focus on women's reproductive capacity and autochthonous nature in his discussion of women's bodies and marriage. It may follow that such ethnocentric and androcentric tropes in Buber's description reflects a limitation of the phenomenological gaze that is inevitably grounded in a particular experience of the self as gendered and culturally signified. I would argue that this is in fact what is happening; Buber is speaking in a particular, gendered, culturally constructed voice. As such, this problem, or potential problem is not structural; it is not a problem of how embodiedness can *possibly* be signified in his thought. Rather, it is a limitation of a situated description; constrained by its own original embodied, enculturated, gendered, posture. Feminists are equally subject to this limitation. As such, feminist ethics can only offer the corrective of opening up spaces for multivocal narratives for this problem.

Marriage As Paradigm

Buber's understanding of embodiedness as a condition of the self's encounter with the Thou undergirds his discussion of marriage. Buber's idealized description of marriage provides us important insight into Buber's view of women because his thought is most often concerned with persons as persons. Buber begins with the premise that the marital relationship that he describes is an ethical relationship. Therefore, for Buber, the ethical marital relationship is contrasted, in conjunction with all other genuine I-Thou relationships, with I-It relationships. Since he is primarily interested in the connections between the I-Thou relationship with God and ethical I-Thou relationships with other humans, Buber's emphasis is largely on ethical relationships when he discusses marriage. It is therefore not surprising that Buber's emphasis on marital relationships as I-Thou relationships results in a largely positive view of the participants in these relationships. Correspondingly, Buber's discussion of women in marital relationships presents women in a favourable, if not idealized, light.

One of the best sources for consideration of how Buber views marriage is in his essay "Question to the Single One" which criticizes Soren Kierkegaard's ethical/religious model of the Single One as articulated in *Works of Love*. Kierkegaard is specifically hostile to the erotic relationship and is antagonistic towards the marital relationship because he contrasts erotic and romantic relationships as self-interested relationships with the ideal selfless love of God. In critiquing Kierkegaard's emphasis on the relationship with God to the exclusion of other relationships such as marriage, Buber reveals his own view of the marriage

relationship; if the marital relationship is an I-Thou relationship it is absolutely valued.

Buber emphasizes that to love another human cannot detract from one's potential engagement in an I-Thou relationship with God. He advocates a love orientation towards God that is simultaneously exclusive and inclusive. "Exclusive love to God ('with all your heart') is, because he is God, inclusive love, ready to accept and include all love" (1974:73). Buber bases this rejection of Kierkegaard's formulation of exclusivity on an affirmation that humans are creatures, created by God and therefore can not be an obstacle to relationship with God (1974:73). He explains the need to, "apply this to our relations with creatures: only when all relations, uncurtailed, are taken into the one relations, do we set the ring of our life's world round the sun of our being"(1974:76). Our relationship with God should be at the centre of our relationship with other persons, informing them and grounding them, but Buber always insists that an ethical relationship with God requires ethical relationships with other creatures. Buber rejects Kierkegaard's notion that our primary and most authentic ethical relationship is with God.[20] Buber states unequivocally, "I am forbidden to speak essentially only with God and myself" (1974:78). The relationship with God is the central relationship that embraces and defines all other authentic relationships with other creatures.

> Human representations of the relation change, the truth of the
> relation is unchangeable because it stands in eternal mutuality; it is
> not man who defines his approach to it but the creator who in the
> unambiguity of man's creation has instituted the approach. (1974:75)

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[20] Buber underestimates in this essay the importance of other authentic relationships with humans for Kierkegaard who argues that love of God must be judged by its fruits, i.e. our ethical relationships with other humans. The more important distinction is that for Kierkegaard relations to humans must always go through God. Buber explicitly specifies that human relationships are not necessarily predicated on a prior relationship with the divine.

The structure of the I-Thou relation is primordial and eternal. The model for relationship itself is initiated with creation where we humans, women and men, are created as relational, dialogical beings.

Because Buber is responding to Kierkegaard's argument in *Works of Love* he must also respond to Kierkegaard's rather strident anti-sexual and anti-female rhetoric. Buber's reply includes a variety of statements about how relationships with women do not impede relationship with the divine. Referring to Kierkegaard's rejection of his fiancé Regina in order to devote himself to relationship with God, Buber powerfully declares, "God wants us to come to him by means of the Reginas he has created, and not by renunciation of them" (1974:73). While Buber comes close to objectifying women by speaking of them as a category, his uses of the category "Reginas" is a fairly good corrective gesture for this potential problem by insisting on the specificity of named women. For Buber, a woman, or a love relationship with a woman, is not an obstacle to relationship with God but is rather the proper preparation for relationship with God. A love relationship with a woman is an "essential relation" which is appropriate for all humans for all times because love relationships, when genuine, are paradigmatic of the I-Thou relationship with God. The potential problem is if woman is merely a means for this accomplishment. However, I think it is clear that Buber does not imagine women as a mere means especially in light of his description of the I-Thou relation in *I and Thou* where he specifically and consistently speaks of both male and female participants in the meeting.

Buber understands yet rejects Kierkegaard's anxiety about woman's earthly finitude being an impediment to relationship with God. Buber makes two statements regarding women's connection to the world. The first, made in his

introductory paragraph, distinguishes Kierkegaard's status as the "single one"

and his relationship to Regina, from other solitary Christian thinkers like

Augustine and Pascal and their relationships to the influential women in their lives:

> His "single one" cannot be understood without his solitariness, which
> differed in kind from the solitariness of the earlier Christian thinkers,
> such as Augustine or Pascal, whose name one would like to link with
> his. It is not irrelevant that beside Augustine stood a mother and
> beside Pascal a sister, who maintained the organic connection with
> the world as only a woman as the envoy of elemental life can; whereas
> the central event of Kierkegaard's life and the core of the
> crystallization of his thought was the renunciation of Regina Olsen as
> representing woman and the world. (1974:60)

His second statement, made during the heart of his argument and directed solely at

Kierkegaard, makes an important qualification that it is from the male perspective

that women can be regarded in this way:

> Expressed with a view to the man, the woman certainly stands 'in
> dangerous rapport to finitude', and finitude is certainly the danger,
> for nothing threatens us so sharply that we remain clinging to it. But
> our hope of salvation is forged on this very danger, for our human way
> to the infinite leads only through fulfilled finitude. (1974:84)

While in the first statement it appears as though he is indeed affirming women's

autochthonous nature, the qualification in the second statement seems to imply an

internal contradiction in Buber's argument. In the second statement, it appears that

Buber is not affirming that women are ontologically more bound to the world than

men are. He seems to be arguing that male perception of women's particularly

embodied grounding in the finite world through sexuality, childbearing and

childcare, reflects an essentially human and necessary path towards God. Buber's

acceptance of Kierkegaard's association of woman with the world is somewhat

disturbing in that this type of argument has historically been used to deny women's

ensoulment, rationality, and spiritual capacity. However, his qualification that this

is a male view, somewhat mitigates the problem in that Buber opens up the

possibility of a non-androcentric view—even if he is not the one to voice it. Although I think this interpretation of the latter statement is the most fair reading of Buber's rejection of Kierkegaard's argument regarding woman as earthly/earthy, we are still left with the problem posed by Buber's initial statement about Kierkegaard's status as the single one. The difference between these two statements involves two separate issues. First, the earlier statement is unqualified. Second, the earlier statement does not invoke the idea that this posited female connection to the world is dangerous—if anything women have contributed to the world by nurturing the intellectual geniuses of Augustine and Pascal. In light of Buber's general disinterest in making essential claims about women's nature in his work as a whole, I would suggest that the first statement is also qualified in that women, through their potential bodily experience for reproduction, have the capacity for an "organic connection with the world" that men do not share. In doing so, Buber seems to be appealing to some form of generic female experience of embodiedness, which is gendered only in its alterity, where woman as Other than man is at least partially described in terms of her reproductive potential. This reading reflects Buber's other discussions in *I and Thou* and several of the essays collected in *Between Man and Man* where he invokes the idea of embodiedness as a feature of human existence and necessary for a complete understanding of the encounter of dialogical relation. Since Buber does not make further gestures towards moving towards a gendered biologically essentialist view of woman, I believe that his intention is descriptive rather than prescriptive. That description is still of course a problem.

Buber is explicit in his valuation of the marital relationship. The marital relationship brings one into relationship with creation, the world. Beyond this, the marital relationship connects the self to society. Buber declares in one of his most

powerful statements: "If the ethical is the only means by which God communicates with man then I am forbidden to speak essentially only with God and myself" (1974:78). If responsibility is engendered in the mutual encounter between persons and between person and God, it is immoral to isolate oneself from relations with other persons. The marital relation presupposes society with other creatures and as such denies any possibility of rejecting the obligation one has to other persons.

> 'He who has entered on marriage', who has entered into marriage, has been in earnest, in the intention of the sacrament, with the fact that the other is; with the fact that I cannot legitimately share in the Present Being without sharing in the being of the other; with the fact that I cannot answer the lifelong address of God to me without answering at the same time for the other; with the fact that I cannot be answerable without being at the same time answerable for the other as who is entrusted to me. (1974:83)

The marriage relationship can now be seen as one side of an I-Thou relationship with God. An isolated person who is not in an essential relation to another person cannot enter into relationship with God. Although Buber does not go so far as to say that one must be married, this model cannot be viewed without understanding it against a cultural background of compulsive heterosexuality. Undeniably, this exemplary presentation of heterosexual marriage is wholly consonant with a Jewish understanding of the primacy of marriage for the human being. Even as the Rabbis could not imagine a healthy, ethical and spiritual life without marriage, Buber cannot imagine an isolated life. It is important to note that Buber does not merely insist on marriage or condemn the unmarried as irrevocably closed off from ethical relationship. People must engage in authentic relationships and must not be isolated. If a person is not isolated, it seems clear that being unmarried is not an ethical problem. Yet marriage has a particular power for Buber. "Marriage is the exemplary bond, it carries us as does no other into the greater bondage, and only as

those who are bound can we reach the freedom of the children of God" (1974:84).

Marriage links us more closely with other persons and with God. For Buber, the Beloved in the I-Thou romantic relationship is not effaced. "When a man loves a woman so that her life is present in his own, the You of her yes allows him to gaze into a ray of the eternal You" (1970:154). But even if the Beloved is not effaced, we are left without any account of the female lover gazing at her Beloved. The description is always from the point of view of the masculine subject. Still, for Buber, any I-Thou relationship, including the marital I-Thou relationship opens oneself up to relationship with God and as such women are not formally excluded or marginalized in this relationship. Further, while marriage has the ability to bring us into relationship with God, it seems that God also maintains and empowers the marital relationship through the I-Thou relationship.

> Marriage can never be renewed except by that which is always the
> source of all true marriage: that two human beings reveal the You to
> one another. It is of this that the You that is I for neither of them
> builds a marriage. (1970:95)

This mutual revelation of God, "The You that is I for neither of them," is the foundation of marriage.

Following from traditional rabbinic Jewish understandings of marriage, Buber is overwhelmingly positive towards marriage and therefore sexuality. He is however critical about self-centred eroticism which occurs outside an ethical relationship. He asks rhetorically,

> Indeed, take the much discussed eroticism of our age and subtract
> everything that is really egocentric -in other words, every relationship
> in which one is not at all present to the other, but each uses the other
> only for self-enjoyment -what would remain? (1970:95)

Buber is in no way condemning sexuality as egocentric, rather he is railing against an objectification of the other for sexual gratification. Objectification of the other is

the ethical danger in erotic relationships (and indeed in all relationships); it is a pathos of self-interested eroticism. Interestingly, even when an erotic relationship overwhelms and deceives the participants momentarily, Buber does not denounce the erotic. In comparing the ecstatic person and the lovers who are overwhelmed by their passion, Buber shows how even though one may imagine that the I-Thou is dissolved into a unity of being, the terms of the I-Thou remain independent and distinct. If anything, Buber describes this phenomenon in a sympathetic and glowing manner, "the rapturous dynamics of the relationship not a unity that has come into being at this moment in world time, fusing I and You..." (1970:135). Buber neither mocks the experience nor warns against it. Buber opens up another relational space within ethical relationships through his description of a relationship that is simultaneously ethical, sexual, and romantic. The anxiety about selfish sexual gratification that is present in Buber reflects western cultural and Jewish anxieties about the power of sexuality to lead us into immorality and sin. Even though Buber has a highly ambivalent relationship to rabbinic Judaism in terms of legal and doctrinal observance, I would still argue that (especially in contrast with Kierkegaard ascetic impulse) we see clearly in Buber the Jewish affirmation of sexuality when properly expressed in marriage. Legitimate sexuality is, for Judaism, a mode of being which is expressed ethically. The laws of Onah, which require the wife's sexual satisfaction and consent, demand ethical treatment of the spouse. While Buber would never accept that legislation could ensure an ethical orientation, it is clear that he has internalized an acceptance that marriage, when engaged in correctly, is an ethical relationship. When Buber is comfortable with the sexual marital relationship, the result is an overwhelmingly positive presentation of women as mutual, authentic, lovers and partners.

From the above discussions it is abundantly clear that Buber fully attributes moral agency to women within the context of marriage if we accept Buber's claims about the I-Thou relation as being ethical, reciprocal, and mutual. Nowhere in his writings do we find the suggestion that women suffer from any disability that might impede their participation in ethical relationship. In *I and Thou*, Buber consistently affirms that a woman can equally be a Thou in the I-Thou relationship:

> When I confront a human being as my You and speak the basic I-You to him, then he is no thing among things nor does he consist of things.
>
> He is no longer He or She, limited by other Hes and Shes; a dot in the world grid of space and time, nor a condition that can be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities. Neighbourless and seamless, he is You and fills the firmament. Not as if there was nothing but he; but everything else lives in his light. (1970:59)

Although the gendered language here is somewhat confusing, it is clear that in specifying "She" as the female Thou, Buber, as in countless other instances, is explicitly including women as potential, actual, and necessary, participants in ethical relationship.

Jewish Feminism and the Law

From a Jewish feminist perspective, Buber's de-emphasis of religious law as the primary determinant of moral and religious behaviour within his ethic is helpful but also problematic. As Jewish law describes and prescribes many of the religious, cultural and legal disabilities to which Jewish women are subject, Buber's antinomian position helpfully suggests ways to evade these problems by curtailing the power of the law to prescribe behaviour. Such an evasion is problematic in that is it an evasion, and does not necessarily offer us a solution for the embeddedness of

patriarchal, androcentric and sometimes misogynist tendencies within Judaism as a whole. More seriously, one can argue that Buber's approach fails to provide any insight into negotiating with the law for those who reject his antinomian position and wish to work within the legal framework of traditional Judaism.

In examining this area of his thought it will be useful to examine several of the arguments made by Lori Krafte-Jacobs in her discussion of Buber in *Feminism and Modern Jewish Theological Method*. Krafte-Jacobs' analysis represents a rare feminist critique of Buber and an even rarer Jewish feminist systematic engagement with his thought. Krafte-Jacobs describes Buber's theological method as "hybrid," basing Judaism equally on the sometime clashing cornerstone values of God and Israel, and placing Torah in a derivative position. Her conclusion is that such a hybrid method is ultimately inadequate for "grounding the changes feminist Jews know to be necessary"(1996:119). She argues that although such an approach is appropriately holistic, it fails to provide a prioritized method that is needed to resolve competing claims and "safeguard what is most important to us"(1996: 120).

Krafte-Jacobs argues that Buber's antinomian position, based on the dialogical relation, means that one is essentially autonomous in determining what is revelation and what one is required to do ethically:

> Where the ultimate authority is one's own hearing of the divine voice, women are freed from oppressive beliefs and practices imposed on them at the prerogative of a religious power elite that "hears" for everyone. This is no small gain. In addition, and more positively, Buber's method enables women (not only women, of course) to find that self-validation that comes from autonomous decision-making regarding what is and is not revelatory, that is, from the private defining, experiencing and expressing of spiritual encounter. For women unaccustomed to total freedom and responsibility in the religious realm, this method can certainly appear liberating. (1996:103-104)

According to this reading, Buber's response is liberating not only to women but also to those persons who, like many Reform Jews, already have an understanding of the law as being historically conditioned and constructed. For Reform Jews, ethics is the heart of Judaism. Any law that is understood to be clearly anti-ethical, such as for example the laws concerning *momzerim*, are superseded by that higher ethical standard. As such, Buber provides philosophical arguments that further justify their position. From a liberal Jewish feminist perspective, the traditional authority law may not necessarily pose a problem in liberal communal contexts that are already willing consider certain laws as no longer ethically authoritative. The situation is quite different if one holds a more traditional understanding of the relationship between law and ethical praxis. If the authority of the law is the problem, Buber's position offers little insight for working within the parameters of traditional Jewish legal thought.

Continuing with the same interpretation, Krafte-Jacobs sharply criticizes Buber's focus on personal revelation as a ground for ethical behaviour. She argues that it fails not only to clearly provide a normative ethic; in privileging personal revelation Buber is in danger of lapsing into ethical subjectivism. She is concerned that

> the same autonomy that allows the individual Jewish woman to express her Judaism as she sees fit extends to her oppressor. No one can legitimately question the personal revelation of anyone else. Not mere autonomy, but total, isolated, unaccountable subjectivity prevails. Women then have no power—certainly no grounds—to effect change on any broad scale; the only proper arena for a Jewish woman's struggle for religious justice is her own life... Issues of justice are never merely personal, as Buber would very readily admit. But as long as revelation is the source of authentic behaviour (even though this is not to be understood in terms of prescriptions), Jewish women are left with no basis on which to call the Jewish community to account. There is simply no check on a method based on the subjectivity of personal revelation. (1996:104-105)

But is Krafte-Jacobs critique consistent with what Buber is actually arguing? Buber's characterization of ethical responsibility as "responsibility of an I for a You" can be heard as dangerously paternalistic or subjectivist only if one fails to appreciate the very real criteria that Buber insists upon in developing his ethical thought. For Buber, the I-Thou relation structures ethics and his description of that relation is of course not only descriptive, it is *prescriptive*. The definition of the I-Thou relation provides absolute, albeit non-specific, criteria for identifying relations as ethical: reciprocity, mutuality, exclusiveness, treating the other as a full person and not a subject, directness and freedom from deception etc. Each of these characteristics must be present in the I-Thou relation. If feminist insights into the injustice of the position of women in Judaism are compelling, then those injustices must be recognized as anti-ethical and therefore incompatible with I-Thou relations. Consider Buber's statement on solicitude for the other,

> In its essence solicitude does not come from mere co-existence with others, as Heidegger thinks, but from essential, direct, whole relations between man and man, whether those are objectively based on ties of blood, or those which arise by choice and can either assume objective, institutional forms or, like friendship, shrink from all institutional forming and yet touch the depth of existence. (1974:206)

Krafte-Jacobs' critique misses the point; Buber is arguing that it is the relation itself that guarantees the ethical, not the institution. The fact that *institutions* fail to guarantee the ethical treatment of their constituents testifies to the *institutional* inadequacies of regulating the ethical. Because the relation is dialogical, ethical decision-making is neither private nor autonomous. Buber's emphasis on personally hearing revelation is absolutely meaningless outside of the context of relationality.

The problem has more to do with how realistic it is for Buber to expect a community to actually "stand in a living reciprocal relationship to a single living center, and...stand in a living, reciprocal relationship to one another"(1970:94) when

it has distressingly failed historically to stand in a living, ethical, reciprocal relation to fifty percent of its constituents. The treatment of women under Jewish divorce law, the failure of Orthodox Judaism to accept women as communal leaders as rabbis, and the ongoing limited communal expectations about women's full training and participation in the development of Jewish law testify to the real cultural, legal and religious disabilities under which Jewish women labour.

Feminism and Buber's Thought

Considering the preceding comments it is surprising that feminists and particularly Jewish feminists have not to a greater degree availed themselves of Buber's thought. In discussing the problem of the lack of a Jewish intratheological debate in contrast with the well-established tradition of feminist critiques of Christian theologians, Plaskow notes that Buber is one of several Jewish figures who has not been subjected to a Jewish feminist critique. Despite this observation, Plaskow does not offer a critique herself. In *Standing Again At Sinai*, Plaskow mentions Buber positively several times at different points in her argument as offering an insight or approach which she finds to be usefully illustrative of the Jewish tradition or of a dissonant voice within that tradition. Most importantly, Plaskow's theology seems to be heavily influenced by Buber's understanding of the encounter with God. Plaskow describes Judaism's encounter with God as "Godwrestling"[21]

> I imagine them as moments of profound experience; sometimes of
> illumination but also of mystery, moments when some who had eyes
> to see understood the meaning of events that all had undergone. Such

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[21] Plaskow is referring to the title of Arthur Waskow's book *Godwrestling* which in turn relies on the biblical account of Jacob wrestling with God. The notion of wrestling or struggling with God has become an important trope in Jewish feminist narratives.

moments might be hard-won, or sudden experiences of clarity or
presence that come unexpected as precious gifts. But they would need
to be interpreted and applied, wrestled with and puzzled over, passed
down and lived out before they came to us as the Torah of God.
(1991:33)

This idea of encounter with God as momentary, mysterious and precious strongly

evokes the language used by Buber in *I and Thou*. Indeed Plaskow's insistence on

the transformation of Jewish theology as the only appropriate redress for the

inequalities experienced by women due to their marginalization within the Jewish

tradition seems to echo Buber's call for a philosophical transformation of our

understanding of encounter with God.

An even clearer indebtedness to Buber in the development of feminist

thought is evident in the work of several scholars working in the area of "care"

ethics and/or dialogical ethics. While there are many scholars working in this area,

not all identify their work as feminist. Examples of Buber's influence on feminist

scholarship in this area can be found in Rose Graf-Taylor's work in feminist

psychology and, more relevant here, in the thought of feminist ethicist and

educational theorist Nel Noddings (c.f. Rose Graf-Taylor, 1996; Nel Noddings, 1984).

Whereas Graf-Taylor observed that the "similarities between Buber's philosophical

statements and the conclusions from feminist research regarding the development

of the self in women are often astounding" (1996:328), Noddings is one of the only

feminist thinkers to explicitly explore the application of Buber's model to feminist

ethics. It is unsurprising that Noddings should be so heavily influenced by Buber in

that she works in the area of psychology and education—two fields which have been

extremely interested in Buber's I-Thou model.

Published two years after Carol Gilligan's *In A Different Voice*, Noddings'

Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education, is the classic

articulation of feminine care based ethics. James Walters notes in *Martin Buber*

and Feminist Ethics that Nel Noddings has come to be representative of care ethics

in feminist philosophical discourses (2003:77).

Proceeding from Carol Gilligan's work on gendered ethical models, Noddings

argues in favour of an ethic based on natural caring which is contrasted with

traditional masculine models of ethics. If masculine ethics is largely concerned with

moral reasoning or a logic of justice, feminine ethics is grounded in receptivity,

responsiveness and relatedness where the feminine self longs for goodness. The

feminine experience of caring for others provides the model for an ethic of care:

> History, legend and biography might profitably be reinterpreted in
> light of feminine experience. Both men and women may participate in
> the "feminine" as I am developing it, but women have suffered acutely
> from its lack of explication. They have felt and suffered and held fast,
> but they have—as a result—been accused of deficiency in abstract
> reasoning, of capricious behaviour, of emotional reaction. (1984:44)

Care, for Noddings, has strong correlations to Buber's dialogical relationship model.

She contends, "Taking *relation* as ontologically basic simply means that we

recognize human encounter and affective response as a basic fact of human

existence" (1984:4). Although she does not cite Buber specifically at this point, it is

clear that she is invoking Buber's understanding of the self in relationship to others

(Johannesen, 2000:156). Noddings quotes Buber more frequently than any other

thinker; often using Buber's distinctive language to articulate her own ethical

model. Human ethical relationship is organized around the experience of caring.

The self, "the one caring," encounters and is "engrossed" by the other, the "cared

for." Caring is thus a "natural" response to encounter with the other where the self's

tendency to objectify the other is "displaced" as the self enters into authentic

relationship. The paradigm of natural care is modeled after the mother / child

relationship. The mother "naturally" responds to her child, sharing the child's pain

and joy. Although relationality is natural, Noddings emphasizes that the natural impulse to care must be chosen or rejected. As such, care is ethical in that it involves choice.

Noddings compares caring to Buber's description of love in *I and Thou* by quoting, "it endures but only in the alteration of actuality and latency" (1984:17). Caring as an empathetic feeling for the Other is like the I-Thou relation according to Noddings:

> When I receive the other, I am totally with the other. The relation is for the moment exactly as Buber has described it in I and Thou... I do not think the other, and I do not ask myself whether what I am feeling is correct in some way... (1984:32)

Although Buber is clear that the I-Thou consists of responsibility for the other, Noddings sees caring as only partly constituted by responsibility (1984:40). Using the example of abortion, Noddings modifies Buber's understanding of responsibility to speak of how obligation is dependent on the encounter and corresponds to the capacity for responsiveness on the part of the "cared-for." Thus in the case of abortion, the mother's obligation to care grows as the foetus develops and becomes more actual in its potential to become a responsive "cared-for" (1984:88-89). For Noddings, responsibility and responsiveness are co-conditions of the natural caring that is occasioned by the encounter with the other. In the case of abortion, if a pregnant woman has not "encountered" the foetus and "admits no sense of relatedness," she is not "caring naturally" and must "summon ethical caring" (1984:89). Presumably, this need to "summon ethical caring" increases as the pregnancy progresses. This example underscores how for Noddings mutuality is not prerequisite to ethic of care. Although mutuality should ideally be present, Noddings insists that the "one caring" can find completion even when the "cared for" does not (or cannot) reciprocate.

In "Ethics and Self-Knowing: The Satisfaction of Desire," Winnie Tomm demonstrates how Buber's I-Thou, I-It relationships can be applied in a feminist framework. Grounding ethics in subjective experiences encourages us to develop connections with others that are not dependent on an oppositional stance leading to a devaluing of either oneself or others that is at the root of social injustice. Relying on Buber, Winnie Tomm describes this as an I-It relationship (1992:102). The reason that such devaluing is the cause of injustice is because it leads to the objectification and domination of others. However, when our ethics develop out of subjective realities, we come to have a heightened awareness of our connection to others—this is what Tomm labels an I-You encounter: "The I-You manner of relating permits a continuum between private and shared experience, without including an oppositional stance between self and other that characterizes the I-It relation in its objectification of the other" (1992:103). It is the objectification of women that has been responsible for centuries of gender-based oppression—therefore feminists have a commitment to challenging objective, dominations relations wherever they occur. Developing an ethics that is grounded in an I-You relationship is one way to eradicate depersonalizing, dominating relations.

It is difficult to pinpoint Buber's influence on feminist ethics in that his dialogical ethic is so indebted to existential critiques of the objectification of the Other. Such critiques enter into feminist discourses through Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*, but also through many other important existential and postmodern thinkers. As such it is perhaps unsurprising that Buber's contribution is sometimes overlooked or subsumed into generic statements about the function of alterity in ethical discourses.

Congruencies With Feminist Ethics

How is Buber's thought congruent with the various interests of feminist ethics? Where in Buber's thought do we find opportunities for the development of feminist ethics? Because feminist ethics itself includes diverse viewpoints and interests, this discussion is framed by questions relating to common themes found in many expressions of feminist ethics. In addition to those opportunities already highlighted in this critique, these themes include the need to address the marginalization and oppression of particular groups (including women), unequal power relations, diversity of experiences, and social injustice. Although Buber addresses these themes in multiple ways through the development of his ethical thought, it is possible to pinpoint four movements which are exceptionally compatible with the general aims of feminist ethics: First, his emphasis on ethics as relational. Second, the importance of responsibility to the Other. Third, encounter as occurring with a particular and concrete Other. Finally, the valuation of the Other as an equal and full participant in the ethical meeting.

Buber's understanding of the I-It relationship in contrast with the I-Thou relationship is explicative of how persons are treated as the Other in interpersonal and social relations. For Buber, the It world, characterized by instrumental relations, is contrasted with the world of the Thou, which is characterized by genuine relation. "Buber's goal was to formulate an alternative discourse and an alternative mode of relating to others that was non-competitive, noncontrolling, nonpurposeful, and nonutilitarian" (Silberstein, 1989:117). It is precisely the relations of the It world which perpetrate and perpetuate the alterity of others which in turn lead to the marginalization and oppression of particular groups. In

insisting on the qualities of the I-Thou relation, Buber is critiquing and offering

an alternative to the dominant political and philosophical discursive practices that

rely on the objectification and domination of other persons. As a critique that

comprehensively addresses the philosophical, economic, political and social causes

of injustice, Buber's analysis harmonizes well with feminist critiques that attempt

to develop a systematic analysis of the root causes of oppression.

If for Beauvoir the subordination of the Other is characteristic of human

existence, for Buber the potential of the Other to meet with the self and be

transformed into a Thou in the I-Thou relationship postulates an ethical paradigm

which sets up a very different existential possibility. This model establishes a space

for one of the most foundational concepts in feminist theory: that the ascription of

alterity correlates with injustice. The foundations of oppression lie not only in the

individual victimizations occasioned by sexism, classism or racism, as if such

prejudices emerge wholly developed *ab initio*; the foundations of oppression are

found in the very types of thinking and being that allow the Other to be encountered

as a object of one's will. Such an analysis operates at a foundational and structural

level that can be used to support a variety of feminist ethical strategies.

Buber's commitment to revising, deconstructing, analyzing concepts and

more importantly, testing those concepts against concrete reality, also speaks to

feminism's insistence on lived and particular experience as an essential element of

philosophical theory. In *A Believing Humanism* Buber makes a statement that

could easily be voiced by an entire cross-section of feminists who passionately argue

that it is the concrete particular context that moral statements must be tested:

"Concepts become problematic because they do not show a concrete context that can

be controlled. Every abstraction must stand the test of being related to a concrete

reality without which it has not meaning" (1967 a:153). Correspondingly, Buber's insistence on the I-Thou relation as exclusive, immediate and reciprocal and as essentially occurring between the lived particular participants of the meeting similarly resonates with feminist interests in the use of concrete experience as a starting point for feminist ethics. These promising theoretical principles must, however, be weighed against the paucity of specific explicit normative descriptions of what precisely constitutes ethical or unjust behaviour.

Alternately, Buber's unambiguous insistence that ethics are relational is understandably appealing for many feminists and provides a relatively straightforward principle for feminist ethics. The claim that ethics are relational is particularly attractive to feminists who have critiqued western philosophical ethics for focusing ethical discourse on the solitary (male) moral agent. One major criticism of western philosophical ethics has been its inability to account for a female subject as the moral agent. Establishing relationship as the locus of the ethical is an important step towards inclusion of different subjects and perspectives. Buber argues that, "Hatred remains blind by its very nature; one can hate only part of a being. Whoever sees a whole being and must reject it, is no longer in the dominion of hatred but in the dominion of the capacity to say You" (1970:68). A relational ethical model demands genuine encounter with the Other. If one of the goals of feminist ethics is to articulate a more accurate description of people's actual moral experience, Buber's understanding of ethics as relational (and its corollary that the breakdown of genuine relationships can be identified as one crucial factor in immoral and unjust behaviours) tends to more accurately reflect our lived experience of both the ethical and the non-ethical. In positing ethics as relational as opposed to contractual or justice based, Buber effectively challenges an

instrumental view of the Other which feminist ethics hope to redress. Buber's emphasis on responsibility for the Other avoids many of the problems inherent in feminine ethics while retaining the core idea that ethics are primarily relational. Buber avoids Sherwin's critique of care based feminine ethics where Sherwin is concerned that feminine ethics will continue to prescribe the virtues of caring while men continue to pursue rights based models of justice (c.f. Susan Sherwin, 1993:17). Buber's understanding of the I-Thou relationship privileges neither gender in their capacity to engage in fully ethical relationships. Far from a gendered division of ethical "work," Buber fully assumes that both men are women are potentially capable of entering into the meeting.

Opportunities For Jewish Feminist Ethics

How does Buber provide opportunities for the development of Jewish feminist ethics? From a Jewish feminist point of view, the correlation between interpersonal relationships and relationships with the divine is perhaps Buber's greatest strength. By positing human ethical relationships as the training ground for relationship with God, Buber offers a model that simultaneously invokes an ideal potential model of relationship as well as urgent responsibility to the Other. This view has clear biblical roots. Traditional Jewish and feminist interpretations of the *Song of Songs* highlight that we learn of love of God through love of human beings. There can be no more powerful and compelling model for ethical relationship than that which one experiences with the divine, how remarkable that we learn about that relationship with the divine through our encounters with persons. A Jewish

feminist engagement with Buber's thought potentially disturbs Buber's normative claims about the divine as well as his descriptions of marriage and ethics.

As an ethical principle, relationality challenges systems of dominance that depend on hierarchical structures. For feminists, relationship disrupts androcentric narratives that privilege power over the Other. In this way, the ethical principle of relationship can be a strategic preliminary step towards satisfying feminist concerns about gender injustice by pointing towards a different model of justice. Jane Flax explains the importance of challenging androcentric models:

> To the extent that all political practices and visions of justice have
> been affected by or reflect the existence of male domination, feminist
> theorists also feel compelled to offer something new: concepts of
> justice that do not presuppose or require asymmetric gender relations
> for their realization. (1990: 234).

While I am convinced that Buber's thought can be used effectively to critique injustices based on race, class, gender and other types of marginalization, I am concerned about the place of heterosexual marriage in thought. As an ideal that plays out within the context of Jewish and western cultural heterocentric narratives, Buber's reliance on heterosexual marriage as a premiere model of ethical relationship may be incapable of fully addressing heterosexism. Can Buber's articulation of heterosexual marriage as an ethical paradigm apply to lesbian and gay relationships? Plaskow argues that

> a feminist approach to sexuality must take sexual mutuality as a task
> for the whole of life and not just for Friday evening, fitting its
> commitment to sexual equality into its broader vision of a society
> based on mutuality and respect for difference.(1991:198)

The mutuality in marriage as described by Buber would seem to meet Plaskow's standard but we have to remember that Buber's understanding of marriage is not only heterosexual but also Jewish. It may be that the Jewish understanding of

marriage is so fundamentally structured according to a heterosexual model, in terms of specific dualistic gender roles within marriage, law and society at large, that its heterosexuality cannot be deconstructed. If the Jewish ideal of marriage can embrace homosexual as well as heterosexual relationships, I would argue that it can only do so if it can distinguish between marriage and not-marriage, or rather between committed relationships and not-committed relationships. Plaskow asks us to reconsider sexual relationship in terms of fundamental values that transcend traditional Jewish heterosexual models of marriage

> We need to apply certain fundamental values to a range of sexual
> styles and choices. While honesty, responsibility, and respect are good
> that pertain to any relationship, the concrete meaning of these values
> will vary considerably depending on the duration and significance of
> the connection involved. (1989:149)

For Plaskow, like Buber, sexuality in all its ethical forms can lead one back to God. Laura Levitt criticizes Plaskow here for moving from contingent criteria that would allow multiple visions of ethical erotic relationships towards a hierarchical sexual contract model (1997:103). While Levitt's comments are well taken, I am not sure that I agree with her that the hierarchical or contractual elements which Plaskow, and for that matter Buber, describes is necessarily problematic. The notion that human sexual relationships can be covenantal is powerful and compelling. In combining contingent criteria with absolute criteria, both Buber and Plaskow contrast committed relationship with that which is not genuine or enduring. In doing so, both suggest a model of relationship which can inclusively value and respect homosexual relationship.

In terms of the development of Jewish feminist ethics, I would argue that Buber can most productively be read as emphasizing an ethic of relationship that is situated in community. Buber's central claims about the relational constitution of

community and the place of the divine in community are elaborated upon in the essay "Dialogue" by focusing on the ways in which communities forge their identity in light of shared ethical imperatives:

> The feeling of community does not reign where the desired change of institutions is wrested in common, but without community, from a resisting world. It reigns where the fight that is fought takes place from the position of a community struggling for its own reality as a community. (1974:51)

In that Buber has defined the Jewish encounter with God as one where the moral and religious come together, a Jewish feminist reading of Buber's assertion prompts specific questions. Who has historically shared in defining of moral and religious imperatives? Who has benefited or failed to benefit from their claims? How might a definition of community as specifically constituted through ethical relationship and relationship with the divine be strategically employed to further feminist analyses of Jewish historical and contemporary experiences of community? Here I turn to Ellen Frankel's feminist commentary on Leviticus 25:1-26:2 (which describes the laws concerning the Sabbath and jubilee years) in the *Five Books of Miriam* as an intertext that suggests ways in which Jewish feminist ethics might further develop, in conversation with Buber, that thick account of ethics that I argue is essential to this project.

Frankel's commentary is presented in the form of three separate Midrash. The first Midrash is framed as a conversation between our contemporary Jewish daughters, Huldah the preacher, Beruriah the Scholar, Leah the Namer, our Bubbes (the fond and intimate Yiddish term for grandmothers) and the "Sages in our own time." This conversation begins with a question from the daughters about whether or not these laws apply equally to Israelite men and women. The ensuing exchange illustrates several issues. Although, as Huldah the preacher explains, the

laws concerning the jubilee year (which frees slaves and requires that all individual and family debts be forgiven) and the sabbatical year (which provides a year long rest from agricultural labour) are addressed to both men and women, the contemporary sages note how these years "merely restored the status quo ante. Since women didn't tend to own property, they couldn't regain what was never theirs to lose" (1998:189). The Sages concede that because women did participate in the economic life of Israel, they did benefit from these laws but the Bubbes remind those present that although women may have been released from agricultural labour, there could not have been any release from women's day to day labour of caring for children, cooking, weaving, housekeeping and bearing children. This conversation draws our attention to who experiences the full privileges and benefits of membership in community. How has the sphere of those privileges and benefits been defined to exclude women? Despite these problems, the contemporary daughters conclude with the optimistic analysis that tremendous opportunities remain in this model of "social reengineering."

The second and third Midrash further complicate the questioned universality of relational obligation proffered by the first Midrash. The second Midrash is narrative that gives an example of how generosity is rewarded. It is framed by an interpretive key which is announced by the statement: "Our mothers teach: We are all responsible for the other-those who have for those who have not, those who own for those who are owned, those who gain for those who lose" (1998:189). The obligation to the Other is structured as responsibility for those who are more vulnerable that ourselves.

This key interrupts the biblical text again in the final, third Midrash which returns to the conversational mode. Here questions are raised about who, other

than Israelite women, might not be protected by these laws. The daughters ask how the Torah can condone slavery when "we were once slaves," and ask, is this not hypocritical? Hagar the Egyptian Slave agrees that it is hypocritical and charges that Israelites were no different from their neighbours. "They regarded slaves like me as nothing but property, to be bought, sold, and passed down to their children" (1998:190). Again we are brought back to the question, who are we in relationship with? The privileged relationship that we hold in community with each other necessarily excludes, or limits our responsibility for, those who are not members (or equal members) of community. Although Jewish law does take into account the (more limited) rights of Israelite slaves, and seemingly addresses women as well as men, all relationships are not equivalent and all persons are not equally protected in those relationships. A feminist ethic of relationship questions the status and configuration of paradigmatically ethical relationships. If a feminist reading of Leviticus 25:1-26:2 at first prompts questioning of how this text is gendered, its next step is to examine how the framework of that relationship constructs community and enacts other exclusions. A thinker like bell hooks might argue that the ethical fault line in this model is that it does not sufficiently target systems of dominance as the object of its analysis. In and of itself, relationship is an inadequate category of analysis for overturning existing systemic oppression.

Despite the real opportunities that Buber provides for the development of feminist and Jewish feminist ethics in terms of embodiment, moral subjectivity, and most importantly relationality and community, a feminist reading continually comes up against the problem of how to apply Buber's ethic in the real world; a world where lofty ethical principles have failed to protect the most vulnerable

persons in our society.[22] Buber's thought describes and prescribes an ideal—an ideal that cannot help but unravel if it were to be institutionalized. Buber makes it clear that the I-Thou relation cannot be sustained; it inevitably shifts into an I-It relation. The importance of Buber's thought as a social and philosophical critique should not be underestimated. As an ideal, it can be used to identify and test ethical principles, but it is unclear how effective it might be pragmatically enacted if it is not complemented by other ethical models that can contribute increasingly thick descriptions of injustice that can lead to the radical transformation of society.

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[22] Steven Katz also raises the problem of the lack of ethical and religious norms in his critique of Buber's thought. He asks, "can such a theological (and moral) position lead to anything but religious and ethical relativism?" (1983:38)

CHAPTER 3
EMMANUEL LEVINAS

• OVERVIEW •

If modern Jewish philosophy at its best is not merely a subset of western philosophy, but is a philosophy in itself, with its own questions, methods and concerns, then Emmanuel Levinas is a model modern Jewish philosopher. He inherits, recasts and exceeds questions from the western philosophical tradition's and Judaism's historical and philosophical encounter with modernity. Husserl's phenomenological analysis, Heidegger's existentialism, Judaism's tradition of rabbinic thinking, and the ethical rupture of the Holocaust frame his thought. Levinas begins his philosophical reflections with a powerful and radical assertion as to the nature of philosophy; he speaks of "ethics as first philosophy." This announcement is a broad assault on western philosophy's traditional preoccupation with questions relating to ontology and leads to Levinas' exploration of the ethical. He focuses on the phenomena of the "face-to-face" relationship, a relationship in which the self is radically and infinitely responsible for the Other. The result is a body of work that is primarily concerned with ethical responsibility for the Other. His analyses of the phenomena of history, time, God, the good, justice, politics, eros, sensuous enjoyment, philosophy, are anchored by his ethics of alterity and radiate out from this pressure point in his thought.

Interest in Levinas as a philosopher has grown significantly over the last 25 years. Although he is generally credited with introducing Husserl and Heidegger to French intellectual thought (his dissertation on Husserl introduced Jean-Paul Sartre to phenomenology), he was largely unknown outside the French academy until the publication of *Totality and Infinity* in 1961 and Jacques Derrida's essay "Violence and Metaphysics" in 1964.[23] As Derrida was himself still a relative unknown outside French intellectual circles in 1964, Levinas remained relatively obscure in French philosophical circles until the mid 1980's when Levinas' emerged as a major figure of post-modern French thought.

Levinas' wide-ranging but coherent philosophical reflections have profoundly impacted not only ethical discourses and theories of religion. His thought has reverberated through post-modern thought and thus has also begun to increasingly serve an intertext for political philosophy, and cultural theory, as well as literary and textual criticism. Additionally, he has become an important figure in such disparate disciplines as aesthetics, nursing, psychology and health care, and pedagogy.

The parameters of an exposition of the ethical thought of such a complex, prolific and provocative thinker must necessarily be limited at the outset. My intent is to hone in on those areas of Levinas' thought that are most salient to the goals of this project. In setting up an interdisciplinary conversation between modern Jewish thought, feminist theory and Jewish feminism that will contribute to the development of feminist and Jewish feminist ethics, certain central issues quickly emerge as those which either have already elicited feminist response or which I

argue ought to be further interrogated. Chief among these are Levinas'
arguments about ethics as first philosophy, responsibility for the Other, alterity, the
feminine, erotic relationships, maternity, embodiment, and justice. Levinas'
engagement with the rabbinic tradition, his discussions of law and observance, and
the connection between the Holocaust and ethics, raise specific questions and
concerns for the development of Jewish feminist ethics.

Levinas' Life and Work

Emmanuel Levinas offers a staccato outline of the formative influences of his early
life in the first sentences of his memoir, "Signature," in *Difficile Liberté* (*Difficult
Liberty*).

> La bible hébraïque dès le plus jeune âge en Lituanie, Pouchkine et
> Tolstoï, la révolution russe de 1917 vécue à onze ans en Ukraine.
> Depuis 1923, l'Université de Strasbourg où enseignaient alors Charles
> Blondel, Halbwachs, Pradines, Carteron et, plus tard, Guéroult.
> Amitié de Maurice Blanchot et, à travers les maîtres qui avaient été
> adolescents lors de l'Affaire Dreyfus, vision, pour un nouveau venu,
> éblouissante, d'un peuple qui égale l'humanité et d'une nation à
> laquelle on peut s'attacher par l'esprit et le cœur aussi fortement que
> par des racines. (1997: 405)

Levinas was born in Kovno, Lithuania in 1906 (in 1905 according to the Julian
calendar that was normative in Lithuania at the time). His childhood and education
illustrates the increasing impact of modern European influences on Eastern
European traditional Jewish life at the beginning of the 20th century. Kovno was one
of the major centres of traditional talmudic scholarship in Europe, but was also
home to the vibrant Lithuanian-Jewish intellectual community. The Levinas family

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[23] Levinas humorously noted, "It was Sartre who guaranteed my place in eternity by stating in his famous obituary
essay on Merleau-Ponty that he, Sartre 'was introduced to phenomenology by Levinas'" (2002:xvii)

was active in this liberal intellectual community, seeing themselves as "enlightened" Jews rather than as assimilated. Levinas education reflects this sensibility. Although he and his family spoke Russian at home, Levinas joked that he was familiar with the square letters (Hebrew) before the Cyrillic ones. His father, the owner of a small book and stationary store, hired a tutor who taught Levinas Hebrew not from the traditional Jewish texts, but from Hebrew language books. When Levinas became sufficiently proficient to read the Bible in Hebrew, his copy of the Bible did not include the rabbinic commentaries that are prerequisite to the traditional study of Torah. Indeed, Levinas did not study talmudic interpretations of the Bible or apparently any talmudic texts until much later in life.   .

Levinas traveled to Strasbourg, France in 1923 to pursue his university studies. Levinas became increasingly interested in phenomenology and studied under Husserl and Heidegger. Levinas' dissertation, "Théorie de l'intuition dans la phenomenology de Husserl" ("The theory of intuition in Husserl's phenomenology"), in concert with his other publications on Husserl and Heidegger, would influence Sartre and other French thinkers in introducing phenomenology as a major stream within French intellectual discourses.

The pre-war years saw developments in both his personal and professional life. He was naturalized as a French citizen in 1931, performed his military service, and in 1932, married Raïssa Lévi whom he had known in Kovno. He translated Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations* (1931) with Gabrielle Pfeiffer and published a number of articles and essays on phenomenology. He also began to critically engage the rabbinic texts that would continue to engross him throughout his life. These years saw his first publications on Jewish thought and contemporary Jewish life.

Levinas became a teacher and administrator at the Alliance Israélite Universelle in Paris and held that position from 1933 to 1939. Established in 1860, the Alliance's mandate was to promote the emancipation, integration and education of Jews in the Mediterranean basin. Focusing on French-speaking communities, the Alliance opened schools for Jews in Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. During this period Levinas published *Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l'hitlérisme* (1934) and *De l'évasion* (1935).

After the declaration of war in 1939, Levinas was mobilized to serve as a Russian and German interpreter for the French army. The Germans captured him along with his division, at Rennes. Rather than being sent to a concentration camp as a Jew, Levinas was first detained in France in a *Frontstalag* and then transported to a military camp near Hanover, Germany as a POW to work at hard labour. It was during this detention that he began writing *De l'existence à l'existant* (*Existence and Existents*). Although his wife and daughter did survive the war, his entire family in Lithuania perished.

Between 1946 and 1947 Levinas presented the four lectures that would be compiled in *Time and the Other*. After 1947 Levinas lectured frequently at Jean Wahl's philosophical college and became director of *l'Ecole Normale Israélite Orientale* (Oriental Israelite Normal School), the school that the Alliance had developed to train teachers for its schools in the Mediterranean. It was during this period that Levinas first studied Talmud intensively under the tutelage of the talmudic scholar Mordechai Chouchani. Levinas began to give talmudic lectures ten years later at what would be known as the *Colloques des Intellectuels Juifs* de France.

Following the advice of Jean Wahl, Levinas explored the subject of the State in *Totalité et Infini (Totality and Infinity)*, published in 1961. *Totality and Infinity* brought him acclaim in academic circles and drew the attention of Jacques Derrida whose response "Violence and Metaphysics" in 1964 would later become so important in introducing Levinas' thought to a wider audience. In 1974, Levinas published his "sequel" to *Totality and Infinity, Otherwise Than Being (Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence)*.

During the late 1960's and early 1970's, Levinas held three appointments as professor (University of Poitiers, 1964; University of Paris-Nanterre, 1967 ; Sorbonne, 1973), received the Albert Schweitzer prize for Philosophy (1971), received the first two of his five honorary doctorates and also served as a visiting lecturer at the University of Fribourg. Levinas became honorary professor at the Sorbonne after his retirement in 1976. In the years after his retirement from teaching in 1979, Levinas continued to publish prolifically and won several important prizes for his work. A little more than a year after his wife's death in 1994, Levinas died in Paris in 1995.

In addition to the works mentioned above, Levinas published numerous articles that were eventually collected in several volumes, including the following: *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (1949), *Difficile Liberté* (1963), *Quatre lectures talmudiques* (1968), *Du sacré au saint, Cinq nouvelles lectures talmudiques* (1977), *Humanisme de l'autre homme* (1972), *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée* (1982), *Transcendance et intelligibilité* (1984), *A l'heure des nations* (1988), *Entre Nous* (1990), and *Liberté et commandement* (1994).

Ethics As First Philosophy

> "My task does not consist in constructing ethics; I only try to find its
> meaning" —Emmanuel Levinas, (1985: 90).

Levinas' affirmation of ethics as first philosophy is the central insight of his

phenomenological method. In *Totality and Infi*nity, Levinas defines phenomenology

as a philosophical method learned from Husserl:

> Intentional analysis is the search for the concrete. Notions held under
> the direct gaze of the thought that defines them are nevertheless,
> unknown to this naïve thought, revealed to be planted in horizons
> unsuspected by the this thought; these horizons endow them with a
> meaning—such is the essential teaching of Husserl. (1995a: 28)

Inspired by Husserl's phenomenological analyses, Levinas embraces the

phenomenological project of attempting to "get at the things themselves." In an

interview with Philippe Nemo, Levinas calls phenomenology "searching for the

constitution of the real for consciousness" (1985:39). Phenomenology places

emphasis on observation of the phenomena of human experiences. Husserl's

phenomenology focuses on describing the structures of "natural" experience as they

enter into consciousness. Husserl described this original state as a "natural

attitude"; Levinas described it as "naïveté." One is able to identify and analyze

experiential structures through phenomenological reduction, without the

intervention of theory. These structures allow consciousness to refer to objects

outside the self and "endow them with meaning." The goal is to "get at the things in

themselves" through the reduction of pure description or, as Levinas says, a non-

analytical but necessary deduction. He explains that "[w]hat counts is the idea of

the overflowing of objectifying thought by a forgotten experience from which it lives"

(1995a:28).

If Levinas learns the classical phenomenological method from Husserl,

Levinas learns from Heidegger that the object of phenomenological inquiry is

everyday life. In *Sein und Zeit*, which Levinas describes as "a sovereign exercise of phenomenology" (1985:39), Heidegger tries to investigate the meaning of Being by analyzing how human beings (*Dasein*) experience Being. Beginning with everyday life, what Heidegger calls "facticity," the phenomenologist attempts to identify the existential structures of the human being as situated in Being. This somewhat awkward phrasing is necessary to underline Heidegger's critique of descriptions of the human that allow for a split between subject and object. Heidegger's phenomenology insists that one cannot speak of humans and Being as though humans were detachable from Being. For Heidegger and Levinas, ontology as a form of inquiry, is already grounded in an ontology of what Heidegger describes as *In-der-Welt-sein,* being-in-the-world. Levinas speaks of Heidegger "re-educating the ear" in reminding us that Being is a verb, that one can only speak of the "happening" of being. Levinas' saw Heidegger's method of beginning with concrete experience as a crucial improvement over Husserl's phenomenology. Following Heidegger, Levinas will use his observations of "everyday" manifestations of relationship to deduce that ethics is indeed first philosophy and illustrate the ethical relationship as being grounded in alterity.

Interrupting the Solitary Self

Levinas' 1947 work, *Existence and Existents*, is the prolegomena to the ethical thought that will be articulated in *Totality and Infinity* and further clarified in *Otherwise Than Being*. In *Existence and Existents*, Levinas explores the question of subjectivity by distinguishing between existence and existents. From the point of view of understanding his ethics, Levinas' task in this work is to describe how an other interrupts the existent, the solitary self, such that ethical relationship is not

only possible, but also characteristic of existence. In order to do so, Levinas

must first describe how human subjectivity is accomplished. The accomplishment of

human subjectivity, called "hypostasis" by Levinas, indicates that there is an

existence that precedes existents. It is this primordial state that Levinas describes

as the "*il y a*," the *there is*.

The *there is* is radical impersonality, the "rumbling silence" that the child

feels as he or she sleeps alone. It cannot be conceptually described, it is at the

boundaries of what can be said. It is the impersonal emptiness which is full, the

silence that is a noise, "neither nothingness nor being" (1985:48). The *there is* the

reversion to nothingness that is "being in general." The *I* is depersonalized,

submerged and exposed in the *there is*. Hypostasis, the consciousness of the existent

in existence, leads one out of/away from the *there is* towards solitude where the ego

is occupied with the self.

> To be conscious is to be torn away from the *there is,* since the
> existence of a consciousness constitutes a subjectivity, a subject of
> existence that is, to some existent, a master of being, already a name
> in the anonymity of the night. (2001:55)

Solitude is the condition of consciousness. The self is in a world of objects that are

his or her own.

Before Levinas can analyze the phenomena of ethical relationship, he must

build on his description of the *there is* and begin to speak of existence in the world.

How does the existent move from solitude into relationship with the Other? If the

self is originally self-interested and self-absorbed, and "no one is good voluntarily"

as Levinas attests in *Otherwise Than Being* (1994:11), what occasions the

possibility, and more importantly the necessity, of ethical relationship?

Being-in-the-world allows for an interval between the ego and the self where

the self is saved from the burden of existence. The relationship between the self and

the world becomes one of *jouissance*. In French, *jouissance* refers to nourishment and enjoyment, earthly sensual and sexual pleasure, but it also can refer to the authority or right to make use of something. This feature of *jouissance* is often underemphasized in translations and discussions of Levinas' thought. The pleasure of being-in-the-world is the pleasure of sensual mastery and also sexual subjectivity. *Jouissance* comprises the potential of transcendent dislocation of the ego from obsessive preoccupation with the self but *jouissance*, as knowledge and intelligibility grounded in the self, is in itself incapable of surmounting solitude.

In *Time and the Other*, Levinas revisits and expands his consideration of the "instant" where the self emerges as a subject, and focuses further on time as sociality. Levinas had already begun to formulate time in this way in *Existence and Existents* when he asked "Is not sociality something more than the source of our representation of time: is it not time itself?"(2001:96). In *Time and the Other*, Levinas speaks of the subject breaking out of the solitary instant of his or her own hypermateriality, extending towards past and future. Similar to Heidegger's notion of ecstatic time, the subject is nourished and finds joy in being-in-the-world.

Levinas follows Heidegger in confronting death, or rather being-towards-death as a possible mode of disrupting temporal subjectivity, but sees its implications differently. For Heidegger, death is characterized by mineness (*Jemeinigkeit*), nothing is as "mine" as my death. For Levinas, death is not that which is most mine, it is that which absolutely unknowable and which is the limit of the possible—a limit of the subject's virility: "Absolutely unknowable means foreign to all light, rendering every assumption of possibility impossible, but where we ourselves are seized" (1995:71). We are seized by something that is totally beyond our selves, something that we cannot manipulate or assimilate through *jouissance*,

something that renders us *"no longer able to be able [nous ne pouvons plus pouvoir]"* (1995: 74). Levinas argues that death breaks up solitude and thus existence must be what he calls "pluralist." A self who is in painful need, in proximity to death in its solitude "takes its place on a ground where the relationship with the other becomes possible" (1995:76). Here is the connection to the Other and thus to ethics. For Levinas, the alterity that is announced by death is most like the alterity that is announced by the Other. Levinas is following an analysis of alterity. It led him to a discussion of time, death and now, the Other—the key to his ethics.

Alterity and the Other

> *"L'expérience fondamentale que l'expérience objective elle-même*
> *suppose—est l'expérience d'Autrui."* (1997:409)

Levinas' description of the Other develops over time but the Other that is introduced in his earliest works is familiar in later works; the Other is incomprehensible, mysterious and irreducible to "the same." Consciousness of the Other does not allow one to grasp, fully comprehend or reduce the Other to the same. We can only experience the exteriority of the Other; the Other remains mysterious and unknowable. Unlike all other (*l'Autre*) objects that make up the world in which the self exists, the Other escapes and thwarts the self's instrumentalist and objectivist efforts to reduce all others to itself.[24] Like death, the Other (*l'Autrui*) subverts and puts into question the self's egological subjectivity. The self who experiences *jouissance*, who lives in the world and from the (*vivre de*)

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[24] Levinas uses *l'Autrui*, translated as Other, to refer to only the human Other with whom I have an ethical relationship. He uses *l'Autre*, translated as other, to refer to all things that are other than the self (i.e. objects). There is some debate as to whether ethical relation with animals is strictly possible according to Levinas' thought.

elements of the world, has the potential to be seized by the Other in ethical relationship.

This interruption is the foundational ethical insight of Levinas' thought. He explains that the phenomenon of this interruption of the self's ipseity and constraint of the self's liberty and will to totalize *is* ethics, "We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics" (1995a:43). This "new modality" challenges the idea of totality in ontological philosophy by asserting an irreducible multiplicity (2000:66). As Levinas explains in the concluding pages of *Totality and Infinity*, "For the idea of totality, in which ontological philosophy veritably reunites—or comprehends—the multiple, must be substituted the idea of a separation resistant to synthesis" (1995a:293). This "separation resistant to synthesis" is the alterity of the Other. In the following sections, I will illustrate how Levinas develops his analysis of alterity by first focusing on the feminine Other and the erotic relationship, and then on the Other and the ethical relationship.

The Feminine Other: the Other "par excellence"

Levinas identifies the Other "par excellence" as the feminine Other. In *Existence and Existents,* he bases this assertion on a hypothesis that he then explores more fully. Levinas determines that the alterity that he is targeting with his phenomenological analyses points to an original relationship of alterity. For Levinas, who speaks from the position of a masculine self, the original relationship of alterity is the erotic where the feminine Other is the quintessential example of alterity. He asks us to follow his reasoning in *Existence and Existents*:

> Let us anticipate a moment, and say that the plane of eros allows us
> to see that the other par excellence is the feminine, through which a
> world behind the scenes prolongs the world. (2001:85)

Levinas explains the choice of the feminine for this role by asserting the need

for a "difference" which was not merely attendant but essential. Such a model of

difference could serve to illuminate the alterity of the ethical relationship (cf.

Levinas, *Time and the Other*, preface from 1979).

In early works like *Time and the Other*, Levinas describes the feminine

Other in two complementary ways. First, the feminine is identified through its

specific essence, not because of its opposition to the masculine. If the feminine were

defined in terms of its opposition to the masculine, its alterity would depend on its

relation to the masculine and no longer be absolute. Levinas insists on this essential

difference by rejecting any formulation that describes the feminine as either the

lack of some masculine quality or the complement of the masculine. Second, Levinas

identifies the feminine's specific essence as its alterity. He maintains that:

> The difference between the sexes is a formal structure, but one that
> carves up reality in another sense and conditions the very possibility
> of reality as multiple, against the unity of being proclaimed by
> Parmenides. (1995:85)

The dichotomy set up is not one of opposing genders; rather, it is the opposition

between the Other and the self (cf. Perpich, 2001:31-32).

The alterity of the feminine Other announces the plurality of Being that

requires that we discard previous ontologies that were predicated on the sameness

of existents. The feminine Other resists symmetry because of the feminine's

inherent characteristics. The feminine for Levinas is characterized as mysterious, a

"flight before light," which "bears alterity as an essence"(1995:87-88).

> Hiding is the way of existing of the feminine, and this fact of hiding is
> precisely modesty. So this feminine alterity does not consist in the
> object's simple exteriority. Neither is it made up of an opposition of
> wills. The Other is not a being we encounter that menaces us or
> wants to lay hold of us. The feat of being refractory to our power is not
> a power greater than ours. Alterity makes for all its power. Its
> mystery constitutes its alterity. (1995:87)

The Other's alterity is mystery for Levinas, which is "defined by modesty"(1995:87). For Levinas, modesty is a feminine characteristic that functions to describe the Other's privacy, "hiddeness" and vulnerability to profanation. Each characteristic that Levinas attributes to the feminine consistently underscores the alterity of the Other.

Levinas' most careful exposition of the feminine Other occurs in *Totality and Infinity*. In this work, the feminine is central in two of the four sections of the book: Section II where the feminine Other is described as the welcoming presence of the dwelling, and Section IV, to be discussed shortly in terms of the erotic relationship, where the feminine Other is the erotic Beloved. Feminists have read these two sections very critically because it is in these two sections that Levinas invokes the most problematic stereotypic metaphors associated with women.

Section II of *Totality and Infinity* is essential to understanding Levinas' ethics because it sets up the preconditions of ethical relationship. Until this point in this work, Levinas has been developing his account of exteriority (in terms of alterity) and is now expanding his analysis of interiority (in terms of subjectivity). Here, the feminine Other will be contrasted with the self. Levinas describes a virile self who inhabits the world as pure sensibility, filled with elements and objects that are at his or her disposal. This fundamental ipseity occurs as "being-for-oneself" at home, *être chez soi*. As Richard Cohen notes, Levinas "is therefore still far from describing the fully constituted human being and world encountered across the ethics of face-to-face relations" (1994:197). Levinas is describing those first movements of the accomplishment of subjectivity in existence that occurs as hypostasis in breaking out of the *there is*. In *Time and the Other* and *Existence and Existents*, Levinas had already suggested that breaking out of the *there is*, from

solitude into relationship, are preconditions of the ethical. In the subsection

"Habitation and the Feminine," Levinas describes the process through which the

self takes refuge in the home. The dwelling allows "recollection" of an already

present Other which distracts and suspends the self's spontaneous reactions to the

world (1995a:154). The Other interrupts the self through the recollection of the

intimacy of the home, the welcome that the Other proffers to the self (1995a:155).

This is possible only through relation with an Other who is both present and absent,

who approaches and withdraws. He then explains:

> And the other whose presence is discreetly an absence, with which is
> accomplished the primary hospitable welcome which describes the
> field of intimacy, is the Woman. The woman is the condition for
> recollection, the interiority of the Home, and inhabitation. (1995a:155)

The feminine Other, co-inhabits the home as a welcoming presence, in relationship

with the self, but not yet in ethical relationship. It is the feminine presence in the

home that welcomes the self from primordial being and allows the self to live in the

world.

> The feminine has been encountered in this analysis as one of the
> cardinal points of the horizon in which the inner life takes place—and
> the empirical absence of the human being of 'feminine sex' in a
> dwelling nowise affects the dimension of femininity which remains
> open there, as the very welcome of the dwelling. (1995a:157-158)

Levinas goes so far as to argue that "every home in fact presupposes a woman"

(1995a:157). Levinas is clear that the feminine Other who welcomes the self in the

dwelling is not yet the transcendent Other (*autrui*) who will be so important in the

ethical relationship. Instead this Other is the intimate thou (*tu*) who manifests all of

the "possibilities of the transcendent relation with the Other" (1995a:155). She is "a

delightful lapse in being" and the "source of gentleness in itself." The feminine

interrupts virile masculine existence and becomes the condition for the good that is

beyond being.

The alterity of the feminine, as a domestic welcoming presence for the self, as mysterious, modest and vulnerable, is patterned on cultural narratives about gender roles and sexual difference. As early as *Time and the Other*, Levinas warned against understanding the feminine in some romantic fashion as the "mysterious, unknown or misunderstood woman"; he insisted that he was strictly speaking of the feminine alterity of the Other (1995:86). Despite this claim, we can see from the above descriptions that Levinas appeals to the most common and conventional cultural stereotypes about women, femininity, and the feminine, in order to illustrate the feminine Other's alterity. The ethical implications of the use of these extremely problematic gendered stereotypes will be a key issue for a feminist reading of Levinas' thought. As we shall see in Levinas' account of the feminine Other in the erotic relationship, these gendered tropes will still be very much at issue.

The Feminine Other and Eros

The feminine Other in the erotic relationship serves two major functions in Levinas' ethics. First, it allows Levinas to explore that trace of the original relationship of alterity and further articulate his description of sexual difference. Second, by contrasting the erotic relationship with the ethical relationship, Levinas is able to educe an ever more complex account of the ethical. Here, I am interested in illustrating the first of these two functions, but also in drawing attention to those accounts of the feminine Other that will so problematize a feminist engagement with his thought. I will discuss how Levinas' contrasts the erotic with the ethical in the context of his discussions of the ethical relationship.

The alterity of the erotic relationship is structured by the feminine Other's essential alterity.

> But erotic alterity is not restricted either to that which, between comparable beings, is due to different attributes which distinguish them. The feminine is other for a masculine being not only because of a different nature but also inasmuch as alterity is in some way its nature. (1985:65)

The alterity of the feminine Other engenders what Levinas describes as the pathos of eros. Erotic alterity is disjunctive because although the erotic relationship is oriented towards union, fusion and complementarity, the erotic fails to accomplish this reduction of the Other to the same. Levinas makes it clear that despite romantic notions about the fusion of lovers' souls, the lovers are neither united nor do they actually love each other. The erotic is egoistic: the lover loves being loved; the lover loves "himself." The Beloved is never loved. The duality of two separate individuals is maintained as a dual egoism. Despite striving for unity, the erotic relationship preserves alterity because fusion is impossible. The Other slips away, withdrawing into mystery.

The Beloved's ambiguity and mystery is central to what Levinas calls a phenomenology of voluptuousness. First introduced briefly in *Time and the Other* and elaborated more fully in *Totality and Infinity*, the "caress" is the mode of the erotic and the central trope of Levinas' phenomenology of voluptuousness. "The caress is a mode of the subject's being"; the subject reaches out towards the Other in the caress (1995:89). However, the Other is never touched, never reached by the subject's caressing. The distinction between touching and the caress is in intentionality. Touching has the object of grasping or possessing; the caress is the hungry anticipation of the "pure future without content" (1995:89). It is without

content because the self does not know, possess or grasp what it seeks. Alterity

is maintained; the Other remains distinct from the self.

Face-to-Face: a phenomenology of transcendence

The face-to-face encounter is the organizing event of Levinas' phenomenological

account of the ethics of alterity. It is in the face of the Other that we see the *height*

that must constitute ethics. In *Ethics and Infinity,* Levinas cautions that the face

cannot be described phenomenologically. He says that the face is "straightaway

ethical," meaning that the face already indicates relationship (1985:85). The

epiphany of the face, looking into the face of the Other, being seized by the Other's

expression, is presented as representative of encounter with the Other. First

described in *Time And The Other*, the face-to-face is not yet ethical, it is introduced

as a primal relation that calls the self's subjectivity into question:

> The relationship with the Other, the face-to-face with the Other, the
> encounter with a face that at once gives and conceals the Other, is the
> situation in which an event happens to a subject who does not assume
> it, who is utterly unable in its regard, but where nonetheless in a
> certain way it is in front of the subject. The other "assumed" is the
> Other. (1995:78)

In the "decency" of "everyday" social life, we come into contact with the other (here

not the Other because it is not an ethical relationship), in sympathy as an "alter-

ego" (1995:83). The other's alterity is unrecognized; the other appears as an illusion

of the same.

When we encounter the other as the Other we recognize the Other as the

"weak, the poor, 'the widow, and the orphan,' whereas I am the rich or the powerful"

(1995:83). Here is the heart of Levinas' argument about ethics and alterity. For

Levinas, all relationships with another, and most importantly all ethical

relationships, presuppose alterity. "Transcendence is not an optics, but the first

ethical gesture"(Levinas, 1995a:174). It is only in the encounter of the Other's

alterity that ethical relationship becomes possible.

Levinas contrasts the ethical encounter with the Other that preserves

alterity with the anti-ethical relation where the self encounters the other as a thing,

an object of his or her power. Instead of invoking the other as Other, the self "only

names them, thus accomplishing a violence and a negation" (1996:9). The   negation

of the Other, as an attempt to possess and totalize the Other, is also the will to

murder. One can only "wish to murder" the Other who resists totalization.

> But when I have grasped the other (*autrui*) in the opening of being in
> general, as an element of the world where I stand, where I have seen
> him *on the horizon*, I have not looked at him in the face, I have not
> encountered his face. The temptation of total negation, measuring the
> infinity of this attempt and its impossibility—this is the presence of
> the face. To be in relation with the other (*autrui*) face to face is to be
> unable to kill. It is also the situation of discourse. (1996:9)

The anti-ethical relation is transformed into the ethical relation in the face-to-face

that Levinas describes as moral consciousness. When the Other's face summons the

self into encounter with the Other, the self's will to murder is thwarted and

transformed into responsibility for the Other.

Infinity and language

While in *Time and the Other* it is the face of the Other which compels responsibility,

in the 1951 essay "Is Ontology Fundamental" the Other is presented as an

interlocutor who summons us. The relation with the Other is an original relation

which is beyond comprehension and that takes place in speech. The Other's

particular face is figured as speech, as interlocution. In encountering the Other, I

already encounter him or her as interlocutor.

> The other (*autrui*) is not an object of comprehension first and an
> interlocutor second. The two relations are intertwined. In other

> words, the comprehension of the other (*autrui*) is inseparable
> from his invocation. (1996:6)

In the encounter with the Other, the subject greets the Other as a particular being, without possessing the Other. Only in the encounter with a human being is this greeting necessary or possible. In 1951 Levinas had already stressed the ability of the face to limit the self's will to murder, in 1961 Levinas picks up this theme again in *Totality and Infinity* and investigates the face's capacity to discursively command responsibility by speaking of the infinity of the face. For Levinas, the infinity of the Other's face is the glimpse of all that radically exceeds the self, "beyond the capacity of the I" (1995a:51).

The infinity recognized in the Other's face is essential to the Other's ability to command the self to ethical responsibility. When I greet the Other, I recognize the Other as the weak, the poor, the widow, and the orphan, because the Other approaches me from a "dimension of height." If it were not for this height, my encounter with the commanding Other would only be one where I pity or sympathize with the Other. This is the necessary asymmetry of the face-to-face relationship. The Other is vulnerable to me and my will to efface the Other and bring the Other under my control. But because the Other approaches me from this dimension of height, I see "infinity" in the Other's face, and the Other commands me to not murder, not totalize. When we are struck by the infinity in the face of the Other, we glimpse God. For Levinas, infinity is "beyond being," it cannot come from my own knowledge. These two features of the face, the ability to glimpse God in infinity, and the alterity of the Other who commands responsibility, are inseparable. This is a radical theological statement. Tina Chanter explains,

> For Levinas, the only access to God is through the face of the other.
> The face-to-face encounter has nothing to do with proving that God

exists. Rather the other who presents himself as absolutely or
irreducibly other, also signals God... (1995:184)

The infinity of the face, in which I glimpse God, commands me to ethical responsibility for the Other. Levinas is close to Buber here, in correlating relationship with the Other with relationship with God when he says: "Hence metaphysics is enacted where the social relation is enacted—in our relations with men. There can be no knowledge of God separated from the relationship with men" (1995a:78). But where Buber argues that we learn how to come into relationship with God through our relations with humans, Levinas is saying that the self glimpses God in the Other face's command to responsibility. This claim is not the same as claiming that God commands me to act ethically. Levinas is unequivocal that it is the Other that commands the self, that we also glimpse God does not change the source of this call to responsibility. Levinas describes how the infinity of the Other's face resists the self's will to totalize:

Cet infini, plus fort que le meurtre, nous résiste déjà dans son visage,
est son visage, est l'expression originelle, est le premier mot: "tu ne
commettras pas de meurtre." (1998:217)

In the French original we see details of Levinas' argument that are less evident in the English translation. *Visage* translates not only as "face" but also as expression. Levinas speaks of *"le visage"* (the face) elsewhere, but here he uses *"son"* to indicate the particularity of the face that belongs to a specific Other. But Levinas obscures the personal pronoun, using the plural *"nous"* we instead of the singular. The infinity of *his* face/expression, stronger than murder, already resisting *our* murderous intent in his face/expression, is his face/expression, is the original expression, the first word: "Thou shall not murder." The infinity of *his* face is already present, already resisting—it is his face. This "original expression," this

"first word" is addressed in the intimacy of "*tu*"[25] (1995a:200). This already obligating intimate speech of the Other seizes the self.

The ethical relationship breaks through and out in language as the face-to-face encounter. Here, the saying *is* the face.[26] Discourse or language does not merely signify, it disrupts the self's egoism, allows the self to experience responsibility and respond ethically. Language calls the self's egoistic freedom into question in the ethical relation (1995a:206). It allows the self to "speak the world" to the Other by designating and "putting in common" the world with the Other. This is teaching, "a discourse in which the master can bring to the student what the student does not yet know" (1995a:180). For Levinas, teaching is not merely maieutics; that Socratic method of questioning that "gives birth" to understanding by eliciting from a student the latent truths that every human, through their innate reason, already knows. If the maieutic method were the limit of what speech could communicate, one would never be able to access or share what one did not already contain in oneself. Instead, teaching brings me more than I know as a solitary I:

> To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression,
> in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry
> away from it. It is therefore to receive from the Other beyond the
> capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity.
> But this also means: to be taught. (1995a:51)

Language is thus a welcome and an offering. This notion of language as welcome and gift is essential to Levinas' argument that communication and community with the Other and with others is constituted by transcendent encounter. It is in attentive response to the Other, when we recognize our own biases, experiences and

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[25] In French, "*tu*" is the second person singular. "*Tu*" is an informal, intimate form of address that is similar to the German "*du*."

insights are not common and we respond in a way that does not seek to totalize

the Other, that speaking becomes meaningful and *ethical*.

Contrasting the Ethical and Erotic Relationships

Although I have introduced the erotic and ethical relationships separately, Levinas

often contrasts terms in order to explain them more fully. Due to the way in which

Levinas traces the alterity of the ethical relation to the alterity of the erotic relation,

his account of both types of relation are enhanced through a comparative exposition.

It is by holding the two in tension, noting their similarities and pinpointing

divergences, that Levinas is able to deepen his analysis of ethical alterity. The most

obvious similarity between the two relations has already been noted; both the erotic

and ethical relationships involve the self and the Other encountering each other but

remaining distinct. The difference is that the ethical relationship begins outside the

self in a call from the Other. This essential difference will highlight both the

structure of each type of relation and the ways in which the status and role of the

feminine Other emerges and recedes in his thought.

Levinas presents the distinctions between these two relations in sharp relief

in *Totality and Infinity*. Here it is helpful to recall the organization of the text. The

first section of the work focuses on alterity, the distinction and relation between the

self and the Other. In the second section, Levinas presents the phenomena that

frame his analysis: intimacy of the dwelling, *jouissance*, desire, nourishment, labour

etc. Section III is the climax of the work, outlining his ethics and elaborating the

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[26] Levinas distinguishes between the saying and the said. The said is the content that is communicated. The saying is how that content is communicated. In language, the saying and the said are correlated even while we understand that there may be many sayings for the same said (1994:5-7)

face-to-face as the quintessential model of ethical relations. This is followed by the denouement of the final fourth section where Levinas explores "beyond the face" in his discussion of the erotic. As Richard Cohen correctly observes, this section depends utterly on the phenomenological account established in Section III (1994:207-208). Levinas invokes the feminine Other when it serves him well, in his description of the phenomena that Cohen helpfully refers to as "regions of meaning" (1994:207). Thus in addition to his analysis of the feminine in his descriptions of the regions of meaning in Section II, Levinas also relies on the feminine Other in his discussion of the erotic "regions of meaning" in Section IV. However, as Cohen also observes, the Other of the face-to-face relation is not specifically feminine in Section III. Cohen highlights this difference in distinguishing that while Section II and IV refer to "regions of meaning," the ethics described in Section III is "the domain of the human, described without reference to gender" (1994:207). His proof text for this interpretation is a citation from *Ethics and Infinity* where Levinas explains: "The best way of encountering the other is not even to notice the color of his eyes" (Cohen 1994:207 citing Levinas, 1985:85).

The erotic relationship is not equivalent to the ethical relationship; the failures of the erotic, namely the absence of meaningful language and *height*, are the essential features of the ethical. The features of the erotic relationship, egoism, voluptuousity and the desire for fusion, are ultimately incompatible with the face-to-face ethical relationship. Levinas explains, while in the ethical relationship the face-to-face relation is always "posited in front of a we," the erotic relationship concerns only the lover and the Beloved (1995a:213). "Eros, then, stands to the fully human tasks of ethics and justice as an interlude, intermission, or vacation"

(Cohen, 1993:2). This interlude is occasioned by the lack of a social dimension in the erotic relationship.

In contrast with the ethical relationship, the erotic relationship does not similarly open up to Infinity even though the alterity of the Other is maintained.

> If to love is to love the love the Beloved bears me, to love is also to love oneself in love, and thus to return to oneself. Love does not transcend unequivocably -it is complacent, it is pleasure and dual egoism. (1995a:266)

The desire of eros, the desire of desire, is as Levinas describes, the pathos of voluptuousness, where the lovers strive for unity, identity and fusion, but experience each other's alterity and always remain frustratingly separate. The voluptuous subject finds himself the "self of an other, and not only as the self of himself" (1995a:270).

While there is a suggestion of the connection between the ethical and the erotic relationship *in Time and the Other*, by the time of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas has strictly differentiated between the two types of relationships. We see this distinction in the following passage quoted in part earlier:

> The Beloved is opposed to me not as a will struggling with my own or subject to my own, but on the contrary as an irresponsible animality which does not speak true words. The beloved, returned to the stage of infancy without responsibility—this coquettish head, this youth, this pure life 'a bit silly'—has quit her status as a person. The face fades, and in its impersonal and inexpressive neutrality is prolonged, in ambiguity, into animality. The relation with the Other are enacted in play; one plays with the Other as with a young animal. (1995a: 263)[27]

This text leaves no doubt that the Other in the erotic relationship is profoundly and negatively transformed from the positive if mysterious Other

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[27] This passage is often cited by feminists as one of the most problematic examples of Levinas' description of the feminine Other in Levinas' corpus. It will be considered in detail when I discuss feminist critiques of his work.

who compels ethical responsibility in the ethical relationship. This erotic Other "has quit her status as a person" and is likened unto a "young animal." While the Other's face in the ethical relationship reveals truth, the Other in the erotic relationship is effaced and speaks untruth. While in each case the duality of being is maintained, and thus there is a phenomenological similarity between the two types of relationships, the erotic relationship is already invested with pejorative connotations that the ethical relationship does not share.

Another distinction between the ethical and erotic relationship is evidenced in Levinas' distinction between metaphysical desire and erotic desire. Erotic desire can be fulfilled or satisfied because its desires are egoistic and not transcendent. Erotic love itself is understood as the "satisfaction of a sublime hunger" (1995a:34). The phenomenon of voluptuousity consists in an "ever-striving-for" which would dissolve upon satisfaction. Metaphysical desire can never be satisfied because in the face-to-face encounter one can never grasp and know the Other completely; it hears/understands (*entends*) the alterity of the Other and thereby finds meaning in that alterity as the alterity of the Other and God. "The metaphysical desire has another intention; it desires beyond everything that can simply complete it. It is like goodness—the Desired does not fulfill it but deepens it" (1995a:34). In contrast with metaphysical desire, erotic desire does not find any meaning in the alterity of the Other or of God. While metaphysical desire is oriented towards God and the Other, erotic desire can only orient back towards the self.

The difference between the ethical relationship and the erotic relationship is further revealed in the relationship with God which is itself manifest in the relationship with the Other. In *Time and the Other*, Levinas writes:

> We think that the idea-of-the-Infinite-in-me -or my relation to God - comes to me in the concreteness of my relation to the other person, in the sociality which is my responsibility for the neighbour. (1995:136)

The relationship with the Other as neighbour is not self-interested and is the very locus of our experience of relationship with God. This is contrasted with the erotic relationship that does imply a form of self-interest in the desire for correlation that emerges in the erotic relationship. This is the strongest condemnation of the erotic relationship; erotic self-interest is the antithesis of the ethical orientation which demands a transcendence of self-interest into obligation to the Other.

> Responsibility is without concern for reciprocity: I have to respond to and for the Other without occupying myself with the Other's responsibility in my regard. A relationship without correlation, *love of the neighbour is love without eros*. It is for-the-other-person and through this, to-God! (my emphasis, 1995:137)

While the relationship with the Other provokes and commands ethical responsibility through the face-to-face encounter, in the erotic relationship the orientation is not towards and for the Other, but towards and for the other's voluptuousity ultimately returning to the self (1995a:266).

Despite the egoism inherent in the erotic relationship, Levinas does not want to characterize the erotic relationship as a power relationship. The self does not grasp, possess or know the Other. If the self could do so, the erotic relationship would conflate into a fusion. Such a fusion is structurally impossible because of the unknowableness and mystery of the feminine Other. Even though the erotic relationship is not a power relationship in *Time and the Other*, there is a struggle inherent in the erotic relationship that is outlined in his later work, *Totality and*

Infinity. The intrinsic struggle of the erotic relationship is not resolved by transcendence as it is in the ethical relationship. In the erotic relationship, the Other is opposed to the self without transcendence:

> The Beloved is opposed to me not as a will struggling with my own or subject to my own, but on the contrary as an irresponsible animality which does not speak true words (1995a: 263).

The Beloved's failure to speak truth is the most damning condemnation of all.

Levinas makes it clear that equality resides in the ethical life (the ethical life is equality in its self) and that the sexual life is subordinate to the ethical. He makes this statement within the context of the Genesis story and this context must remind us of the ways that Levinas' aim in reading these passages is to locate ethical insights within traditional texts. But in positing the relation as more importantly metaphysical than physical, and moreover rehearsing a passage from the Bible which has historically been used to assert male priority, Levinas is inevitably appealing to classically western binaries: mind/body, man/woman, dominant/subordinate.

How should we understand Levinas' understanding of the erotic? On the one hand, Levinas is heir to the western philosophical tradition's discomfort with the erotic. His references to animality, irrationality, lying, the capacity of the carnal to profane the ethical as well as his determination of the relative impurity of love relationships, all strongly suggest an internalization of classical negative views of sexuality. It is therefore unsurprising that Levinas reinscribes the association between the feminine and these negative views of sexuality. Still, Levinas' treatment of the erotic is somewhat disconcerting in that Levinas is also a Jewish philosopher and Talmudist, who is well versed in the Jewish view of sexuality. Although Jewish thought and law does incorporate a strong suspicion of the sexual,

Judaism also evinces an affirmation of the sexual as necessary, ethical, blessed and commanded. While there is an anxiety about female sexuality in the tradition, there is a much greater anxiety about male sexuality being inappropriately expressed. Levinas' ambivalence about the erotic synthesizes and moves beyond each tradition's position largely because he is approaching the problem of the erotic relationship from a phenomenological perspective. One can argue that his interpretation of the phenomena of erotic relationships is informed by these influences but it is the logic of the larger ethical system which determines the conclusions of these interpretations.

Erotic Accomplishments: fecundity and paternity

The erotic's thwarted attempt for complete identity and duality leads Levinas to explore the category of fecundity as it plays out in paternity and filiality. Fecundity is the desire of desire. In *Time and the Other*, Levinas describes paternity as "the relationship with a stranger who, entirely while being other, is myself, the relationship of the ego with a myself who is nonetheless a stranger to me" (1995:91). Paternity and filiality are the accomplishments of fecund desire, joining parent and child. Paternity is like the erotic in that it is a relationship of alterity—a relationship with a stranger. It is unlike the erotic relationship because although in the erotic relationship this stranger is not myself, in the paternal/child relationship the child is myself, "I do not *have* my child; I *am* in some way my child" (1995:91). In the final pages of *Time and the Other*, Levinas explains how the opening of future time, occasioned in the erotic's interruption of the ego's return to the self, is similarly accomplished in the son. "Paternity is not simply the renewal of the father in the son and the father's merger with him, it is also the father's exteriority in

relation to the son, a pluralist existing" (1995:92). Put more simply, in the erotic relation two remain two (this is the pathos of eros, because they fail to achieve the unity they strive for), and in the paternal relation the two are one while remaining two. By *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas will name this relationship transubstantiation and conclude: "Fecundity evinces a unity that is not opposed to multiplicity, but, in the precise sense of the term, engenders it" (1995a: 271-273). It is a special relationship among other relationships of alterity where the self becomes other and survives. As the self becomes other to itself, there is a promise of an open future, of infinity.

In the account of eros and paternity, the object of the erotic relationship is not the Beloved feminine partner but rather the production of the child, or more specifically, the son. The paternal relationship is ethically privileged over the erotic relationship because the paternal/filial relationship is social—that is leading to fraternity, which constitutes ethics—while the erotic relationship takes place at a level of laughter and silly animality. Filiality, the view of the relationship between father and elected son from the son's point of view, allows the son to exist in fraternity, in relationship (and out of relation) to other sons. By the close of *Totality and Infinity*, fraternity, as informed by paternity and filiality, is the condition for face-to-face ethical relations.

The Ethics of Maternity: proximity and substitution

As Levinas' thought evolves, the contrast between the ethical and erotic relationship become less central to his larger investigation of alterity as the basis of ethics as first philosophy. An important shift takes place in *Otherwise than Being* when the model of the call to responsibility by the feminine Other in the face-to-face relation

and the father/child relations begin to be reconfigured in favour of the more precise idea of proximity and substitution in maternity. Proximity arouses an "unexceptionable obligation" (1994:88) where "I am-for-the-other" (1994:90).

> The neighbour concerns me before all assumption... I am bound to him... Here there is a relation of kinship outside of all biology, "against all logic." It is not because the neighbour would be recognized as belonging to the same genus as me that he concerns me. He is precisely other. The community with him begins in my obligation to him. The neighbour is a brother. A fraternity that cannot be abrogated...(1994:87)

Proximity is a "disturbance" of time, a "suppression" of the distance of consciousness, where one is obsessed with the "nudity" and "poverty" of the face (1994:89). That being-for-the other is not a choice; in proximity the Other is "already" in my arms, already carrying the Other "in my breast as the nurse bears the nurseling" (Levinas referring to Numbers, 11:12, 1994:91). I may protest like Moses that I did not "conceive" the people whom I am responsible for, I may feel persecuted by this unasked for, unprovoked obligation, but the stranger is already incumbent upon me.

Our obligation to the Other is enacted in the approach where the I is excessively responsible to and for the Other. "To be oneself, the state of being a hostage is always to have one degree of responsibility more, the responsibility for the responsibility of the other" (1994:117). Levinas characterizes this responsibility in terms of the idea of substitution where the I substitutes the self for the Other. First developed in 1967 and most clearly articulated in *Otherwise than Being* where Levinas devotes the central fourth chapter to the topic of substitution, substitution represents not a reversal or a change of place but a radical passivity where I substitute myself for the Other. Substitution is the relation: "My responsibility for

the other is the *for* of the relationship" (1994:80). This idea is made even more

explicit in "Ethics as First Philosophy," first published in 1984:

> A responsibility that goes beyond what I may or may not have done to
> the Other or whatever acts I may or may not have committed, as if I
> were devoted to the other man before being devoted to myself.
> (1993:83)

He calls this relation of substitution a "guiltless responsibility" and the

"responsibility of the hostage" (1993:83, 84). Our proximity that arouses obsessive

obligation is material and corporeal. We are subjects of flesh and blood; Levinas

insists that only a "subject that eats can be for-the-other, or can signify.

Signification, the one-for-the-other, has meaning only among beings of flesh and

blood" (1994:77). Our proximity and substitution for the Other is a rending and

sacrificing of the persecuted self for-the-other and is expressed in the most carnal

terms: To give bread to the Other, is to be a person who is "hungry and eats,

entrails in a skin, and thus capable of giving the bread out of his mouth, or giving

his skin" (1994:77). It is the "exposure to wounds and outrages" (1994:105). It is like

the hemophiliac's hemorrhage," where one always "empties oneself anew of oneself"

(1994:92). Finally, it is the maternal body, gestating, and nourishing the Other.

Proximity and substitution are illuminated in maternity. Maternity evokes

Levinas' most visceral and corporeal imagery. He asks, "Is not the restlessness of

someone persecuted but a modification of maternity, the groaning of the wounded

entrails by those it will bear or has borne?" 1994:75). Maternity is characterized as

the epitome of sensibility. It is passive responsibility for the Other; a body

nourishing the other, suffering for the Other. Levinas explains how maternity best

illuminates this excessive obligation to the Other:

> In maternity what signifies is a responsibility for others, to the point
> of substitution for others and suffering both from the effect of
> persecution and from the persecuting itself in which the persecutor

sinks. Maternity, which is bearing par excellence, bears even
responsibility for the persecuting by the persecutor. (1994:75)

The maternal body's gestation of the child, caring for the child, held hostage by the

child represents this exceptional responsibility. In this view, maternity is the

ultimate substitution for-the-other, the apotheosis of the ethical.

Justice: from the face-to-face to maternity

Until this point, the focus has been on the relationship between two persons: the

self and the Other, but Levinas is also deeply concerned by the urgent question of

justice for the many. Levinas' ethics as first philosophy is a prophetic protest

against the totalizing thinking that is manifest in western ontological philosophy,

and which he believes is at the root of the totalitarianism itself.[28] Ontology fails to

disrupt and "call into question" the self's egoism and will to totalize the Other by

focusing on the existents relationship with Being instead of alterity. On an

individual basis, such philosophies lead to the types of thinking where the

unfettered ego treats the other as an object of his or her power. When this failure is

magnified at the level of the State, a mythology of impersonal, unbiased, anonymous

"justice" leads to the barbarisms of totalitarian injustice.

Levinas' initial forays into the question of justice proceeded from his

investigation of alterity and his development of his account of interpersonal ethics.

As Richard Cohen details in his introduction to *Face to Face with Levinas*:

More than ethics is required in order to be good, *justice* is also
required. The subject realizes that the absolute other is also relative
to others, and that its own inalienable infinite responsibility for the

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[28] In his 1990 preface to his 1933 essay, "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," Levinas unequivocally asserts that the horror of Nazism is a possibility that is "inscribed within the ontology of a being concerned with being" (1990:63). When relationship with the Other is secondary to ontology, it "remains under obedience to the anonymous, and leads inevitably to another power, to imperialist domination, to tyranny" (1995a:47).

> other is also a responsibility to others and a responsibility like
> others'. In this way the value of justice, of *equality*, emerges from the
> originary unequalled and *unequal* ethical relation. (1986:8-9)

The encounter with the Other, opens the possibility of Others. The intimacy of the face-to-face relation reveals the communal context of that encounter. Levinas makes this clear when he maintains that everything "that takes place here "between us" concerns everyone, the face that looks at it places itself in the full light of the public order..." (1995a:212). The encounter between the self and the Other does not take place in isolation, it takes place in particular social and political contexts where others are present. Levinas explains:

> The thou is posited in front of a we. To be we is not to "jostle" one
> another or get together around a common task. The presence of the
> face, the infinity of the other, is a destituteness, a presence of the
> third party (that is, of the whole of humanity which looks at us), and a
> command that commands commanding. (1995a:213)

The presence of the third party is not incidental to the face-to-face relation; it supplements it and announces the need for justice. Justice is the logical correlate of ethics. If the ethical face-to-face relationship involves responsibility for the Other, Justice involves responsibility for all Others. The Other who is presented as particularly vulnerable in the face-to-face relation is analogous to the widow, the poor and the orphan, persons who are particularly economically vulnerable in *society*. Robert Gibbs correctly observes that the poor one is the archetypal Other in Levinas' thought. "Ethics is an optics for thought, but its setting is being before the poor" (1994:235). Significantly, both justice and interpersonal ethics are figured in iconic terms that evoke the vulnerability of the poor: destituteness, poverty, nakedness, and hunger. Our obligation to the poor is both to the Other who confronts me and the third person who joins us. It is this "third person" that accomplishes communal ethics. The third person, "joins me to himself for service; he

commands me as a Master," but I am also to command on behalf of Others as well (1995a:213).

How then to develop an account of justice that can enact the standards of the face-to-face relation? How can we institutionalize this obligation to the Other in law? Several obstacles are immediately apparent. I cannot enter into relationship with all others in society as I might with the Other. There are some I will never meet or hear of, let alone enter into relationship with. But I still risk harming these many others even if I am oblivious to them. Worse, injustice is already institutionalized in our laws, economy and social relations.

> Institutional injustices, such as structural inequalities and market
> distortions, are the primary forms of injustice, because I cannot find
> the others whom I oppressed through participation in institutions,
> and so I cannot redress the wrong. (Gibbs, 1994:231)

Equality and symmetry are necessary for the law to be just instead of tyrannical, but in creating a universal subject as the object of law, one constantly risks injury to a specific Other. A "humanity of interchangeable men...makes possible exploitation itself" (1995a:298). Justice, in *Totality and Infinity*, is primarily conceived of as a corrective for this tyranny of interchangeability, a protest against the "philosophy of the neuter" in insisting on the non-reciprocity of ethical relation. If under the totalizing effects of the philosophy of the neuter the Other is silenced and effaced, justice "consists in again making possible expression, in which in non-reciprocity the person presents himself as unique. Justice is a right to speak" (1995a:298).

But what are my *particular* obligations to the Other and the third party? The particular Other is in a sense precluded from the purview of his ethics at this point in his thought because of how he understands the face-to-face encounter. The obligation is radical, but without distinctions. Distinctions would imply knowledge

or comprehension of the Other. In *Ethics and Infinity* he questions whether or not it is even possible to speak of a phenomenology of the face:

> I do not know if one can speak of a 'phenomenology' of the face, since phenomenology describes what appears. So, too, I wonder if one can speak of a look turned toward the face, for the look is knowledge, perception. I think rather that access to the face is straightaway ethical. You turn yourself toward the Other as toward an object when you see a nose, eyes, a forehead, a chin and you can describe them. The best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes! When one observes the color of the eyes one is not in social relationship with the Other. The relation with the face can surely be dominated by perception, but what is specifically the face is what cannot be reduced to that. (1985: 85-86)

So although we encounter an individual Other with their own face, there remains the question of how that Other's particularity is actually present to the self. The Other is always Other; the self can only come up against the exteriority of the Other even as the self is seized by the Other and glimpses infinity in the Other's face. The specific experiences of a person that one would describe as contributing towards constituting their particular identity—i.e. those of gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, class, and/or disability—are *not* accounted for in the description of the face-to-face encounter with the Other as the "widow, the poor, the orphan" who compels ethical responsibility.

Levinas begins to delve more deeply into the question of particularity and justice in *Otherwise Than Being* where the demands of justice are complicated by the excessive and always increasing obligation to the Other and to Others. Patricia Werhane insightfully contrasts the account of justice in *Totality and Infinity* to that presented in *Otherwise Than Being* by suggesting that the latter work speaks less of rights than of "a surplus of duties over rights" (1995:65). Radical responsibility to the Other in the face-to-face is problematized when the third party is already also in proximity, to me and to the Other, and they are in proximity to each other.

> The other and the third party, my neighbors, contemporaries of
> one another, put distance between me and the other and the third
> party. "Peace, peace to the neighbor and the one far-off" (Isaiah 57;19)
> —we now understand the point of this apparent rhetoric. The third
> party introduces a contradiction in the saying whose signification
> before the other until then went in one direction. It is of itself the
> limit of responsibility and the birth of the question: What do I have to
> do with justice? (1994:157)

Levinas claims that proximity "takes on a new meaning in the space of contiguity" (1994:157); the fact that the third party is my neighbour's neighbour, an Other to my Other, is the "birth of thought, consciousness, justice and philosophy" (1994:128). In proximity to the Other, the third is already permanently incumbent upon me, interrupting and opening the closed society of the ethical face-to-face relationship. Their contemporaneousness disrupts the ethical relationship between the self and a solitary Other. Thus justice does not occur at the same time as the face-to-face or proximity. Justice takes place when one reflects on *particular* responsibilities to and for the Other and Others.

What is our precise duties to the Other, what is our obligation to Others? This is evaluated as a "calculus" or measure of the particularities of Others (1994:159) because there

> must be a justice among incomparable ones. There must then be a
> comparison between incomparables and a synopsis, a togetherness
> and contemporaneousness; there must be thematization, thought and
> inscription. (1994:16)

Levinas explains in *Otherwise Than Being* that justice practically involves systemization:

> Justice is necessary, that is, comparison, coexistence,
> contemporaneousness, assembling, order, thematization, the visibility
> of faces, and thus intentionality and the intellect, and in
> intentionality and the intellect, the intelligibility of a system, and
> thence also a copresence on an equal footing as before a court of
> justice. (1994:157)

In a just society there can be "no distinction between those that are close and those that are far off"; there are both faced and faceless (1994:159). This is the "reversion of the incomparable subject into a member of society" (1994:158).

The problem of justice is the originary problem of a society that seeks political equality. The task of ethics of first philosophy is to put into question the types of thinking that might allow the goal of equality to slip into the mode of totalization. Gibbs reminds us that it "is an unfortunate heritage we have that mislocates ethics in individuality and sociality in totality" (1994:229). For Levinas, it is the assymetrical ethical relation with the Other that disrupts and limits the totalizing tendencies of social equalization. The face of the Other must interrupt moral laws and in a sense retest them against the alterity of the Other. More importantly, they invoke and evoke the standards of the face-to-face for those who not yet faced—the faceless in the crowd. "In the proximity of the other, all the others than the other obsess me, and that obsession already cries out for justice" (1994:158). There is no guarantee that any institutionalized moral law will be just; proximity and substitution (and maternity) can only provide the paradigm for thinking about and considering the needs of the Others in recognizing and disrupting the totalization that leads to injustice.

Judaism

Having surveyed the major elements of Levinas' ethical thought, I am now able to close this exposition with a more detailed discussion of the influence of Judaism on Levinas' ethics. Although Levinas had a tendency to keep his Jewish and philosophical works separate, and indeed speaks of the difference between the

"Jewish" and the "Greek," it would be misleading and distortive to strictly demarcate the two or consider them in isolation from each other. Levinas' ethical writings are utterly consonant with Jewish traditional thought and his "Jewish" writings are certainly the product of a rigorous and systematic rationalist philosophical method. But more than this must be said. Although it is possible to speak at length about Levinas' thought without detailed reference to the impact of Judaism on that thought—and in fact, I have done so in order to introduce his thought—to do so obscures and sunders many of the conceptual connections that frame his phenomenological descriptions.[29] Until this point I have largely followed Levinas' ethics through the texts that are most often labelled his "philosophical writings." Levinas' "Jewish" writings include *Difficult Liberty* and several collections of talmudic readings (not all of which have been translated into English). Although I have made reference to *Difficult Liberty*, I have chosen to not work closely with the Jewish texts because they require not only a basic understanding of Levinas but also require some understanding of rabbinic method and Jewish history and thought.[30] At this point, I would like to focus on what is "missed" when one does not take Jewish thought and history into account in Levinas' ethics.

What is the relationship between Judaism and philosophy in Levinas' thought and how does this play out in Levinas' "philosophical" and "Jewish" writings? While Cohen argues that "the work of Levinas stands or falls

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[29] Misreadings are potential when a critic fails to recognize Levinas' Jewish influences, and considers Levinas' transitions and phenomenological descriptions without reference to Judaism. Some of Claire Elise Katz' most interesting readings of Irigaray's critique of Levinas arise when she pinpoints how Irigaray's unfamiliarity with Judaism' impact on Levinas' misdirects Irigaray's critique by demonstrating how Irigaray only takes note of Levinas' male bias, but not his Jewish one (2003:71). I will discuss Katz' arguments more fully later in terms of feminist engagements with Levinas' thought.

[30] As I am interested in developing Jewish feminist ethics and not only feminist ethics in general, I will necessarily turn to Levinas' Jewish works when I read Levinas strategically in the interest of developing Jewish feminist ethics

independently of its relation to Judaism and Jewish thought," and follows Levinas' own distinction between the Jewish and the "Greek" as being particularly explicative of the place of Judaism in his thought, Cohen is perhaps too willing to take Levinas' self-analysis at face value (1994:127). I find Handelman's phrasing most helpful to think about the relationship between his "Jewish" and "philosophical" writings when she borrows Derrida's term "double reading" to express how "they are translations of one into the other" (1991:270). In a sense, nothing new is being said in one or the other; both modes are expressing the same account of the ethical—albeit with more or less explicit cultural references. In the same way that Levinas returns again and again to qualify, re-speak and interrupt his own philosophical speech always to undermine totalizing thought, we see a similar qualification, re-speaking and interruption in his "Jewish" writings.

Most scholars agree that Levinas' interest in asserting the primary importance of ethics is characteristic of Jewish thought. Steven Shwarzchild has made the case that the primacy of ethics is "the one perennial differentia of all Jewish philosophical thought—what Kant calls 'the primacy of practical reason,' i.e. the metaphysical ultimacy of ethics and its constitutive and functional decisiveness even for the cognitive world" (1985:252). Wyschogrod reads Levinas' understanding of the "authentic enterprise of Judaism" as the "bringing to light of the ethical life world as it is understood in traditional Jewish texts" (2000:177).

Several scholars trace Levinas' particular understanding of the ethical responsibility to and for the Other, to Judaism. Claire Elise Katz's *Levinas, Judaism and the Feminine: The Silent Footsteps of Rebecca* is particularly interested in how the feminine is developed from Jewish sources, but also explicitly

demonstrates how Levinas' thought is inseparable from its Jewish context by arguing forcefully that,

> Levinas' philosophical project is not merely to recover the ethical; it is
> to reclaim the ethical as Jewish while also translating the Hebrew
> into Greek. It is to render the saying into a form that all can
> understand. (2003:21)

In a similar vein, Handelman speaks of Levinas' "prophetic call of philosophy to Judaism and Judaism to philosophy," explaining that "he can do so because his call comes ultimately from the primary and irreducible interhuman relation to the other that in his view founds them both" (1991:270). Catherine Chalier and Claire Elise Katz devote considerable attention to rabbinic and biblical influences. Chalier quotes two talmudic sources to highlight the thematic influences:

> We are all responsible for one another (*Sanhedrin* 27b).

> Anyone who is able to take a stand against the faults of the people
> living with him and does not do it, is responsible in their place. It will
> also be the case if these people are his neighbours or even people who
> are living wherever on the earth; he will have to answer for them if he
> does not interfere when they are doing wrong. Rav Papa says that the
> Princes of exile are responsible for the faults of the whole world
> (*Chabad* 55a). (1991:124)

Gibbs and Oppenheim focus on the connections between God and ethics and stress how Levinas' identifies in Judaism the potential to reorient philosophy. Gibbs speaks of Levinas' Judaism as "an ethics understood as concrete responsibility for others, correlate with the radical transcendence of God" (1994:4). In *Speaking/Writing of God* Oppenheim frames the issue in terms of the ways in which Levinas' account of relationship with God is expressed in responsibility for the Other (1997:ix). Similarly, Peperzak asks rhetorically if anyone would "not recognize this God as the God of Moses and the Prophets?" in Levinas' account of the infinite glimpsed in the Other's face (1999:15). Wyschogrod underlines the ways

in which Levinas' understanding of the "suffering and helpless Other" who, before God, "cannot compel but only solicit and appeal," is distinctly Jewish (2000:182).

Judaism, God and Ethics

In Levinas' philosophical thought, it is the infinity of the face in which the self recognizes the obligation to the Other. God is already present in the ethical relation. In his Jewish writings especially, Levinas frames the question of ethics in terms of Judaism's understanding of God: *"La relation éthique apparaîtra au judaïsme comme relation exceptionnelle: en elle, le contact avec un être extérieure, au lieu de compromettre la souveraineté humaine, l'institue et l'investit"* (1997:31). For Levinas, Judaism's greatest insight is its emphasis on interiority and its relation to ethics. In "A Religion for Adults," he turns to commentaries on Genesis to underline how the ego is put into question by an account that precedes human existence. Awareness of God's creation interrupts the will to possess, forcing the recognition of the "illegitimacy" of one's powers. One is already confronted by the Other, incapable of reducing the Other to the same (1997:32). Thus for Levinas:

> *L'éthique n'est pas le corollaire de la vision de Dieu, elle est cette vision même. L'éthique est une optique. De sorte que tout ce que je sais de Dieu et tout ce que je peux entendre de Sa parole et Lui die raisonnablement, doit trouver une expression éthique.* (1997:33)

Like the ethical encounter with the Other who commands us to responsibility, our relation to God, our knowledge of God is also expressed in commandment. But this commandment does not destroy or deny the self's freedom.

Jewish Law and Ritual

In the essay "Judaism and the Present," Levinas explains that the question of observing the law, of keeping kosher, of observing the Sabbath, are questions that are at issue for those who have chosen Judaism (*déjà décidés au judaïsme*). The choice of observing the law or not is described by Levinas as a "domestic quarrel" (*querelle domestique*) (1997:294).

It is in "A Religion for Adults," that Levinas most clearly articulates his understanding of the relationship between Judaism, ritual and ethics. For Levinas, the law is "effort" that is directed towards God and ethics; the effort to Jewish ritual constitutes a rigorous discipline, that strives to achieve the justice that brings me into extraordinary proximity with God. *"La voie qui mène à Dieu mène donc ipso facto—et non pas surcroît—vers l'homme; et la voie qui mène vers l'homme nous ramène à la discipline rituelle, à l'éducation de soi"* (1997: 35). Like Buber who argues that the way to relationship with God is through relationship with humans, Levinas also correlates relationship with God with relationship with the Other. Levinas must give priority to relationship with the Other since there is no path to God except through the Other's face. But he breaks with Buber in his willingness to see relationship as leading to law and ritual. Thus Levinas is able to cite the talmudic account where three students argue what verse is representative of and constitutes the "whole of the Torah": "Hear, Oh Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One (an expression of monotheism), "You will love your neighbour as yourself" (an expression of ethical responsibility), or "You will sacrifice a lamb in the morning and another at dusk" (an expression of daily discipline and obedience to God). The Rabbi, their teacher (master), judges that it is the last verse that is correct (1997:35). This is a remarkable passage for Levinas to cite when one considers what

the choices were; would not someone who is only familiar with his philosophical writings expect him to choose the second verse? There is no reinterpretation of the verse as an ethical commandment. It is because ritual observance is the quintessential expression of love of God, commanded responsibility to the Other, and ultimately the expression of social justice that Levinas must concur with the Rabbi. Levinas' understanding of ritual and legal observance is not the cold and legalistic observance that is described by Christian anti-Jewish polemics. Levinas stresses, "ritual is not at all external to conscience. It conditions it and permits it to enter into itself and to stay awake. It preserves it, prepares its healing"(1994a:17).

Ritual observance cannot only be directed at God, as if one is not in relationship with humans. Levinas cites the talmudic statement concerning forgiveness: "The transgressions of man toward God are forgiven him by the Day of Atonement, the transgressions against other people are not forgiven him by the Day of Atonement if he has not first appeased the other person" (Mishna, Tractate *Yoma* 85a-85b). He emphasizes that ritual observance is not merely a matter of piety but rather is intrinsically related to our moral conscience as Jews. He asks the remarkable question:

> If we Jews, without ritual life and without piety, are still borne by a
> previously acquired momentum towards unconditional justice, what
> guarantees do we have that we will be so moved for long? (1994a:18)

It is the inviolate connection between Judaism's understanding of this ethical relation with God that for Levinas, expresses most clearly the universal message of Jewish thought. Abandoning Jewish ritual and law would sunder Jewish life from its ethical urgency.

The Holocaust: "the shadow of a question mark"

Levinas rarely writes explicitly about the Holocaust or his own experiences during the war. He is more likely to refer to the *thinking* of Nazism than to the actions of the Nazis. Other than the dedication in *Otherwise Than Being* to the "victims of the same hatred for the other man," there are few overt references to the specific horrors of the Shoah. A clue to this reticence is found in his essay, "Loving Torah More Than God," included in *Difficult Freedom*, and one of the few pieces that are precisely located against the backdrop of the Holocaust. In the opening pages he speaks of his reluctance of "turning the Passion of Passions into a spectacle, or these inhuman cries into the vanity of an author or director." He asks us: "Let us simply listen to the thought which they express" (1990a:143). For Levinas, the Holocaust is understood as the result of the types of thinking that rely on reducing the Other to the same, where one totalizes the Other in the moment that one encounters the other instrumentally. Once one slips into the kinds of thinking that allow one to sever the bonds of common humanity, barbarism is potential. As such, Levinas' entire oeuvre is a response to the Holocaust, one that determinedly evades turning it into spectacle while prophetically calling for radical responsibility for and to the Other. "The Passion that is called 'Holocaust'," says Levinas, "and the whole past of trials whose memories this sacrifice will have forever updated, project on to the future the shadow of a question mark" (1994c:3). The Jewish experience of this disordered and incomplete world is expressed as the command for justice; where "the burning of my suffering and the anguish of my death [are] able to be transfigured into the dread and concern for the other man" (1994c:3-4).

The 1955 essay "Loving the Torah More Than God" responds to the anonymous short story "Yossel, son of Yossel Rakover from Tarnopol Speaks of

God." The short story is presented as a memoir of a narrator who is caught up in the last hours of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. Levinas describes this text, first published in an Israeli journal, as "beautiful and true," not merely emotionally evocative, but intellectually provocative, conveying "a deep and genuine experience of spiritual life" (1990a:142).

Levinas begins with the question of theodicy, what does the victimization and suffering of the Holocaust tell us of God? Rejecting atheism as a response based on a simplistic and immature understanding of a God who "dished out prizes, inflicted punishment or pardoned sins—a God who in His goodness, treated men like children" (1990a:143), he turns to Yossel, who experiences a new "certainty" of God, even though God seems absent "under an empty sky." The absence of God leads Yossel to assume "the whole of God's responsibilities," and this is the paradox that this short story and Levinas expresses: "The path that leads to the one God must be walked in part without God" (1990a:143). Monotheism must be able to answer the challenges, questions and doubts of atheism when God "hides His face" and leaves humans responsible for their own justice and injustice. Levinas specifies that the image of God "hiding his face" is not so much a theological or poetic image, it speaks to that moment when the human recognizes that he or she is alone in the world, that God will not intervene, that no institution stands between the self and a savage and disordered world, that no immature religious "feeling" will be of consolation, that suffering is the condition of responsibility. It is in the responsibility occasioned by God's absence that God's presence emerges "from within." Oppenheim summarizes: "The distinctly 'Jewish sense of suffering' which follows upon the struggle against injustice brings an intimacy with God" (1997:42-43). God and humans are in relationship not through sentimental communion

(*communion sentimentale*) within the love of an incarnate God but through the relation in spirit/relation between souls (*relation entre esprits*) that is enacted through the intermediary of Torah's teachings (1997:204). Here we can see how Levinas is misunderstood by Melissa Raphael in the *Female Face of God in Auschwitz* where she characterizes Levinas' account only linking humans with God through Torah and not through Divine presence and chastises him for his harsh theology (2003:46). Raphael does not appreciate Levinas' assertion that the relation between human and God occurs not through the presence of incarnation but through the glimpse of the divine occasioned by ethical encounter with the Other. The ethical relation must be prior. The intimate presence occasioned from within the suffering responsible self is no less meaningful than some sort of idealized mystical or external presence. That Raphael construes the responsibility of suffering as God asking "the 'superhuman' of 'man'," does violence to Levinas' understanding of ethical responsibility for the vulnerable Other. It is precisely human to respond to the call of the Other, to command justice. Levinas' conclusion, that we must "love Torah more than God," is an affirmation that relationship with God is established through ethics.

Talmudic Readings

Levinas' talmudic studies in France after the Holocaust, his frequent reference to Jewish sources and concepts, as well as his collections of lectures on the Talmud, testify to Levinas' conviction that rabbinic sources are essentially relevant to the project of modern Jewish philosophy but more importantly are universally significant. Levinas is not interested in deconstructing talmudic texts as some post-modern exercise of academic self-indulgence. Rather, Levinas sees the talmudic

sources as a vibrant and urgent call to ethical responsibility that transcends the

historical and cultural specificity of the texts. Levinas is not speaking only to the

secularized or traditional Jew in order to show the relevance of talmudic thought to

modern Jewish existence. Levinas' project is both broader and more subtle. In his

introduction to *Nine Talmudic Readings* Levinas describes these interpretative

commentaries as an attempt to translate the wisdom of the Talmud into the modern

idiom, that is, to translate the Jewish into the "Greek"—the language of philosophy

and western culture (1994a:9).

> The chief goal of our exegesis is to extricate the universal intentions
> from the apparent particularism within which facts tied to the
> national history of Israel, improperly so-called, enclose us. (1994a:5)

In interpreting and re-interpreting traditional Jewish Halakhic (legal) and Agaddic

(narrative) talmudic texts, Levinas is positioning these texts in discursive relation

with modernity, demonstrating that the ethical wisdom of the texts are not limited

to a particular historic or even Jewish experience. Levinas' translation of the

language of the talmudic texts emphasizes the universality and timelessness of the

compelling ethical values and ideas that are embedded in the texts. Through

translation and reinterpretation these values and ideas are revealed to be

essentially relevant to post-modern ethical dilemmas.

At the centre of Levinas' talmudic readings is always, as in his

"philosophical" texts, concern for the Other. If ethics is first philosophy for Levinas,

ethics is also unequivocally first Judaism. In his introduction to his translation of

Levinas' *New Talmudic Readings*, Cohen explains:

> Levinas' talmudic readings are dedicated to a sober vigilance, to an
> attentiveness to and for the other, to a moral conscience and
> conscientiousness; his readings demonstrate the intimate link that
> binds exegesis, humanism, and religion. (1999:12)

Levinas pursues these goals by rehearsing many of the same signifiers that he relies upon in his philosophical writings: the feminine, the Other, maternity, paternity, filiality, fecundity, and eros. As we shall see in my discussion of Jewish feminist readings of Levinas, the gendered tropes rely particularly on Jewish, and specifically biblical, imagery and narrative. Further, it is in the Jewish sources that this influence is markedly evident because he explicitly raises them in relation to their Jewish sources.

Levinas interprets the Talmud as proving the need for Jews and Judaism. Levinas argues that the Sanhedrin court

> protects the universe. The universe subsists only because of the
> justice made in the Sanhedrin. The role of Judaism, of which the
> Sanhedrin is the center, is a universal role, a deaconry in the service
> of the totality of being. (1994a:78)

Levinas makes this assertion with utter conviction. He argues that rabbinic Judaism, which is heir to the Sanhedrin, provides a universal role that the Sanhedrin's opposite (the Sadducees, who he correlates with Christianity) cannot fulfill. The Sanhedrin (and through them rabbinic Judaism) protects the Law, even as it engages with it and argues about it. Rejecting Christian interpretations that stress that it is the spirit of the Law that must be fulfilled, Levinas argues alongside the talmudic sages that it is precisely in the letter of the Law, and the struggle with that letter, that the Law is fulfilled. Levinas contends that this special role which Jews and Judaism fulfills is not a matter of "racial excellence" or "pure grace":

> [F]or there to be justice, there must be judges resisting temptation.
> There must be a community which carries out the mitzvoth right here
> and now. The delayed effect of mitzvoth carried out in the past cannot
> last forever. (1994a:83)

Jews, as represented at their ethical best by the wise judges of the Sanhedrin,

resist the temptation of pleasure without responsibility and protect Justice. The

mitzvoth that Jews fulfill have an enduring pedagogical effect not only on Jews but

also on the whole world. Similarly, Levinas insists in his commentary "Judaism and

Revolution"(Tractate *Baba Metsia*, 83a-83b) that

> Israel means a people who has received the Law and, as a result, a
> human nature which has reached the fullness of its responsibilities
> and its self-consciousness ... no longer in need of being educated, our
> duties our limitless. (1994a:98)

Acceptance of the Law represents a constitutional and ultimately metaphysical

transformation that demands Jewish responsibility to the world.

• FEMINIST CRITIQUE•

Since Simone de Beauvoir's now famous footnote in the *Second Sex* and Luce

Irigaray's later, more developed challenge in "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas: On

the Divinity of Love," feminist critics of Levinas have wrestled with the problems of

the place of woman and the feminine in his thought. Reading Levinas from a

feminist perspective is difficult and sometimes painful. His description of the Other

as feminine and his often reflexive internalization of female stereotypes is troubling

to most feminist readers. Yet Levinas' radical insistence on the priority of ethics,

the valuation of difference, and the ethical responsibility of the self to the

vulnerable Other, resonate powerfully with feminist ethical interests.[31]

Levinas' ethical philosophy is both compelling and troubling when viewed

through a feminist critique of his work. Levinas' use of male normative language

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[31] Portions of this chapter were previously published as "Engendering Questions: Developing Feminist Ethics With Levinas " (2000:13-20).

and his uncritical use of androcentric Jewish texts pose an initial difficulty for both a feminist and Jewish feminist constructive readings of Levinas. More significantly, Levinas' association of the feminine with the Other, particularly in light of his discussions of the erotic relationship, pose real obstacles for feminists who are interested in engaging his thought. Despite these real problems, Levinas' critique of western philosophy and totalitarian thinking combined with his arguments for the primacy of ethics as first philosophy and his analysis of alterity as the condition of ethical relationship, suggests important opportunities for feminist theory in general and feminist ethics in particular. Finally, Levinas' ability to deftly integrate his philosophical and Jewish concerns—without compromising either—invites Jewish feminists to re-imagine and reconfigure their relationship with Jewish thought as neither oppositional nor conciliatory. In the same way that Levinas argues that ethics is first philosophy, Jewish feminists can argue that feminism is first Judaism.

In her preface to the anthology *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas* Tina Chanter asks:

> What would it mean to be a good reader of Levinas' texts? To whom
> does Levinas address himself? How does one read Levinas as a
> woman, that is, without reading over what is said of the feminine as if
> it had nothing to do with being a woman? (2001:2)

In the following discussion I trace the different ways in which it is possible not only to be a "good reader" of Levinas' texts, but also to be a good feminist reader. A good feminist reader listens attentively to Levinas, but also hears Levinas in conjunction with the concerns raised by feminist reflections on gender, sexual difference, philosophy, politics, history, religion, and popular culture. A good feminist reader must be cognizant of the ways that allegiances (to Levinas or to feminism) might

distort a fair reading. Finally, a good feminist reader must read constructively,
entering into a dialogue to locate not only problems, but also opportunities.

Feminism and Levinas' Thought

There is a real and growing body of feminist criticism that has engaged Levinas'
thought. In contrast with Buber and Fackenheim, Levinas has become the object of
significant feminist investigation and analysis. Where Buber's thought is invoked
relatively uncritically in feminist appropriations of the I-Thou ethical model, and
Fackenheim is virtually disregarded, Levinas has, especially in the last five to ten
years, increasingly become the subject of feminist analysis. Feminists are interested
in his thought for two major reasons. First, Levinas' importance as a philosopher
has grown within postmodern discourses. As contemporary feminist theorists
increasingly engage postmodernism, Levinas has necessarily invited feminist
critique. Second, Levinas' description of the feminine Other as a central image in
his description of ethical relation seems to demand a feminist response.

Although one can speak of Levinas' influence on feminism, especially for
example in Luce Irigaray's thought, it is perhaps more meaningful to speak about
how feminists have responded to Levinas in terms of how Levinas challenges and is
challenged by feminist thinkers. Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray and Catherine
Chalier were the first thinkers to focus on questions relating to the feminine, gender
and sex in Levinas' thought. Since then, Levinas' writings have attracted the
attention of a number of feminists working in a variety of disciplines, including
modern Jewish philosophy, western philosophy, Jewish Studies, postmodern theory,
literary theory and textual criticism, aesthetics, psychoanalysis and political theory.

Feminist critiques of Levinas' thought have met with an ambiguous reception. Because these critiques tend to focus tightly on a handful of texts (*Time and the Other*, "Judaism and the Feminine" but most particularly *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise Than Being*) that refer to the feminine Other, the erotic, and maternity, and these critiques targeted topics that were of specific feminist interest, many non-feminist scholars paid little attention to critiques that could be regarded as highly specialized readings. One of the tasks of feminist scholars has been to demonstrate that the feminine, and other gendered tropes that are so problematic for feminist readings, are not incidental Levinasian curiosities but are integral to his larger thought. Most difficult has been the feminist claim that these tropes represent a problem in Levinas' thought that needs to be addressed.

Simone de Beauvoir: a footnote

Beauvoir, like Levinas, is interested in the question of the Other. Agreeing with Hegel and Sartre (but disagreeing with Levinas), Beauvoir maintains that the self can only become self through encounter with the Other; it is through Otherness that one identifies one's own subjectivity. The Other gazes at me and objectifies me, and my subjectivity is revealed in that alterity. In this understanding, the relationship should necessarily be reciprocal; the Other is self for itself, the self is Other for the Other. Through her analysis of the condition of women, Beauvoir explores how the woman is consistently and cumulatively figured as Other in relation to the man.

Beauvoir's brief critique of Levinas in *The Second Sex* is presented in a footnote to her introduction where she explains how the alterity of woman is constructed in opposition to the male. Levinas is cited as a paradigmatic example of this type of thinking and she quotes at some length the "Eros" section from *Time*

and the Other where Levinas explains his choice of the feminine as the "absolutely contrary contrary" (Beauvoir, 1989:xxii citing Levinas, 1995a:84). Beauvoir follows this quotation by musing:

> I suppose that Levinas does not forget that woman, too, is aware of her consciousness, or ego. But it is striking that he deliberately takes a man's point of view, disregarding the reciprocity of subject and object. When he writes that woman is mystery, he implies that she is mystery for man. Thus his description which is intended to be objective, is in fact as assertion of masculine privilege. (1989: xxii)

Beauvoir underscores Levinas' uncritical masculine perspective in attributing alterity to the feminine. While Beauvoir appreciates the attempt to describe the alterity evident in the relationship between self and Other, the problem with Beauvoir's analysis is that she is proceeding from a very different account of subjectivity than Levinas. She begins from the position that the self is both the object and subject of the gaze. Human consciousness is free in its own existence; struggling for its freedom against others who are similarly subject and object. This free, independent consciousness is quite firmly rejected by Levinas whose exploration of the *there is*, solitude and the encounter with the Other disrupt the ego of the self and place alterity at the centre of subjectivity. As a footnote, this analysis is of course not systematic or comprehensive and really makes use of Levinas instrumentally rather than truly engaging his thought. Still her point is well taken, and does pinpoint one of the problems that feminists have with his thought; namely his unrelenting masculine perspective.

Luce Irigaray: questioning sexual difference

Luce Irigaray, the French feminist philosopher who famously critiqued Levinas with her two essays, "Fecundity of the Caress" and "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas: On the Divinity of Love," engages Levinas' thought through her own philosophical

project. An interdisciplinary thinker working in the areas of philosophy, linguistics and psychoanalysis, Irigaray has become one of the pre-eminent feminist theorists and an increasingly important continental philosopher.

Tina Chanter observes that Irigaray's thought "is profoundly influenced by Levinas' conception of ethics" and that this is evident in her choice to include a response to Levinas' "The Phenomenology of Eros" from *Totality and Infinity* as the final chapter, "The Fecundity of the Caress," of her *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (Chanter,1995:214). Chanter is correct in evaluating "The Fecundity of the Caress" as not only a response to the small section in *Totality and Infinity*, but as evincing an engagement with Levinas' work as a whole. Dealing with the feminine, both in terms of eros and the feminine dwelling, this text explores how the erotic relation functions in terms of the ethical relation in Levinas' thought.

Chanter explains how Irigaray relies on Diotima for her understanding of eros as a rebirth of the self and the other (1995:214). Like Levinas, Irigaray is interested in exploring a new "modality" that redefines the existent's relation to existence. She opens the "Fecundity of the Caress" with language that evokes the *there is*:

> On the horizon of a story is found what was in the beginning: this
> naïve or native sense of touch, in which the subject does not yet exist.
> Submerged in pathos or aesthesis: astonishment, wonder, and
> sometimes terror before that which surrounds it. (1993:185)

Similar to Levinas' insistence that the relation with alterity is prior to thinking about the experience of relationship with the Other, Irigaray stresses that eros is

> prior to any eros defined or framed as such. The sensual pleasure of
> birth into a world where the look remains tactile—open to the light.
> Still carnal. Voluptuous without knowing it. (1993:185)

Invoking this understanding of the erotic as rebirth, Irigaray describes how the caress leads to "a new birth,"

> a new dawn for the beloved. And the lover. The openness of a face
> which had not yet been sculpted. The bloom that comes of flowing to
> the depths of what nourishes it again and again. Not a mask given or
> attributed once and for all, but an efflorescence that detaches itself
> from its immersion and absorption in the night's most secret place.
> Not without sparkling. The light that shines there is different from
> the one that makes distinctions and separates too neatly. (1993:189)

Irigaray contends that whereas for Levinas erotic desire always leads the self back to the self; she understands erotic desire to lead beyond the self. For Irigaray, the caress is fecund, resulting in the rebirth of the Beloved and the lover. In light of the way that the (feminine) Beloved sinks into the abyss in Levinas' account, Irigaray is not satisfied with Levinas tying fecundity to paternity and the child as a solution to this egoism (1995a:194).

Irigaray argues that the essential lack of sexual difference in Levinas' thought proceeds from his androcentric view of sexuality. In her estimation, Levinas' construction of *jouissance* is particularly based on masculine experience and a distortive one at that. In "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas" she concludes that Levinas

> knows nothing of communion in pleasure. Levinas does not seem to
> have experienced the transcendence of the other which becomes im-
> mediate ecstasy in me and with him or her... This autistic, egological,
> solitary love does not correspond to the shared outpouring, to the loss
> of boundaries which takes place for both lovers... leaving the circle
> which encloses my solitude to meet in a shared space... where the
> perception of being two persons becomes indistinct... acceding to
> another energy... an energy produced together and as a result of the
> irreducible difference of sex. (1991:180)

While one could argue that Levinas does understand the idea of a shared space (though fusion is not possible), what is central to Irigaray's critique is the notion of energy produced as a result of the difference of sex. Levinas does not internalize this conception and fails to account for the irreducible difference of sex despite, or perhaps due to, his identification of alterity as feminine. It is important to note that

both thinkers rely on a heterosexual model of sexuality; Irigaray is correct that Levinas' account is unequivocally framed by a masculine perspective that reproduces western culture's androcentrism, but she does not similarly critique, or recognize in her own thought, that same culture's heterocentric bias.

Irigaray remains focused on the place of the feminine in Levinas' thought. For Levinas, the feminine is presented as Beloved (never lover), mother, and widow.

> For him, the feminine does not stand for an other to be respected in her human freedom and human identity. The feminine other is left without her own specific face. On this point, his philosophy falls radically short of ethics. To go beyond the face of metaphysics would mean to precisely leave the woman her face, and even to assist her to discover it and keep it. (1994:194)

Levinas is not interested in ethically empowering women specifically. Levinas is wholly unconcerned with woman as a specific subject. As the Beloved, the feminine Other is the object of the caress who allows the masculine lover to reach the "height" but falls into the abyss and thus accesses neither ethics nor God. Her sole purpose is to support the masculine self, ethically, religiously and reproductively (in the production of the child as the object of voluptuousity). Thus not only is the feminine Other relegated to her traditional roles of reproduction and object of sexual desire, and stereotypically imagined as modest, vulnerable, mute and even animalistic, she is apparently excluded from the ethical. In the ambiguous erotic relationship, Irigaray charges Levinas with using the feminine Beloved

> as a refuge, only to discard her as profane, the gesture of eros returns her to the abyss, meanwhile catapulting [the masculine self] to the lofty heights of divinity, to communion with his God, to the righteousness of responsibility. (Chanter, 1995:215)

Although Levinas recognizes that his analysis does proceed from a masculine perspective, Irigaray criticizes him for not understanding how this viewpoint causes

him to replicate sameness. Specifically she charges him with failing to recognize that

> the locus of paternity, to which he accords the privilege of ethical
> alterity, has already assumed the genealogy of the feminine, has
> already covered over the relationships between mothers and
> daughters, in which formerly transmission of the divine word was
> located. (1991:180)

Irigaray argues that Levinas' displacement of the feminine Other into the son, in conjunction with his ignorance of communion in pleasure contributes to his failure, in her view, to integrate the "function of the other sex as an alterity irreducible to myself"(1991:180). She contends that Levinas loses the feminine as the self's Other when there is a transformation of the flesh of the other into his own temporality (1991:180). However, even if the self loses the feminine as its Other in the prototypical relation of Eros, the feminine's alterity is never transcended or transformed. Even if it is possible for an Other to be male, the feminine will always be Other to the masculine self through its mystery and hiding. Levinas, in this reading, precisely rehearses the relationship between masculine self and feminine Other that Irigaray identifies as the locus of the necessary absence of female subjectivity in philosophical, psychoanalytic and cultural discourses.

It is ultimately Levinas' construction of the erotic relationship that invites Irigaray's most intense criticism. Levinas concludes that the erotic relation cannot access transcendence; the erotic relationship takes place apart from and outside the ethical. The erotic is like the ethical in terms of alterity, but unlike the ethical in terms of sociality. The erotic relationship occurs between the lover and the Beloved. Only in fecundity, through paternity, does the erotic relationship lead to the future, to transcendence, to ethics, through the child. Irigaray asks why Levinas cannot imagine an erotic relation that is ethical. She suggests that his pejorative view of

the erotic is linked to his insistence on reproduction as the fulfilment of voluptuousity. Claire Elise Katz argues in *Levinas, Judaism and the Feminine* that Irigaray distorts Levinas' argument in conflating the erotic and ethical (2003:70-71). In order for the erotic to be like the ethical, either the erotic and ethical relationships must both be mutual or they must both be asymmetrical. If they were both asymmetrical, we would be left with an "unsatisfying" erotic relationship while maintaining the asymmetry of the ethical relation that is necessary for transcendence. If both were reciprocal, the erotic would fulfill the ideal of mutual romantic love, but the ethical would fail to accomplish transcendence. Katz argues that at any rate, Levinas' is presenting a commonsense account of the erotic where the lovers tend to turn in towards each other, excluding the rest of the world. Here I think Katz does not sufficiently appreciate Irigaray underlying concern in her criticism of the erotic relation; namely, the problem of sexual difference in Levinas' thought. Irigaray, I would argue, focuses on the erotic precisely because it is the focus of master narratives about women as material, natural, animalistic and ultimately bereft of their own subjectivity. A rethinking of sexual difference thus requires a rethinking of the erotic—commonsense descriptions do nothing to disrupt accounts of the erotic that reify woman as Other. Thus Irigaray cannot follow Levinas in distinguishing between the erotic and the ethical and further cannot concede that the resolution of the absence of the ethical in the erotic can only, or even primarily, be accomplished in reproduction.

Irigaray's critique is not that Levinas' is wrong in focusing on alterity in the erotic and ethical relationships, but that his androcentric understanding of the feminine and the erotic, leads him to distortively represent these relations and ultimately undermine his own project. Levinas' basic error is outlined in the first

sentences of "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas" where Irigaray challenges his misunderstanding sexual difference where the feminine appears only as "the underside or reverse side of man's aspiration toward the light, as its negative" (1991:178). The feminine is again recreated as the object of a masculine erotic strategy when Levinas replicates a patriarchal notion of sexual difference where one sex is privileged over the other. "The beloved woman falls back into infancy or beyond, while the male lover rises up to the greatest heights" (1993:194). But in fact, the feminine is revealed to be not truly Other, but only an "aspect" of the masculine self (1993:203). Thus, from Irigaray's point of view, Levinas fails in precisely what he is trying to achieve. Instead of demonstrating that ethics is first philosophy because philosophy must begin with an exploration of radical alterity, he reinscribes sameness.

It is in this sense that Irigaray takes Levinas to task for failing to be attentive to sexual difference. Few critics have been sufficiently clear on this point. In any other definition of the term of sexual difference, one would say that Levinas is highly *attentive* to sexual difference in his description of feminine and masculine phenomena, especially in light of his claims that sexual difference carves up reality. But in Irigaray's interpretation, the "sexual difference" that we are left with in western patriarchal culture is illusory and has usurped woman's subjectivity. Levinas is accused of failing to appreciate the ways in which his construction of the feminine Other replicates these modalities and, most damning of all, does nothing to subvert them.

Catherine Chalier: ethics and the feminine

Catherine Chalier's "Ethics and The Feminine," included in the collection *Re-Reading Levinas*, is a focused reading of key passages related to the feminine and ethics in Levinas' thought. Chalier addresses three questions in this essay: first, the role of the feminine in establishing the conditions for the ethical relation, second, the relationship between maternity, substitution and ethical responsibility, and third, how the feminine disrupts being. In the first section of this essay Chalier argues persuasively that the feminine is excluded from the ethical in Levinas' thought. Relying on the essay "Judaism and the Feminine" from *Difficult Liberty*, Chalier traces Levinas' description of the feminine's role in inhabiting the dwelling and welcoming the self into the dwelling. The feminine thus interrupts the self's virility (and will to totalize), pulls the masculine self out of its self-involved manipulation of the objects of the world (the will to conquer) by drawing the self into the home where intimate recollection is possible. The ethical life depends on this interruption. Chalier concludes this section with the evaluation that the feminine welcome is the condition of ethics in Levinas' thought and that as it stands in Levinas' analysis

> the feminine would be excluded from the highest destiny of human
> being. This highest destiny would be reserved for the masculine once
> it has been converted to ethics thanks to the feminine. (1991:123)

Chalier moves from this rebuke to investigate the status of maternity in Levinas' ethics. She contends that Levinas' account of maternity in *Otherwise Than Being* is "the very pattern of substitution," where the maternal body signifies that being for-the-other in which I am hostage for the Other and given over completely to the Other. She summarizes, "The maternal body is ruled by the Good beyond being; it has not chosen the Good but the Good has elected it. It is a passive body, a body that

is a hostage since it is evicted from its own being" (1991:126-127). Using the story of Rebecca as a premiere example of the feminine, Chalier concludes that the ultimate role of the feminine in Levinas' thought is its mission to interrupt the being that is the ego's complacency, narcissism, and callous disregard for the Other.

Cohen's Reading: challenging feminist critiques

Richard A. Cohen is one of the most prominent scholars working with Levinas' thought and his analysis of Levinas' work is often extremely helpful. He has also provided some of the most blunt criticisms of feminist readings of Levinas' work. He has strenuously disagreed with many feminist critiques of Levinas' description of the feminine Other, most famously in a remarkable footnote where he systematically dismisses the analyses presented in essays by Irigaray and Chanter included in *Re-Reading Levinas* (though he appreciates Chalier's reading found in the same collection) and incidentally mentions the "limitations" of Beauvoir's reading (1994:195-196). His chapter, "The Metaphysics of Gender," included in *Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas*, cited below, presents a reading of the place of gender in Levinas' thought that implicitly refutes many feminist critiques.

Cohen describes Levinas' gendered phenomenological account as both unremarkable and extraordinary. In Cohen's estimation, Levinas' description of the feminine is remarkable because of its "anthropology and concreteness," but it is "unremarkable because he uses these terms in their most conventional senses... what he calls 'woman' or 'feminine' is a gentle, intimate, warm and personal presence" (1994:197). Because Levinas' description of ontology is phenomenological, describing "regions of meaning" according to their essences and how their meaning

is constituted, it relies on metaphor. The "everyday" meanings of feminine and masculine allow Levinas to speak in a language that is comprehensible. Cohen claims that

> Levinas is not, in any event, presenting, defending or glorifying a biological thought, or for that matter, a psychological or sociological one. His claim is not that a woman's place is in the home or a man's place is at work, but rather that essentially different ontological regions such as "at homeness" or "economic exchange" exhibit characteristics whose contours follow the same contours as those expressed in the conventional language of gender discrimination. (1994:201)

Cohen insists that the accuracy of Levinas' descriptions and "how one evaluates the moral significance of regions of being" are two separate questions (1994:201). He does concede that "No doubt these two questions are not unrelated" (1994:2001) but he challenges any critique of Levinas' "injudicious" use of gender on the grounds that Levinas is merely appealing to conventions that are comprehensible to any person participating in the discourses that he is referring to. Cohen will only grant that Levinas might be criticized on the basis of his perpetuation of these stereotypes, but he undermines even this possibility in a footnote where he suggests this is all a slippery slope anyway: if Levinas has inappropriately gendered these regions of being, perhaps the description of all regions of being also depend on male gendered determination. "Such a view, however, not only mobilizes a relativism which forecloses possible argumentation, whether towards agreement or disagreement, but, more profoundly, it forecloses any possible communication, even its own enunciation to another" (1994:201-201). Cohen cites Levinas' response from *Ethics and Infinity* where he was asked about whether his use of gendered language is anachronistic and Levinas responds with a statement that insists, according to Cohen, "on the greater importance which pertains to the ontological discrimination which this language is enlisted to reveal" (1994:202). Cohen reaffirms that what is

"important" is that we can describe these regions of being through "universals dependent on an always concrete human alterity, through which reality itself takes on feminine and masculine characteristics" (1994:202). Because the separation of descriptions of being from the anthropological is, according to Levinas, a virile, masculine way of thinking, Cohen is able to joke in a sidebar that Levinas' thought must then be "feminine" before seriously specifying that Levinas' thought is "dis-inter-ested." Cohen insists, "Levinas is quite able to distinguish description from prescription" and reminds us that "Being, for Levinas, is inseparable from signification. Signification is inseparable from the irreducible alterity of a human transcendence, which is manifest concretely across such characteristics as gender, age, family, and pedagogic relationship" (1994:203-204).

Cohen's assessment of the place of gender in Levinas' thought (and the feminist misunderstandings that might attend it), is predicated on the assumption that all of this is philosophical language, an ultimately ethically neutral tool used by Levinas to communicate his phenomenology. The problem with this reading is that from a feminist perspective, language and metaphor are expressions of a relation of power. Although Cohen assures us that Levinas "is quite able to distinguish description from prescription," Levinas is reproducing relations of power that have historically expressed description of women and the feminine as prescriptions. If language/speech is a crucial condition of ethics, as Levinas insists, it is disingenuous to strip language of its ethical dimension in this case. There is a real slippage between Levinas' phenomenological descriptions of gendered regions of meaning and his accounts of the human. To suggest that feminist critiques silence dialogue in this matter, as if there were some politically correct discourse that is objectively

not an expression of a relation of power, is an attempt to silence feminist critiques from even raising the question.

Women in Levinas' thought

Having introduced the critiques offered by Beauvoir, Irigaray and Chalier, and presented Cohen's response, in order to establish the context of feminist engagement with Levinas' thought, the next step is to explore how his discussion of the feminine correlates with, or is disconnected from, the image and status of women in his thought. I will first examine Levinas' "philosophical" texts and then focus specifically on gender in his talmudic readings.

A Philosophy of the Other: women and the feminine

Levinas claims that he is not speaking of women as women *per se* when he elaborates his understanding of the feminine Other. My understanding is that he uses gendered terms and concepts to challenge our received notions of ontology, ethics, and relationship. In asserting ethics as first philosophy, Levinas privileges and elevates alterity above ontology. The feminine is invoked as a way to recast and exceed ontology. His goal is to disrupt our notions of totality, system, symmetry, reciprocity, and complementarity. That ethics precedes ontology requires this disruption; gendered tropes help to accomplish that disruption. The philosophical association between the feminine with alterity is in itself a radical challenge to totality. While this seems to be Levinas' intention, the effect is not always so clearly metaphorical.

Although the feminine is not meant to signify a particular being, and indeed is meant to refer to a tendency or way of being, we need to understand why Levinas' appeals to a characterization of the feminine that so clearly invokes stereotypical gendered features. Levinas' ability to disrupt our notions of the same rely on casting the feminine as being capable of interrupting the economy of being through her alterity. This ability is absolutely bound up with cultural constructions of the feminine that posit the feminine as Other. Developing this description of the feminine's essential alterity, Levinas draws on a host of attributes that are immediately familiar as western archetypal characteristics that have traditionally been associated with woman. These characteristics have been used to describe and inevitably prescribe woman's behaviour, place and status in western culture where woman's nature is contrasted with man's: Woman is associated with the body; man with the mind or spirit. Woman is uncontrolled, sexual and animalistic; man is controlled, rational, and intellectual. Woman is private, vulnerable, operating in the secure and nurturing domestic sphere; man vigorously goes out into the world and operates in the brutish, perilous, public sphere. Woman is receptive, passive, and gentle; man is virile, active and aggressive. Levinas' description of the feminine re-enacts these binaries where the feminine Other is presented as, modest, hiding, non-rational or animalistic, non-verbal or mute, sexual and eroticised, vulnerable and weak, domestic and private. That Levinas does not formally conflate the feminine with women in his thought does not mean that there isn't slippage between the two. Part of the problem with Levinas' account is that it is very difficult to disentangle a phenomenological description that relies on stereotypes that both signal and enact the oppression and marginalization of women.

Interpreting the connection between the feminine and women is further complicated by Levinas' evolving strategic analysis of the feminine as the Other par excellence.

> Sex is not some specific difference...Neither is the difference between the sexes a contradiction... Neither is the difference between the sexes the duality of two complementary terms, for two complementary terms presuppose a preexisting whole. (1995:49)

But note the slippage here between (biological) sex and feminine alterity. In order to describe the feminine Other's alterity, Levinas must describe its difference negatively in terms of sex because biological sex serves as the interpretive key for the phenomena of alterity. Levinas cannot speak of the feminine Other without resorting to this type of language. What results is a strange doublespeak where he is simultaneously speaking of and not speaking of actual women.

One of the most problematic texts for feminists engaging Levinas' work is the final section of *Totality and Infinity* that deals with the erotic as a relation that is beyond the face. The feminine presented here is the Beloved. The Beloved does not affect the self in the way that the Other does in the face-to-face relation. The mystery of the face, which speaks "thou shall not commit murder," is profaned in eros. The Beloved is exhibited immodestly in erotic nudity as an inversion and subversion of the face. Erotic nudity lies and signifies falsely; appearing as the social and as communication but actually only exhibition. The Beloved's "speech" is *only* laughter; expressing innuendo, lasciviousness, "beyond the decency of words, as the absence of all seriousness, of all possibility for speech" (1995a:263). Whereas the ethical relationship is directed toward and beyond the Other, the erotic relationship is directed toward the Beloved and back toward the self. In this sense, the feminine is inevitably effaced and negated in the erotic relationship. The masculine self loves the feminine Beloved's love for the self; the erotic relationship deteriorates into a

hyper-masculine form of narcissism where the feminine is ultimately absent.

The contrast with the Other of the face-to-face relation is stark:

> The beloved is opposed to me not as a will struggling with my own or
> subject to my own, but on the contrary as irresponsible animality
> which does not speak true words. The beloved, returned to the stage
> of infancy without responsibility—this coquettish head, this youth,
> this pure life 'a bit silly'—has quit her status as a person. The face
> fades, and in its impersonal and inexpressive neutrality is prolonged,
> in ambiguity, into animality. The relations with the Other are enacted
> in play; one plays with the Other as with a young animal. (1995a:263)

The above passage is extremely difficult at a variety of levels. If the feminine Other

is irresponsible, animalistic, prevaricating, faceless, a non-person, the masculine

self is its opposite: responsible, human, truth telling, faced, a person. Even though

Levinas does not argue that this opposition is actually enacted between the genders

as biologically sexed beings, this passage reifies virtually every negative stereotype

of woman as irrational, untrustworthy, emotional, frivolous and animalistic. Even

with an understanding of Levinas' use of gender stereotypes as a provocative tool

used to challenge our understanding of relationships, this passage is irredeemable.

One cannot appeal to such incendiary and perniciously damaging stereotypes

without considering how they attach to the androcentric misogyny in the traditions

in which they emerged. One must criticize Levinas' for breaching his own ethical

standard. Levinas argues against totalizing the Other, treating the Other as an

object instead of as a person. In reifying the negative sexual stereotypes of women

within the context of a philosophical ethical system, Levinas is concretizing the

alterity of women who as a group are historically particularly vulnerable to

marginalization and objectification. If, as Ewa Ziarek suggests, Levinas' originality

lies "in its obstinate refusal to think the other" (1993:64), how can we reconcile this

value with such descriptions? Although I concede that these are descriptions that

invoke gendered metaphors for a specific purpose, this does not explain or resolve

the problem of the use of pernicious images of women to further his project. One cannot imagine invoking the stereotypic metaphors that have historically been applied to oppress, marginalize and devalue any other marginalized group in a similar way. The use of these metaphors is violent and their reproduction and reinscription is unethical. If phenomenology "describes what appears" (Levinas, 1989:85), the description of the phenomenon cannot be separated from the actual women that are targeted by the stereotypes upon which the description is founded. It is at best naïve, and at worse intellectually and ethically dishonest, to pretend otherwise.

A similar, and even more problematic description of the feminine as welcome is presented in the essay "Le Judaïsme et Le Féminin," first published in 1960 (one year before *Totality and Infinity*) and collected in *Difficile Liberté* in 1963, offers a detailed description of the ontological function of the feminine:

> La femme ne vient pas simplement tenir compagnie à un être privé de société. Elle répond à une solitude, intérieure à cette privation et, ce qui est plus étrange, à une solitude qui subsiste malgré la présence de Dieu ; à une solitude dans l'universel, à l'inhumain qui resurgit quand l'humain a déjà soumis la nature et s'est élevé à la pensée. Pour que le déracinement inévitable de la pensée qui domine le monde s'accommode d'un repos—d'un retour chez soi—il faut que, dans la géométrie des espaces infinis et froids, se produise l'étrange défaillance de la douceur. Son nom est femme. Le retour à soi, ce recueillement, cette apparition du *lieu* dans l'espace, ne résulte pas comme chez Heidegger d'un geste bâtisseur, d'une architecture qui dessine un paysage, mais l'intériorité de la Maison dont l' «envers » vaudrait l' « endroit » sans la discrétion essentielle de l'existence féminine qui y habite, qui est l'habitation même. Elle rend le blé, pain, et le lin, vêtement. La femme, la fiancée, n'est pas la réunion dans un être humain de toutes les perfections de la tendresses de la bonté qui subsisteraient en soi. Tous ce passe comme si le féminin en était la manifestation originelle, le doux en soi, l'origine de toute la douceur de la terre. (1997:55)

Here the feminine labours to welcome, nurture, nourish, clothe and create a restful home for the self. She makes bread from wheat and clothing from flax—tasks that

Levinas tells us the rabbis teach that man cannot accomplish for himself even though he wrests the crops from the earth through his labour. She gently protects the self from masculinized public life and the "geometry of infinite and cold space." Although this essay is aimed at exploring the place of woman in Jewish (rabbinic) thought, his description of talmudic conceptions of the home as feminine is virtually identical to that which is found in *Totality and Infinity*. These tropes are repeated again in the talmudic reading, "And God Created Women," where Levinas approvingly refers to Proverbs where the woman

> makes possible the life of men; she is the home of men. But the
> husband has a life outside of the home: He sits on the Council of the
> city; he has a public life; he is at the service of the universal; he does
> not limit himself to interiority, to intimacy, to the home, although
> without them he could do nothing. (1994a:169)

The contrast between the feminine domestic sphere and the masculine public sphere that is present above and in *Totality and Infinity* is also manifest in western philosophical discourses. This schism is intensified in traditional Jewish texts (and Levinas' account of them) and other traditional texts from other religious traditions. This is not a new idea by any means.

Levinas' account of maternity in *Otherwise Than Being* introduces another way of thinking of the feminine that has the potential to resolve many of the problems occasioned by the feminine Other and the feminine Beloved, but at the same time, raises other thorny issues that must be addressed by a feminist engagement with his thought. Chalier has already highlighted many of the difficulties posed by maternity. Chalier explains that although maternity is the very "pattern" of substitution, as a hostage for the Other, the subject of the maternal body is effaced in its passivity. She interprets Levinas' account of maternity as "the ultimate meaning of the feminine" in his thought and chastises Levinas for positing

that motherhood is the only avenue to achieving ethics. Although maternity is undeniably a potentially powerfully positive metaphor for ethical responsibility, I am deeply troubled by the hostage imagery and the uncritical, if not romanticized, valorization of maternity. In her analysis, Claire Elise Katz highlights the link between Levinas' notion of maternity and his references to Isaiah and quotes the prophet who asks, "Can a woman forget to have compassion on the child of her womb? Can a woman forget her suckling child?" (Isaiah 49:15). The prophet replies with an answer that stresses the bond between God and Israel: even if the mother might forget, God will never forget God's people. The mother-child bond is presented as the pinnacle of human obligation for the other; only God's bond with humans can divinely exceed that relation. Katz emphasizes that the obligation to the child is prior to choice:

> Once pregnant, the maternal body is transformed and immediately
> begins to nurture the growing fetus inside her. In the state of
> pregnancy, the mother cannot help but feed her child. The mother has
> no sooner taken in food than her body distributes that food to the
> fetus inside her. She does not choose to feed the child, but her body
> does so nonetheless. (2003:133)

The model of proximity where the self is already obligated by the Other is provocative and undeniably persuasive. But to illuminate that obligation through the model of maternity is not without its dangers. If one acknowledges that the lack of reproductive choice is one form of injustice that women have historically suffered, is it not extremely troubling to invoke such imagery? The fact that men may also be maternal in Levinas' thought does not vitiate the problem because it sanitizes and may make us complacent about how the ideal of the maternal reproduction has been used to describe women's nature, prescribe their roles and status in society, and reinforce the responsibility for the rearing and protection of children as a woman's issue. Can we forget that in western culture women's role in reproduction has been

linked, not only to positive images of nurturance, but also to women's passivity,

and intellectual, spiritual, legal, and moral deficiencies? An account of maternity

that does not ethically grapple with these historic realities is naïve and ethically

irresponsible.

Talmudic Readings

Nine Talmudic Readings' interest in gender is marginal at best. Yet at the same

time, *Nine Talmudic Readings* includes two entire commentaries that focus on texts

where gender is absolutely central. In "Desacralization and Disenchantment"

(Tractate *Sanhedrin* 67a-68a), the text considered discusses sorcery, and

particularly, sorceresses. Levinas interprets this text through the connection he

establishes between sorcery and the sacred. He asserts, tongue in cheek:

> Sorcery, first cousin, perhaps even sister, of the sacred, is the
> mistress of appearance. She is a relative slightly fallen in status, but
> within the family, who profits from the connections of her brother,
> who is received in the best circles. (1994a:141)

Levinas' point is simply that the sorcery discussed in the talmudic text is not in

opposition with the sacred, but exists in relationship with the sacred. Yet to do this

he invokes a gendered stereotype that associates women with appearance. While

sorcery is associated with the feminine in this text, there is no reason to oppose

sorcery with a masculinized sacred.

Levinas is at pains to distance himself from the Gemara's interpretation of

the Mishnaic use of the term "sorceress": "The text says 'sorceress' whether it be

man or woman; but one says 'sorceress' because the vast majority of women engage

in sorcery" (Tractate *Sanhedrin* 67a-68a). He quickly argues that this part of the

text cannot be taken literally as there are many virtuous biblical women (such as

the matriarchs) who do not indulge in sorcery, and concludes: "Rest assured of the

dignity of the biblical woman. Rest assured of the dignity of the feminine in itself" (1994a:, 142). Levinas recognizes, to the relief of feminists reading his commentary, that

> wherever men dominate society, a certain ambiguity attaches itself to the humanity of woman. She is most particularly evocative of sexuality and eroticism, doubling in some fashion her human nature in an ambiguity—or in an enigma—of sublimation and depth, of modesty and obscenity (1994a:142).

Feminist relief is short-lived when we recall that for Levinas, feminine ambiguity, mystery, hiddeness and modesty are *metaphysical* characteristics of the feminine (e.g. 1995:85, 87). We cannot ignore that when gender stereotypes are attached to women in patriarchal societies, the result of these stereotypes is consistently marginalization and injustice for women. Positive female paradigms, such as the matriarchs offered by Levinas, are just as likely to reinforce the negative impact of these stereotypes. Typically, although the talmudic text invites a close analysis of the particularly gendered images of sorcery, Levinas has little more to say about gender in this passage, preferring to focus the moral danger of the deterioration of the sacred.

Levinas also fleetingly refers to gender in "As Old as the World," where the talmudic text (*Sanhedrin* 36b-37a) examines the "Song of Songs." Levinas rejects a connection between justice and erotic love (suggested by the talmudic text) as "[t]hat would be a bit facile and a bit insipid: justice would be founded on love and love on the erotic" (1994a:76). The problem with such a linkage? The erotic is the "instinct of possession, domination and aggression"; perverse values upon which justice might be based (1994a:76). One only has to examine Levinas' philosophical works to understand his difficulty with the erotic and with the feminine Other who is present

in every erotic relationship as the Beloved. It is unsurprising then, that Levinas denies the possibility of grounding justice on such an amoral relationship.

Similarly, Levinas' location of ethics in the sacred texts of Judaism, presents a difficulty when Levinas reifies the male normative theology and language of these texts through his own use of male normative language. "The Pact" is an excellent example of Levinas' ethical interpretation of talmudic sources. In this reading Levinas considers a talmudic exposition of the covenant given at Sinai. In a section entitled "Law and Interpersonal Relations," Levinas articulates his ethical exegesis of the text in terms of responsibility to the Other as exemplified by the Israelites at Sinai. This compelling unity of ethics within the Jewish text is undermined by Levinas' definition of the Israelites as "more correctly described as men participating in a common humanity, (who) answer for each other before a genuine human law" (1989:225). A telling dissonance between the generic humanity and human law with the specific men is generated. Humanity and human law discursively become masculinized in their alignment with the men who compose humanity. Levinas' interpretation of *"Kol Yisrael 'arevin zeh lazeh* 'All Israel is responsible one for the other', which means: all those who cleave to the divine law, all men worthy of the name, are all responsible for each other" is equally disturbing (1989: 225). The message is alarming; ethics are a masculine project when men are responsible for other men and women are neither heard nor present.

It is ultimately on the issue of gender that Levinas fails. Philosophically, the "ethical" lessons learned from his treatment of gender are not universalizable; they disenfranchise half of the human race. From a Jewish/talmudic perspective, his conclusions are a distortion of the rabbinic view of women. However ambivalent the

Jewish tradition may be about women, and women's sexuality, it never comes

close to suggesting that women are not or were not fully human.[32]

Although several feminist scholars have considered the ways in which

Levinas' relies on Jewish conceptions in his articulation of the feminine, Claire Elise

Katz's *Levinas, Judaism and the Feminine* is the only full length exploration of the

question. Katz' argument is that although Levinas' presentation of the feminine is

at times difficult, by tracing its development to its Jewish sources, a positive

reading is possible:

> Levinas' critique of Western philosophy is implicitly a critique of the
> Western construction of masculinity as virility, and he is using a
> Jewish conception of the feminine as the image of its interruption.
> (2003:5)

While I strongly agree with Katz that Levinas' work must be read in terms of its

Jewish dimension, I question her emphasis. She maintains "reservations about

Judaism" while asserting that Judaism provides the tools for her positive reading.

Perhaps it is because I think about Judaism not only as it is represented in

traditional texts but as it is practiced, my reservations are not for Judaism, but for

Judaism's interpreters—and Levinas is one of those interpreters. Indeed, my

problem with Levinas is—despite his ethical philosophy—his seeming inability to

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[32] The talmudic texts have their own exegetical history with their own hermeneutical methodology that has been consistently applied in their history. The form and structure that these traditional interpretations have taken are essential to the discourse in which they operate. Levinas largely respects traditional talmudic hermeneutical rules. However, as he himself notes, he is not a master Talmudist. His weakness in dealing with these texts is the isolation in which he interprets them. Rather than drawing on other talmudic texts to build his argument, Levinas reaches out towards his knowledge of philosophy, literature and history. While there is nothing wrong with this approach, and in fact it does serve his ultimate purpose in opening up the texts to a modern audience, such an approach cannot be seen as fully within the rabbinic exegetical tradition. His interpretations are valuable in that they link two ethical discourses that certainly benefit from this kind of cross-pollination. Perhaps it is inevitable that where both of these discourses are most morally problematic, in terms of their treatment of women, Levinas compounds and magnifies that ethical fracture. If nothing else, Levinas' failure, in terms of gender, highlights the hermeneutical principle that the biases and assumptions which one brings to interpretation inevitably informs the interpretation which is engendered.

pull away at the sexist detritus that has become embedded and extended through generations of interpretations.

Consider the following: Katz helpfully discerns the influence of the creation story in Levinas' discussion of the *there is* in *Time and the Other*. Her reading is extremely valuable in targeting the role of the feminine in the erotic, but also in terms of his thought in general:

> He also uses the biblical story of the creation of woman as the inspiration for the originary experience of alterity. The feminine thus appears as an enigma: Levinas' ethics, while marked by sexual difference, also gives a fundamental role to the feminine. The alterity provided by the face of the feminine sets the rest of the project in motion. The feminine also serves as the interruption of virility. In *Time and the Other*, the feminine shifts the emphasis from autonomy and power to the necessity of relationships and the creation of life. Let us recall that although *Isha* means woman, in the story of Adam and Eve, woman is named "Eve," and the Hebrew for Eve is *Chava*—life. It is woman who both means and creates life. (2003:76)

In Christian readings, the story of Adam and Eve is the locus of Augustine's 4th century theory of Original Sin. This reading contrasts sharply with normative Jewish readings that do not correlate the sin of Adam and Eve with sexuality. But examine how Levinas' proceeds with his interpretation of this text in his talmudic reading of Tractate *Berakhot* 61a in "And God Created Woman." This particular text (among others) has been grist for the mill for countless feminist critiques which focus on the problematic representation of woman in the Talmud. The sexism and misogyny in the text is overt and inescapable if one follows traditional (Jewish and particularly Christian) interpretations of the text.[33] Levinas' interpretation of gender differences in this text amounts to a sort of shrugging acceptance of a

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[33] Some examples of problematic areas include: Eve is mentioned as being cursed before Adam, man is being cited as being made in the image of God (woman is not), woman is presented as being made ideally to bear children (man's procreative purpose is not physiologically stressed), man may not walk behind a woman etc. Interestingly, Levinas does not provide us with the *Mishna* segment of the text (which often provides material for gender interpretation) and only provides us with the *Gemara* segment.

gendered division of labour in creation: "Fundamental are the tasks that man accomplishes as a human being and that woman accomplishes as a human being" (1994a:169). What are the tasks of the human woman? Levinas does not specify what these tasks might be but his immediate reminiscence about Proverbs is suggestive: the man does work in the outside world (politics) and the woman keeps the home. This is of course the pattern that is phenomenologically established in one of his most important works, *Totality and Infinity*.[34] He concludes, "Man and woman, when authentically human, work together as responsible beings. The sexual is only an accessory of the human" (1994a:170).[35] Authentic humanity challenges "the revolution which thinks it has achieved the ultimate by destroying the family so as to liberate imprisoned sexuality. What is challenged is the claim of accomplishing on the sexual plane the real liberation of man"(1994a:170). At no point during this interpretation does Levinas consider the ethical implications of positioning women in this manner. With an uncritical androcentrism that is staggering in its implications Levinas describes how woman is designed for her role in the human relationship:

> In the feminine, there is face and appearance, and God was the first hairdresser. He created the first illusions, the first make-up. To build a feminine being is from the outset to make room for appearance. 'Her hair had to be done.' There is in the feminine face and in the relation between the sexes this beckoning to the lie, or to an arrangement beyond the savage straightforwardness of a face-to-face encounter, bypassing a relationship between human beings approaching each other in the responsibility of the one for the other. (1994a:174)

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[34] "The feminine has been encountered in this analysis as one of the cardinal points of the horizon in which the inner life takes place–and the empirical absence of the human being of 'feminine sex' in a dwelling nowise affects the dimension of femininity which remains open there, as the very welcome of the dwelling. (1995 a:157-158)

[35] It is always intriguing how often the feminine is associated with the sexual that is in turn devalued as either malevolent, base or merely irrelevant. In different contexts, Levinas manages to associate all of these judgments with sexuality and femininity.

He attempts to argue that the primacy accorded to the masculine in this model actually affords women a privileged place. God desired to have two different "equal" beings (masculine and feminine), yet to do so would have "inevitably" meant war. Levinas does not offer an explanation for this inevitability. Since justice could not be satisfied,

> he had to subordinate them one to the other. There had to be a
> difference which did not affect equity: a sexual difference and, hence,
> a certain preeminence of man, a woman coming later, and as woman,
> an appendage of the human. (1994a:173)

Astonishingly, Levinas concludes, after having explained a particularly irritating misogynist passage which warns men that it is better to follow behind a lion than a woman, that woman's place is not really so terrible—since she precedes idolatry.

> You see: the feminine is in a fairly good position in this hierarchy of
> values, which reveals itself when choices become alternatives. It is in
> second place. It is not woman who is thus slighted. It is the
> relationship based on sexual differences which is subordinated to the
> interhuman relation—irreducible to the drives and complexes of the
> libido—to which woman rises as well as man. Maybe man precedes—
> by a few centuries -the woman in this elevation. From which a
> certain—provisional?—priority of man. Maybe the masculine is more
> directly linked to the universal, and maybe masculine civilization has
> prepared—above the sexual, a human order in which woman enters,
> completely human. (1994a:107)

For Levinas, who preaches for the ethical responsibility towards the vulnerable, the *widow*, the disenfranchised and marginalized, to suggest that second place is really not that bad, is unconscionable. To suggest, that a few *centuries* of subordination paves the way for woman to enter, "completely human" (when Levinas *insists* on the full acknowledgment of the Other as fully human), is a travesty.

Levinas' exegesis of Jewish sacred texts does not challenge either their androcentric bias or their patriarchal dimension. While Levinas considers these texts wholly in terms of their ethical message and content, Levinas does not consider the ethical question of women's marginalization in these texts or in the

Jewish tradition as a whole. While it would be unfairly anachronistic to expect a sophisticated feminist critique of biblical and talmudic texts by Levinas, it must be noted that although he is able to focus on the feminine and sexual difference, he is unable or unwilling to take up a critical position in relation to those accounts. Ultimately, his readings of these texts are unequivocally androcentric. Since Levinas grounds his ethical philosophy not only on phenomenology and metaphysics but in the sacred texts of Judaism, and his interpretation of those texts are androcentric, Levinas' ethical philosophy must be critically considered in light of this lacuna.

There is much more to be said about women in Levinas' thought. In the following section, I will further discuss Levinas' gendered narratives as a gravitational centre that pulls at every response to two overarching questions: First, where does Levinas' thought provoke an engagement with feminist theory and ethics? Second, where can feminists find strategic opportunities to develop alliances with Levinas?

Levinas and Feminist Ethics

Particularity and Experience

One of the most important issues that Levinas' account raises for feminists is the problem of particularity and experience. There is a real tension in Levinas' insistence on the one hand that the "best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes" and on his persistent and passionate condemnation of totalizing and effacing the Other. In not noticing the colour of the Other's eyes, we

are impelled to authentically engage in the face-to-face relationship. But in not noticing the colour of the Other's eyes, we also cannot appreciate what the Other has experienced and what the Other needs from us ethically. From a feminist perspective that insists on experience as a primary category of ethical analysis, this blindness to the specificity of the Other does not allow for the "thick" description of ethics that I have argued must be at the heart of feminist ethical thinking. More bluntly, I assert that ethics are violated and injustice occurs when the specificity of the individual Other is removed from the purview of ethical response. Although in Levinas' works up to and including *Totality and Infinity*, he argues that the non-particularity of the face is what allows the overwhelming responsibility for the Other, I would argue that this conception is at risk of totalizing the Other. From a feminist perspective, it is this kind of thinking that allows Levinas' to appeal to the "conventional" gendered stereotypes which can be experienced as damaging by readers who have painfully experienced the concrete ramifications of such gender narratives in their own lives.

If *Otherwise Than Being* allows for an account of particularity in its presentation of the need for justice between "incomparables," is it sufficient for the development of a feminist ethic that is responsive to the diverse experiences of injustice that concerns feminist (and Jewish feminist) ethics? In the sense that it allows for a "calculus," justice in this work does seem to remove a major stumbling block for constructing feminist ethics in light of his thought. My concern is that this analysis applies only in reflecting on our duties in terms of justice to the many, it still does not apply in proximity to the specific face of the Other. As of *Otherwise Than Being*, justice no longer happens at the same time as proximity and the face-to-face encounter. Thus the experiences of the Other, that I argue must ground

feminist ethical response both in terms of the individual and in terms of society,

can only be taken into account in social ethics. Levinas does not suggest that the

measuring that takes place in reflecting on justice ever refers back to inform the

face-to-face. We are left with a partial solution that, from a feminist perspective,

destabilizes the entire project. There is no perfect resolution to this problem. A

strategic feminist response to Levinas needs to keep this issue at the forefront of its

deliberations as it listens attentively to Levinas' claims.

Congruencies with Feminist Ethics

Levinas' philosophy represents a unique challenge to feminist thought. His

phenomenological characterization of the Other as feminine as well as his often

reflexive internalization of female stereotypes in his description of the Other is

disturbing and provocative. Yet Levinas' profound and radical emphasis on

responsibility to the Other is simply too compelling to be dismissed. From a feminist

point of view, such an imperative responsibility to the Other resonates powerfully

with the advocacy stance of feminist ethics. Viewed in this light, Levinas' emphasis

on relationship, subjectivity and alterity suggests that there is room for dialogue

between Levinas and feminist ethics. The feminist response to Levinas began with

Simone de Beauvoir's terse critique of Levinas' feminization of the Other in *The

Second Sex* and blossomed with Luce Irigaray's challenge in "Questions to

Emmanuel Levinas: On the Divinity of Love." This response continues here by

moving from critique to appreciation with an exploration of how Levinas' thought

can enhance feminist ethics. By engaging certain key concepts and strategies found

in Levinas' thought, feminists have an opportunity to develop ethics that learn from

Levinas. Acknowledging his weaknesses and strengths, innovative applications of

Levinas' thought require that we use imagination in constructively applying Levinas' principles. In considering feminist applications, this occasionally requires a further leap of the imagination as we try to apply these principles in ways that exclude any tendencies towards marginalization of women or other vulnerable groups.

Levinas' project suggests important opportunities—both methodological and theoretical—for feminist theory and feminist ethics. Three areas are particularly salient to the development of feminist ethics: First, how can sexual difference forward the development of feminist ethics? What would such an ethic look like? Second, what is the relationship between writing from a masculine perspective and what Helene Cixous describes as *"Écriture Feminine"* in terms of the development of ethics, feminist or otherwise? How might such a distinction impact feminist ethical thought? Finally, how does placing the body at the centre of ethics or de-emphasizing embodiment, problematize or open up the horizons of feminist ethics? These questions are linked through Levinas' thought but they are also framed by historical and contemporary feminist discourses.

Sexual difference

Is there a place for phenomenological accounts of sexual difference in feminist ethics? Do all phenomenological descriptions reinscribe cultural stereotypes? Is there, from a feminist point of view, already a flaw in Levinas' thought because of his method? Can we provisionally grant, based on Beauvoir's and Irigaray's work, the premise that phenomenological accounts are helpful in providing critiques that explicate and complicate the effects of gendered discursive practices? If we do, how do we extend those critiques such that we move beyond description into the realm of ethical speech/action?

Relying on the types of feminist critical positions advanced by bell hooks and other feminist theorists that critique liberal feminist projects, I begin with the premise that feminist ethics needs to be both radical and revolutionary in its identification and deconstruction of systemic oppression. It is insufficient to merely address specific injustices; the systems that produce those injustices must be targeted. Levinas' critique underlies the ways in which totalitarian thinking is grounded in and manifest in a systemic account of Being and demonstrates how a phenomenological approach can be used to discern and interrupt these kinds of thinking. Levinas effectively demonstrates the ways in which a phenomenological method that focuses on alterity, can simultaneously reveal and enact ethics as first philosophy.

In that phenomenological accounts depend on a rethinking of being and existence in their efforts to understand the ways in which phenomena appear to consciousness, the phenomenological method is particularly helpful in its ability to highlight and reveal underlying systems of oppression. Irigaray suggests that although Levinas' account is flawed in that it does not adequately subvert and interrupt sexual sameness, she does not essentially challenge the phenomenological approach. Her solution is still phenomenological in that she is trying to explore the ways in which philosophical, psychoanalytic, mythological, literary, historical and contemporary discourses impact the subject. Irigaray outlines the scope of this project:

> A revolution of thought and ethics is needed if the work of sexual difference is to take place. We need to reinterpret everything concerning the relations between the subject and the cosmic, the microcosmic and the macrocosmic. Everything, beginning with the way in which the subject has always been written in the masculine form, as man, even when it claimed to be universal or neutral. (1993:6)

Similarly, Beauvoir's project must rely on a similar approach in order to challenge received notions about the ontological status of Woman. In these analyses we can see that the method of investigating phenomena and deducing their effects on consciousness is not the problem; when phenomenological accounts are directed at gender injustice, as in the case of Beauvoir and Irigaray, they do not need to replicate essentialized views of women.

Must a feminist phenomenological account of gender necessarily reinforce the same stereotypes of femininity that Levinas has replicated? Is it inevitable that such accounts must reproduce masculinist thinking in the way that Levinas does in *Totality and Infinity*? Is it primarily the method that arouses Craig Vasey's blunt assessment that the description of the feminine in these passages as a "fairly straightforwardly ... expression of good old-fashioned masculine privilege and arrogance" (1992:324-25)? The danger appears to be in how phenomenological analyses are framed and how they are expressed. An argument that it would reinforce stereotypes is suggested by Judith Butler's statement on the perception of gender where she argues, "(g)ender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (1990:33). Since I would argue that a phenomenological description of gender is constructed within the regulatory frame that Butler describes, it is reasonable to be concerned that a phenomenological approach does in fact run this risk. Levinas does not seem to be able to escape this regulatory frame in trying to articulate alterity primarily in terms of stereotypic gendered conventions, and frankly would almost certainly disagree with Butler's analysis. But if, as Irigaray suggests, the only woman we know is the *masculine feminine* (the woman as man sees her), the problem of

woman being constructed within an androcentric system makes it even more urgent that we explore and develop subversive phenomenological descriptions.

Clearly, there are other grounds for the development of feminist ethics. I emphasize that the phenomenological method represents an opportunity that can be better pursued in light of Levinas' failures and successes. Feminist ethics can be forwarded through a radical phenomenological account of gender. Such an account needs to be radical in that it needs to accomplish what Levinas accomplishes in disrupting totality through a radical account of alterity. In theory, a truly radical phenomenological account of alterity should not reproduce—as Irigaray suggests— sameness. Like Michèle LeDoeuff, I would contend that appropriating a phenomenological account of woman, femininity or femaleness, does not require that feminists also receive those distortive account of gender that serve to marginalize women. Le Doeuff argues:

> As soon as we regard this femininity as a fantasy product of conflicts
> within a field of reason that has been assimilated to masculinity, we
> can no longer set any store by liberating its voice. We will not talk
> pidgin to please the colonialists. (1987:196.)

As Irigaray suggests, an ethics grounded in sexual difference depends on voicing a different account of "sex" and gender. I am particularly interested in describing the slippages between conventional notions of sex and gender, between cultural fantasy and embodied experience, between gender as performance and sex as signification. The strength of a phenomenological approach is its ability to address the permeability of these phenomenon and account for the encultured and embodied *experience* of gender without resorting to biologically or essentialist models. An ethics that proceeds from such an account takes seriously the impact of these phenomena on consciousness and elicits a wariness of precisely the types of totalitarian thinking that Levinas demands that we disrupt.

Perspective, voice and language

One of the challenges faced by feminist ethicists is the question of perspective and voice. I have raised perspective as a critical factor in the development of a phenomenological approach to gender within the context of structuring feminist ethics. Inasmuch as perspective shapes the questions asked, perspective is inseparable from the response that proceeds from these questions. But the question of voice, although related to response, raises somewhat different queries about the power implicit in analysis and interlocution. Who speaks? Who is allowed to speak? Who allows speaking? Further, thinking about voice in terms of feminist ethics challenges us to think about the place of experience in these interlocutions. Does our experience of gender produce gendered speech and gendered ethics? Like many feminists of my generation who have been profoundly influenced by the critiques offered by third wave feminist thought, I tend to argue that feminist ethics (and feminism itself) should be deeply suspicious of homological and monological accounts that obfuscate difference and diversity. Ethics are hermeneutical; they rely on an interpretation about who and what is at stake in moral phenomena.

Feminist ethics need to articulate in what ways gendered perspectives are heuristic and in what ways voice or writing is particularly gendered. The question of a gendered subject is a dominant theme in feminist thought. In the 1976 essay "Laugh of the Medusa," French feminist Hélène Cixous joins Irigaray in her critique of the phallogocentrism of western thought. Cixous passionately argues that woman must engage in *l'écriture feminine*, she must "write herself." Cixous argues that women must do so at two levels: first, individually. "By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display"(1983:284). Second, as an act "that will

also be marked by woman's seizing the occasion to speak, hence her shattering entry into history" (1983:284). The term *écriture* in French speaks of both the text produced and the act of writing itself; it is a writing of the self, for the self, and from the self.

We can begin to think more critically about the place of gendered *écriture* in feminist ethics by examining Levinas' thought as an example of a particularly masculinist perspective, or to use Cixous' language, what I will call *écriture masculine*—a gendered, situated *écriture* that is incontrovertibly masculine in voice and context. Levinas' *écriture masculine* is the product of his male position.

Levinas' use of male normative language is disturbing. While almost all modern Jewish philosophers use male normative language to describe humans, persons, the self and the Other, one can look to instances in Martin Buber's and Emil Fackenheim's writings where female pronouns are specifically used to include women. These instances are rare in the writings of Buber and Fackenheim but do occasionally appear. In the case of Levinas, we rarely see the use of female language except in the case of metaphors and regions of meaning that rely on feminine cultural constructions for their explication. Levinas' philosophical preoccupation with language in general, and gendered language in particular, begs the question of why, where we might reasonably expect gender inclusive language, we find male normative language. This inconsistency, in conjunction with other elements of Levinas' work represents a distinct preference for the male person and a specifically male worldview.

Levinas obliquely responds to the problem of his masculine perspective in his 1979 preface to *Time and the Other* when he distinguishes between the formal reciprocity that is logically present in any relationship with the Other, whereby the

other must be self for itself and the self must be Other for the Other, and the more significant "transcendent" alterity that he seeks to address:

> Femininity—and one would have to see in what sense this can be said
> of masculinity or of virility; that is, of the differences between the
> sexes in general—appeared to me as a difference contrasting strongly
> with other differences, not merely as a quality different from all
> others, but as the very quality of difference. (1995a:36)

And so Levinas does seem to open up the possibility of a feminine subject that might identify in masculinity and virility a similar transcendent alterity. Even if this question opens up a possibility of another perspective, that possibility is in a sense foreclosed by the problem of the specificity of the characteristics of these gendered/sexed categories of femininity, modesty, mystery, maternity, masculinity, virility, fecundity, paternity, and filiality. If these terms were truly reciprocal they would be rendered meaningless because then they would signify only a formal difference. Levinas' phenomenological descriptions of these terms are utterly specific to the male (heterosexual) subject and do not translate to the experience of women in precisely the same way. At best, it would seem that Levinas can only leave room for another phenomenological account, yet to be articulated, by a female subject.

My reading of Levinas' use of gender recognizes that this work represents a particular voice, which is situated and gendered, and which speaks through and from particular culturally constructed understandings of gender roles. Levinas appeals to androcentric constructions (and thus in theory is able to recast them), not only because they are familiar and intelligible to the reader, but also because he is writing as a male subject and they are familiar to him. As such it is legitimate to question Levinas on the grounds that his speech is not merely gendered, it is so entrenched in his own subject position that it speaks for others (namely women)

instead of with others. As Sonia Sikka argues in "The Delightful Other: Portraits of the Feminine in Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Levinas":

> Nonetheless it remains true that, far from leaving blank the space entitled "woman" and inviting her to fill it in herself, Levinas writes all over this space, inscribing it with his desires, his needs, his mission, in terms of which the feminine is never a for-the-sake-of, but always an in-order-to, a means rather than an end. (2001:103)

This is the masculine perspective that so frustrates feminist readers of Levinas' thought; there is no metaphoric feminine, no actual woman, who announces her own subjectivity. At every level, and in every way, Levinas' consistently and cumulatively excludes women from everything but alterity. With the possible exception of maternity, there is virtually no model or example of the fully human, fully subject, fully ethical woman. One does not have to reiterate again why relegating female subjectivity to the maternal body—that is primarily ethically understood as being hostage for another—might raise feminist ire.

Many scholars are apologetic of Levinas' androcentrism, suggesting that it is inevitable and unremarkable. Manning suggests that Levinas takes on masculine perspective out of respect for the feminine and sensitivity to the question of appropriating the feminine, he asks rhetorically: "Levinas' philosophy is a male philosophy, written from a man's point of view (how could it be otherwise?), but perhaps it is the best kind of male philosophy in that in opposing all relations of power with every Other, it opposes every relation of power and oppression between men and women" (1991:137). Sikka rejects this line of reasoning and other explanations for Levinas' unrelenting masculine perspective and replies:

> But surely feminism, if it speaks to men as well as women, asks men to see women differently from how they have in the past. It asks them not to constitute women within the horizon projected by their own desires, but to see them *in some sense* more as they see themselves and other men, at least to the point of acknowledging that women, too, look out at the world rather than being merely looked at, that

they, too, desire rather than being merely desired, that they, too, speak rather than being merely spoken about, that they, too, are individuals with differing characteristics rather than a homogenous group possessing a simple and common essence. And it asks them to become acquainted with women more in the way that they would become acquainted, *ideally*, with other men: through a respectful, attentive, and considerate dialogue. (2001:104)

This protest seems to be at the heart of most feminist responses to Levinas. Framed another way: Notice the ways in which Levinas through his masculine perspective fails to welcome women as subjects, be attentive to the ways in which Levinas is complicit in his reinscription of stereotypes that undermine the status of women in society, politics and philosophy, imagine the ways in which his account might be transformed if women's subjectivity were explicitly integral. In terms of developing feminist ethics, this reading stresses the importance of perspective if one seeks to not only speak about the ethical, but to speak ethically. It also leads towards a closer examination of the place of the body in ethical thought.

The Body in Exile?: writing of/from the body

One of the ways that feminists might explore the question of perspective is through an interrogation of the place of the body in ethics. I would like to pursue how the body and embodiment might usefully be further developed as a category of feminist ethical analysis by focusing on Levinas' rehearsal of embodiment in his ethics. I suggest that Hélène Cixous' exploration of writing from the body highlight how the body plays an important—if sometimes obfuscated—role in Levinas' philosophical thought. Cixous' comment about "returning to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display" (1983:284) recollects Levinas' description of the feminine Other, who in the erotic relationship is figured as erotic nudity, the object of the caress. Her proclamation

that feminine writing will be marked by woman's seizing the occasion to speak (1983:284) reminds us of Levinas' description of the feminine Other's muteness, her inability to speak. But it is this idea of a confiscated body that is so suggestive of the problem of the feminine in Levinas' thought which raises some of the most compelling questions. How does a gendered *écriture* write of and from the body? In particular, how does Levinas write of the female body? Where is the female body, and—when one recalls the closing pages of *Totality and Infinity*, with its condemnation of the philosophy of the neuter—why is it seemingly in exile in his thought?

Phenomenology places emphasis on observation of the phenomena of human experiences as they appear in consciousness. Both the observation of these experiences, and the experiences themselves, must be understood as gendered because the bodies that experience them are *situated* bodies. Levinas' *écriture* establishes the male body as metaphorically and physically normative. As much as he speaks of and from a male body, he is constrained to speak in ways that explicitly reflect those experiences. The male body is normative in its implicitness as much as in its explicitness. What is fascinating is how Levinas accomplishes this normalization at the same time he wrests gendered tropes from actual female bodies.

The body, Levinas explains, should not be understood materially as "the contingent fall of the spirit into the tomb or prison of a body" (1995:56). Neither should it be denigrated as it is in idealism where the subject is pure freedom which must overcome the obstacle of the body. The body is simultaneous with—never prior or dependent upon or separate from—subjectivity the binary opposition of body/mind or body/soul is no longer viable. Indeed, Levinas consistently and

cumulatively reinforces the challenge to separating the body from subjectivity;
human subjectivity is corporeal, "a body turned to and touched by other bodies in a
world common to them and me" (Peperzak 1999:109). Levinas' insists on materiality
and embodiment as essential to the recurrence to the self that makes substitution
possible:

> It is a recurrence to oneself out of an irrecusable exigency of the other,
> a duty overflowing my being, a duty becoming a debt and an extreme
> passivity prior to the tranquility, still quite relative, in the inertia and
> materiality of things at rest. It is a restlessness and patience that
> support prior to action and passion. Here what is due goes beyond
> having, but makes giving possible. This recurrence is incarnation. In
> it the body which makes giving possible makes one other without
> alienating. For this other is the heart, and the goodness, of the same,
> the inspiration or the very psyche of the soul. (1994:109)

Yet this emphasis on the intertwining of ethics and embodiedness, which
Oppenheim describes as "positive" and typical of modern Jewish thinkers (1997:22,
26), is problematic in the way it plays out in his thought. Consider Levinas'
statement in *Difficile Liberté* where he underscores that the biblical bodily creation
of woman from man's side, 'flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone', is both a natural
structure and an ethical paradigm. He explains this phrase signifies: "une identité
de nature entre la femme et l'homme, une identité de destin et de dignité et aussi
une subordination de la vie sexuelle au rapport personnel qui est l'égalité en soi"
(1997:58). Here we have an example of the slippages between actual bodies and
ethical tropes. In developing these kinds narratives about the body, Levinas at once
places the body at the forefront of the discussion and then pulls the actual body out
of the analysis. For example, Levinas asserts that the feminine Beloved, "the par
excellence correlative of the caress" must not be literally identified with the body
(1995a: 258). In the relation of the caress, he says: "the body already denudes itself
of its very form, offering itself as erotic nudity. In the carnal given to tenderness,

the body quits the status of an existent" (1995a:258). Neither fully human nor fully embodied, the erotic feminine is both indiscretion and exhibitionism, both discretion and interiority. The caress is the approach to the feminine, equivocal, vulnerable, desired body. The caress does not grasp, nor is it directed towards another's body. That which is caressed, the feminine, slips away, exposed and hidden, present and beyond the touch. This is voluptuousity: a pleasurable frustration, "an intentionality without vision," "between speech and the renouncement of speech" a "face that goes beyond the face" (1995a:259-260). Similarly, paternity is described in terms of the father's relationship with the child that is modelled explicitly on the bodily relation. Paternity allows the masculine subject to transcend the non-ethical, non-linguistic, non-social abyss of the feminine (cf. Oliver, 2001:227). This is of course, only possible through the feminine. The father needs the feminine mother to beget the unique, elected son in whose unique face, substance and gestures the father will recognize his own self. Although this recognition implies a biological relation and the importance of the male paternal body, the paternal body is excised from the relation. The paternal body must be irrelevant in the election of the son in order to maintain the contingency of the relation, and not insignificantly, to avoid the problem of the dubious biological parentage of fathers. Levinas clarifies:

> If biology furnishes us the prototype of all these relations, this proves,
> to be sure, that biology does not represent a purely contingent order of
> being, unrelated to its essential productions. But these relations free
> themselves from their biological limitation. (1995a:279)

It is the father's choice in electing and loving the child that is important, his bodily genetic contribution to his engendering is necessarily irrelevant.

The corporeal maternal body is both irrelevant and utterly essential in maternity. His study of maternity arouses a similar sense of dissonance between

Levinas' vocal and insistent claims to the essential embodiedness of subjectivity, the metaphoric nature of gendered language, and the powerfully physical signifiers he chooses to rely on. Susan Handelman locates the role of maternity in terms of Levinas' attempt to resolve the "Gordian knot" of the Cartesian body/consciousness problem and defines maternity in Levinas' thought as "the 'matrix', the immediacy of the ethical, the very sense of 'the material'" (1991:255). Catherine Chalier reads his description of maternity as metaphor and more than metaphor (1991:127). However, maternity, as *a* if not *the* mode of ethical responsibility in relation, must not result in an ethic where sexual difference leads to discrimination. Women must not be privileged over men in their potential for ethical responsibility. Maternity must therefore be absolutely disassociated from biological origin or signification. As Stella Sandford argues in her essay "Masculine Mothers," in order to accomplish this Levinas must disconnect maternity from any biological connection to the female. This is achieved not only through disavowals of the biological origins of maternity but also by displacing the female through a returned discussion to paternity. Sandford clarifies, "Retrospectively, paternity signifies nonbiologically in order that it might mirror and at the same time justify or explain the nonbiological status of maternity; in order, that is, that men might be mothers" (2001: 190). If we follow Chalier, female bodies, if they are to be ethical, must be mother-bodies. If we follow Sandford, female bodies are completely removed from the equation.

As much as Levinas disrupts gendered tropes in his writing and extricates those tropes from biological sex, Levinas is clear that bodies do in fact matter. For example, the bodily need to eat is presented as the condition for the relation to the neighbour. As a feature of "flesh and blood" existence it signifies the vulnerability, susceptibility and mortality that constitutes humanity. In *Otherwise than Being*

corporeality is a condition of subjectivity and of relationship with the Other. Corporeality unites the traits of "for the other, despite oneself, starting with oneself, the pain of labour in the patience of aging, in the duty to give to the other even the bread out of one's own mouth and the coat from one's shoulders" (1994:55). Ethical proximity requires bodily proximity. Human bodies matter in terms of corporeality being a condition of subjectivity. Particularly in the erotic, female bodies matter because alterity is inscribed in sexual difference. References to laughter, play, the coquettish head all serve to reinforce bodily imagery. The stark and disturbing description of a young silly woman in *Totality and Infinity* is an image of humanity dissolving into animality. She has quit her status as person even as in her erotic nudity, her body has quit its status as existent. Even if his inclusion of the body operates primarily at the metaphorical and metaphysical level, Levinas' gendered metaphysics and his critique of the philosophy of the neuter are attempts to revalue the body philosophically. Although the physical remains problematic, the bodily gestures are essential to the depiction *and* the experience: "Life is a body," writes Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*, "not only lived body [*corps propre*], where its self-sufficiency emerges, but a cross-roads of physical forces, body-effect" (1995a:164). In *Otherwise Than Being*, the body becomes even more important as the site of proximity and substitution.

The exceptionally bodily metaphors that characterize Levinas' thought—*jouissance*, the face-to-face, the caress, not to mention fecundity, paternity and maternity—each demonstrate that embodiedness conditions, and is a condition of, human experience. The female body is written in throughout Levinas' thought through these highly bodily and gendered tropes. Yet in the same moment the feminine is written in, the female body is often disturbingly written out. To

summarize: In terms of the body, several things are happening in Levinas' thought. First, as in the case of the feminine where the feminine does not refer to woman or women, the bodily descriptions and metaphors are not referring to actual bodies. Second, the more that Levinas insists that he is not referring to actual bodies, the more he relies on bodily descriptions and metaphors to explain his position. Third, where Levinas invokes bodily descriptions and metaphors and those descriptions or analogies are negative, they are most likely to be associated with the feminine. What is left of the female body in Levinas' *écriture masculine* is, to use Derrida's term, a trace. The female body as Other is multiply exiled, as woman, and as embodied subject. She is the uncanny stranger on display that Cixous described and her body has indeed been confiscated.

Opportunities for Jewish Feminist Ethics

As a Jewish philosopher, Levinas has a particular relevance to Jewish feminism. Both Levinas and Jewish feminists are sincerely committed to Judaism although they do approach Judaism with particular interests. Much of Levinas' engagement with Judaism is a demonstration that Judaism is the source of, and therefore corroborates, the ethical principles that he has advanced. I, and many other Jewish feminists, would argue that the justice that Jewish feminists seek for women within Jewish life and thought is rooted in, and similarly corroborated by, Judaism itself. In Levinas' talmudic readings and biblical interpretation we hear both the philosophical and Jewish voice. Levinas never sacrifices either philosophy or Judaism for the other. He is able to do so because it is clear that he firmly believes that Judaism and ethics are ultimately consonant. When perceptible conflicts arise

as in the case of *Nine Talmudic Readings*, he is able to read these texts creatively in order to resolve apparent inconsistencies. Most importantly, he does so in a way that is legitimately within the rabbinic tradition. He does not violate the texts in order to reconcile them with his thought. Similarly, Jewish feminists have a joint commitment to Judaism and feminism, and most continue in the firm belief that feminism and Judaism are ultimately not in conflict. Although early Jewish feminists often focused on highlighting problematic areas of Jewish life and thought, many Jewish feminist scholars working in the field today are intent on identifying and exploring—often in creative and previously unimagined ways—strategic resources within the tradition.

Despite Levinas' important contributions to modern Jewish philosophy, a Jewish feminist reading of Levinas can be uncomfortable. His description of women in Judaism is often disturbingly uncritical and oblivious to the very real problems occasioned by misogynistic representations of women in traditional texts. When he comes up against anti-female tendencies in Jewish texts, Levinas is most likely to dissociate them from the text by asserting Judaism's deeper message of valuation of the feminine and thus he seems to be unwilling to read creatively. Perhaps he is unconcerned with androcentric and patriarchal influences because such biases do not (in his opinion) invalidate his central claims about the ethical message of the text.

Still, the very fact that Levinas turns to Judaism for corroboration of his ethics is an extremely powerful message for Jewish feminists. If the central message of Judaism is ethical, as Levinas and others insists, it must speak ethically with, to, and about, all marginalized groups, including women. If the sacred texts of Judaism reflect anti-female biases they must be read creatively in terms of the

Jewish exegetical tradition. Levinas' harmonization of philosophical ethics and Jewish ethics is an excellent model for Jewish feminists who continue to engage Judaism both as Jews and as feminists. His innovative treatment of Jewish themes and values suggest a powerful mode of engaging and challenging Judaism faithfully and ethically.

It is interesting but unsurprising that the main problem many feminists have with Levinas is precisely the same problem many Jewish feminists have with Halakha. Both Levinas and Halakha respectively internalize a view of the feminine and/or women as metaphysically and/or psychologically having certain gendered traits.[36] The and/or is crucial here; the slippages between woman and the feminine in biblical and rabbinic thought, and in Levinas' gendered language, resist simple demarcation. Each appeals to a narrative in which woman and the feminine are mutually referential. Linda Zerilli who describes how difficult it is for feminist critiques to disrupt gendered narratives by referring to a mythology of "woman":

> Woman is a mythology. A mythology cannot be defeated in the sense that one wins over one's opponent through the rigor of logic or the force of the evidence; a mythology cannot be defeated through arguments that would reveal it as groundless belief (e.g., the postmetaphysical feminist project). A mythology is utterly groundless, hence stable. What characterizes a mythology is not so much its crude or naive character—mythologies can be extremely complex and sophisticated—but, rather, its capacity to elude our practices of verification and refutation. (1998:443)

A mythology of the feminine is multiply inscribed in Levinas' thought through western philosophy and popular discourses, as well as by traditional Jewish configurations of the feminine.

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[36] For example, Tamar Ross argues that Jewish feminists have ignored that "the Halakhic position regarding women is based on a certain psychological or metaphysical truth–a conception of the basic difference in character between the sexes which demands consideration or preservation (1993:480).

Holocaust

Levinas' landmark *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, first published in

French in 1974 begins with the dedication,

> To the memory of those who were closest among the six million
> murdered by the National Socialists, and of the millions upon millions
> of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the
> other human being, the same anti-Semitism.

Yet virtually nowhere in the text do we find a mention of the Holocaust itself.

Otherwise than Being speaks to central questions of ethical responsibility, the face-

to-face relationship and language. Responsibility to the Other emerges as the

dominant theme of the text, articulating the primacy of ethics as first philosophy

through phenomenological description. In particular, Levinas develops the notion of

the responsible self who encounters the Other's alterity in pain and who is afflicted

in proximity to the Other.

> The neighbor concerns me before all assumption, all commitment
> consented or refused. I am bound to him, him who is, however, the
> first one on the scene, not signaled, unparalleled; I am bound to him
> before any liaison contracted. He orders me before being recognized.
> Here there is a relation of kinship outside of all biology, 'against all
> logic'. It is not because the neighbor would be recognized as belonging
> to the same genus as me that he concerns me. He is precisely other.
> The community with him begins in my obligation to him. The
> neighbor is a brother. (1994:87)

Nazi anti-Semitism, biological racism, is possible only when the "fraternity" which

Levinas describes is unrecognized. Failure to acknowledge that bond is the ultimate

moral failure leading to all other moral collapses.

When this passage is read in the interest of developing a feminist response to

the Holocaust, we see an important correlation between Levinas and Jewish

feminist thought. In the same way that Levinas understands that obligation is prior

to the face-to-face relationship, a Jewish feminist response must begin with the

conviction that ethical responsibility cannot be prioritized along lines of gender or

any other identity. A Jewish feminist response cannot only respond to women's experiences. More radically, it also cannot only speak to Jewish experiences. In that a feminist response to the Holocaust necessarily critiques the silencing and marginalization of women in terms of philosophical and historical responses to the Holocaust, it cannot then in turn marginalize any other experience. In Levinas' terms, there can be no logic which denies kinship with the Other. Levinas' dedication to *Otherwise than Being* makes this clear in using anti-Semitism as the signifier for all hatreds that lead to victimization. Anti-Semitism is the signifier for the will to totalize. Structurally, feminist critiques of alterity proceed in much the same way. This type of critique identifies the reification of woman as Other as symptomatic of the marginalization or oppression of all Others. The specificity of women's otherness is extended, as a signifier, to all groups who suffer injustice through their alterity. Totalization of the Other is the baseline by which injustice must be judged. Framed in this way, a feminist response to the Holocaust posits gender as a complimentary rather than a competing category of analysis.

As important as universalism is for a feminist response to the Holocaust, such a response must also justify its project in terms of its particular interest in gender. Raising the question of gender in relation to this horror initially seems absurd if not obscene. In the face of genocide, doesn't the question of gender seem petty? Doesn't a philosophical response have to be "bigger" than that? Doesn't a philosophical response need to address human concerns, concerns that transcend gender and all other particularities? I submit that the Holocaust demands specificity: a specificity which compels memory and which demands response. A response that is open to the face of the Other: A response that refuses to replicate or perpetuate the un-naming of persons. A response that is grounded in the lived

history of the named. Women have been effaced in the history of the Holocaust.

It is only in the last 10 to 15 years that we are realizing to what degree the absence of women in our history has distorted our understanding of the history of the Holocaust. We are only now beginning to discern how gender affected not only how women survived and perished in the Holocaust, but how gender constructed those experiences. Since post-Holocaust ethics respond to the historical experiences of the Shoah, these responses have proceeded from an incomplete history. Not only does it fail to speak to women, but it denies itself. It perpetuates the totalization of the Other which Levinas protests.

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> To read Levinas, to really read him, is to allow oneself to be claimed
> by a text whose predicative statements may be concealed imperatives.
> What is more, in Levinas' view, exegesis necessitates the reader's
> intervention, the eliciting of meanings that are not predetermined,
> and presupposes that texts contain more than they contain. The
> exegesis of his own writings is not exempt from this textual
> expansiveness. (2000:ix)

The above statement by Edith Wyschogrod was not made as a feminist methodological statement, but it could very well have been written by myself or another of the many feminists who approach Levinas because they have been claimed by his texts but are also compelled to respond and intervene constructively as feminists and Jewish feminists.

Levinas' philosophy is a critique of both the individual and of society. Using a philosophical anthropology where the egoism of the self is the impetus for human behaviour, Levinas describes how both the individual and the state have a natural tendency to attempt to totalize the Other through appropriation, effacement,

objectification and annulment. By insisting on ethics as first philosophy, Levinas' goal is to develop a philosophical description which subverts and overturns this natural tendency. While his use of gendered stereotypes is undeniably troubling, his explicit objective is virtually feminist in its social critique of the pernicious marginalization and totalization of vulnerable persons and groups.

There can be no more effective ground for social justice that Levinas' passionate insistence on the inevitable and immediate obligation to Others—the poor, the orphan, the stranger, and the widow. Systematic inequalities of power must be redressed at both the individual and social level. We are commanded to do so. This notion of command is so powerful for feminism, because we not only are commanded, we command as well. The command comes from the powerful, from the marginalized, from the rich, from the poor, always aiming at ethical relationship.

By focusing on relationship between two specific persons in the *face-to-face* encounter, Levinas offers a paradigm that is particularly amenable to feminist ethics. One major criticism of western philosophical ethics has been its inability to account for a female subject as the moral agent. While Levinas hardly accounts for a female subject in his gendered account of the face-to-face relationship, and does not fully allow for particularity and experience as a category of ethical analysis, an ethic based on a relationship model is still particularly attractive to feminists who have critiqued western philosophical ethics for focusing ethical discourse on the solitary (male) moral agent. Establishing relationship as the locus of the ethical is an important step towards inclusion of different subjects and perspectives.

Feminist ethics can benefit greatly from using phenomenological justifications for ethical orientations. Levinas' phenomenological description of the relationship between alterity and responsibility highlights the problem of

establishing a basis for compelling ethical behaviour. At present, most feminists are still resorting to "ought" language in order to overturn traditionally androcentric ethical models. "Ought" language does not form a sufficiently compelling motivation to compel the *empowered* to ethically respond to the *disempowered*. The development of a phenomenology of alterity which establishes ethical exigency, such as Levinas' *face-to-face* relationship, but which can do so with a feminist sensibility as to the significance of the symbolic construction of woman, would be a powerful strategy for feminist ethics.

The compelling linkage between alterity and ethical responsibility in Levinas' thought is one element of Levinas' ethics that should be closely examined by feminist ethicists. While many feminist thinkers have embraced the concept of Otherness in gender critiques, Levinas' specific formulation of the relationship between alterity and ethics can be effectively appropriated by feminist ethics. Feminist constructions of the Other have largely focused on articulating how members of particular socially marginalized groups (i.e. women, the poor, people of colour) are understood as Other. Otherness becomes simultaneously an explanation for injustice and a symptom of injustice. Ethically, the alterity of the Other must be remedied because it leads to injustice. As in the example of affirmative action, this is to be accomplished primarily by promoting conditions where the effects of marginalization will be minimized if not eventually negated. The impetus for ethical action lies in the awareness of injustice and the recognition that one ought to fight against injustice. This classic understanding of the function of alterity in feminist ethics has been further developed by a variety of feminist thinkers, notably Drucilla Cornell. Cornell's "ethical feminism" argues for a model where the self is to have an orientation to, and yearning towards, non-violent relationship to the Other and

otherness (1995 75-106). The ethical relationship assumes a commitment of responsibility to the Other where one actively repudiates any attempt to subsume the particularity of the Other into a monological system which denies that particularity.

In both the classic construction and Cornell's proposal, alterity is essentially distinct from the ethical. In both cases, it is the consequences of alterity, rather than alterity itself, which provoke the self's ethical response. While these approaches are effective, Levinas' insistence on the link between alterity and responsibility and the ability of the Other to command the self to act ethically accomplishes two important tasks. First, in identifying this urgent and inexorable command to respond ethically in the alterity of the Other, this model clarifies the correlation between ethical responsibility and alterity. Here, the ethical response is the unavoidable response to alterity itself. What are initially perceived as the consequences of Otherness, which feminist thought identifies as marginalization and injustice, are revealed as actually constituting alterity. This reconfiguration accomplishes the second, more important task of transforming the orientation of ethical response from self-determination of ethical norms into a relationship where it is the Other who commands the self.

Even when Levinas is most vulnerable to feminist critiques, his powerful portrayal of the radical responsibility of the self for the Other is undiminished. Levinas' ethics offer both theoretical and methodological models that will enhance the ability of feminist and Jewish feminist ethics to concretely address issues of unequal power, social and political marginalization, violence and prejudice. Levinas' commanding ethical voice presents an almost irresistible invitation for feminists to enter into dialogue with his thought.

A major theme of this discussion has been the need to think creatively in terms of reading Levinas and developing feminist ethics. Paradoxically, it is Levinas' specificity that requires and legitimates this creativity. The masculine self who is at the centre of Levinas' thought cannot really be changed without violating his voice. Yet Levinas' ethical principles and themes do not *necessarily* apply only to the masculine subject, I would argue that they need to be re-spoken, translated, and transformed, so that a feminine subject can also voice them. I have proposed that feminists enter into conversation with Levinas. While the initial response has been hostility, we can move from hostility to synergy, from rejection to collaboration.

EMIL FACKENHEIM

• OVERVIEW •

Emil Fackenheim is principally known for his philosophical and theological responses to the Holocaust. He is most closely associated with two of his works, the widely read *God's Presence in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections*, published in 1970, which systematically yet succinctly engages questions relating to philosophy, faith, liberalism, ethical humanism and the Holocaust, and *To Mend the World: Foundations of Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought*, published in 1982, which uses the metaphor of *Tikkun Olam*, mending the world, in conjunction with his understanding of Midrashic response, in order to begin to outline the foundations of a Jewish philosophical and theological response to the Holocaust. The importance of his thought, and of these two works in particular, cannot be overstated; Fackenheim is without a doubt one of the pre-eminent voices of contemporary post-Holocaust Jewish philosophical and theological reflection.

Fackenheim's philosophical and theological responses to the Holocaust are controversial because of the way in which he argues that the Shoah not only ruptures, but reframes Jewish life and thought. Kenneth Seeskin summarizes the very disparate responses to his work: "To some, he is a good philosopher who made a wrong turn and allowed the spectre of radical evil to overwhelm him; to others, he is the first philosopher with the courage to discuss this evil in an authentic way" (1993:42). As such, Fackenheim disturbs post-Holocaust philosophical discourses,

and challenges us to think critically about the continuing philosophical, theological, religious, cultural and ethical impact of the Holocaust.

In 1987, Fackenheim contemplated the place of the Holocaust in his thought in a review essay entitled, "The Development of My Thought":

> As I reflect at age seventy on the development of my thought, I can easily identify its dominating theme. In 1933 I was sixteen years old, being at the time a German still, as well as a Jew. Soon it became evident that Nazism was not a passing episode but rather a catastrophe for Jews, for Germans, for Christianity, for the whole modern world. With this however, there came to me the growing conviction that Judaism had the resources to respond, and I set out to find out what I could. By the time I became a rabbinical student in 1935 my goal was clear, and while later complexities came about that at the time I was too naïve and ignorant to suspect (as well as numerous excursions elsewhere), the goal itself has not really changed. (1987:204)

Although Fackenheim is best known for his responses to the Holocaust, and indeed it is a dominant theme in his work, it must be emphasized that the Holocaust looms so large in his thought because of his recognition of its enormous impact on Judaism and Jewish life in the modern world. Although this may seem self-evident, Fackenheim repeatedly claims that his thought is primarily directed at Judaism itself, not the Holocaust in particular. Fackenheim is ultimately concerned with philosophical questions about Jewish existence in a modern world that includes the trauma of the Holocaust.

This targeted appraisal of Fackenheim's thought is aimed at identifying those areas that are most at issue in establishing an interdisciplinary conversation between modern Jewish philosophy, feminism and Jewish feminism and that are most likely to furnish opportunities for the construction of feminist and Jewish feminist ethics. Fackenheim's articulation of a theological response to the Holocaust that is grounded in history, which is understood as necessarily incomplete and fragmentary, that emphasizes Jewish continuity and ethical obligation, and is

framed in terms of Tikkun Olam, highlights and points towards many of the key elements that will be essential to the development of a Jewish feminist ethic that might seriously and meaningfully engage the Holocaust.

Fackenheim's Life and Work

Fackenheim was born in Halle, Germany in 1916 into an educated and acculturated German Jewish family. The start of his university career coincided with the first Nazi assaults on Jewish civil liberties. In 1935 he commenced his studies in Judaism at the liberal *Hochschule für Wissenschaft des Judentums* in Berlin (where he studied with Leo Baeck), an institution devoted to the methods and ideals of the Haskalah and *Wissenschaft*.[37] In 1937 Fackenheim became the last Jewish student permitted to enrol at the Martin Luther University in Halle and it is there that Fackenheim began to focus on the post-Hegelian philosophy that would so influence his life's work. In 1938, Fackenheim resumed his rabbinical studies. He was arrested after *Kristallnacht* (Night of Broken Glass) in November 1938 when synagogues (including the Halle synagogue) and businesses were destroyed. He was subsequently imprisoned at the Sachsenhausen proto-concentration camp outside Berlin where he remained for 3 months. After his release in 1939, which was

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[37] The *Wissenschaft* was a major intellectual movement of the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment). It originated among German Jewish intellectuals during the late 19th century and was most closely associated with the thought of Abraham Geiger and Leopold Zunz. Despite the many successes of the Jewish Emancipation, the diminishment of Jewish civil disabilities had not led to the eradication of anti-Semitism. The endurance of anti-Semitism within Europe in general, and Germany in particular, was understood as being caused by not only an ignorance of Jewish history and the Jewish tradition but more importantly was the product of Judaism being perceived as not being a rational and historically evolving cultural tradition. As such, the *Wissenschaft* saw its task as the scientific historical-critical study of Judaism leading to the cultural and political recognition of Judaism. By applying new historical critical methods to Jewish classical texts, the *Wissenschaft* would demonstrate how Judaism (the Jewish religion as well as Jewish literature and philosophy) had developed in concert with its encounter with other cultural traditions and thus represented a historically evolving, legitimate religious cultural tradition.

conditional upon his leaving Germany within a few weeks, Fackenheim successfully completed his rabbinical examinations and was ordained a Reform rabbi in Berlin. Exiled from Germany, Fackenheim first pursued doctoral studies at the University of Aberdeen between 1939 and 1940. After the war broke out, he was interred as an enemy alien in Scotland and was soon deported to Canada where he would spend the next 20 months in a prison camp administered by the Canadian military near Sherbrooke, Quebec.

After being released, Fackenheim began his doctoral studies at the University of Toronto and received his doctorate in 1945. He served as Rabbi for Reform Congregation *Anshe Sholom* from 1943 to 1945. During that time, he was also a member of the department of philosophy at the University of Toronto where he initially focused on Post-Kantian German philosophy. He became full professor in 1979.

Fackenheim retired from his position at the University of Toronto in 1984 and emigrated from Canada to Israel where he continued to write and teach. He became a fellow of the Institute of Contemporary Jewry at the Hebrew University at Jerusalem where he taught until his death on September 19, 2003.

Developments in Fackenheim's Thought

From his earliest student writings in 1938, until the late 1960s, Fackenheim primarily focuses on two areas: philosophical reflection in conversation with the continental philosophical tradition (especially Hegel but also Kant, Kierkegaard and Heidegger), and secondly, philosophical and theological polemical engagement with philosophical liberalism and Jewish liberalism. His later thought principally

responds to and engages the Holocaust and its impact on modern Jewish life and thought.

While Fackenheim's increased focus on the Holocaust in the late 1960s is a key moment, it is important to note other developments in his thought as well. Fackenheim appraises these evolutions in his essay "These Twenty Years: A Reappraisal" included in his collection *Quest for Past and Future: Essays in Jewish Theology* first published in 1968. He notes the unchanged elements: First, Fackenheim has an existential understanding of Jewish history as a history of "encounters between God and Israel of which the evolution of ideas is a mere human reflection" (1970:8). His Jewish existentialist understanding of God as the living God of Scripture who is active in Israel's history, is heavily influenced by the thought of Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig.[38] Second, revelation is an important part of that history and "differs qualitatively from human inspiration" (1970:8). Third, because he describes revelation as "an event of divine incursion shot through with human interpretation" debates and arguments between liberal and Orthodox Judaism must be viewed as being secondary to more urgent questions about the significance and meaning of revelation (1970:8). Finally, Fackenheim consistently stresses the importance of faith, defining it as "total commitment." Jewish faith is grounded in actual experiences that occur in history. The total commitment of faith is "either to an all-consuming experience in the present, or else to memories of such experiences which had taken place in the past" (1970:114).

Fackenheim is also aware that he has reformulated and even rejected several of his earlier philosophical and theological statements and approaches. One way of

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[38] c.f. Seeskin, 1993; and Steven Katz, 1983

thinking about the developments in Fackenheim's thought is in terms of three principal stages. In the first stage, from his earliest writings until 1957, Fackenheim is preoccupied with illustrating the need for faith by focusing on the human condition. In 1954, Fackenheim presented his theological project in "An Outline of a Modern Jewish Theology." Fackenheim asserts that every religion, including Judaism, requires theology in order to present a "coherent account of religious faith" (1970:99). Criticizing previous Jewish theologies for a "lack of system," Fackenheim suggests the following model: The relation of humans, and particularly Jews, to God, constitutes Jewish faith; a Jewish theology must not only account for this faith, but also defend the centrality of "a supernatural God, and a relation to such a God" (1970:100). Thus if classical theology "works its way down" from the premise of God's presence and revelation, a systematic Jewish theology must "work its way up," beginning with human existence and demonstrating, critically and logically, that humans must "raise the question of the Supernatural" (1970:101). If human existence does not raise this question, and demand the response of Kierkegaard's "leap of faith," then religious faith is obsolete. Fackenheim concludes, "From this it follows that the analysis of the human condition constitutes the necessary prolegomenon for all modern Jewish, and indeed, all modern theology" (1970:101).

The second stage of Fackenheim's thought, beginning in 1957, is a result of Fackenheim recognizing that this earlier approach, which he characterizes as setting up the opposing extremes of religion and secularism ("humanism" and "supernaturalism"), required that he "staked all on a radical leap from one to the other." He concludes in 1968, "But I now think that modern religious life is more complex and subtle than the extremes set up by such a theological polemic"(1970:9).

Perhaps most importantly, Fackenheim becomes conscious in his later thought that both theology and philosophy can provide, or fail to provide, adequate solutions to the problem of despair in the modern world. Arguing that both philosophy and theology are limited by setting up a binary opposition between faith and despair, he ultimately categorically rejects this earlier construction and concludes, "there is both despair within faith and serene confidence without it" (1970:9). He further observes that in his earlier work, in critiquing liberalism, he did not pay sufficient attention to what was "right" with liberalism. Upon later reflection, Fackenheim perceives that the optimism of liberalism, "the refusal to despair in an age rife with despair," is itself a worthy and significant contribution (1970:8). As much as in his early thought Fackenheim engaged in polemical philosophical discourses with liberalism, over time he realized that in focusing on liberalism's external challenges to classical Judaism, he ignored internal criticisms of "how classical Judaism, once reaffirmed, is to come to terms with the modern world" (1970:8). Oppenheim points to two major features of the second stage of Fackenheim's thought, both of which are illustrated by defining this stage's theological position in terms of "committed openness to the voice of God":

> Jewish theology is possible only after there has been a commitment to
> Jewish existence. The commitment, in turn, leads to an openness to
> God's voice in the present as well as in the past... Fackenheim saw
> that Jewish belief does not originate out of man's quest for God or out
> of some abstract relationship between God and man. The relationship,
> the covenant, between God and Israel, begins with God's election of
> this particular people, and Fackenheim reiterates the importance of
> election by making the Jew's "singled out condition" the point of
> departure. (1985:92-93)

This middle stage represents a real break with the first in terms of theoretical and methodological assumptions. The third stage, characterized by increasing focus on the Holocaust, is not similarly a break in his thought as had been the shift from the

first to second stage. Oppenheim evaluates this stage as a "development, or better, a leap from the second...a leap where no repudiation was necessary" (1985:96).

The third stage of Fackenheim's thought begins in the late 1960s when Fackenheim rethinks his understanding of Jewish faith and its relation to history. Prior to 1967, Fackenheim maintained that, "faith was impenetrable to historical falsification"(Morgan, 1987:113). This position, most clearly expressed in the 1964 essay "On the Eclipse of God," argues that from the perspective of the believer, no empirical argument or historical event can refute faith. Fackenheim explains, "Put radically, this means that there is no experience, either without or within, that can possibly destroy religious faith" (1970:231). The subject of the Holocaust, first raised in terms of the need to respond religiously to Auschwitz in "On the Eclipse of God," becomes truly central to his thought in late 1966 or 1967. It is at this point that Fackenheim feels that it is both possible and necessary for the Jew to begin to address the Holocaust.

> Not until I faced this scandal [of Auschwitz] did I make what to me was, and still is, a momentous discovery. Jews throughout the world—rich and poor, learned and ignorant, believer and unbeliever—were already responding to Auschwitz, and in some measure had been doing so all along. Faced with the radical threat of extinction, they were stubbornly defying it, committing themselves, if to nothing more, to the survival of themselves and their children as Jews. (1970:19)

Two events occur during this time that seem to have played an important role in this shift in Fackenheim's thinking; the Six Day War and his experience in late 1966 or early 1967 when he participated in a conference on Jewish identity. Fackenheim remembers both of these events as catalysts for his focused interest in

philosophically responding to the Holocaust, but it is the conference that is identified as a personal defining moment.[39] Fackenheim was speaking to the audience and made the statement: "A Jew today is one who, except for an historical accident—Hitler's loss of the war—would have either been murdered or never been born." There was no response. In *To Mend the World*, Fackenheim presents this silence as archetypal of the failure to respond to the Holocaust: "There is an awkward silence. And the conference proceeds as if nothing has happened" (1994:295). For Fackenheim, the silence that met his words at the conference is not the awful silence that followed the Holocaust that Wiesel described. Whereas that earlier silence was the silence that occurred after a trauma that made speech impossible, here silence is specifically a betrayal of the victims. Questions must be asked: How can Judaism and Jewish life authentically respond to the trauma of the Shoah? What kind of response is historically, morally and religiously authentic? The moral demands that emerge after the Holocaust cannot be extricated from the historical and religious exigencies that are equally and concurrently imperative.

This is also the period when Fackenheim first develops his often quoted 614th commandment, the call for the obligation of Jewish survival that commands that Hitler not be granted another "posthumous victory." In *To Mend the World*, he describes how soon after, the sudden and stunning Israeli military victory of 1967 would take on revelatory significance as a crucial and decisive moment in the history of the establishment of the modern State of Israel. This event, which compelled Jews to re-experience the threat of their own destruction, causes

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[39] Oppenheim recounts how, in a personal conversation between the two, Fackenheim reflected on this conference as the turning point in his thought (1985:95-96).

Fackenheim to reflect on the meaning of the establishment of the State of Israel and its significance for Jewish history.

Fackenheim's mature understanding of faith, revelation and God's presence in history depends significantly on the models established during the second stage of his thought and the rejection of his original methodological approach used in the first stage. Fackenheim understands Torah as the human account of divine incursions into human history. These incursions or divine events are actual and not imagined or fabricated for religious or cultic purposes. The Torah is not merely an account of that experience; it is a human reflection on the experience of encountering the divine. Fackenheim specifies the human role in the development of that account by noting that: "the reception is shot through with appropriation and interpretation" (1970:307). The human dimension in the communication of revelation is a function of the interpretative nature of "listening." Even in interpersonal dialogue, listening to another human necessarily involves interpreting that dialogical encounter. In the case of encounter with divine, interpretation and appropriation is "*a fortiori* inevitable when the human 'listening' is in faith and the 'voice' heard is divine"(1970:307).

One of Fackenheim's most significant theological developments occurs during the third stage when he begins to assert the theological importance of including the possibility of 'radical surprise" in his definition of faith. Radical   surprise   is correlated with his development of the idea of epoch-making events. Fackenheim's point here is that many historical events in Jewish history, whether biblical or modern, are watersheds; they represent new conditions that prompt new questions and elicit new answers and thus must be understood as epoch-making events. "Radical surprise" is the response to new revelation that unexpectedly and radically

transforms previous understandings of revelation and relationship with God.

This claim already depends on Fackenheim's post-1957 understanding of God's election of the Jewish people as the ground of both Jewish self-understanding and modern Jewish thought, the need for a commitment to the past historical relationship between God and the Jewish people, as well as an openness to future revelation from that relationship. This insight in turn depends on Fackenheim's self-criticism of his earliest stance where he emphasized the Jewish openness to God's voice in past events, and his recognition that such an emphasis necessarily presents a model of faith that is static. He says, "This point may have been academic for most Jewish generations, but not for the generation which has witnessed Auschwitz and the first Jewish state in two thousand years" (1970:9). Auschwitz and the establishment of the State of Israel have each transformed Jewish life in unprecedented ways, and Jews today must be attentive to the possibility of additional future revelatory transformations. Fackenheim expresses his "religious and theological guilt and repentance" that in his writings from the 1960s he disregarded the uniqueness of the Holocaust (1978:43).

These developments, largely arising from his confrontation of the Holocaust after 1967, need to be understood as a critique not only of his own earlier thought but also of many modern theological and philosophical stances. Michael Oppenheim explains:

> The confrontation with the Holocaust crystallized Fackenheim's
> doubts about the foundations of his theological reflections and led him
> to explore areas that have been neglected by many before him. The
> existential necessity of an open, "vulnerable," encounter with history
> became inescapable as he recognized the threat that the Holocaust
> continued to pose to the religious foundations of Jewish life. (1985:88)

In order to confront the Holocaust, Fackenheim will need to examine and restructure his approach to the religious and philosophical foundations of Jewish

existence. Through a close reading of *God's Presence in History*, we can more closely follow how Fackenheim's response to the Holocaust becomes the pressure point of his philosophical engagement with Judaism, Jewish life, Jewish thought, and western philosophy.

Restructuring Theological and Philosophical Categories

The Holocaust forces the Jew to philosophically and theologically reflect on the nature of Jewish existence after the Holocaust. The result of this questioning engagement is the unavoidable restructuring of theological categories. Such a restructuring necessarily involves a critical engagement with questions relating to Jewish faith and belief, Jewish practice, and ultimately Jewish existence itself. For Fackenheim these questions are urgent; what is at stake is the survival of Judaism in the modern world (1970:5). Central to this project is Fackenheim's articulation of how the Holocaust, as a modern epoch-making event, demands a re-evaluation of the relationship between history and Jewish existence. Fackenheim's analysis can best be grasped by focusing on two complementary and interrelated themes which emerge in his thought: first, how the Holocaust profoundly alters and ruptures our understanding of Jewish existence in history and, second, the relationship of persons or community with God. These themes are clearly interconnected; Fackenheim's conception of Jewish existence within history is bound up with understanding of the Jewish people's relationship with God. Similarly, Fackenheim's articulation of the Jewish people's relationship with God depends utterly on a particular view of God's acting within history.

Fackenheim makes the case that the Holocaust demands that we ask new and unprecedented questions of the God of history. It demands that we confront the faith that existed before the Holocaust and test it "in light of contemporary experience" (1970:9). As much as the Holocaust requires a restructuring of theological categories and a re-evaluation of God's presence in history, the central Jewish experience of struggling with God continues after the Holocaust. Fackenheim must answer the question, how to speak of an I-Thou relation with God after Auschwitz? Buber himself had asked this question in 1958: "Can one still speak to God after Oswiecim and Auschwitz?" (1958:203). From Fackenheim's perspective Buber never resolved this question satisfactorily, at least in part because Buber relegates historical knowledge to the I-It relation; the I-Thou relation occurs in meta-history, not the history of the death camps. The resolution of this question is crucial to Fackenheim's project and leads him to his analysis of God's presence in history.

Fackenheim's understanding of this Jewish return into history is based on his understanding that God acts in history and that certain historical experiences of God's presence in history are profoundly transformational and impact all future understanding of the Jewish people and Jewish history.

God's Presence in History

God's Presence in History, first published in 1970 and based on a series of lectures that were delivered at New York University in 1968, advances many of the major arguments and themes that are characteristic of Fackenheim's later work. Organized in three sections or chapters, Fackenheim addresses three major themes

that are respectively challenged by the history of the Holocaust: In section one, Fackenheim outlines what he describes as the "structure of Jewish experience" by introducing the key concepts of root experiences and epoch-making events and makes his case for recognizing God's presence in history. The second section explores secularist arguments about the death or non-existence of God and rebuts them philosophically. The third section, identified by Michael Morgan as "the framework for virtually all of Fackenheim's subsequent work" (1987:114), rehearses Fackenheim's central philosophical and theological response to the Holocaust, that one must hear the "commanding voice of Auschwitz" and respond authentically. I draw attention to the first and last sections of this work, where he outlines his understanding of the religious and ethical imperatives generated by the Holocaust, as being of particular import for Fackenheim's theological and ethical claims.

"The Structure of Jewish Existence": epoch-making events and root experiences

It is in *God's Presence in History* that Fackenheim is most articulate in outlining the dialectical relationship between the Holocaust, Jewish history, and Jewish life. This work illustrates how Hegel, Kierkegaard and Buber significantly inform Fackenheim's understanding of God's presence in that history. Fackenheim would later declare in 1987 that Hegel had "left a more lasting and profound impact on my thought than any other philosopher" (1987:205). He was impressed with Hegel's attempt to philosophically engage the category of (Christian) revelation on its own terms, as divinely inspired while "avoiding a reductionism that destroys it" (1987:205). Hegel, for Fackenheim, heralds the possibility of trying to understand revelation philosophically. This theoretical assumption drives Fackenheim's

method, but it is Kierkegaard and Buber who provide the paradigm for understanding God's relationship with humans. If Kierkegaard provides the model for faith as the individual, passionate, subjective, "leap of faith" that must constantly be renewed and which constitutes the true self, it is in Buber's Jewish model for dialogical relationship between humans and God, that provides the theological framework that will ground Fackenheim's post-Holocaust theology.

Following Buber, Fackenheim proceeds from the assumption that God exists and that in order to enter into relationship with God we must begin from an orienting position of openness that might allow us to hear God's (commanding) voice. As such, Fackenheim's response to the Holocaust is the response of a believing, committed Jew. As Steven Katz notes, "Thus the Fackenheim who hears 'a commanding voice from Auschwitz' is the Fackenheim who already stands within the covenantal affirmation"(1983:207). It is the already present covenantal commitment that provides the ethical and religious logic for all that will follow.

Fackenheim's understanding of a Jewish "openness" to God's presence in history is associated with how Jews have historically understood themselves within that history. The dialectical link between Jewish existence and God's presence in Jewish history is explained through Fackenheim's proposed categories of "root experiences" and "epoch-making events."[40] The simplest distinction between these two categories is that epoch-making events challenge faith while root experiences ground and define faith. Epoch-making events are "moments of crisis...catastrophes that test the structure of faith as defined by root experiences through unforeseen

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[40] Fackenheim's understanding of a "root experience" is based on Irving Greenberg's concept of an "orienting-experience." He rephrases Greenberg's term in order to emphasize the historical quality of the experience. "Orienting," stresses the historical impact of the experience, "root" expresses both the originary historical quality of the experience as well as its historical effects. See note 10, 1972:32.

circumstances" (Seeskin, 1993:44). An epoch-making event is one that is historically unique, alters the way that subsequent history is understood, and makes significant unprecedented demands on the Jewish people. Examples of epoch-making events in the history of the Jewish people include "the end of prophecy, the destruction of the first Temple, the Maccabean revolt, the destruction of the second Temple, and the expulsion from Spain" (1972:8-9). Fackenheim stresses that these events are "more" than epoch-making events that challenge faith; they are root experiences. A root experience, like Irving Greenberg's orienting-experience, is a religious or theological category that shapes our understanding of past, present and future history. First, a root experience involves a dialectical relationship between past and present. Fackenheim's classic example is Sinai. The original experience takes place in the past, but all subsequent experience must be understood in terms of that history. Second, it is public and historical; its historicity is dependent on its public or communal impact. In the case of Sinai, it is the public and historical experience that is central; the revelation of Sinai is given to the entire Jewish community, it is remembered communally. Third and most important, a root experience involves access to the presence of God, which is also subsequently accessible to future generations who were not originally present (1972:9—11).

The Holocaust seizes Fackenheim's attention not only because it is a traumatic and rupturing epoch-making event but because it is also a root experience. The Holocaust both informs and recasts many difficult theological and philosophical issues, including the nature (and even the possibility) of divine human relationship, the character and significance of revelation, the meaning of Jewish history, Jewish Christian relations, and the nature of ethical and religious obligations. As a Jewish philosopher and theologian, Fackenheim concludes that

each of these issues must be understood in terms of the overarching religious and philosophical question of how and why Judaism must survive. The Holocaust is an epoch-making event because it meets the above criteria of uniqueness, altering subsequent understandings of history and making new moral demands. According to Fackenheim, the Shoah also meets his criteria of a root experience: dialectical relationship between past and future, public and historical, and most contentiously, access to the experience of the presence of God by those who were not present.

The effect of the Holocaust to transform our understanding of history itself is evidence of how an epoch-making event has the capacity to alter subsequent interpretations of history. Fackenheim maintains that the modern traumas of Hiroshima and Auschwitz affect all religious belief. He contends that, because of the Jewish understanding of God's action in history, the Holocaust is particularly problematic for Jewish belief: "They had a unique relation to this God, if only, in their case alone and for nearly four millennia, because collective survival was bound up with Him" (1972:6). That Jews were murdered, not because of what they believed, but because of what their grandparents believed, puts into grave question how a Jew can obey the God of history and put their own children at risk of being victims of a second Holocaust. After the Holocaust, previous understandings of God's presence in history become problematized. If God acted in history, and continues to act in history, how do we understand that God did not act to prevent the Holocaust? If Judaism understands the Jewish people as living in covenant with God, and that covenant is itself played out in sacred history, how can we understand the Holocaust in terms of that history? Can we still think of Jewish history as sacred history? In Fackenheim's view, previous understandings of the catastrophic events of Jewish history are no longer applicable; indeed, applying such

interpretations are morally and religiously unacceptable because they were predicated on understanding those events as punishment for Israel's sins—an interpretation that Fackenheim views as blasphemous when applied to the Holocaust.

Fackenheim develops the distinction between the saving and commanding aspects of the divine presence of history to explain the importance of human response. Again using the example of Sinai, he explains that salvific acts occur within history. Because the divine incursion occurs within human history, humans necessarily participate in salvation by responding to the divine commanding voice. "A commanding voice is heard even as the saving event is seen; and salvation itself is not complete until the Voice is heeded" (1972:15). Human freedom is an essential element of this encounter with the commanding divine presence. The commanding voice as "sole Power" initially destroys human freedom but that freedom is restored through "gracious Power," "and indeed exalts it, for human freedom is made part of a covenant with Divinity itself" (1972:16). Because God's presence occurs within history without destroying human freedom, and "not as its consummation or transfiguration" (1972:18), the Jewish experience of the Divine in history is necessarily theologically confronted by events that seemingly point to God's absence or abandonment. How can one understand God's presence at the Red Sea but not at the second Temple or Auschwitz? Fackenheim turns to *Midrash* as a traditional rabbinic method of preserving the root experiences of Judaism in the face of epoch-making events.

Midrash, is the traditional rabbinic form of interpretation of scripture or texts through various modes including "para-Biblical reworking and retelling, imitation, epigrammatization and citation in support of favored views" (Goldin,

1995:1). This reworking and retelling of narratives is inevitably pedagogical and has an essential ethical content. Fackenheim identifies five characteristics of the Midrashic "framework" in *God's Presence in History*. First, Midrashic thinking "reflects upon the root experiences of Judaism." It is these root experiences which define Judaism and Jewish faith at their most basic level and which constitute Jewish experience and identity. Second, in reflecting on these experiences, Midrashic thinking, like philosophical reflection, is cognizant of the contradictions implicit in root experiences. Third, in contrast with philosophical reflection which does not have an *a priori* commitment to retaining the integrity of these experiences, Midrashic thinking is "stubbornly committed to their truth" even when those truths are seemingly paradoxical. Fourth, because the integrity of the experience must be maintained, Midrashic thought is limited in its ability to resolve contradictions; it may only express these contradictions. Midrashic thinking is "fully deliberate" in leaving these contradictions "unresolved" and thus is "consciously fragmentary." Fackenheim explains that Midrashic thinking "is insistent that this fragmentariness is both ultimate for human thought and yet destined to an ultimate resolution." As such, Midrashic thought is "both fragmentary and whole." Fifth and finally, the commitment to the truth of the root experience is best conveyed through the Midrashic model (1972: 20-21).

Fackenheim reasons that the narrative mode of Midrash is in many ways more amenable than the discursive philosophical mode to responding to these epoch-making events. These events, as encounters within history between God and the Jewish people, cannot adequately be described discursively. Discursive philosophical language is necessarily restricted to precise, comprehensible truth-claims. As such, it is limited in its ability to fully describe the human experience of

the inexpressible and incomprehensible encounter with the divine. Midrash, as

a narrative hermeneutic strategy, is able to include within its transmission

k'b'yachol, the Midrashic technical term that describes the phenomena of how the

rabbis understood what they were trying to communicate at the same time they

could not adequately or fully articulate what they were trying to convey. (1972:24).[41]

"The Commanding Voice of Auschwitz": midrashic existence

In the final section of *God's Presence in History*, Fackenheim builds on the lines of

argument established in the first two chapters in order to outline his conception of

an authentic response to the Holocaust. The problem is illustrated with "The

Madman's Prayer," where Fackenheim juxtaposes Elie Wiesel's "pious Jew who was

slightly mad—for all pious Jews were by then slightly mad" against Nietzsche's

madman who announced the death of God. Wiesel's madman rushes into a

synagogue in Nazi occupied Europe where a group is praying. Pausing and realizing

what he is hearing he entreats them : "Shh, Jews! Do not pray so loud! God will

hear you. Then He will know that there are still some Jews left alive in Europe"

(1972:67). Fackenheim contrasts this with Nietzsche's account, where the madman

bursts in on a group of men and charges them with God's death.

> There however, all similarity ends. For in the one tale there is horror
> because God is dead; in the other, because He is alive. One madman
> addresses God's murderers; the other, His victims. The first hopes
> that some men will be free; the second fears that tomorrow all Jews
> will be dead. An abyss yawns between the prophecy of a dead God and
> a prayer addressed to a living God, but spoken softly, lest it be heard.
> (1972:67-68)

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[41] c.f. Samuelson, (1989: 293)

The "terrible Midrash" of Elie Wiesel's madman is the crucible of post-Holocaust

Jewish life.[42] Because Jews cannot "disconnect God from the world," because Jewish

existence is so utterly bound up with the experience of God's presence in history, the

madness of the Holocaust cannot be met by Nietzsche's death of God narrative

(1972:69). The greatest challenge that the Holocaust represents to any theological

account of the presence of the Divine in history is the question of theodicy. Can it be

met by previous models of Midrashic response?

To begin to explore this problem, he initiates his analysis with a

consideration of past Jewish responses to evil and suffering in terms of sin,

retribution and martyrdom. In particular, he focuses on rabbinic doctrinal

interpretations that explained catastrophes in terms of the Biblical analysis "for our

sins are we punished," and observes that other epoch-making events have similarly

required the suspension of this doctrine. Fackenheim relates the example of the

rabbinic explanation of the destruction of the Second Temple. The destruction of the

Temple could and should have been understood in terms of punishment for Israel's

sinfulness, because such an interpretation affirmed the inviolate relationship

between human action and history. Yet the rabbis necessarily denied that the result

of the destruction of the Temple, namely the paganization of Jerusalem by Hadrian,

could be attributed to Israel's sinfulness. Such an interpretation would be morally

and religiously intolerable. The theological consequences of such an interpretation

are repugnant and absurdly inappropriate. Fackenheim recognizes that the

necessary disconnection between history and human action in particular cases like

the paganization of Jerusalem or of the Holocaust problematizes our understanding

of divine action in that history. Just as in the case of the paganization of Jerusalem, the explanation that catastrophe results from sinfulness "becomes a religious absurdity and even a sacrilege" when applied to the Holocaust (1972:73). It is unthinkable to imagine that any people's actions could ever remotely begin to justify that horror as a punishment, just as it is unthinkable to imagine that God could ever visit such a punishment on a people.[43] One cannot even speak of martyrdom as a possible model for "understanding" this suffering because the victims had no choice; no distinction was made between the faithful and the secular Jew, the observant and the non-observant, even those who did not identify as Jews were victims of the same murderous program. This is the particular historical reality that is so appalling to Fackenheim: the victims of the Holocaust were not targeted because of their own actions or beliefs, but because of the choice of previous generations to live as Jews. This realization inevitably leads to terrifying alternatives: choose to live as Jews in this generation and choose to raise Jewish children, or "abandon our millennial post as witness to the God of history" (1972:71).

Fackenheim next turns to what he describes as the Midrashim of protest. The examples of Abraham, Job and Jeremiah each demonstrates how, whether the protest is a renunciation of protest itself, a "despair of faith," or a protest against the unjust reward of the wicked, the protest in these accounts always remain

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[42] This is the beginning of the idea of "Mad Midrash" that will be so important in Fackenheim's future thought and especially in *To Mend the World*.

[43] Underlying this discussion is Fackenheim's resistance to any teleological interpretation of the Holocaust. This point should be remembered when Fackenheim's 614th commandment is subject to critiques which argue that the 614th commandment leads to a Judaism that is overwhelmed and subsequently reoriented and constituted by the Holocaust. The 614th commandment commands that "the authentic Jew of today is forbidden to hand Hitler yet another, posthumous victory" (1987a:159). Such critiques misunderstand or disregard the limitations that Fackenheim himself places on the 614th commandment. As I will discuss later, the 614th commandment is an incomplete and fragmentary "Midrashic" response that cannot be applied hegemonically.

"within the sphere of faith" (1972:76). He asks whether after Auschwitz Jewish

protest can still remain within that sphere? He answers in the imperative:

> within the sphere of faith we protest on behalf others, and above all
> on behalf of those who would not or could not be or stay within the
> sphere of Jewish faith and yet were murdered on account of it. In
> faithfulness to the victims we must refuse comfort; and in faithfulness
> to Judaism we must refuse to disconnect God from the Holocaust.
> (1972:76)

The problem with this type of protest Midrash is that it cannot transcend the

disruption of Auschwitz. Faithfulness in the present to the victims does not seem to

allow the faith of the past that insists on God's presence in history. One possibility,

which Fackenheim quickly rejects, is the Midrash of Rabbi Akiba who describes

God's powerlessness and God's sharing of Israel's exile. Fackenheim rejects this

potential interpretation as a form of Buber's "eclipse of God" theological metaphor.

Both the Midrashic formulation and Buber's response depend on God's complete

absence from at least one moment in history (during the exile, or during the Shoah).

Fackenheim argues that you cannot have it both ways. If God is present in history,

God must be present during the most traumatic events of that history. If God is not

present, how can we speak of God's presence in the past?

> A divine eclipse which were total in the present would cut off both
> past and future...the eclipse of God remains a religious possibility
> within Judaism only if it is not total. If all present access to the God
> of history is wholly lost, the God of history is Himself lost. (1972:77-
> 78)

The only response which Fackenheim can assert is one which both protests and

affirms God's presence in history. The model for this response is the "commanding

voice of Auschwitz" which is expressed virtually without change throughout

Fackenheim's thought. He reiterates his previous formulation:

> Jews are forbidden to hand Hitler posthumous victories. They are
> commanded to survive as Jews, lest the Jewish people perish. They
> are commanded to remember the victims of Auschwitz lest their

memory perish. They are forbidden to despair of man and his
world, and to escape into either cynicism or otherworldliness, lest
they cooperate in delivering the world over to the forces of Auschwitz.
Finally, they are forbidden to despair of the God of Israel, lest
Judaism perish... A Jew may not respond to Hitler's attempt to
destroy Judaism by himself cooperating in its destruction. (1972:84)[44]

This moral and religious imperative is more familiarly known as Fackenheim's

"614th commandment" which will be more fully elaborated in the 1978 work, *The*

Jewish Return into History. Although this statement has been distortively

popularized into an authoritative and comprehensive political statement,

Fackenheim is clear here, and in later works, that this injunction is a "fragmentary

statement" (1972:85). He expands on this thesis by presenting four fragments that

highlight the exigencies of post-Holocaust Jewish existence: the commands to

remember, survive, hope and stand in solidarity with the victims and other Jews.

Fackenheim recognizes that these imperatives are in conflict, and that they are so

in different ways for religious and secular Jews. For religious Jews, the command to

hope and survive forbids the previous reconciliatory responses of mysticism[45] and

martyrdom. Both are untenable for Fackenheim because the trauma of the Shoah

occurs in this world, and martyrdom implies the choice of dying for God—a choice

that was clearly not available to the victims. Secular Jews, who cannot return to the

Midrashic framework of faith and God through Auschwitz, must somehow link with

the experience of God's presence in history or be cut off from not only the Jewish

past, but disobey the commandment for Jewish unity in their widening "the chasm"

between the secular Jews and "the religious Jew" (1972:89). The conflict for either

type of Jew leads to madness, however:

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[44] Fackenheim's citation for this passage is "Jewish Faith and the Holocaust"(1968), and *Quest for Past and Future* (1970:17ff).

[45] Fackenheim uses mysticism here to refer to a focus on the otherworldly.

> The voice of Auschwitz commands Jews not to go mad. It
> commands them to accept their singled out condition, face up to its
> contradictions, and endure them. Moreover, it *gives* the power of
> endurance, the power of sanity. The Jew of today *can* endure because
> he *must* endure, and he must endure because he is *commanded* to
> endure. (1972:92)

This is a Midrash that bears a type of meaning for the Holocaust, what Morgan describes as the "object of our response, a reality to be addressed, opposed, a memorial to the most radical evil and the most noble humanity" (1987:114). This "type of meaning" is in contrast with any type of narrative that might attach a purpose to the Holocaust. Although Fackenheim is clear in asserting that "Auschwitz will forever after resist religious explanation" and that no "religious meaning will ever be found in Auschwitz, for the very attempt to find it is blasphemy" (1970:18), he is walking a very fine line here. Clearly Fackenheim's entire argument has "meaning" in a religious sense as much as in a moral sense. Consider how Fackenheim closes *God's Presence in History,* by charging Jews with the obligation to the victims of the Holocaust to survive and witness:

> *"mir zeinen do"*—we are here, exist, survive, endure, witnesses to God
> and man even if abandoned by God and man. Jews after Auschwitz
> will never understand the longing, defiance, endurance of the Jews of
> Auschwitz. But so far as is humanly possible they must make them
> their own as they carry the whole of the Jewish past into a future yet
> unknown. (1972:97-98)

The structure of this responsibility is both powerful and disturbing. By placing this terrifying history at the centre of Jewish life and the Jewish future, Fackenheim gives the Holocaust (or acknowledges, depending on your point of view) unprecedented power to signify, frame and inform all that is Jewish: Jewish thought, identity, practice, politics and ethics.

Recurring Themes

Fackenheim's later works exhibit a remarkable continuity with the method and themes established in *God's Presence and History*. Methodologically, Fackenheim begins with the philosophical and theological challenges that the Holocaust poses for Jewish life and interrogates these challenges in light of Jewish sacred texts and history, modern Jewish thought, the particular history of the Holocaust, and western philosophical thought. Thematically, Fackenheim critically exposes the urgency of the need for authentic response to the Holocaust, particularly as correlated with its unprecedented impact on Jewish existence. He examines the viability of potential models for such a response, and turns to Midrashic thinking as the most legitimate and perhaps only feasible method that is available after the Holocaust. This overarching concern for an authentic response provokes and frames *The Jewish Return into History*, and his 1982 work, *To Mend the World*. Fackenheim also explores the implications of this challenge through a range of related questions in a variety of shorter articles and essays. Fackenheim's ultimate goal is to argue for a commitment to continued Jewish existence. As such, in addition to Fackenheim's concern for Jewish unity among secular and religious Jews, the meaning and significance of the establishment of the State of Israel takes a central place in many of his discussions (especially in *The Jewish Return into History*).

The Holocaust, Modern History, and Jewish Life

In *To Mend the World: Foundations of Post-Holocaust Thought*, Fackenheim argues that the Holocaust renders previous Jewish philosophical responses to modernity inadequate. Jewish identity is the heart of the problem of modernity for the modern

Jew. According to Fackenheim, it is only Baruch Spinoza and Franz Rosenzweig who, among "first rank" modern Jewish philosophers, consider their Jewish identity as a *philosophical* issue. Fackenheim maintains that their diametrically opposed responses to modernity represent the two potential responses available to Jews before the Holocaust. Based on these two responses, the modern Jew could either, like Spinoza, eschew Judaism as a "free man-in-general," or like Rosenzweig, opt into Judaism as a "free Jew-in-particular." Whereas Spinoza argued that Jews and Christians could co-exist peacefully if they would only rise above the petty theological and cultural controversies that divided them, the history of European Jewish emancipation demonstrates that Spinoza's option is a "chimera"; only the Jew is expected to be free of their particular ethnic, cultural and religious identity, others, namely Christians, do not need to similarly disengage their "extraneous" identities because their identities are already normative. The particular history of the Holocaust renders Rosenzweig's option of making all Jewish existence ahistorical, also untenable. The events of the Holocaust thrust the Jewish people "back firmly, inescapably, irrevocably, back into history: not into sacred history, but rather into the flesh-and-blood history of men, women, and children..." (1994:33). Thus Fackenheim simultaneously rejects Spinoza's assimilationism and Rosenzweig's disassociation of Jewish life from history; the only possible response to a modernity that includes the terrifying history of the Holocaust is a return, as a Jew, into the realm of lived history.

Uniqueness of the Holocaust

That the Holocaust is unique is a central premise of Fackenheim's project (1970; 1972; 1979; 1985; 1994, 10-14; 2001). In various texts, Fackenheim outlines several

essential features that characterize the Holocaust as unique and many of these points were discussed earlier in my discussion of *God's Presence in History*. His subsequent discussions of the unprecedented nature of the Holocaust do not so much represent an evolution in his thought as much as they increasingly complicate our understanding of that uniqueness through a deepening and more disturbing narrative:

1. Jewish survival is in doubt after the Holocaust. One third of the Jewish people were murdered. That the victims of the Nazis included eastern European Jewry, who Fackenheim describes as among the most traditionally observant, "the most Jewish of Jews," is a significant feature of this danger (1994:12).

2. Total genocide was the goal, "not a single Jewish man, woman or child was to survive," or would have survived, if Hitler had succeeded (1994:12). The language of "vermin," "parasites" and "viruses" each highlight this goal (1987a:136). Other genocides and mass murders might be similar up to a point (Fackenheim notes the close resemblances with the Armenian genocide (1987a:135), but the goal of total extermination, ceaselessly pursued until the last possible moment—even when such actions were clearly against the Nazi interests of winning the war and survival in the face of approaching liberating forces—is historically unprecedented in Fackenheim's view.

3. In addition to the goal of genocide was the equally unprecedented emphasis on "maximum prior humiliation and torture" (1987a:137). Associated with this goal is the transformation of the concentration camp victim into the Muselmann, the walking undead: "the Auschwitz praxis reduces the 'non-Aryan' to a walking corpse covered with his own filth, on the theory he must

reveal himself as the disgusting creature that he has been, if disguisedly, since birth" (1987a:138).

4. The means of murdering an entire people was similarly historically unparalleled, involving: the "precise definition of the victims," juridical and legislative procedures, technical and technological systems of identifying, rounding up, transporting, killing, and disposing of the bodies of the victims, "a veritable army of murderers and also direct and indirect accomplices: clerks, newspapermen, lawyers, bank managers, doctors, soldiers, railwaymen, entrepreneurs, and an endless list of others" (1987a:136-137). Fackenheim also points to indirect accomplices in the form of philosophers, theologians that contributed to the intellectual, cultural, political and religious context that made such events possible.

5. Fackenheim is particularly struck by the fact that it was Jewish existence itself which the Nazis sought to destroy; Jews were murdered not because of what they believed or what they did, but because of what their grandparents believed —because they were Jews (1978:47-48). "The Auschwitz *praxis* was based on a new principle: *for one portion of mankind*, existence itself *is a crime, punishable by humiliation, torture, and death*" (1987a: 137, 1994:12).

6. The Holocaust was evil for evil's sake. "The 'Final Solution' was not a pragmatic project serving such ends as political power or economic greed. Nor was it the negative side of a positive religious or political fanaticism. It was an end in itself"(1994:12). Any military, political or social explanation obfuscates and denies the Nazi goal of exterminating an entire people.

7. Those who carried out the 'Final Solution' were not, in general, "sadists or perverts." Those who set out the goals and methods were "ordinary idealists,

except that the ideals were torture and murder" (1994:12). The
perpetrators were "ordinary men" to use Christopher Browning's terminology
(1992)

8. The fact that the murder of Jews was perpetrated by their neighbours, "done
by people they, so to speak, went to school with," adds yet another
incomprehensible layer to the horror of the Holocaust (2001:438).[46]

The uniqueness, or unprecedented nature, of the Holocaust is one theme in
Fackenheim's work that has generated some of the most critical responses to his
thought. The uniqueness of the Holocaust is potentially a philosophical, theological
and/or historical claim. Holocaust historians who would argue for the uniqueness of
the Holocaust include those who focus on ideology and those who focus on process.
Yehuda Bauer concentrates on the unprecedented, but historically traceable,
confluence of anti-Semitic intentions and ideology that created the context in which
the planned murder of millions became possible (1982:330-334). Raul Hilberg's
analysis centres on the never before seen processes and technological apparatuses
necessary for the development of the systems of concentration, labour and death
camps. Among Jewish historians there is considerable disagreement as to the
historical uniqueness of the Holocaust within the context of Jewish history. Here
the question is not whether or not the Holocaust is quantitatively different, but
whether or not it is qualitatively different; how is the Holocaust not like other
instances of Jewish persecution and suffering? Michael Berenbaum rehearses many
of Fackenheim's arguments in asserting that the Holocaust is both historically

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[46] Fackenheim adds additional historical arguments in his preface to Yehuda Bauer's *The Jewish Emergence from Powerlessness* (1989).

unique within Jewish history yet also universal (1990:31). Berenbaum rejects a strictly unique interpretation of the Holocaust, locating important "moral lessons" in examples, such as the Armenian genocide, that are "analogous but not equivalent to the Holocaust" (1990:34). Scholars of Jewish studies and modern Jewish thought have also argued against describing the Holocaust as unique based on the evaluation that in stressing the uniqueness of the Holocaust one is not merely arguing that the Holocaust is different but that that uniqueness implies that the Holocaust is "worse" than other atrocities. In this vein, Peter Novick protests that the attribution of uniqueness is really an argument for the preeminence of Jewish suffering in the Holocaust. Others, like David Biale (1992), have additionally suggested that arguing for uniqueness impedes solidarity between those who have suffered other forms of evil. Jacob Neusner identifies the system of the "American Judaism of Holocaust and Redemption" to highlight the problem of placing the Holocaust at the centre of Jewish identity and politics (1987:283-284).

The problem with many of these arguments when applied to Fackenheim's understanding of the meaning of uniqueness is that they apply *historical* arguments to a claim that is primarily *theologically* insightful. The distinction is difficult here because Fackenheim places history at the centre of his theology. I am fundamentally disinterested in proving or disproving any claims about the Holocaust's historical uniqueness. I too think that such calculus breeds invidious comparisons. Where Fackenheim speaks about the Holocaust in terms of a human response to a communal trauma that seeks to interpret that experience in light of religious thought, experience and faith, I would argue that he is doing something

very different.[47] But when we examine how Fackenheim uses the category of uniqueness, it becomes clear that although Fackenheim slips into quantitative statements (i.e. the Nazis sacrificed specific strategic resources, like railway cars, in order to pursue the "Final Solution"), he is primarily making a qualitative evaluation. Fackenheim's concern for meaning is not a strictly historical question; it is a theological or religious question that includes historical experience within its purview. Throughout his post-1967 thought, the uniqueness of the Holocaust is consistently aligned with his conception of epoch-making events that make new religious demands on Jews and non-Jews.

I agree with Michael Oppenheim who views uniqueness as a religious category rather than a historical or social scientific category. I would argue that Fackenheim's claim to the uniqueness of the Holocaust is most compelling when framed in terms of Jewish and Christian experience. Conceived as an experience that unarguably has rocked the foundations of Jewish and Christian thought, and has demonstrably shaped contemporary Jewish life[48], Fackenheim's claims about the Holocaust's uniqueness allow us to focus on its philosophical and theological impact. This, I think, is a more accurate reading of Fackenheim's intention in developing both the category of and role of uniqueness within his thought. Finally, although much has been made of Fackenheim's assertions as to the empirical historical uniqueness of the Holocaust, this question does not get to the heart of his argument. His thought does not depend on the historical quantitative accuracy of such statements. What is more central is Fackenheim's articulation of the

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[47] Fackenheim complicates this context himself in texts like the preface to Yehuda Bauer's *The Jewish Emergence from Powerlessness* where he makes quantitative as well as qualitative claims.

[48] c.f. Neusner, 1987.

Holocaust as an epoch-making event that makes unprecedented moral and religious claims. That scholars of Jewish culture and religion are so troubled by the consequences of such claims on the future of Jewish life, testifies to the fact that these consequences are already enacted in response to the profound impact of the Holocaust on modern history and Jewish life.

Midrash

This search for meaning in response to the Holocaust dictates particular theoretical and methodological exigencies that Fackenheim argues are fulfilled in the Midrashic framework that he identified as characteristic of Jewish existence in section one. Midrash is an authentic mode of response that emerges from within the Jewish tradition and which, he believes, is capable of speaking to the moral, historical and religious demands and challenges of the Holocaust. That Midrash emerged after the destruction of the Second Temple is critical for Fackenheim's decision to consider Midrash as a model for response to the Holocaust. The catastrophe of the destruction of the Second Temple, with its consequence of the paganization of Jerusalem, required a response that addressed the profound impact of the calamity without attenuating or destroying the Jewish people's connection to the formative root experiences which shapes Judaism. The Holocaust, as a cataclysm with the potential to undermine Judaism, requires an authentic model of response that can fulfill the same role in addressing the trauma without severing (or allowing the Shoah to sever) that connection to the root experiences that constitute Jewish life.

Midrash for Fackenheim is more than a model for response; it is a model of existence where the bond between God and the world is complex and paradoxical.

Midrash internalizes this paradox through confrontation, and in "the very act of confrontation reaffirms the bond" (1978:263). But Midrashic existence is meant for an imperfect world; the world after the Holocaust is not merely imperfect, it is the anti-world; the world that follows what Fackenheim calls "Planet Auschwitz." What follows the Holocaust can only be "Mad Midrash," as exemplified in the work of Elie Wiesel. Mad Midrash is the "impossible togetherness" of a "relentless self-exposure to the Holocaust" and a "Jewishness steeped in tradition." It is the warning in a synagogue in Nazi occupied Europe enjoining the worshippers to not pray so loud lest God hear them; lest God notice that some Jews are still alive in Nazi Europe (1972:67). It is what Fackenheim calls an obliged madness where one is condemned to be sane in an insane world. It remains Midrash only through absolute protest against the anti-world and an absolute affirmation for Tikkun Olam, the passionate determination to mend, to restore the world.

> For Midrashic existence points to an existence in which the madness is transfigured. Midrashic madness is the Word spoken in the anti-world which ought not to be but is. The existence points to acts to restore a world which ought to be but is not, committed to the faith of what ought to be must and will be, and this is its madness...Without this madness a Jew cannot do—with God or without him—what a Voice from Sinai bids him to do: choose life. (1987a:334)

After the Holocaust, every Jewish response is Midrashic: approximate, inadequate, grasping for sanity.

Fackenheim asks, "How shall we live with God after Auschwitz? How without him? Contend with God we must, as did Abraham, Jacob, Job. And we cannot let him go" (1978:48). Where then will Jewish life after the Holocaust take us? The evaluation that Midrash represents an authentic response to the uniqueness of the Holocaust is based on Fackenheim's assertion that it is response itself that makes for authenticity; it is authentic in that it involves a relentless "self-

exposure" to epoch-making events. The question of authenticity is central. Modern *Midrashim* are authentic when they speak in a language and voice that is in continuity with Judaism's ongoing historical encounters with God and self-reflecting understanding of those encounters.

In developing the Midrashic model, Fackenheim is clearly arguing for a multiplicity of responses to the trauma of the Holocaust. Two of his complimentary proffered responses, the "614th commandment," and the retrieval of the kabbalistic concept of mending the world, Tikkun Olam, are both Midrashic responses. The 614th commandment commands that "the authentic Jew of today is forbidden to hand Hitler yet another, posthumous victory" (1978:24). The retrieval of the category Tikkun Olam, is proffered as a "moral necessity" for the post-Holocaust Jew (1994:300). Individually these responses are, in and of themselves, inadequate, incomplete—signifying more in their narrative form than they can ever discursively express. That there is more to be said, that more must be said in a variety of ways, is integral to the very notion of Midrashic response.

The 614th Commandment and Jewish Survival

In the introduction of *To Mend the World*, Fackenheim describes how the 614th commandment was his response to the disturbing hypothesis that the Holocaust is unique. If the Holocaust were unique, then previous frameworks were no longer applicable. If the Holocaust was not a disruption of Jewish history, then

Fackenheim could refer to the biblical character or nation of Amalek as symbolic of murderous evil and dispense altogether with referring to Hitler in his formulation.[49]

> Still if the Holocaust was unique there was no choice. As it happened, but a short time later the Jewish people collectively shared this perception when, faced with the threat of a second Holocaust in the weeks preceding the Six-Day War, they were, after a long period of repression, at length forced to confront the fact of the first [Holocaust]. (1994:10)

The 614th commandment, that the "authentic Jew of today is forbidden to hand Hitler another posthumous victory" is perhaps Fackenheim's most well known articulation of the particular moral exigencies placed on Jews after the Shoah. It is also almost certainly the most poorly contextualized and misunderstood movement in Fackenheim's thought. The most common misunderstanding is that the 614th commandment commands Jewish belief and the survival of the Jewish people solely in order to preclude another "posthumous victory" for Hitler.

Ironically, Fackenheim observes that while philosophers "and similar folk" misunderstand this ethical imperative, "the people widely understood it"(1970:205). The 614th commandment is Midrashic; it is fragmentary and incomplete. As a Midrash, it is an oppositional response to the "dilemma" of post-Holocaust Jewish life:

> [If] a post-Holocaust Jew continues to bring up children, he is implicated in the possible murder of his great-grandchildren, for what was once actual is possible ever after. And if, refusing to be implicated in murder, he has no children, he does his share in making an end to both Jews and Judaism. Collectively, then, the post-Holocaust Jew is either a potential murderer or a suicide; either way Hitler wins (1970:205).

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[49] Amalek was the grandson of Esau who led his followers to attack the people of Israel "smiting the hindmost, all that were feeble behind," as they fled Egypt through the Sinai dessert under Moses' leadership (1 Samuel 15:2). As the archetypal enemy of Israel itself, Amalek has come to personify evil in the Jewish tradition; in the modern period the Nazis, and most recently, Arabs, have been associated with Amalek in certain popular discourses.

The either/or binary of suicide/murder must be resisted. Remarkably, the 614th commandment is heard as the commanding voice of Auschwitz itself. That voice commands us to remember the victims of the Holocaust. That voice commands us not to despair. We must uphold the value of life, we must affirm the value of life, we must reject collective and individual suicide. We must preclude the possibility of another Holocaust; we must not allow a second Holocaust to happen to ourselves or to others. We must not despair of God. Finally, Judaism and the Jewish people must survive. Long-standing distinctions between secular and religious Jews are banished and rendered meaningless, Jewishness after the Holocaust can only be framed in terms of that commanding voice.

Several critics problematize the ways in which the commanding voice of Auschwitz is presented in relation to other revelatory experiences. Seeskin suggests that we consider Buber's influence on Fackenheim's construction of the concept of commandment:

> Buber argued that all commandments are a human response to the divine presence and therefore shot through with human feeling and interpretation. Fackenheim has added the idea that even among the ovens and mass graves, the divine presence can be encountered. More important, the encounter issues in a positive course of action: the continued existence of the Jewish people (1993:49).

Katz argues that herein lays the problem. If we read the 614th commandments against the "skeleton" of Buber's metaphysics, then the commanding voice of Auschwitz can only be understood as the human response to the divine. It cannot be understood as the Divine response—it cannot be like revelation at Sinai. Thus the commanding voice reveals revelation; it is not revelation itself (1983:219). In terms of this project, I am not dissuaded by Katz's reasoning here. Even if the commanding voice reveals revelation, from the point of view of human response— which is the religious/ethical imperative that I am interested in—the command is

still made and heard as revelatory. I also find Fackenheim's argument that there are epoch-making events that require a new religious response to be theologically compelling. I would argue that this is precisely what generations of Jewish thought have voiced: responses in light of contemporary experiences and challenges within the context of a shared communal history. Katz highlights a more problematic issue in questioning the overemphasis in the 614th commandment on Hitler instead of on God in stressing the importance not giving Hitler another posthumous victory:

> What he intends to assert is: "Jews respond to God not to Hitler," but
> he accents the latter and often in his anti-Nazi passion, only at best
> implies the Divine Presence. Insofar as God is not the central feature
> of the equation the equation *is* misconceived (1983:224).

Although such a reading is viable, Fackenheim's own emphasis on the Holocaust as an epoch-making event within Jewish history suggests to me that Katz's reading "accents" the 614th commandment to a greater degree than Fackenheim would himself admit; Fackenheim insists that the 614th commandment is Midrashic—fragmentary and incomplete—and *not* a comprehensive equation. Hearing the commanding voice of Auschwitz means responding to the horrors of the Holocaust without despair and insisting on affirming the root of experience of Judaism—that God is present in the history, is in relationship with the Jewish people, and that the Jewish people must survive. Katz also asks why this is a new imperative? Jewish survival has always been mandatory (1983:220). I agree with Katz here, but I also accept Fackenheim's claim that this imperative is more urgently heard after the Holocaust. Fackenheim must stress it again here because the Holocaust presents an unprecedented threat to Jewish existence, because neither the choice of martyrdom or apostasy was possible. From Fackenheim's point of view, at no time in the history of the Jewish people has the decision to remain faithful to Judaism and to God

removed the choice of future generations to choose for themselves. After the Holocaust, the obligation of the survival of the Jewish people is heard in the commanding voice of God, the duty to survive is a sacred duty—but never before has that duty been so fraught with peril.[50]

Tikkun Olam

The theological implications of the commanding voice of Auschwitz prompts Fackenheim to recover and recast the kabbalistic concept of Tikkun Olam, mending the world, as an authentic response to post-Holocaust existence. In contrast with the commanding voice, Tikkun Olam is a revelation of God's saving grace. Fackenheim argues that if the Holocaust is a "novum of inexhaustible horror," the realization that Tikkun was actual during the Holocaust and can be actual after the Holocaust is a "novum of inexhaustible wonder." For Fackenheim, Tikkun Olam takes the form of resistance. It is resistance to the "singling-out Holocaust assault." It is a moral necessity because complete collapse, the complete collapse of human goodness, as much as the complete collapse of Judaism itself, is possible. The Tikkun of resistance

> must be thought of as a life-and-death, day-day-and-night struggle,
> forever threatened with collapse and in fear of it, and saved from
> actual collapse—if at all—only by the source of whose strength will
> never cease to be astonishing (1994:302).

He contends that Tikkun as resistance is possible "because during the Holocaust a Jewish Tikkun was already actual" (1994:300). That Jews resisted during the

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[50] Although Katz' argument is thoughtful and serious, my engagement with Fackenheim does not depend on the perfect construction of a systematic response. What is valuable in Fackenheim is his insight that it is imperative that we respond religiously and ethically to the Holocaust and further, that our response to the Holocaust is necessarily fragmentary. In my development of a feminist critique of Fackenheim's thought, I will demonstrate that some of Fackenheim's fragmentary responses are helpful to the development of feminist and Jewish feminist ethics.

Holocaust, that Judaism and human goodness did not wholly collapse, means that the potential for Tikkun existed and was not eradicated.

Fackenheim realizes that focusing on the Tikkun that was enacted during the Holocaust can lead to yet another dilemma for post-Holocaust theology. If we focus, or in Fackenheim's words "hold fast to" those who could choose Tikkun—whose Tikkun makes our post-Holocaust Tikkun possible—we might conclude that the rupture is partially mended and our Tikkun is not as urgent. But in doing so we silence or ignore those who could not choose. Not all victims of the Holocaust did or could resist. Their ability to choose Tikkun was also murdered. Yet if we focus on this group of innocent victims, we must despair of the possibility of any Tikkun. According to Fackenheim, either possibility leads us to a "God is dead" despair or a faith for which, having been with God in hell, either nothing has happened or all is mended (i.e. the acts of Tikkun erase or resolve the trauma). Fackenheim resists both theological conclusions and insists on a dialectical tension that affirms both experiences. Neither type of experience can be discarded or ignored. Each type of experience, that of the victim who could not choose Tikkun and that of those who were able to choose Tikkun, must be held in tension with the other.

A post-Holocaust Tikkun must emerge from this tension and comprise three elements: First, a recovery of Jewish tradition. This recovery may take place religiously or secularly. For the religious Jew, this recovery takes place through the Word of God. For the secular Jew, this is accomplished through the "word of man and his 'divine spark'." Second, a recovery in the sense of recuperating from an illness is necessary. Third, the recognition and affirmation that each of these recoveries is fragmentary, incomplete and fraught with risk. Without the recovery of the Jewish tradition "there is no Jewish future." Without the recovery from illness,

one must retreat from facing the Holocaust "or be destroyed by it." Finally,

without the essential recognition that either recovery can only be fragmentary, any

response becomes inauthentic.

Christian tikkun

Fackenheim is unequivocal that the Holocaust is an epoch-making event, which

engenders unprecedented religious and moral demands. Both Christians and Jews

are subject to these new demands that are particular to their respective historical

experiences and religious traditions. Each must engage their own tradition and

reconsider them in light of that trauma. The authentic Christian must ask: "Would

Jesus have been sent to a death camp because he was a Jew?" Using Primo Levi's

language, Fackenheim asks, could Jesus have been made into a *muselmanner*—the

living dead of the concentration camp, without hope or ability to choose, with divine

spark within destroyed? The authentic Christian cannot avoid the rupture of the

Holocaust and salvation can only be found in the confrontation with that rupture.[51]

Like the Jew, the Christian must also recognize the rupture caused by the

Holocaust if Christians are to participate in a Christian Tikkun (1994:280). Zionism

is one of the essential elements of both a Christian and Jewish Tikkun. Although

the existence of the State of Israel as a Jewish state is justified for reasons that are

entirely separate from the Holocaust, the Holocaust provides additional

justification. Mending the rupture of "Jewish trust in the Gentile world" after the

Holocaust was not fully accomplished by Allied troops, nor present-day friendships

between Jews and non-Jews, nor by new generations of Germans "who bear no

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[51] Fackenheim argues, in agreement with many post-Holocaust thinkers, that the Holocaust poses specific theological challenges to Judaism and Christianity in a way that is not similarly at issue in other religious traditions.

guilt" (1994:305). Fackenheim stresses that the "Jewish emergence from powerlessness" through the establishment of a Jewish state is essential for the mending of the post-Holocaust rupture of Jewish trust in the Gentile world (1994:304-305). But even the non-Jewish support of the Jewish state would not now be capable of bringing about a Christian Tikkun if it were not that a Christian Tikkun had already begun in the "Holocaust world." This Tikkun was what Fackenheim describes as a "Tikkun of ordinary decency" (194:307). The gentile who, acting out of decency, resisted and risked his or her life, made himself or herself into something worse than a criminal, had nothing to sustain him or her "except ordinary decency itself"(1994:307).

Fackenheim has been criticized on the basis that he has given disproportionate theological weight to the Tikkun of individual resistance during the Holocaust. Zachary Braiterman in particular has questioned how the accounts of resistance should be read:

> Much depends on the telling. True, the stories testify to the dignity of the human spirit. Perhaps they even point to some transcendent trace. However, they also remind us that human good and divine sparks remain powerless before the face of Evil. Indeed, Fackenheim makes too little, a bare minimum of revelation, mean too much. (1998:150).

How can so much theological weight be accorded to these relatively infrequent, and, in Braiterman's description, ultimately impotent acts of resistance, especially when balanced against "the gross fissure" that they are presented as capable of healing? Braiterman concludes, "The future of Jewish life, the future of the world, are made to rest on an edifying but meagre stock of moral good" (1998:150).

Melissa Raphael also cites this passage in *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz*. Although she is highly critical of Fackenheim on several points, Raphael

herself makes the case that the "instances of care" exhibited during the Holocaust do have theological significance. She clarifies her stance:

> I would insist from the outset that, first, the instances of care...
> [which Raphael refers to in her work] were, however numerous, never
> enough to assuage the depth of pain that had elicited the care and
> never enough to match the quality and quantity of the assault.
> Second, while those who died in or survived the Holocaust may have
> contributed to a process whereby God and creation were to be
> redeemed, their doing so was less a purpose than an effect (2003:138).

Raphael's elucidation of her own position could very well have been written on behalf of Fackenheim. Fackenheim would never suggest that there is any type of theological balance between the acts of Tikkun and Nazi atrocities. He similarly would categorically reject any teleological description of resistance, and would use similar language as Raphael and speak of resistance as "responses" that participated in Tikkun. Most importantly, Fackenheim would insist that the Tikkun accomplished by resistance during the Holocaust was incomplete, and it is the potential for future Tikkun that the Holocaust Tikkun announced is what is theologically at issue here. Fackenheim does not need to make redemptive claims about the victims and survivors of the Holocaust—and I suspect he would find the framing of such a discussion obscene. His point, more clearly, is that the novum of the Holocaust was so overwhelmingly evil that one could reasonably suppose that it would forever disallow the potential of future human Tikkun. The Tikkun of the Holocaust ruptures the totality of evil and allows for the possibility of future redemption. This is, as Raphael suggests, the eschatological and prophetic mode of theological historiography, "reading history in reverse." Post-Holocaust theologians who operate within this theological and "supra-historical" mode may "want to attach very large meanings to very small signs" (2003:139).

Revelation, the Law and Jewish Practice

If Tikkun is the model for Jewish and non-Jewish life, what place is there for

traditional Jewish sources of authority and direction? One of the most enduring

issues confronted by Fackenheim is the question of the relationship between

revelation, religious law and Jewish practice within the modern context. This

question is urgent for Fackenheim because Jewish practice and its relation to

Jewish history and Jewish identity is absolutely bound up with the question of

Jewish survival.

The final essay in *Quest for Past and Future*, "A Response to Five Questions,"

offers some of Fackenheim's most succinct and concise answers to questions about

Jewish belief and immediately addresses the issue of revelation, religious law and

Jewish life. The first question asks,

> In what sense do you believe the Torah to be divine revelation? Are all
> 613 commandments equally binding on the believing Jew? If not, how
> is he to decide which to observe? What status would you accord to
> ritual commandments lacking in ethical or doctrinal content (e.g. the
> prohibition against clothing made of linen and wool)? (1970:306)

Fackenheim is interrogating the claims of liberal (and specifically Reform) Judaism

which problematizes the absolute authority of the Law to dictate Jewish behaviour.

This is not a rhetorical question that is already answered by Fackenheim's own

personal belief and practice. His answer to this question is framed by his own

philosophical and theological reflections on Jewish history and contemporary

Jewish existence. He replies,

> A modern Jew can escape his own time-bound appropriating no more
> than could his fathers; but his interpretation is Jewishly legitimate
> only if it confronts, and listens to, the revelation reflected in the
> Torah, which continues to be accessible only through the ancient
> reflection which *is* the Torah...If a modern Jew rejects a particular
> ancient response as invalid for him, he must do so not because his
> response to the divine challenge has been reduced to a mere
> compartment of life, but because the divine challenge demands of his

> life a different total response. Thus, new commandments are
> given even as ancient ones lose their reality. (1970:308-309).

The structure of this answer typifies Fackenheim's statements about the place of tradition and law in Jewish life. First, he begins with a historical and contemporary affirmation of the centrality of Torah and revelation for Judaism and Jewish life. Only once he has established those parameters does he allow the option of non-traditional, but still authentic, response. There is a strong element of conservatism in the wording of this injunction, but Fackenheim is characteristically liberal by opening up the possibility of non-traditional response through the criteria of responding to the divine challenge. Because Fackenheim conceives of the Holocaust as an epoch-making event that voices a new divine command, the Holocaust and other epoch-making events gives rise to the need for rethinking what might constitute authentic religious response.

Fackenheim maintains a tension between conservatism and liberalism in his thought by specifying that the attributions of authenticity or inauthenticity are attached to what Jews do (and not to the Judaism to which they subscribe or fail to subscribe). The only meaningful categories are those of authentic Jews or unauthentic Jews. While such categories would seem to reinforce a traditional definition of Jewish practice, Fackenheim consistently rejects such an interpretation and insists that a Jew is authentic when he or she responds to epoch-making events, and that an inauthentic Jew declines to respond. In theory, Fackenheim is arguing that such a distinction does not privilege traditionally observant religiosity over liberal religiosity or secularism and renders other distinctions obsolete. Whether a Jew is liberal or traditional, secular or religious is no longer of primary importance. That a Jew responds to the epoch-making events of the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel is the sole indicator of

a Jew's authenticity. Yet we are again caught back in the problem of what type of response is authentic. If authentic responses are Midrashic, as we saw above, are all modern Midrashic responses authentic?

The question of authenticity in practice brings us back to Midrash. Fackenheim's understanding of *Midrash* as authentic response grounded in a particular tradition does invoke a certain conservatism that may constrain the ability to claim authenticity on behalf of radical Midrash. Although this question will be considered in greater depth within the context of a feminist critique of Fackenheim's thought, for the purpose of providing an overview of the attribution of authenticity, one can simply say that, for Fackenheim, the further one gets from traditional forms of Judaism, the more difficult it becomes to claim that Judaism is functioning within authentic parameters. Traditional Judaism is already responding to the commanding and saving voice of the Divine presence. The question will be how non-traditional Judaism might legitimately respond. Here we should understand Fackenheim as responding to Buber. As much as Fackenheim agrees that a person must stand in lived relation to the Divine, Fackenheim does not want to fall down Buber's slippery slope that might lead to an antinomian position. Therefore Fackenheim must insist that observance of the Law has historically meant authentically standing in lived relation to the Divine.

> How can a religious life be anything but barren which springs, not
> from the immediate experience of the Nameless, but from slavish
> submission to the authority of a codified book? But except for rare
> periods of religious decline, the Jew's loyalty to the Book was not one
> of slavish obedience. Rather, the Book without kindled the soul
> within. In rethinking its thoughts, the Jew thought his own. In
> imagining its experiences, he relived them. In obeying its
> commandments, he made them into a way of life. The past did not kill
> the present; instead, reviving itself in the present, it gave life to the
> present" (1970:119).

Whereas Buber is suspicious of basing one's behaviour on the Law, Fackenheim

is suspicious of finding excuses to disregard the Law. Still, Fackenheim declines to

insist on any particular form of religious observance, or religious observance at all,

not the least because religious observance was not a condition of persecution during

the Holocaust.

Twenty years later, Fackenheim revisits the question of the relationship

between the Law and modern ethical values in *What is Judaism: An interpretation*

for the Present Age. In a discussion summarizing the sometime problematic

relationships of the various denominations to Jewish law, Fackenheim argues that

Reform Judaism's greatest strength is its willingness to confront "conflict between

present and past." Indeed, this engagement has been Reform Judaism's greatest

contribution to Judaism as a whole in that Reform Jews have "been at the forefront

of virtually every modern moral cause." Without further prolegomena, Fackenheim

makes the following statement:

> The *Siddur*—the traditional orthodox prayer book—asks a male Jew
> to thank God daily for having him made a man, and a Jewish woman,
> to thank Him for having made her "according to His will." Can there
> be any modern Jew, regardless of belief or affiliation—of either sex—
> who can recite this prayer with a good conscience? Surely it is best to
> alter this prayer, or not say it at all (1999:143).

This rhetorical question is followed by a warning: Reform Judaism's willingness to

confront and expel those elements of tradition which are ethically unacceptable is

not without its own unpalatable consequences:

> But corresponding to the great strength of Reform Judaism there has
> been a weakness, evidenced by the fact that this prayer, as well as
> nearly all others in the Siddur, have been altered or expunged with
> great ease, and often without any twinges of conscience. (1999:143)

Fackenheim goes on to explain that Reform Judaism has actually not resolved the

conflict between past and present, but has often dissolved the conflict in giving

primacy to the present, through its "liberal" or "progressive" orientation. Fackenheim scathingly criticizes Reform Judaism for its confusion of the "most serious contemporary religious and moral challenge with the latest fad" and further compares the Reform Jewish position with, the *Luftmensch*, a "human being living on air" (1999:144).

> This is that of a progress-worshipping Jew who through that worship has destroyed for himself the possibility of *teshuvah*, of a turning and returning through which a Jew's "days" are "renewed" as "of yore" (1999:144).

Fackenheim then moves on to a discussion of Conservative Judaism, whose greatest merit is "to protest against this progress-worshipping, past-abandoning tendency within Reform Judaism" (1999:144). Fackenheim quotes Solomon Schecter's statement that Conservative Judaism understands the need for halakhic change, but does so with a sensitivity to grounding that change in a historical understanding of the interpretation of the Law given "by the collective conscience of Catholic Israel, as embodied in the Universal Synagogue." Fackenheim then questions the viability of the terms of this definition in the contemporary period and ironically notes that Conservative Judaism's strength, its grounding in history, becomes its weakness as a "tendency to seek refuge in 'history' from difficult dilemmas, thus making timidity and lack of principle into a virtue" (1999:145)

The two texts examined here span over twenty years and in bringing them together here we see the continuity in his thought. Fackenheim asks us to think about revelation, the Law and Jewish practice according to a new rubric—new but clearly one that is absolutely in continuity with tradition. By focusing on the commanding and saving presence in history, and insisting on locating Jewish life firmly within that history, Fackenheim re-places the definition of authentic Jewish life in terms of that historical experience. In the following section I will consider

how feminists and particularly Jewish feminists might usefully construct ethical responses in light of Fackenheim's insights into the impact of the Holocaust with particular attention to the development of a feminist Midrashic model.

•FEMINIST CRITIQUE •

Fackenheim's thought provides some of the most compelling challenges for the concrete development of feminist and Jewish feminist ethics. Because Fackenheim is so seriously engaged with developing a post-Holocaust Jewish theology, that Jewish focus necessarily engages Jewish feminism in ways that are less central to mainstream feminist thought. Fackenheim's statements about revelation, Jewish practice and Jewish survival have particular implications for Jews and thus for Jewish feminism but do not largely speak to feminism in general. However it is important to keep in mind that Fackenheim's response to the Holocaust as an epoch-making event speaks not only to a Jewish, or even a religious, audience. Feminism has a vital stake in responding to the Holocaust. A feminist attention to the ethical implications of the Holocaust immediately recognizes that the targeting by the Nazis of Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, political enemies, and other victimized groups, was predicated on establishing the Otherness of each group of persons and constructing the victims as less than human. In framing the atrocities of the Holocaust at least in part as question of the Other, feminist theorists can identify significant correlations between the types of thinking and acting which marginalize and victimize persons in contemporary and historical contexts on the basis of gender, class, race, ethnicity, religious affiliation, disability and/or sexual

orientation, and the types of thinking and acting which rendered possible the violations of the Holocaust.

Fackenheim's theoretical emphasis on history, epoch-making events, the significance of the Holocaust and the urgency of authentic response, inevitably focus ethical discourses on praxis. This emphasis on praxis, combined with the weight accorded to historical experience in the construction of ethical models in Fackenheim's thought, correlates significantly with many feminist and Jewish feminist concerns. But it is in Fackenheim's Midrashic model that I recognize the greatest possibilities for Jewish feminist ethics.

These prospects must be weighed against the potential hazard that his thought poses as well. Fackenheim's analysis invokes the moral and religious authority of the Holocaust. As such, it leads inexorably to ethical prescriptions. Although Fackenheim is at pains to limit the ways in which his thought should be practically applied, that authority could be overwhelming in its capacity to subsume and silence other competing ethical claims. Fackenheim's passionate interrogation of the ethical and theological exigencies that arise from the Holocaust is not merely philosophical reflection; it is an immediate call to action. Feminism also entails a call to action. Are these calls to action complementary or in conflict? Are there particular problems for the feminists or Jewish feminists hearing this call? Are there particular opportunities for either?

For Jewish feminism, one important question will be whether or not Fackenheim's vision of authentic Judaism gives rise to particular burdens for Jewish women. Does Fackenheim's understanding of authentic response problematize or even vitiate Jewish feminist efforts to transform the Jewish tradition? The impact of the Holocaust on the development of Jewish feminist ethics

must be carefully articulated. No other single event marks Jewish history, thought and identity in precisely the same way. The question then, is how should the Holocaust mark Jewish feminism and in what ways does Fackenheim provide insight into how post-Holocaust Jewish feminist ethics should develop?

Feminism and Fackenheim's Thought

Despite these opportunities and potential problems, feminists have had surprisingly little to say about Fackenheim. References to his work are brief, and often merely acknowledge him as an important contributor to post-Holocaust thought. There has been no sustained feminist treatment of Fackenheim's work in particular. Melissa Raphael, one of the few feminist thinkers to engage his thought, offers a feminist critique of some of his major claims within the context of her larger project of developing a Jewish feminist theology of the Holocaust. Her brief analysis of Fackenheim in *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz: A Jewish Feminist Theology of the Holocaust* provides a feminist reading that is significantly different than my own.

Although Raphael appreciates Fackenheim's model of Midrashic response and describes it as "morally serious" the imperative for Jewish survival expressed in the 614th commandment, she is critical of Fackenheim on several points (2003:30). Raphael criticizes Fackenheim for his account of the commanding voice of Auschwitz, arguing that it

> brings the theological project into dangerous proximity to that of
> Hitler. Here God's command is not only prior to Hitler's command, it
> is also a countermand subsequent to and in competition with Hitler's
> command. That is, Fackenheim's God is one who, as 'The
> Commanding Voice of Auschwitz', has not been deposed by history
> and has not been robbed of his monarchical prerogative because the

> command, though good, can match the form and type of
> oppressive commands. Fackenheim's position typifies the patriarchal
> refusal of divine abjection and its affirmation of a God whose
> expectation of Jewish obedience to his beneficent will refuses
> Auschwitz as the imposition of another powerful, but evil, masculine
> will. In being subject to God's will, Israel could be subject to no other
> and was, in that sense, free. (2003:30)

Fackenheim's theology, in the classical sense of speaking about God's nature, is what Raphael objects to. The problem with this analysis is that it is incomplete. It overemphasizes the 614th commandment's theological authority, disregards its Midrashic and fragmentary quality, and ultimately ignores its context in terms of disassociating it from Fackenheim's other Midrashic statement as to the saving presence of God. To suggest that the commanding quality of God's voice is at all comparable to the *Kommandant* of a concentration camp who "berated," "shouted" and swore at prisoners misunderstands or discounts the religious and ethical obligation that is elicited by the commanding voice (2003:310). Raphael further critiques Fackenheim's description of the commanding presence on the basis that it necessarily begs the question of why God did not command "Germany to call a halt to the agonies it had commanded" (2003:30). This criticism follows from her rejection of Fackenheim's basic premise that one cannot speak of God's presence in terms of what God did or didn't do (because such discussions lead to atheism, or death or absence of God theologies), but can only reflect theologically on how one ought to respond to the commanding voice of that presence.

Raphael is more effective in her query as to how women might hear the commanding presence of God. She asks how women might hear God at "the second Sinai of Auschwitz when she was not there to receive the revelation of Torah at the first?" (2003:30). Referring to Plaskow's now famous observation about women's exclusion at Sinai, Raphael mischaracterizes that exclusion as absence. Plaskow

more precisely speaks of how women, although present, were not *addressed* at

Sinai. Raphael asks:

> Consequently we must ask *how* are women *there* and *where* they are
> positioned to received the epoch-making revelation of God in
> Auschwitz? Are women in contemporary Judaism subject to the socio-
> biological factors continuous with those the Bible narrates? The
> continuities between biblical, rabbinic and contemporary Orthodox
> interpretations of revelation would suggest that they are. (2003:31)

Raphael does not define her use of the phrase "socio-biological" factors, and it is

unclear precisely what she means, but one must presume based on the context she

provides, that she is referring to an institutionalized masculinist perspective within

the Jewish tradition that consistently describes women nature in terms of a social

and biological "nature." If this is indeed what she means, one must question

whether she indeed wants to correlate post-Holocaust theology with Orthodox

popular practice (and which Orthodox community is she referring to?). Not all post-

Holocaust theology is produced solely by Orthodox scholars, and not all popular

post-Holocaust discourses are limited to Orthodox communities. I would assert that

the question is of course much larger. How has the marginalization of women's

agency within these root experiences, or more precisely the *memories* of these root

experiences contributed to that matrix of interconnected descriptions, prescriptions

and proscriptions that continue to marginalize women within Jewish cultures? How

have these root experiences continued to project the fantasy of an economy being

where the masculine is normative and the feminine is Other? How can we speak of

female presence without reducing the multiplicity of women's experiences to some

essentialized female experience? In what ways are we reproducing the

marginalization of women that Plaskow identifies?

Instead of focusing on these questions, Raphael directs her critique towards the image of the divine in Fackenheim's account as reproducing those patriarchal descriptions of God that exclude female descriptions.

> Only where the Jewish God is also called by her female names and pronoun will her voice be heard by all Jews because a God made exclusively in the masculine image is always calling over women's shoulder to someone else. If God calls to women in Auschwitz it is as a God hidden by the profanation of God's image unto death and in the tradition's exile of God-She from its discourse and practice (2003:31).

Such a criticism depends on an essentialized description of masculinity and femininity where commandment is associated with the masculine. Is the commanding voice that compels religious and ethical obligation already heard as gendered or sexed? One questions how a feminine ethical *imperative* might otherwise be voiced. Her critique further relies on an account of the Jewish experience of the divine as hyper-masculine. Although masculine imagery dominates scriptural descriptions of God, female imagery does exist (indeed Raphael wants us to reaffirm those images). While I agree that gendered metaphors are often highly evocative, must *all* portrayals of the divine be specifically gendered? Is this the only corrective for androcentrism that is theologically imaginable?

The theological correlation between the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel is the basis of one of Raphael's more sustained critiques of modern Jewish theology. She observes that Fackenheim argues that Jews must respond authentically to the Holocaust by committing to the continued existence of the State of Israel. Feminists must critically interrogate such a claim:

> Even if Jewish feminism supports at least the principle of Israel as a homeland for Jews, it would not, particularly from an early twenty-first century perspective, invoke territorial acquisition and the conflict and suffering it has spawned as a providential sign, compensating for the depthless suffering of the Holocaust or redeeming God from unbelief. The moral and political conditions obtaining in Israel have not supported the weight of theological

> expectation set upon it. Most Jewish feminists have been justly
> critical of the State of Israel's perpetuation of gendered and intra-
> ethnic inequalities and its unjust and oppressive politics towards the
> Palestinians. In turning his face back to Israel this God may have
> turned away from the Palestinians with whose oppression Jewish
> feminists may identify both as women and as Jews. Although
> sensitive to the anti-Semitic undertones of the pro-Palestinian stance
> of the wider feminist movement, most Jewish feminists, in solidarity
> with history's present victims—the strangers we are biblically
> commanded to care for—give powerful voice to the aims of the Israeli
> peace movement. (2003:32)

Raphael's point is well taken but grossly oversimplifies the political realities of a situation where the discourse is framed by violence instead of by the political will of the majority of Israelis and Palestinians who want peace. Most North American Jewish feminists (indeed most North American Jews), including scholars, activists and committed persons, overwhelmingly support the existence of the State of Israel. The relative increasing criticism heard among north-American Jewish feminists about the treatment of the Palestinian people by the State of Israel is still uncommon enough to be noteworthy, and is almost always couched in phrases that affirm their support of the continued existence of the State as a Jewish state. Criticizing particular State policies does not necessarily correlate with anti-Zionist sentiment. Many Israelis actively protest their government's policies in regards to the Palestinian people.

More importantly, there has to be a differentiation on the one hand between the theological and ethical justifications for the existence of the State of Israel as a Jewish state, and, on the other hand, the political realities of that state and the human actions made on behalf of the state. Raphael is correct that the Holocaust should not be invoked as a justification for State-sponsored violence and oppression, but such an argument begs the question of what modern Jewish philosopher does so? What seems to underlie this question is a deeper anxiety about the Jewish

identity of the State itself. Is the problem the bare existence of a Jewish state or what the state does? Raphael is astute in pinpointing Fackenheim's deafening silence on the subject of Israel and the Palestinian people, but I would argue that although the actions of the State may provoke painful *ethical* questions, they cannot give rise to *theological* questions. Raphael's conflation of the theological arguments on behalf of the existence of a Jewish state with the actions of the State is simply not helpful.[52]

Despite Raphael's real criticisms of Fackenheim's thought, her own post-Holocaust theology is admittedly similar to Fackenheim. Using the model of Midrash, Raphael notes that she agrees with Fackenheim insofar as she has "proposed that an ethical, embodied, and practical sanctification of the world is the response to Nazism that is most translucent to divine will, agency and presence" (2003:137). But Raphael breaks with Fackenheim over his silence about the Palestinian people and his disregard for gender issues and characterizes both as "moral rupture[s] in the fabric of Jewish life" (2003:137). In terms of the need to repair the damage done to the Palestinian people, she agrees with Marc Ellis that "the Holocaust, dwarfing all other suffering, has blunted Jewish moral sensibility to other situations that require healing or *Tikkun*"[53] (2003:137). In terms of gender, Raphael makes the sweeping claim that Fackenheim's Tikkun is "oblivious to gender: to the abuses of female religious agency, legislated by Orthodox Judaism

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[52] One must also ask if Israeli state actions give rise to theological questions, why only focus on this issue? Why not focus on the historical and institutional marginalization of Sephardic Jews within Israel, the inequities faced by women in divorce and custody battles that take place in religious courts that privilege men, the effects of military policies on women's status in Israeli society, domestic violence against women, or the historic legal exclusion of women to pray with Torah scrolls at the Western Wall. If Israeli life can evoke theological problems that must be addressed because the State of Israel is at least partly theologically justified, all of the above are problems that must be addressed as well.

[53] Marc Ellis (1999:174, n 13, and 25, 73, 75, 78).

itself" (2003:137). Although I would agree that Fackenheim is not attentive to feminist concerns, and does not bring gender to the forefront of his discussion, it is clear from his discussion of the prayer in the Siddur in which the male Jew thanks God for making him a man and not a woman (discussed above and again below), he grants that gender injustice demands an ethical response.

Raphael is plainly in agreement with Fackenheim on the need for a meaningful Jewish theological response to the Holocaust and that such a response must refer back to the Tikkun that occurred during the Holocaust in order to speak of possible Tikkun after the Holocaust. Still, Fackenheim fails to provide the theological resources for Raphael's specific concerns for female God language and imagery, or her insistence that post-Holocaust theology must address feminist criticisms of the Jewish tradition. Her engagement of key elements in Fackenheim's work within the articulation of her own proposed feminist theology suggest several jumping off points for future feminist analysis of his thought.

Women in Fackenheim's thought

In contrast with my earlier discussions of Buber and Levinas where I began with an overview of their overt statements about women (and the feminine), Fackenheim has relatively little to say about women. This is not to say that Fackenheim ignores women, in fact Fackenheim is, especially in his later works, most often inclusive of gender when speaking of human persons. With the exception of brief but significant discussions of childbearing and childrearing, most of his statements are intended to broadly apply to persons and not merely to men.

Mad Midrash

My interest in engaging Fackenheim from a feminist perspective was first prompted by my concern upon reading an essay by Fackenheim's student and interpreter, Michael Morgan. In this essay, "Jewish Ethics After the Holocaust," Morgan makes an assertion about the need to effectively marginalize lenient Jewish legal decisions regarding the permissibility of abortion within a larger argument about Jewish ethics after the Holocaust. From a feminist perspective, Morgan's ethical imperative is an example of how women's bodies become the object, but not the subject, of philosophical discourses. Here is a troubling example of how Fackenheim may "play out" in the concrete development of Jewish ethics. Obviously, Morgan's argument is Morgan's own and not Fackenheim's, however I would argue that the construction of his analysis is heavily informed by Fackenheim's argument and is in fact a response to a statement about Jewish women and reproduction that Fackenheim makes in *To Mend the World*.

Morgan contends that after the Holocaust, all Jewish ethics must in some way meaningfully address or respond to the Holocaust. More generally, Jewish ethics must begin with "the intellectual and historical situation of contemporary Jews and Judaism" (1995:194). Citing *God's Presence in History*, Morgan relies on Fackenheim's notion of orienting (epoch-making) events to argue that "by starting with the Holocaust we can formulate an account of Jewish obligation and particularly of Jewish moral obligation that responds in a profound way to the deepest Jewish intuitions and to the most serious criteria for Jewish thinking today" (1995:195). Again following Fackenheim, Morgan affirms that ethical imperatives are heard in the commanding voice of the divine, and as such have moral authority in terms of their *status*, but the *content* of those messages are

mediated through human interpretation. He explains, "the ground of obligation

is absolute, but the specific obligations are historical, conditional, revisable, and

relative" (1995:195). Morgan then outlines five criteria for the development of a

legitimate and acceptable moral theory. In summary, Morgan argues that such a

theory must be attentive to the past as well as the present, God as well as man (sic),

the needs of the Jewish people as well as humanity, and the continuing existence

and "destiny" of the Jewish people. Finally, a valid Jewish moral theory must

explicate the nature of Jewish obligation and provide a means of "identifying,

interpreting and communicating those obligations" (1995:196-197). Again following

Fackenheim, he then carefully argues that the Holocaust provides the foundation

for such a theory.

In searching for an example for such a moral theory, Morgan looks to the

responsa (rabbinic legal decisions) made by Rabbi Oshry in Kovno during the

Holocaust. It is based on these responsa that Morgan makes a difficult and

troubling argument. Morgan begins his discussion by introducing a decision by

Rabbi Oshry. In this responsa, Rabbi Oshry permits abortion in a case where the

Nazis had decreed that pregnant Jewish women be executed. Concluding that if the

women did not abort, they would themselves be put to death, Rabbi Oshry

determines that abortion would be allowable in order to save the woman's life. I will

quote his analysis and conclusion in full:

> The point to notice here, however, is not Oshry's decision but rather
> the diabolical purpose served by the Nazi decree. In effect it forced the
> Jews of Kovno to cancel in advance their own future and hence the
> future of the Jewish people. And for those women unfortunate enough
> to become pregnant, it forced them to cut off their own future in order
> to save the present. In short, the Nazi cunning was not satisfied to
> annihilate the Jewish future, to instil fear and remove joy; it enrolled
> the Jews, the victims themselves, in its terrible plot. And more awful
> still, in cases where pregnancy did occur, it enlisted Jewish women as

> the assassins of their own hopes, joys, indeed of their future. The
> effect of this realization on those who took seriously the obligation to
> oppose Nazi purposes must be profound. Who now can fail to consider
> the future as well as the present? Who can neglect the importance of
> the fetus together with the needs of the mother? To be sure, there is
> no ready formula that will tell us how this important consideration
> will or should influence particular decisions. What is nonetheless
> clear, however, is that no facile appropriation of the lenient Jewish
> tradition is any longer possible. To abort without serious threat to the
> mother may very well be to betray that woman whose case Oshry was
> asked to consider and to betray, too, all the Jews of Kovno. (1995:205)

My question, and the question that scholars of Halakha debate, is what is "serious threat"? How narrowly is this criteria understood? Morgan closes this paragraph with a citation to Fackenheim's *To Mend the World* where Fackenheim discusses Jewish resistance to the Holocaust. In this section Fackenheim asks a question that approaches this issue from a significantly different direction. He asks why it was that there was even one woman, who in the "Holocaust world" did not choose to abort, who did conceal her pregnancy and attempt to hide her child and give it a chance to live (1994:216-17).

Although Morgan stipulates that there are a number of factors that must be taken into account in any ethical decision, it is important to note that the example that Morgan turns to is a rabbinic response which itself excluded women from the decision making process. Men ask the questions and women (and men) receive the answers; the entire system reifies women as receptors of the Law, rather than subjects who contribute to its articulation. To suggest that it is this history, with this particular moral hermeneutic, that we must look to in order to begin to formulate a decision is deeply disturbing. To imply that women today might be encouraged to continue pregnancies which would cause them great mental anguish by invoking that context re-places women in that heartrending position. A feminist Midrashic response to that history is one that understands that the tragedy these

women suffered took place in the anti-world. It was by no means a choice. It was a context that horrifyingly precluded all choice. A Jewish feminist ethic may argue in favour of or against abortion, but a Jewish feminist response to the Holocaust understands that it is absurd and obscene to base any argument regarding abortion today on the horror that such women suffered. A post-Holocaust Jewish feminist ethic must address the more central questions of agency and power. The history that Morgan recounts should provoke a critical evaluation of how women are particularly vulnerable to bodily oppression and violence, marginalized groups are targeted and victimized in our society, and also how agency can be constrained in a multiplicity of ways and that that constraint is a crucial mechanism in the perpetration of injustice. Such an evaluation needs to then reflect back to Jewish tradition and identify those ways in which tradition succeeds or fails to address these questions. Each *Midrash*, mutually upheld by the concerns and interests of modern Jewish philosophy, Jewish tradition and Jewish feminism, then contributes to that thick description of ethics and justice that is essential to its viability and authenticity.

Morgan's argument in terms of abortion is not representative of Jewish legal responsa or of modern Jewish philosophical thought.[54] But his ability to make this argument is representative of the absence of women's voices within modern Jewish philosophical discourses. Most alarmingly, it reflects the possible gross distortions that may proceed from that absence. Philosophical and theological responses to the Holocaust are grounded in the history of the Holocaust. They have no meaning

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[54] Even though women are absent as interlocutors of Jewish law, rabbinic responsa about abortion do not proceed along Morgan's analysis. There is a paucity of modern Jewish philosophical reflections on abortion. I cannot point to any that follows Morgan's analysis.

without that terrifying and specific history. It is a history that provides not only

the impetus but constructs the very language in which response is made.

Philosophical and theological responses have, to date, spoken in a language which is

masculine or which purports to be androgynous. Morgan's view inadvertently

exposes the dangers of divorcing post-Holocaust ethics from Jewish feminist ethics.

His basic assumption, shared by virtually every post-Holocaust Jewish philosopher,

is that Jewish ethics must respond to the Holocaust. The danger for post-Holocaust

ethics lies in leaving women and feminist concerns out of the equation. When it does

so, its conclusions are neither ethical nor does it maintain any integrity towards the

experience of the Holocaust. The result is a perverse manipulation of the Holocaust

rather than an authentic response. Nonetheless, very few modern Jewish

philosophers even perceive that their ethics, either actively or passively, distort the

language of contemporary moral discourse. As the Holocaust fills our ethical

horizon, it must not be used to efface legitimate ethical concerns in a manner that

repeats the violations of the Holocaust.

For Jewish feminism, one important question will be whether or not

Fackenheim's vision of authentic Judaism entails particular burdens for Jewish

women. This possibility is suggested by his arguments surrounding reproduction. It

is perhaps unsurprising that the bearing and raising of Jewish children after the

Holocaust should become in Fackenheim's thought one of the clearest moral

imperatives stemming from the Holocaust. Fackenheim observes in horror that it

was the choice of the 19th century great-grandparents to raise Jewish children that

determined whether their 20th century offspring would have been among the victims

or the murderers. Fackenheim then asks the terrifying and inevitable question,

what if those 19th century Jews had known the consequence of raising their children as Jews?

> And what of us who *do* know? Dare we *morally* raise Jewish children, exposing our offspring to a possible second Auschwitz decades or centuries hence? And dare we *religiously* not raise Jewish children, completing Satan's work on his behalf?(1978:48)

The answer to this question must be understood not as an individual question, but as a Jewish question. Raising Jewish children is only one of the many difficult choices Jews must make if they take their duty to Jewish survival seriously.

> The Jew of today cannot authentically face up to the religious choice simply as an individual. To do so is, in effect, to evade, if not his Jewishness, then at least the question posed by his Jewishness. And the question demands a religious answer. Hence to evade it is, for the Jew, to evade part of the religious question itself, and thus to fall into inauthenticity. The Jew cannot face up to the religious question "simply as an individual." Whether he likes it or not, he must face up to it as a Jew. To do so is to recognize that the duty to Jewish survival is, for the Jew, part of what is at stake in the religious choice. (1970:129)

Although under Jewish law it is only men who are obligated to procreate, the pressure on Jewish women to bear the next generation of Jews has never been more urgent. Alongside anxiety about declining birthrates is the ever-present spectre of the Holocaust. Would not low birthrates give Hitler that ultimate "posthumous" victory? In her article, "Jewish Dyke Baby-Making," Hadar Dubowsky, explains how when she and her partner searched for a sperm-donor for their child and she wanted that child to be "biologically" Jewish:

> My Jewish body and soul were yearning to bear a Jewish child. My grandmother is a Holocaust survivor and many of my family members died in the camps. While others were worried about overpopulation, I had been raised with fear that the Jewish people would be wiped out. I learned that, after such a loss, it was almost imperative that Jews procreate. For me, part of that meant using Jewish sperm (2002: 46)

The Orthodox Jewish feminist author Silvia Barack Fishman echoes a similar sentiment when she discusses how many Jewish women living in North America

after the Holocaust "feel a special responsibility for Jewish survival" (1993:1) At

an emotional level, such claims are understandable but disturbing nonetheless.

While in the case of Dubar and Fishman, these claims are self-imposed they take on

a much more problematic character as an ethical imperative. Considering the

coercive history of women and reproduction, such imperatives must be considered

with the utmost wariness and one must further be concerned as to how women's

most significant opportunity for Tikkun might now be understood in terms of their

reproductive capacity to the exclusion of all other possible forms of resistance?

We saw in the example of Morgan's claims about abortion in Jewish law that

the Holocaust can be invoked to make problematic ethical claims. Might not the

Holocaust similarly be invoked to provide a corrective or balancing aspect?

Returning to Rabbi Oshry's responsum, a feminist reading might emphasize that

the women who faced death if their pregnancies were discovered had their ability to

make choices taken away from them. Instead of concluding that women should not

be permitted abortion except in cases where their health is at risk, shouldn't the

ethical principle be that restricting reproductive choice is morally untenable under

any circumstances? In such a reading, a coercive interpretation of women's

responsibility for reproduction after the Holocaust would be offensive. Whatever

one's position might be in regards to the ethics of elective abortions, this discussion

highlights how the Holocaust can be used to justify virtually any position. Once one

affirms that after the Holocaust Jewish life must continue in some essential form,

the description of that form will prescriptively bestow authority on how the

Holocaust should be used as interpretive ethical matrix.

If we take Fackenheim seriously, the negotiation between conservative and

transformative impulses must take place at the level of Midrashic thinking. Jewish

feminism must display that impossible togetherness of a Jewishness steeped in tradition with a radical self-exposure to the root experiences of Judaism including the Holocaust. By using the model of Midrash to bring together the concerns of modern Jewish philosophy, feminist ethics and Jewish feminism, these questions offer an insight into how Jewish feminist ethics can reframe the meaning of being 'a Jewish witness to the world'. A Jewish feminist Midrash, mutually upheld by the concerns and interests of modern Jewish philosophy, the Jewish tradition and Jewish feminism, then contributes to that thick description of ethics and justice that is essential to its viability and authenticity.

Opportunities for Jewish Feminist Ethics

Women's Historical Experiences

In thinking about ways that Fackenheim might be helpful in constructing Jewish feminist and feminist ethics, I suggest that when one reads Fackenheim from a feminist perspective, we can see that one of the first things that a post-Holocaust feminist ethic needs to do is to be inclusive of women's historical experiences. Although one could argue on feminist grounds that such an inclusion is self-evident, I want to locate this exigency in modern Jewish philosophy itself. In particular, I want to demonstrate that if we follow Fackenheim's argument, the inclusion of women is prerequisite to an authentic ethical response.

For Fackenheim, the Holocaust poses a continuing threat to the religious foundations of Jewish life. Only an open, vulnerable, encounter with history has any hope of addressing this ongoing crisis. A vulnerable encounter with history depends

on the necessary restructuring of religious and philosophical categories. This restructuring involves a critical engagement with questions relating to Jewish faith, belief, and practice, and ultimately Jewish existence itself. Encountering history begins with recognizing the root experiences and epoch-making events of that history. As an epoch-making event, the Holocaust profoundly alters and ruptures our understanding of Jewish existence in history. The events of the Holocaust thrust the Jewish people "back firmly, inescapably, irrevocably, back into history: not into sacred history, but rather into the flesh-and-blood history of men, women, and children..." (1994:33).

Fackenheim's insistence on flesh-and-blood history speaks to a feminist interest in specifying the particular history of individual women. When Fackenheim reflects:

> We recall those we named. We also think of many we did not name,
> and, above all, of the countless ones whose memory can only be
> nameless. (1994: 301)

A feminist reading of this text must insist that naming includes naming women. If the Holocaust as an epoch-making event demands authentic response, a feminist reading must in turn enquire as to how women can meaningfully be present in that response and how Jewish feminism can contribute to that response. After the Holocaust, modern Jewish thought responds, either implicitly or explicitly to the Holocaust. More precisely, in doing so, modern Jewish thought has grounded itself, at least in part, in the specific history of the Holocaust. For Fackenheim, it is the epoch-making nature of the Holocaust that demands both a religious and an ethical response. But if the Holocaust is an epoch-making event, it is so for the Jewish community as a whole in all of its diversity. Thus we must question if androcentric accounts of the Holocaust can provide an adequate interpretive matrix for the

Jewish community. When one considers arguments by scholars of the Holocaust

like Dalia Ofer and Lenore Weitzman, who argue in *Women in the Holocaust,* that

although Jewish women were not targeted by the Nazis as women, their experiences

were significantly gendered. The answer must be that these gendered experiences

participate in this epoch-making event. The historical account of these gender

differences in no way suggests that we should privilege women's experiences.

Rather, this historical analysis prompts me to conclude that these particular

experiences need to be meaningfully integrated into the multiplicity of accounts that

Fackenheim argues must ground modern Jewish ethical responses to the Holocaust.

That women's experiences must be rendered visible and accounted for is essential

not only to the development of a feminist response to the Holocaust. Plaskow

argues:

> Feminist Judaism begins with the presupposition that women as well
> as men define Jewish humanity. It assumes that Jewish women's
> experience is an integral part of Jewish experience, and that no
> account of Jewish experience is complete unless it considers fully and
> seriously the experience of Jewish women (1983:76).

The articulation of women's particular experiences as Jews in the general history of

the Jewish people and the particular history of the Holocaust should be viewed not

only as a fundamental element of the feminist project but as a litmus test of modern

Jewish thought's ability to speak in ways that include women as normative

members of the Jewish community and equal stakeholders in the Jewish tradition.

Such a description must recognize that history is a culturally constructed specific

category that is articulated in specific ways to organize and make meaningful

evidence from the past. Bearing in mind that Fackenheim moves from experience to

theology, one can go one step further: If women's experiences, as gendered, are

different from those of men's, that difference must logically lead to different

theological responses. Fackenheim does not address this issue but I do not think that he would disagree that other Midrashic responses, voiced by women in particular, can contribute to Jewish responses.

Midrashic Thinking

If the inclusion of women's experiences is essential to both modern Jewish philosophy and the Jewish feminist project, Fackenheim's particular articulation of Midrash as authentic response suggests a model for both Jewish feminism's need to respond to the Holocaust critically in terms of gender as well as modern Jewish philosophy's need to value women's experiences. From a feminist point of view, these characteristics of Midrashic thinking are extremely helpful in considering the ways in which a post-Holocaust Jewish feminist ethic might proceed. In order to reflect on the root experiences of Judaism, one needs to consider how these experiences are communally meaningful in the present. Asserting that Midrash responds to root experiences and epoch-making events underscores the ways in which such experiences shape and structure Jewish tradition. Discussing the importance of feminist historical analyses, Judith Plaskow argues "we cannot redefine Judaism in the present without redefining our past, because our present grows out of our history" (1983: 31). In terms of Midrashic thinking, insisting that women are historically and contemporarily present in those epoch-making events requires a critical evaluation of how women have systematically been marginalized, silenced or excluded from that tradition.

Fackenheim's assertion that these root experiences are contradictory and paradoxical is also illuminating in terms of Jewish feminist ethics. There is a painful irony in Jewish women's very real valuation in the Jewish tradition, their

essential contribution to Jewish life and culture, their marginalization in religious law and public discourses, and their equality in sharing the fate of Jewish men during the Holocaust. One reads Cynthia Ozick's painful protest about the place of women in Jewish public life in a much more radical way when one hears it specifically against the history of women in the Holocaust. Ozick writes:

> My own synagogue is the only place in the world where I, a middle-aged adult, am defined exclusively by my being the female child of my parents. My own synagogue is the only place in the world where I am not named Jew. (1983:125)

The paradox of Jewish women as being doubly Other, Other as Jew and Other as Woman within the tradition has been critically elaborated by Jewish feminism and yet has largely been ignored by modern Jewish thought. How can we understand this double Otherness more fully when it is read against the epoch-making events of Jewish history? In her essay, "Eating the Bread of Affliction," Susan Gubar asks:

> What does it mean to suggest that Judaism is so constituted as to silence or marginalize women, when Jewish mothers and their children were criminalized and murdered as non-Aryans? (1996:28)

How does this paradox of double Otherness add yet another dimension of self-contradiction? Can we not think of a critique of alterity as one of the moral demands that both feminism and a modern Jewish philosophical response to the Holocaust places upon us?

The need to express these paradoxes and self-contradictions unresolved is perhaps Fackenheim's most fruitful insight for a Jewish feminist reading. Language, speech, expression—are profoundly valued in the Jewish tradition.[55] Divine speech is the mode of creation and the means of revelation. Human speech

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[55] I want to explicitly distinguish between silence as a positive religious rite (i.e. silent prayer), and silence as attentive listening, and silencing the Other. Both silence and speech are valued in the Jewish tradition and either can be modes of religious or ethical response.

distinguishes human life from all other creation. Rachel Adler reminds us in *Engendering Judaism* how speech is intimately bound up with ethical agency when she asserts that the right to speak in a community is absolutely correlated with the community's evaluation of the person or group's status within that community. Silencing or excluding an individual or group, determining that they are unqualified or incapable of addressing the Other, "diminishes their humanity." Adler concludes, "The ability to speak—to address Others and to be addressed—is that which signifies we are fully human. Language and speech are primordially ethical" (1999:viii). Naming and expressing the religious, philosophical, ethical and historical paradoxes and contradictions that Jews struggle with is a hallmark of Jewish existence and a fundamental characteristic of Jewish thought. The process of wrestling with paradox and self-contradiction—holding them in tension while emphasizing and disclosing those tensions is essential. Whether one is directly responding to the Holocaust, or addressing the Holocaust within a broader post-Holocaust ethic, the characteristics of Midrashic thinking as expressed by Fackenheim point to a model that can sustain these tensions.

Tikkun Olam As Resistance

If Midrashic thinking is theoretically helpful for the development of a Jewish feminist post-Holocaust ethic, it is important to examine Fackenheim's examples of possible Midrashic responses. Fackenheim frames the model of Tikkun Olam in terms of resistance. That resistance took the form of every act that denied the Holocaust world. One of Fackenheim's most compelling examples of resistance as Tikkun is related in *To Mend the World* where he relates the story of a group of girls at Auschwitz who struggled to find a way to observe Yom Kippur:

> Once at Auschwitz a group of girls on forced labour decided, so far
> as possible, to observe Yom Kippur. Prayer, of course, was out of the
> question: but fasting, they thought, was not. So they applied to their
> SS supervisor for permission to fast, and for a lighter work load for
> that day for which, they hastened to assure her, they would
> compensate on other days. Furious, the woman denied both requests,
> imposed overtime work in honour of the holiday, and threatened that
> anyone lagging in work on account of the fast would be sent to the
> crematorium without delay. Undeterred, the girls worked and fasted
> through the long day, exhilarated by the thought of Jews the world
> over sharing in it. When the day was done, they tasted their piece of
> black bread, and their 'satisfaction was full'. Yet this 'story' of their
> 'victory' ended with a 'bitter disappointment'. They had miscalculated.
> They had fasted on the wrong day. (1994:322)

Fackenheim's illustration of resistance is one which does not depend on success.

That the girls fasted on the wrong day, does not alter Fackenheim's estimation that

their actions constitute resistance. If anything, their "failure" makes for a perfect

example of the type of resistance that Fackenheim envisions —one which is not

militaristic, which any person can participate in, where intent is the model of

resistance itself. This view is important especially in the North American context

where, as Aviva Cantor observes, the myth of the passive Jewish victim is so

prevalent in both Jewish and non-Jewish Holocaust discourses. She rhetorically

asks:

> Moreover, to define resistance only as taking up arms—the
> masculinist definition is wrong not only ethically but also politically.
> Since the Nazi plan was to murder all Jews, doesn't whatever Jews
> did to try to prevent death—from organizing soup kitchens to
> smuggling medicine to forging identity papers to performing
> abortions—constitute resistance? Doesn't sustaining the will to live
> among people suffering hunger, cold, disease, bereavement, terror and
> mental exhaustion by conducting prayer services, schools, concerts,
> and theatrical performances constitute resistance? Doesn't the
> courage and resourcefulness inherent in all these efforts constitute
> resistance? (1995: 392)

Cantor is attempting to diagnose the effects of patriarchy on North American

Jewish culture, and locates at least part of the problem of post-Holocaust Jewish

identity in terms of the historical gendered narratives that have constructed

that identity as passive, victimized and feminine. In identifying forms of resistance

during the Holocaust that have traditionally been associated with women, Cantor,

like Fackenheim, asks us to rethink the nature of resistance. Both Cantor and

Fackenheim independently intend to redefine resistance in terms of endurance and

survival. Both reject militaristic definitions of resistance. Cantor's argument is in

continuity with several scholars who have argued that the Jew has historically been

associated with the feminine in western culture (i.e. anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic

medieval images of the Jewish male as menstruating, modern stereotypes of the

Jewish mother as domineering and castrating, and of the Jewish male as urban,

unproductive, scholarly and effeminate).[56] Fackenheim does not recognize these

historical narratives or that the definitions of resistance that he rejects might be

construed as masculinist. Gender is not at all at issue here for Fackenheim. Still, it

is interesting that Fackenheim's argument dovetails neatly with feminist critiques

of Holocaust history that excludes women's experiences. From a Jewish feminist

historian's point of view, Fackenheim's efforts are the necessary response to

patriarchal discourses that have positioned the Jew as victim.

Because the concept of Tikkun Olam has been popularized in Jewish, and

most recently non-Jewish, culture in the last few decades it may seem facile to point

to Tikkun Olam itself as a useful model for the development of Jewish feminist

ethics. The frequent association between Tikkun Olam and feminism and social

activism has been well established in popular discourses. Some Jewish feminists

describe feminism as a form of Tikkun Olam, a mending of the damage inflicted on

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[56] e.g. Hyman, 1995:134-169.

women and men by masculinist distortions within Jewish culture. Letty Cottin Pogrebin described the Jewish feminist American politician and activist Bella Abzug as "Tikkun Olam incarnate" after her death. Countless Jewish feminist groups include some mention of Tikkun Olam in their mandates. But Fackenheim's understanding of Tikkun Olam as a Midrashic response that takes place as resistance should have a particular resonance for Jewish feminist ethics. The notion of human participation in the mending of Creation constitutes not only the recognition that Creation is damaged but that humans have the capacity to repair Creation with God. A Jewish feminist ethical Midrash of Tikkun Olam should similarly be framed as resistance: resistance against all forms of anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism, resistance against divisive denominational polemics, resistance against the oppression and marginalization of any person, be they Jewish or non-Jewish, female or male, within the Jewish tradition or within society at large.

Feminist Midrash

Jewish feminists, like Fackenheim, have turned to Midrash as a way of holding these competing impulses of radicalism and conservativism in tension. Those who are familiar with contemporary feminist Midrash can observe that these Midrashim often retell biblical or talmudic stories from the point of view of women. In doing so, these Midrashim re-place women at the centre of Jewish tradition and enrich that tradition by making women present in that tradition as normative actors. It is a way of balancing the need to transform the tradition with the need to keep that transformation grounded within tradition. As Kates and Twersky Reimner explain the purpose of this retelling in their introduction to *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story*:

> women who bring their own questions and points of view to the interpretive and hermeneutic process will enable other women to feel nourished by these texts. And by entering a twenty-six hundred year old Jewish tradition of dynamic interaction with text through commentary and interpretation, Jewish women will redefine a space initially created by other hands, creating a space in which other women can feel they belong. (1994:viii)

The impact of feminist Midrash is profound, not the least because of its accessibility and popularity outside of the academy. In an open letter to the editors of *Judaism Since Gender*, Miriam Peskowitz and Laura Levitt, Rebecca Alpert argues for the relevance of feminist Midrash for the future of Jewish feminism by stressing that,

> Jewish life is based much more on a collective memory and perception, on stories of how we came to be...In Jewish communities all across North America, Jewish feminists have made women part of the Jewish landscape by telling stories about Sara's role in the binding of Isaac, making Miriam comparable to Moses as a leader of the Jewish people, recognizing Vashti as a possible role model alongside Esther, and re-examining the significance of Ruth as ancestor to converts and paradigms of passionate friendship between women. These stories have done more to shape a feminist consciousness than a hundred archaeological digs. (1997:111-112)

I would suggest that feminist Midrash are also reflecting what Fackenheim would describe as Midrashic thinking. In re-imagining women's presence in and engagement with the root experiences of Judaism in response to their being written out of those experiences, Jewish feminists are holding in tension, without resolution, those paradoxes and contradictions which are essential to Jewish women's experiences. The connections between memory and history and present and future are clear.

> Recovering Jewish women's history, then, extends the realm of the potentially usable past. Women's experiences expand the domain of Jewish resources on which we can draw in recreating Judaism in the present. In writing Jewish women into Jewish history, we ground a contemporary Jewish community that can be a community of women and men. (Plaskow, 1989: 45)

But as Umansky argues in her "Creating a Jewish Feminist Theology," where she meditates on her vision of the *akeda* (the binding of Isaac) which results in a type of Midrash on this biblical story,

> As Jewish feminists work to create a theology of their own, they find that not all Jewish sources can be resources for them, that some may have to be emended or rewritten. How much emendation one does will depend on adherence to halacha and loyalty to tradition. Yet before a feminist theology can be created, such emendation must be made. Despite protests from those who refuse to see past visions as anything less than complete, the feminist theologian who tries to respond to Jewish sources as a Jew and as a woman may find it difficult if not impossible to expound upon experiences that have not yet been given expression. (1989:197-198)

Interestingly, for Umansky, the development of feminist Midrash precedes the construction of feminist theology. In such a model, feminist Midrash emerge not from theological claims but from claims about experience, relevance, and comprehensibility.

I would like to suggest that we can already hear examples of feminist Holocaust Midrash in the narratives that have emerged after the Holocaust. In particular I hear examples of what Fackenheim describes as Mad Midrash, those Midrash that respond to the anti-world, to Planet Auschwitz. These examples include Cynthia Ozick's "The Shawl" where Ozick painfully and lyrically speaks of the violence that is done to humanity and human relationship in the quest for survival and the aftermath of survival and Ida Fink's collection "A Scrap of Time" where the mundane details of every day life are rendered surreal in contrast with the staccato-like assault of violence and grief. These stories reverberate with Fackenheim's description of an obliged madness where one is condemned to be sane.

Some of these stories gesture beyond Mad Midrash, hinting at the post-Holocaust Midrashic existence that Fackenheim indicates is the space for authentic response. Fackenheim writes:

> For Midrashic existence points to an existence in which the
> madness is transfigured. Midrashic madness is the Word spoken in
> the anti-world which ought not to be but is. The existence points to
> acts to restore a world which ought to be but is not, committed to the
> faith of what ought to be must and will be, and this is its madness....
> Without this madness a Jew cannot do—with God or without him—
> what a Voice from Sinai bids him to do: choose life (1987a:334).

Emphasis on life, relationships between mothers, daughters, sisters and friends, commonality and community of experience, illuminate these and other Holocaust narratives written by women. These tropes, while highly gendered in women's writings, are not exclusive to women's Holocaust writing, but are important and enduring themes that should ground Jewish feminist ethics.

"A Jewishness steeped in tradition"?

A feminist engagement with Fackenheim's Midrashic model depends on making explicit what is already implicit—namely that the Jewish tradition cannot ethically maintain unchallenged any element of the Jewish tradition that privileges men over women in terms of their social, moral, religious or cultic status. As such, when Fackenheim stresses that Midrashic responses must unite the "impossible togetherness" of two equally exigent characteristics: a "Jewishness steeped in tradition" and a radical "self-exposure" to the Holocaust, neither element ought to be used as justification for maintaining gender inequity within the tradition.

Does Fackenheim's understanding of authentic response problematize or even vitiate Jewish feminist efforts to transform the Jewish tradition? Would he applaud Sylvia Barack Fishman's warning that

> Jewish feminism, a powerful force for positive chance and renewal,
> will be strengthened by isolating and rejecting ideas that clearly
> contradict the historical thrust and moral imperatives of the past.
> Conversely, by not distinguishing between those ideas that are and
> are not consonant with Judaism in feminist thought, Jewish feminism

may compromise its own religious and moral appeal within
mainstream Jewish communities. (1993:232)

Undoubtedly, for Fackenheim, as well as for Fishman, the "Jewishness steeped in history" and the "moral imperatives of the past" are self-evident criteria to those with the authority to speak. Here, Orthodox feminists would seem to be on much more stable ground than liberal Jewish feminists in their capacity to rely on Halakha as an authoritative category. But we must remember Fackenheim's point in asserting that responding to epoch-making events authentically must be the criteria by which Jewishness might be judged. Fackenheim's goal is always to be as inclusive of Jewish community as possible. Divisive denominational polemics have no place in Jewish life after the Holocaust. In making such a bid for universality, Fackenheim necessarily allows for some ambiguity as to evaluating authenticity. If one follows Fackenheim's argument, any evaluation of authenticity cannot preclude secular response, let alone heartfelt religiously committed responses. As such, Fackenheim's model is not only congruent with Jewish feminist efforts it may demand them.

Indeed, the transformation that Fackenheim calls for is no less radical than that of feminism. Interestingly, Fackenheim locates the premier example of how and why Jewish tradition must change and evolve in the case of Morning Prayers where men thank God for not being born a woman. Quoted earlier, Fackenheim's rhetorical question underscores how modern ethical norms challenge traditional worldviews:

> The *Siddur*—the traditional orthodox prayer book—asks a male Jew
> to thank God daily for having him made a man, and a Jewish woman,
> to thank Him for having made her "according to His will." Can there
> be any modern Jew, regardless of belief or affiliation—of either sex—
> who can recite this prayer with a good conscience? Surely it is best to
> alter this prayer, or not say it at all. (1999:143)

Fackenheim is here arguing that the male prayer is, as it is now articulated, morally unconscionable. In doing so, he echoes Letty Cottin Pogrebin's now famous summary of the problem:

> A life of Torah is embodied in Hillel's injunction, 'Do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you.' Men would not like done unto them what is done unto women in the name of halakhah. For me, that is that. (1983 123)

Yet, Fackenheim, like Pogrebin, does not offer an explanation of why it is unacceptable. The reason seems to be self-evident, it clearly devalues women and such a statement cannot be made in good conscience. Our identification of the injustice that the traditional prayer enacts is self-evident because modern western culture now recognizes that such statements are sexist and morally untenable. Where is the critique that comes from within the tradition? Fackenheim argues that post-Holocaust Jewish life must respond to epoch-making events *and* Jewishness steeped in tradition. It would seem then that the censure of the traditional prayer will be most compelling if it could be located in either imperative. Pogrebin provides an undeveloped—but still persuasive—argument for gender equality within Judaism by invoking Hillel's maxim. Such an argument can and should be strengthened and focused.

Fackenheim does not get to the heart of the question—that women are not obligated. If the prayer is a problem, and it is based on the problem of women's lack of valuation, which is in turn based on the problem of women's lack of obligation, then the solution to change or omit the prayer is utterly inadequate. Remember that the Jewish man thanks God for making him a man because men are obligated and not exempted as women are from some time-bound obligations. In the same way that Choseness itself cannot be explained away as referring to obligation and not privilege, male obligation—"choseness"—must be understood in terms of privilege

as well. Ozick claims that women's excusal from time-bound obligations is based

on *kavod ha-tzibur*, the honour or self-respect of the community.[57] For Ozick, this

phrase provides the interpretive key for the status of women in Judaism: "it

supports and lends total clarity to the idea that, for Judaism, the status of women is

a social, not a sacred, question. Social status is not sacral; it cannot be interpreted

as divinely fixed; it can be repented of, and repaired" (1983:126). In response to

Ozick's article, Judith Plaskow argues that Ozick's thesis reflects an unwillingness

to get at the roots of women's oppression within the Jewish tradition. Those roots

are intertwined with androcentric God—language and the reality that, and here

Plaskow agrees with Ozick, the system of Halakha is indeed the product of Jewish

men, and emphatically not Jewish women—and therefore not the Jewish *people*

(Plaskow, 1983, 227-230). The transformation of Halakha is certainly necessary in

Plaskow's view. However the more foundational problem is ultimately theological:

> Clearly the implications of Jewish feminism, while they include
> halakhic restructuring, reach beyond Halakha to transform the bases
> of Jewish life. Feminism demands a new understanding of Torah, God
> and Israel: an understanding of Torah that begins with
> acknowledgement of the profound injustice of Torah itself. The
> assumption of the lesser humanity of women has poisoned the content
> and structure of the law, undergirding women's legal disabilities and
> our subordination in the broader tradition. This assumption is not
> amenable to piecemeal change. It must be utterly eradicated by the
> withdrawal of projection from women—the discovery that the
> negative traits attributed to women are also in the men who attribute
> them, while the positive qualities reserved for men are also in women.
> (1983, 231)

To use Fackenheim's terms, isn't the status of women in Judaism the "content" that

is the interpretative response to revelation that must be re-evaluated in light of

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[57] In point of fact, this phrase only applies to *aliyah*, women reading the Torah before the congregation.

contemporary history? The solution can be no less than a radical revisioning of women's role within Judaism.

Because the historical experiences of Jewish women have taken place within the context of a masculinist and patriarchal tradition, any ethical statement that proceeds from historical experience must address that reality. A Jewish feminist ethic that engages Fackenheim's Midrashic model needs to more explicitly affirm that Judaism cannot perpetuate a normative description of Jewish identity that really signifies Jewish/man. We need to focus on how the construction of "Jewish/woman" as distinct from "Jew" reveals and makes explicit the master codes *within Judaism itself* that renders the masculine normative, maintains the alterity of women and relies on a gendered economy. We need to radically ask, how else but as Jewish *women* might Jewish women be *Jewish*? Further, a Jewish feminist ethic must emphasize that the obligation to challenge masculine privilege is ethically located in Judaism itself and is occasioned by Jewish experience. For example, Ozick argues that it is the Holocaust itself that is the force behind Jewish feminism when she states:

> We are not as we were. It is not unnatural that mass loss should generate only lessons but legacies. An earthquake of immorality and mercilessness, atrocity on such a scale, cannot happen and then pass us by unaltered. The landscapes of our mind have shapes, hollows, illuminations, mounds and shadows different than before. For us who live in the aftermath of the cataclysm, the total fact of the Nazi "selection" appear to affect, to continue to affect, all the regions of our ideas—even if some of those ideas at first glance look to be completely unrelated issues. (1983:135)

When feminism is construed at least in part as a response to Fackenheim's root experience of the Holocaust, the interests of feminism are placed at the centre of Jewish life.

Of all of the thinkers considered in this project, Fackenheim has the most to say about Jewish life. For this reason, Fackenheim's thought speaks particularly to Jewish feminism. Fackenheim's proffered response to the Holocaust invites Jewish feminists to expand our consideration of the Holocaust from historical and literary analysis towards integrating the Holocaust into our reflections on Jewish thought and Jewish life. In developing their own theological responses, Melissa Raphael and Rachel Adler have already begun to do so. Raphael's theological framework centres around how the female presence of God is revealed in the acts of care as resistance. She arrives at this position through a simultaneous engagement with women's Holocaust narratives and post-Holocaust theology and philosophy. Adler also turns towards the experiences of women to develop her theology of lamentation and mourning but does so primarily through traditional rabbinic Midrash. For Adler, the "theological work of lament is to embody not only grief but indignation, not only acceptance but challenge" (2000:167-169). Perhaps more importantly, lamentation is correlated with the metaphor of covenant as marriage—and it is in covenant, however problematic covenant might be, "that offers God and Israel an opportunity to grow into partnership, to begin to recognize the Other as separate from self and yet intimately bound to self" (2000:169).

I have drawn on Fackenheim's thought to forward the development of Jewish feminist ethics by beginning to suggest further areas of exploration and pointed towards models that should be more deeply examined. Theological historiography, Tikkun, post-Holocaust theological grounds for the transformation of Jewish life, and Midrashic thinking and feminist Midrash, can each contribute to a more nuanced and richer Jewish feminist ethical response. But it is Midrashic thinking

itself, with its emphasis on the need to hold in tension the root experiences and epoch-making events of Jewish experience, and its self-defined limitations in its ability to produce only incomplete, fragmentary Midrashic responses which is most helpful. Jewish feminist ethics, like Jewish ethics in general, cannot be comprehensively systematic. Jewish feminist ethics must be interrupted, not only by historical experience, but by a recognition that the ruptures occasioned by gender inequities within the tradition are deeply rooted and resist simple repair.

CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

The object of this project has been to disturb the boundaries between the disciplines of modern Jewish thought, feminist ethics and Jewish feminism in the interest of accomplishing two complementary goals: First, to develop a feminist critical theoretical and methodological framework that can engage modern Jewish thought as a discipline. Secondly, to propose a model for Jewish feminist ethics that is mutually grounded in modern Jewish thought, feminist ethics, and women's historical and contemporary experiences.

An interdisciplinary dialogue assumes that each discipline generates specific questions that potentially disturb the contiguous boundaries of the other implicated disciplines. I have argued that the pressure points that are exposed in bringing these discourses together indicate theoretical and methodological fault lines that each discipline must address. They also disclose the ways in which a discipline fails to consistently and equitably apply its own questions and concerns to those who are outside its primary purview. As important as these critical evaluations are, my focus is in bringing these disciplines together constructively in order to uncover opportunities for the strategic development of each discipline. As these questions are directed both inside and outside of each respective discipline, the questions that each engenders in encounter with other disciplines are ultimately perlocutionary. Whether or not they will prove successful in transforming other disciplinary discourses depends on a willing attentiveness to the concerns that they raise.

The purpose of this conclusion is to map the vectors of this analysis, and plot out the key features of a Jewish feminist ethical response that emerges from an

interrogation of the thought of Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas and Emil

Fackenheim. I began with the assumption of the goodwill of the thinkers involved. I

have found no instance of conscious sexism or any intent to oppress or marginalize

women. Those problems that I have identified are those that emerge from particular

cultural, philosophical and religious discourses that frame philosophical thought as

a whole. My theoretical starting point is perhaps best expressed by Michèle Le

Doeuff:

> Whether we like it or not, we are within philosophy, surrounded by
> masculine-feminine divisions that philosophy has helped to articulate
> and refine. The problem is to know whether we want to remain there
> and be dominated by them, or whether we can take up a critical
> position in relation to them, a position which will necessarily evolve
> through deciphering the basic philosophical assumptions latent in
> discourses about women. The worst metaphysical positions are those
> which one adopts unconsciously whilst believing or claiming that one
> is speaking from a position outside philosophy. (1977:2)

In order to consciously identify those positions that are most salient to a

conversation between modern Jewish thought, feminist ethics and Jewish feminism,

I began with several key questions that a feminist analysis poses for modern Jewish

thought. These preliminary questions chart a basic topography of general feminist

concerns such as the image and status of women, the ways in which women's

subject position may constrain ethical agency, the place of the body in philosophical

discourses, and the ability of an ethical model to respond to diverse ethical claims of

a variety of marginalized groups.

My first questions concerned the place of women in the thought of Buber,

Levinas and Fackenheim as an initial step towards reading how gender is

constructed and performed in their texts. I found that each thinker assumes that

women as a class of persons does not need to be specifically addressed in terms of

ethical responsibility, religious obligation or spiritual capacity. None would suggest

that women are religiously, spiritually or ethically subordinate to men. Each at least minimally acknowledges social, cultural and religious contexts in which gender roles are distinct but they do so in ways where actual women are often peripheral to the discussion. Buber's rejection of Kierkegaard's anxiety about the threat that women pose for men's relationship with the divine in romantic and sexual relationships is not so much a statement about women as an argument for relationality. Still, his argument results in an opposition to a polemical binary where masculine ascetic spirituality is opposed to feminine autochthonous sexuality. Fackenheim's choice of using the particularly disturbing traditional Morning Prayer as an example of the need for transforming traditional practices is also not primarily a statement about women as women, but is instead focusing on the ways in which ethical standards evolve and reveal previously unrecognized injustices. Levinas' analysis of alterity as structuring Being itself, points to sexual difference to illustrate that alterity and explicate the shift from narcissistic ipseity to ethical relationship. Although he relies on culturally constructed accounts of gender in order to (almost literally) flesh out his phenomenological account, again his focus is not women per se.

My next group of preliminary questions asks, what are the ramifications for women's ethical agency if these thinkers are not primarily engaging women as particular ethical subjects, and to a large extent, women are subsumed under the broader category of human? I preface this discussion by specifying that in speaking of moral agency I am not referring to the classical autonomous moral agent of Kantian ethics. I begin with an acknowledgment of feminist critiques of the autonomous moral agent, like those made by Seyla Benhabib in her essay "The Generalized and the Concrete Other: The Kohlberg Gilligan Controversy and Moral

Theory," are largely consonant with modern Jewish philosophical models that problematize the autonomous thinking subject. Benhabib argues that both the *"definition* of the moral domain" and the "ideal of *moral autonomy"* in universalistic contract-based ethical theories "lead to the *privatization* of women's experience and to the exclusion of its consideration from a moral point of view" (1989:158). Benhabib's point that definitions of the parameters of what constitutes morality and how morality is enacted is well taken. In asking about ethical agency, it is clear that modern Jewish thinkers like Buber and Levinas are already internalizing their own critique of the autonomous thinking subject. For Levinas, the problem of the autonomous moral agent is tied to the problem of philosophy itself. When philosophy is conceived as an ontological project, the resulting mode of thinking is totalizing. For Buber, the model of the autonomous moral subject is a mistaken and flawed description of personhood that precludes the I-Thou relation.

By asking about women's ethical agency, I am asking how the definitions of the moral domain and/or what it means to be an ethical subject are gendered. At the simplest level, we can answer affirmatively that these modern Jewish thinkers do not, in principle, suggest that women's agency is formally different from men's. No thinker advances any explicit argument for distinguishing between women and men's ethical agency. However, in that each philosopher's account is grounded in a particular historical, cultural and religious context, each model is bound up in constructions of gender that have particular implications for women as ethical subjects. Where gendered roles like wife and mother are central to a thinker's ethical model, the question of women's ethical agency can be more at issue because these roles have conventionally limited women to the private sphere and have been instrumental in constraining women's subject position in philosophical and cultural

discourse. This correlates with Gatens' observation that in philosophical accounts of women where women are associated with the private sphere and men are linked to the public sphere, the result is an exclusion of women from liberal political life. She points to the philosophical dichotomies of man/woman, mind/body, culture/nature, reason/emotion, public/private as essential to the maintenance of sexual difference, particularly as enacted through the association of women with reproduction and the body, which contributes to women's theoretical invisibility:

> Women most often emerge from these analyses as less than human,
> as bound to their bodies and the exigencies of reproduction, as
> incapable of a certain kind of transcendence or reason that marks the
> *truly* human individual. Clearly, the dichotomies which dominate
> philosophical thinking are not sexually neutral but are deeply
> implicated in the politics of sexual difference. It is this realization
> that constitutes the 'quantum leap' in feminist theorizing. It allows a
> quite different, and more productive, relation to be posited between
> feminist theories and philosophical theories. (1991:92).

When the definition of "human" is tied to a particular set of characteristics and/or regions of being, the humanity, subjectivity and agency of those who are traditionally associated with their opposition is subject to question. For similar reasons, when a thinker's ethical thought is very closely tied to traditional Jewish law, whose narratives and cultic practices often rely heavily on sexual difference, that emphasis on sexual difference may constrict or structure women's ethical agency differently relative to men's ethical agency. Whereas men's agency in Jewish law and traditional practice is tied to religious obligation and authority in the public spheres of religious knowledge, practice and authority as well as communal leadership, women's agency is bound up with their status and responsibilities in the private sphere. Although the private spheres of the home and family are highly valued in Jewish life, there is no question that the public spheres of the synagogue,

communal leadership, and especially the status accorded to religious learning, have traditionally been granted a type of precedence.

What can we conclude about the relationship between a thinker's engagement with Jewish law and tradition and the gendering of ethical subjectivity? Buber's thought raises the fewest overt problems for gendered constructions of agency as neither Jewish law nor gendered roles are dominant in his ethics. Indeed, his symmetrical dialogical model of ethical relationship elides many of the traditional feminist criticisms that are provoked by traditional western models of the normative solitary (male) thinking subject and the split between public and private spheres. Although Levinas reframes the question of the thinking subject even more radically than Buber or Fackenheim, he seems less concerned with a definition of a moral agent than with a definition of what a moral agent *does*.

Fackenheim's need to ground Jewish life mutually in the self-exposure to epoch-making events and a "Jewishness steeped in tradition," combined with his liberal interpretation of what constitutes Jewish life, suggest the possibility of eluding the constraints that are implied by Judaism's traditional understanding of sexual difference. Because Fackenheim is not principally interested in women as a group, Fackenheim offers only one specific instance upon which to hinge the interpretation that traditional masculine privilege is sufficiently morally abhorrent to warrant altering cultic practice—namely the need to change or omit the Morning Prayer mentioned above. I have accorded considerable weight to this example because I read it in conjunction with Fackenheim's very liberal interpretation of the many possible expressions of authentic Jewish life and because there is no compelling evidence to view it as exceptional within his thought. My concern for women's agency in Fackenheim's thought is in his statements about the obligation

to bear and rear the next generation of Jewish children. He is not sufficiently critical in his exposition of this obligation and the ambiguity of the possible ramifications of this religious and ethical prescription. As we saw in Morgan's argument, Fackenheim's argument can play out in ways that disturbingly limit women's ethical agency.

In contrast with Fackenheim's position, Levinas' thought raises questions about women's subject position that are even more difficult to resolve. His often highly gendered phenomenological account depends on sexual difference itself to subvert totalizing modes of thought as well as to delineate the framework of ethical relationship. As such, Levinas' ethic is most subject to the dangers of internalizing and integrating pernicious gendered stereotypes and tropes. In targeting sexual difference and relying on conventional and unchallenged gendered cultural metaphors, Levinas' phenomenological description of alterity, despite his insistence otherwise, continuously risks slipping into portrayal of actual women. The uncomfortable parallels between Levinas' phenomenology and the cultural narratives of western culture and the Jewish tradition that have been used to describe, prescribe and proscribe women's roles, status and agency, serve to reinforce—instead of subvert—those totalizing narratives. In doing so, Levinas' related accounts of eros, maternity, paternity, fecundity, filiality, and the feminine Other, may contribute to a destabilization of the assurance of women's equal agency. Finally, we must ask, as Sherwin does, what does it mean to include women under the general category of moral agent if "the moral concerns that are examined are always those most salient from the male perspective" (1993:11)? The test for women's agency in these cases where women are explicitly assumed to be fully human ethical subject thus must not only be how their agency might be undermined

by the internalization of cultural narratives but whether or not their philosophical rubric is essentially androcentric.

The ways in which women and men's ethical agency can be constructed differently in religious, philosophical and cultural discourses points to the larger issue of the ways in which gendered tropes and gender stereotypes in cultural and disciplinary discourses permeate each thinker's thought. Here we need to be concerned with the ways in which gendered narratives are mutually self-reinforced by slippages between different discourses. The manner in which culturally constructed gendered binaries where woman and/or the feminine is contrasted with man and/or the masculine are established calls for sensitivity to the effects of these narratives. Such dualisms most often rely on establishing the masculine as normative and the feminine as other. For example, in that women are already distinguished as not-man, not-father, the association of woman with mothering and motherhood is rarely equally balanced by the valuation implicit in the association of man with fathering and fatherhood. This asymmetrical equation is reproduced in multiple narratives, including but not limited to philosophical, religious and popular cultural discourses. What is the cumulative effect of women or the feminine being associated with the same characteristics or regions of being in different discourses? How do they reciprocally bolster, confirm and recreate gendered messages? We see this phenomenon at play particularly in the thought of Levinas, but also less obviously in Buber and Fackenheim. Each explicitly or implicitly appeals to, internalizes and replicates patterns of gendered signifiers from a variety of discourses.

The place (or absence) of the body in each thinker's ethics is another area that has emerged as a decisive correlate to the ways in which gender is constructed

and performed in these texts. Both Levinas and Buber's thought confirm the importance of the body for philosophical analysis. Levinas' bodily metaphors and emphasis on phenomenological description of existence as embodied are both problematic and helpful for a feminist engagement with his thought. They are helpful because they invite a consideration of how gender is constructed as a bodily experience, but they are problematic because they rely on an androcentric account of that experience. Because Buber does not need to focus on sexual difference in his treatment of embodiment, his account is both less helpful and less problematic than that of Levinas. Buber's thought opens up the horizons of a discussion of embodiment, and thus the question of gender, but fails to pursue the question meaningfully. In contrast, Fackenheim is the least interested in questions relating to the body or gender and as such provides fewer opportunities for analysis.

The above questions are connected to the ways in which gender becomes the site of marginalization and oppression of persons. My final preliminary question follows the feminist theoretical assumption that gender injustice is a (if not the) pattern for other forms of systemic injustice in asking whether or not each thinker's ethical model was sufficiently diverse, flexible, and imperative to provide an account that could address the specific concerns of feminist ethics in terms of the marginalization and victimization of particular groups. Each of the thinkers considered here stresses that their ethical claims are not limited to Judaism or a Jewish audience. Each argues that the ethical imperatives voiced in their thought do speak to a broader, universal audience. In theory, the ethical principles and mechanisms necessary for addressing marginalized and victimized groups are present in each thinker's ethics. Unsurprisingly, Judaism itself supplies the paradigm for each thinker's understanding of the dynamics of injustice. Jewish

history, and particularly the history of the Holocaust, alongside biblical and rabbinic thought, provide the moral imperatives to protect and sustain the vulnerable other.

The ethical principles that emerge from these experiences and narratives could be sufficient grounds upon which to build a responsive and flexible ethical model that can address the diverse needs of the Other. Yet there is a strange and disjunctive dissonance between these claims for universality and the deafening silence concerning gender injustice in the Jewish tradition and society at large. This issue must necessarily loom large as difficult examples of how modern Jewish philosophy directs its own gaze back on itself and uncritically reproduces its own constructions of Jew and Other. One must ask whether or not gender justice is a fault line that threatens the viability of the ethical system or whether it represents a failure of application of principles that are already present within the ethical framework. I have argued that these lacunae will threaten the system as long as they are not addressed, but that resources exist jointly and severally within the ethical thought of Buber, Levinas and Fackenheim (and Judaism itself) to meaningfully meet these ethical demands. Further, modern Jewish thought can provide the models for addressing other experiences that are similarly framed as unjust and violent encounters with the Other: genocide and ethnic cleansing, global and domestic economic injustice, violence against women and children, racism, as well as heterosexism and other forms of gender oppression. Modern Jewish thought must fully implicate itself in the recognition of the heterogeneity of the broadest possible community of stakeholders and, in the interest of participating in a truly

universal ethical discourse, welcome a multiplicity of experiences and concerns into its purview.[58]

• FEMINIST ETHICS AND MODERN JEWISH THOUGHT•

These preliminary feminist questions have been directed towards Buber, Levinas and Fackenheim's thought and are a prolegomena to a deeper conversation between the disciplines of modern Jewish thought, feminism and Jewish feminism. Before finally appraising how modern Jewish thought might contribute to the transformation of feminist and Jewish feminist ethics, it is helpful to re-assess how a dialogue with feminism and Jewish feminism might impact modern Jewish thought.

I initially surveyed several key streams of feminist ethics as possible entry points into a dialogue with modern Jewish philosophy. These streams included existential feminist ethics as exemplified by Simone de Beauvoir, feminine and maternal ethics, radical feminist ethics, psychoanalysis and French feminist thought as voiced by Irigaray and Cixous, and post-modern feminist thought. Each of these approaches has contributed insights and critiques that have led to more specific interrogations of each thinker considered.

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[58] There is a strong correlation between my argument here and that which is advanced by Iris Marion Young in her essay "Impartiality and the Civic Public." Young argues that it is our understanding of the civil public itself that needs to be reformulated as heterogeneous. She concludes, this "heterogeneous public asserts that the only way to ensure that public life will not exclude persons and groups which it has excluded in the past is to give specific recognition to the disadvantage of those groups and bring their specific histories into the public" (1987:76).

Feminine and Maternal Ethics: Gilligan, Ruddick and Held

Reading modern Jewish philosophy in light of feminine and maternal ethics complicates our understanding of how moral discourses are gendered and how gender plays out in these narratives. For example, Carol Gilligan's work emphasizes the problem of ethical systems that are androcentric. Her particular critique of Kantian, rights-based, deontological ethical systems in her articulation of women's affective and particularistic modes of moral reasoning highlights only one of the ways in which masculinist ethical positions structure moral discourses.[59] This in turn begs the question of how we might want to speak of the gendering of moral discourses and whether or not merely describing cultural narratives of sexual difference does not in turn serve to concretize them. Virginia Held's critical opposition between conventionally masculine contract-based ethics that are particularly suited to the public sphere and feminine mother-child modeled ethics that are more functional in the private sphere draws attention to the ways in which public experiences are privileged in western philosophical discourses and that this valuation is replicated in the methods and content of moral reasoning. This analysis is particularly helpful for delving more deeply into the question of Judaism's traditionally gendered distinctions between public and private obligations and authority. Sara Ruddick's identification of the goals of mothering—preservation, growth and social acceptability—as ideal modes of moral reasoning for men and women, calls for an examination of relationship between values, goals and decision-making in modern Jewish philosophical discourses.

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[59] See Young, 1987, for a helpful overview of Gilligan's care-based ethic as the critical basis for problematizing liberal emancipatory political and moral theory.

The parallels between feminine and maternal ethics and modern Jewish thought are considerable. In her essay "Dependency and Vulnerability: Jewish and Feminist Existentialist Constructions of the Human," Leora Batnitzky ably argues that Levinas and Buber (alongside Rosenzweig), share many philosophical arguments with some expressions of feminine and maternal ethics (which she discusses under the larger category of feminist philosophies of care). Jointly held tenets include a description of the self "who is not wholly autonomous but who is dependent on others and responsive to the vulnerability of others," that ethics and responsibility "emerge" from that dependence and vulnerability, and further share the same language in describing this dependence and response to vulnerability "as 'feminine' in character, and in fact as a kind of mothering" (2004:128). How should we understand these parallels?

One possible entry point is to consider how reading feminine and maternal ethics in conjunction with modern Jewish philosophical texts invites a further analysis of how Judaism has been constructed as feminine in western discourses. Feminine and maternal ethics exaggerate what has been identified as feminine in western culture. Along the lines of Aviva Cantor's analysis of the effects of patriarchy on Jewish life, one might think about reading the effects of patriarchy on modern Jewish thought. Cantor argues that "the experience of Jews under patriarchy," as a "marginal and beleaguered minority," "paralleled those of women, as did their survival fantasies, and value system" (1995:3). Cantor explains that the female value system "that stresses cooperation, altruism, mutuality and interdependence, and an emphasis on relationships, emotionalism and compassion, reverence for life, conflict resolution through consensus, and non-violence" are precisely those values that Jews developed under threat under patriarchy to develop

and maintain social cohesion (1995:4). Judaism therefore developed a reformed patriarchy that depended on a female value system, which is in turn institutionalized in Halakha, which is ultimately enacted in Jewish community. If this female value system is, as Cantor suggests, expressed in Jewish values and moral strategies, then modern Jewish thought, as emerging from the Jewish tradition, also reproduces these values. Indeed, Levinas' critical challenge to "virility" as a mode of thinking and acting in the world, both Buber and Levinas' emphasis on relationship, and Fackenheim's understanding of the interdependence of Jewish community and its future survival, can be seen in this light.

From the point of view of the praxis of marginalized and vulnerable groups, the exclusion of voice and experience is intimately bound up with that marginalization and vulnerability. When women's voices and women's experiences are the starting point of ethical reflection we necessarily reformulate and broaden our account of ethical subjectivity. We begin to, as Ruddick suggests, "reason differently." By taking up a critical position in relation to gendered cultural narratives (and for modern Jewish thought this particularly refers to those emerging from the Jewish tradition and Jewish history), we can ask, how are these highly socialized images of women potentially *human* ethical models? For example, in Holocaust testimony, we often hear of how women formed surrogate families in the camps. Myrna Goldenberg quotes a German-Jewish survivor of Auschwitz who explained that these adopted kinship ties were:

> the best way to survive. You needed others who helped you with food
> or clothing or just advice or sympathy to surmount all the hardship
> you encountered during all those many months and years of
> incarceration. (1998:337)

These surrogate relationships are characterized—often depending on the age of the women—as mother-daughter, sister-sister, and grandmother-granddaughter.

Scholars have argued that female inmates of camps were more likely to forge

such relationships with other women (and assumed that relationship towards men

when they were able to) than their male counterparts. Goldenberg concludes that

Holocaust testimony illustrates that women were more likely to form helping

relationships than men, in observing that "it is difficult to find consistent evidence

of men's caring about one another to the extent that women did" (1998:337).

Although this claim has more recently been challenged by Holocaust historians who

have located narratives about male relationships that also mirror familial

structures, the point that it is *familial* surrogate relationships were sought out and

developed is highly suggestive in light of feminine and maternal ethics.

How might modern Jewish philosophy respond to this historical analysis in

light of the claims of feminine and maternal ethics? Consider that the image here is

the assumption of responsibility for the specific and particular Other as a bond that,

once established, extends into the future. This is in contrast with Levinas' face-to-

face relation which is primordial and which continues beyond death, but cannot

recognize the particularity and specificity of the Other or Others, or the maternal

ethical model which focuses on nurturance. Here we have a model of relationship

that transforms future relations as ethical and bears its specific *and* universal

obligations into the future. This is similar to, but importantly different from,

Levinas' use of maternity as an exemplary ethical relationship. While maternity is a

powerful and compelling image of ethical relation, it would mean something very

different in another context. The signification of this description is altered if the

pregnancy is unwanted, dangerous to the mother's health, or abhorrent because it is

the result of rape. The choice of the women in the camps to forge relationships —

where inmates were deprived of virtually every human choice—similarly casts

Levinas' account in a very different light. It brings to mind that reproduction has not always been a happy choice for women. It ironically highlights the painful reality that women's reproductive, social, economic, and political ability to choose has been highly constrained.

Reading modern Jewish philosophical texts intertextually with and against the grain of feminine and maternal ethics accomplishes two things: first, by reading with the grain and locating ethical thinking that are consonant with feminine or maternal ethical models, it reveals how modern Jewish philosophers like Levinas and Buber do invoke culturally constructed narratives about women and gender. Second, by reading against the grain and seeing how feminine and maternal imagery can be problematic, it challenges us to think about the ways in which those accounts are inadequate, incomplete, or distortive and consider how those accounts might be enhanced by being spoken differently.

The models offered by feminine and maternal ethics, when held in conjunction with the exploration of the historical impact of gendered narratives on value systems and moral reasoning, invites the application of a very different type of analytical lens to the identification of the ethical thematics of modern Jewish thought. The features that emerge as a result of such an enquiry may allow modern Jewish thought to further articulate distinctions between its own rubrics and questions from those of other philosophical discourses.

Existentialist Feminist Ethics: Beauvoir

While feminine and maternal ethics provide the most interesting opportunities for the development of modern Jewish thought through creative and sometimes oppositional readings, Beauvoir's investigation clearly has straightforward

applications for modern Jewish ethical thought. The critical model of Jew as Other has proven to be exceptionally helpful in understanding the ways in which Judaism and Jews have been understood by the dominant non-Jewish cultures that were the historical contexts for Jewish life and how Jews have understood themselves in relation to those contexts. Modern Jewish thought, with its roots in the Jewish Enlightenment and the struggle for Jewish emancipation, has historically had to engage the question of Jewish life in the modern world and what it might mean to "normalize" Jewish life in relation to modernity. These historical questions have since developed into a sustained sociological analysis of Jew as Other that continue to frame modern Jewish philosophical discussions of the nature of Jewish life in the modern world.

Jewish feminist evaluations of Jewish women's experiences of being "doubly Other," as Jews and as women, have similarly become standard theoretical moves in the development of Jewish feminist analysis. Jewish lesbian feminists, alongside other feminists, have further articulated the phenomenon of being multiply Other, due to sexual orientation, race, class, and/or disability. Modern Jewish thought needs to be acutely aware of these multiple and overlapping experiences of otherness and must develop responses that speak to and seriously engage these experiences. As a discipline, it needs to consider how the construction of Jew as Other inadvertently reinscribes other forms of alterity. Particularly in regards to its relationship with traditional Jewish discourses, it needs to question its own position in light of feminist critiques of that tradition. When it fails to explicitly do so, its account is incomplete and distortive.

French Feminist Thought: Irigaray, Cixous

Alongside French feminist thinkers like Irigaray and Cixous, modern Jewish philosophers like Buber and Levinas suggest a very different interpretation of alterity than that to which Beauvoir subscribes. For Beauvoir, woman is constructed as Other. As all humans, irrespective of sex, are individual, autonomous thinking subjects, woman is Other only from the masculine perspective. Several French feminists who are working with psychoanalytic theory dispute this account. These feminist theorists argue that women are not only *perceived* as Other, they *are* Other. Like Levinas who argues that alterity carves up reality itself, such feminists argue that sexual difference must be targeted at the metaphysical level. One can therefore meaningfully speak of women's experiences as distinct from male experience. As such, descriptions of women's experiences necessarily challenge the phallogocentrism of male accounts. Since these accounts are inexorably bound up with the very constitution of one's subject position, undermining monological and monovocal masculinist frameworks entails a call for the radical transformation of society. Leora Batnitzky correctly observes that Jewish existentialists like Buber and Levinas (and Rosenzweig) thus have a "greater affinity with contemporary 'woman-centered' feminist philosophies and with feminist philosophies of care more particularly than they do with ... de Beauvoir's existentialism, which focus on the process of self-constitution" (2004:129). That being said, their formal interest in thinking about subjectivity as relational does not necessarily resolve their androcentric and masculinist accounts of subjectivity.

If we think about gendered writing and writing from the body as ways in which modern Jewish philosophical discourses can develop strategies for sustaining particularity in its ethical reflections, it is helpful to recall that an emphasis on

particularity is already present in the traditional Jewish sources that shape the contours of its ethical terrain. Nancy K. Levene observes in "Judaism's Body Politic" that

> it has become axiomatic that one of the edifying signatures of rabbinic Judaism, over against its Greek and Christian interlocutors in antiquity is its emphasis on forms of particularity, whether legal, historical, and geographical situatedness or simply "carnality," bodily experiences (2004:235).

Although the body was not similarly emphasized in ancient and medieval Jewish philosophy, and efforts to enunciate the systemic and universal qualities of Jewish philosophy tended to erode that accent on particularity, both embodiment and particularity remain hallmarks of Jewish practice, religious law and thought. This emphasis dovetails nicely with Cixous' analysis of voice, writing and the body. Redirected towards modern Jewish philosophy and Jewish traditional discourses, Cixous' thought prompts the related questions of *who* voices the particularity of the Other, in what ways is the Other's embodiment accordingly *displayed* rather than enacted, and finally how is the ensuing dislocation of subjectivity and specificity *deployed* within the ethical system? A focused reading of Cixous and Irigaray's thought in light of traditional Jewish emphases on particularity and embodiment challenges modern Jewish philosophy to re-examine its own discursive practices. More importantly such readings direct our attention towards resources within Judaism and modern Jewish philosophy that interrupt tendencies towards effacing particularity.

• DEVELOPING JEWISH FEMINIST ETHICS•

The final movements of this interdisciplinary conversation take place as a Jewish feminist response to the ethical thought of Martin Buber, Emanuel Levinas and Emil Fackenheim. How might Jewish feminist ethics be developed and enriched through a transformative dialogue with modern Jewish thought? My interest here is not to develop a systematic Jewish feminist ethic or to translate "normative" Jewish ethics into a feminist vernacular. Such an approach would place Jewish feminist ethics as apart from Jewish ethics or speak primarily to Jewish feminists instead with the Jewish community at large. Rather, I propose strategies for interrogating ethical claims such that Jewish feminist concerns and questions are disclosed as emerging from within the diversity of Jewish life and thought.

The strategic models proffered here are mutually grounded in Jewish feminist theory and activism, modern Jewish thought, feminist theory and ethics, and Jewish women's historical and contemporary experiences. Each model is voiced as an imperative and is framed as an example of a principle that is derived from the analysis of each thinker's ethics. The development of Jewish feminist ethics of relationship, alterity and presence are respectively elicited through an interrogation of the thought of Buber, Levinas and Fackenheim. Although each of the three models is a response to a particular thinker, they are self-referential, interdependent and most importantly, *constructive.*[60] They are constructive in two senses. First, from a feminist perspective, although there are real problems with each thinker's ethics, there are also real opportunities to be located in those ethics.

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[60] I am indebted to Rachel Adler, who after listening to one of my first conference presentations as a junior graduate student spoke to me about conceiving of my feminist analysis of post-Holocaust thought as constructive.

Working towards taking the best advantage of those opportunities, the principles suggested here build on common questions and themes that avail themselves of the resources offered by each of the disciplines that participate in this conversation. Second, because these models are organized through an intentional integration of implicated disciplines and experiences, and result from the effort to pinpoint opportunities for the development of Jewish feminist ethical strategies, these responses necessarily move beyond the scope of the original modern Jewish philosophical texts that generate them.

An Ethic of Relationship: Buber

The claim that an ethic of relationship should be an essential feature of Jewish feminist ethics is predicated on the evaluation that relationality is both ethically formative and theoretically provocative. It assumes that relationality is characteristic of both Jewish and feminist ethics. It is further based on the determination that a strategic emphasis on identifying and articulating relationality as an ethical paradigm within Jewish ethical discourses serves to demonstrate how Jewish feminist concerns and questions are internal to those discourses. Reading Buber as a Jewish feminist intertext contributes to the goal of developing a thick description of Jewish feminist ethics. Read provocatively, Buber's dialogical model raises questions about the theological implications of women's place in historical memory, the ethical constitution of community, and the problem of responding to competing ethical claims and the hazard of excluding Jewish law from Jewish feminist ethics.

Following Buber, an ethic of relationship must exhibit two features: First, that relationship must be recognized as transformative and dialogical. Dialogue is

required for ethics to move beyond metaphor into praxis. Buber argues that in entering into the I-Thou relationship one recognizes this responsibility for another. It is in this moment of genuine mutual relation that we are transformed. Second, that relationship itself compels ethical responsibility. The effect of the I-Thou relation continues to influence us even after the I-Thou moment has passed. From a feminist point of view, such an ethic rejects the instrumentalist and objectivist positions that have characterized western philosophical ethics. Significantly, because a dialogical ethic posits ethics as prior to autonomy, an ethic of relationship complicates accounts of moral agency.

For the Jewish feminist, Buber's greatest strength arguably lies in the correlation between interpersonal relationships and relationships with the divine. For Buber, human ethical relationships are prerequisite to relationship with God. The implications of such an ethical imperative are far reaching. From a Jewish feminist theological perspective, focusing on the link between human interpersonal relationships and human relationships with the divine, begs the question of how the Jewish tradition has placed women in the narrative accounts of those relationships. If Judaism is the lived expression of the historical experience of relationship with the divine, that experience is normatively recorded in Torah and Talmud, the traditional sacred texts of Judaism. Yet those androcentric texts tend to marginalize or silence Jewish women's experience of that relationship with God. In that Jewish law and Jewish ethics are articulated through the lens of an incomplete account of relationship with God, we need to acknowledge and render visible the presence of

women within that relationship.[61] Buber's enunciation of the link between human relationships and divine relationships is most apparently constructive in that such a correspondence necessarily refers our ethical reflections back onto interpersonal relations and compels a re-examination of those relationships in light of relationship with the divine. Can there be any stronger justification for encountering women, or any other marginalized or oppressed group, in a way that affirms their full humanity and dignity?

Buber's extension of his description of interpersonal relationships to his understanding of community as the site for ethical relationship holds a particular resonance for Jewish feminists. For Buber, community is the matrix of interpersonal relationships where each person is also in relationship to the divine as the living centre of community. Plaskow suggests that there are important parallels between Buber's conception of the connection between relationship, community and God, and feminist articulations of the role of community in feminist movements:

> The feminist experience of finding in community both a new sense of
> personal empowerment and mission and connection with its
> sustaining source may not be so different from the Israelite
> experience of discovering in community both a dawning national
> identity and a covenant with the God who gave it. In both cases,
> community is the location and vehicle for the experience of God and
> for the continuing enactment of the meaning (1991:158).

One of the effects of thinking about ethical relationship with humans as providing the model for relationship with the divine is to focus on the place of community in Jewish ethics. If community is both the "location and vehicle" of Jewish experiences of the divine, community—always in relation to its divine centre—must also be the

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[61] Part of the solution is to draw on the rich traditions that are already being explored by Jewish feminists as they critically investigate and reclaim women's place in Jewish history While Buber is not particularly helpful in addressing this issue, his emphasis on relationship with God points, in conjunction with Fackenheim's analysis of ethical responses to the Holocaust, towards a deeper consideration of the ethics of presence.

site in which feminist transformations must take place. In *Engendering*

Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics, Rachel Adler argues

> That gender categories and distinctions have changed in the past tells
> us nothing about what sorts of changes we ought to make in the
> future. These changes must be negotiated in conversation where
> participants invoke and reexamine the values and priorities
> enunciated in Jewish tradition in the light of current needs, injuries,
> or aspirations demanding to be addressed. (1999:xv)

Adler's statement is about the future ethical constitution of Jewish community. A

definition of community that does not account for the diversity of participants' needs

and experiences rests on a contextual fallacy, an unreal description of how that

community is constituted that leads to incomplete and erroneous ethical narratives.

Buber's idea that community depends on relationship between persons who are also

each in relationship to God as the living centre of community seems to fit very well

with Adler's argument here that changes must be negotiated in conversation with

the participants of that community. Actual dialogue, carried out in community, and

affirming relationship with God, is essential to the dialogical relation. We need to

think of the multiplicity of Jewish feminist critiques that need to participate in such

a transformational dialogue. In her article "Rethinking Jewish Feminist

Identity/ies: What Difference Can Feminist Theory Make," Laura Levitt argues that

there is an urgent need to allow for instability in Jewish feminist identity in the

construction of Jewish feminist ethics (1996:362). I would suggest that Buber's

model of a community that is made up of particular persons in relation to each other

and to God is necessarily diverse and allows for instability in both personal identity

and communal identity. Buber's insistence on the particularity and specificity of the

participants of the meeting is helpful here in that his notion of relationship, and

particularly relationship in community, eschews both a monological description of

relationship and a monolithic description of community. The recognition of the

specificity and complexity of identities present in the community and within particular individuals demands a more comprehensive description of the problematics. We need to cultivate a fine sensitivity to the variety of ways that persons sometimes joyously and sometimes painfully encounter Judaism.

By explicitly placing the ethical model of relationality at the centre of his description, Buber's thought assumes the highest ethical ideals. It follows that if one is encountering the Other in the ways that Buber prescribes (i.e. reciprocally, with solicitude for the Other, etc.), the ideal of relationship must become enacted in reality. Buber however, is not explicit in describing what those ethical standards might be. This is the problem for any practical ethic that would be based on his thought. It is in practice that we begin to recognize the competing claims that seemingly demand conflicting responses. Buber doesn't seem to be able to conceive that legitimate competing claims might arise in community. As such, he fails to guide us in sorting out equally, honestly, and passionately held moral convictions.

Buber's disengagement with Jewish law also attenuates the close connections between theory and praxis that are central to Jewish and feminist ethics. Jewish ethics has historically been characterized by a tension between ideal standards of ethical behaviour and the more realistic standards of the everyday world.[62] The combination of scripture, jurisprudence and narrative that come together in Jewish ethical discourses results in a much more complex (and concrete) account of ethical praxis than Buber develops. Feminist ethics are similarly concerned with providing richly detailed polyvocal accounts of injustice and ethical response. Jewish feminist ethics must respond to the specificity and diversity of

Jewish life as it is experienced. As such, a Jewish feminist ethic of relationality

that must speak in a feminist voice and exhibit a clear genealogy with Jewish ethics

needs to consider the effects of Buber's disconnection from the Jewish legal tradition

in terms of theory and praxis. Although I would not suggest that Halakha must be

the sole basis of a Jewish feminist ethic, an ethic that proceeds as if Halakha is not

at issue asks us to ignore and not mention the rather large pink elephant in the

middle of the living room. Jewish law is the source of many of the problems and

values that Jewish feminism must address. But is it helpful or prudent to elide

those challenges? Even the most progressive Jewish communities understand that

Jewish law is integral to the Jewish tradition. Rejecting the contemporary authority

of specific laws, as Reform Judaism has done in the case of divorce laws that are

deemed to be ethically abhorrent, or interpreting laws in innovative ways, as in the

case of Conservative Judaism's decision to allow women to be counted in the

minyan, may have resulted in the deepening schisms between different

denominational communities but these decisions are still participating in a Jewish

legal ethical discourse. Jewish feminists are similarly contributing to these

discourses, as evident in the ways in which virtually every Jewish community has

come to address the challenges that Jewish feminists have raised in terms of Jewish

law. Buber is helpful in that he provides an alternate entry point into the

discussion of how Jewish ethics are constituted. But in uncoupling his ethics from

religious law, Buber declines to provide us with resources for engaging the Law and

further does not offer us sufficiently imperative flexible tools for developing

responses within the legal system to specific moral quandaries *occasioned* by the

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[62] For example, see Freund for his discussion of the historical development of Jewish ethical responses to the

law. This may not be a problem for Buber, but it is clearly a problem for traditional communities that respect the authority of religious law and base their ethical behaviour and evaluations of ethical behaviour on that law. Still, in articulating an ethic that is dialogical, transformative and which affirms responsibility, Buber offers a keystone for the development of Jewish feminist ethics. However, such an ethic must also be supported by principles that provide more concrete guidelines for obligation to the Other.

An Ethic of Alterity: Levinas

Alterity is indicated as a promising strategic principle for Jewish feminist ethics on the grounds that it, like relationality, is indexed by Jewish ethics and feminist thought and furnishes a richer account of ethical exigency and praxis. While Levinas' face-to-face encounter is reminiscent of Buber's I-Thou relation, Levinas' emphasis on the alterity of the Other results in an asymmetrical relation in which responsibility is compelled instead of being mutual. Thus, Levinas structures this encounter in terms of its power to transform both the individual's and the state's natural tendency to appropriate or efface those who are different. An ethic of alterity involves the recognition that we cannot make the same types of epistemological or ethical claims about the Other as those we make about the self. The alterity of the Other requires a different kind of ethical response. An ethic of alterity intentionally privileges the Other. When we think about our obligation to the Other as the "poor, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger" as Levinas asks, we are engaged in an ethic of alterity.

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questions of lying and deception (1990: 81-103)

An ethic of alterity bolsters Jewish feminist arguments for gender equity within the tradition, but also provides a deeper and broader challenge. It is not sufficient to merely have a more complete description of injustice; the thick account that I argue Jewish feminist ethics must articulate is enhanced through a close reading of Levinas' description of alterity as the model for ethical relationship. An ethic of alterity compels us to encounter the Other in all of her faces and to consider our will to totalize the Other. We need an ethical model that can respond to injustice, both by addressing contemporary issues and by establishing principles whereby we can forestall future injustice. It is here that a Jewish feminist ethic is well served by Levinas' statement from *Totality and Infinity* where he clarifies the exigencies of responding to injustice. He argues:

> The *thou* is posited in front of a *we*. To be a *we* is not to "jostle" one another or get together around a common task. The presence of the face, the infinity of the other, is a destituteness, a presence of the third party (that is, of the whole of humanity which looks at us), and a command that commands commanding. (1995a:213)

A Jewish feminist ethic must invoke this command to command on several methodological and theoretical levels. I would like to suggest five principles that are central to a Jewish feminist ethic of alterity.

First, the command of the Other is based not on a hierarchical ontology but is in itself a phenomenologically described ethical imperative that is constituted by alterity. The language of commandment developed here must be understood as distinct from, and incompatible with, the language of domination and totalization. The language that is used must go even further, it must disrupt totalizing master-narratives —including those that speak of and to gender. Adler reminds us of the totalizing effect of differential discourses about gender when she summarizes that to:

> polarize by gender is to deny that, bone for bone and synapse for synapse, human beings are much more alike than unlike. Gender variations are meaningful only within the context of human sameness. Social strategies that exaggerate women's difference end by attempting to expunge it. Women must be subordinated or annexed. Their difference must be hidden under veils and segregated in women's quarters or ignored by law and policy and therefore expelled from the public sector. The extensive justification, legislation, and enforcement these acts require creates a masculine discourse about women's difference whose presence replaces that of actual women. (1999:6)

I would suggest that the goal is not to silence gender, but to appreciate the experience of sexual difference in terms of particularity instead of as a polarizing discursive practice that totalizes the Other. The face-to-face relationship recalls that our encounter with the Other is with a specific person, but fails to affirm the particularity of the Other's own face, or recognize her specific needs and aspirations. But with Levinas' discussion of justice in *Otherwise Than Being*, the need to compare "incomparables" comes to the fore, and asserts that particularity must not be subsumed into instrumentalizing discourses. If Levinas' analysis of justice and ethics as first philosophy is followed through to its logical conclusion, it must necessarily disrupt gendered discourses that privilege the male to the detriment of the female.

Second, the command of the Other demands that ethics truly be recognized as first philosophy. Levinas' advocacy of ethics as first philosophy is both a political and ethical imperative. Ethics must precede all other modes of philosophy. It is precisely western philosophy's emphasis on ontology instead of ethics that has permitted the atrocities of the 20th, and now the 21st century and which underlie gender narratives that erode women's subject positions. As a feminist I would argue that the feminist corollary to this dictum is the assertion that philosophy and ethics

are further violated when women and other marginalized groups are excluded from the ethical discourse. If ethics is first philosophy, ethics is also first feminism.

Third, the command of the Other calls for an attentiveness to the narratives of those who have been excluded from our collective memory. Our behaviour, our ethics are grounded in our understanding of our history. My focus has very much been on the experiences of women in the Holocaust as memories that need to be brought forward in framing our discussions of ethics after the Holocaust. One of the most compelling statements about how women's memories of the Holocaust need to be understood as essential to post-Holocaust ethical discourses can be found in Susan E. Nowak's, "In a World Shorn of Color: Toward a Feminist Theology of Holocaust Testimonies." Nowak points to how experience as the basis of feminist theory and reflection about the Holocaust and how survivor testimony is particularly illustrative of Jewish ethical ideals that must participate in post-Holocaust ethics:

> Those experiences, and not abstract theories, shape feminist
> understandings of this catastrophic event. At the same time, these
> experiences illumine the meaning and content of concepts which
> inform the relationship between *tikkun atzmi* [healing of the self] and
> *tikkun Olam* within survivor testimony, e.g. survival, compassion,
> solidarity, and morality. Consequently, survivor experience is the
> paradigm of our efforts to define ethics and construct models of moral
> behavior after the Shoah (1999:34)

A thick description of Jewish feminist ethics that proceeds from the memories of both men and women allows us not only to acknowledge that memories can be distinctly gendered and that certain memories have been privileged at the expense of others. It also allows us to open up the discourse to include other experiences that have been marginalized or silenced.

Fourth, the command of the Other does not conflate or efface particularity in its effort to identify common experiences of injustice. Feminists   often   focus   on

commonality in their efforts to identify systematic oppression. For example, in the Talmud women are "studied" under the category of *Nashim*—the category of women. The absence of a similar category for men highlights the fact that the entire Talmud is written from a male normative position. Levinas warns against even noticing the colour of the Other's eyes in order to truly encounter the Other in the face to face relationship. Such normative descriptions, *even when invoked by feminists*, are particularly prone to the types of thinking that lead to the totalization of the Other. Concretely, this means that a Jewish feminist ethic must be wary of the categories that perpetuate the (anti-ethical) Otherness of persons within a group. Jewish feminists in particular need to be concerned- about how their ethical speech renders certain persons invisible within Jewish feminist dialogues. Sephardic women and their specific experiences are still profoundly marginalized within Jewish feminist scholarship and activism. In different contexts, liberal Jewish feminists and traditional Jewish feminists also experience marginalization when certain dialogues are framed by the position one takes in relation to traditional observance and the Law. Similarly, the specific issues raised by normative heterosexuality in the Jewish tradition lead to experiences of injustice that are often not discerned by heterosexual, and particularly married Jewish feminists. Finally, North American Jewish feminists need to be wary of the ways in which North Americans often dominate Jewish feminist discourses. Each of these instances of difference, and there are of course many more, require that Jewish feminists ethically consider how to disable barriers, remove blinders, and disrupt fantasies about shared identity such that we take up a critical position in relation to our own privilege within Jewish feminist discourses.

Fifth, the command of the Other is addressed to community, not only to individuals. Jewish ethics are communal even when they are personal. Jewish feminist ethics must similarly represent that communal framework. For example, the ongoing scandal of the Agunah who is unable to obtain a divorce is a communal problem that must be addressed by a communal ethic. Under Jewish law the husband must grant the divorce by ritually presenting the *Get* (legal document that outlines the condition of the divorce). Without a *Get*, neither the husband nor the wife may legally remarry under current interpretations and applications of Jewish law.[63] However should either engage in sexual relations with other partners and/or have children with another partner, the wife is subject to particular legal consequences because adultery is defined by the wife's legal status. Only the wife's extramarital offspring has the legal status of being a *momzer* (legal bastard, product of an adulterous union). There are numerous examples worldwide of husbands withholding *Gets* in order to acquire favourable custody and alimony agreements from their wives in civil proceedings. This is a modern problem because the traditional communal strategies for dealing with obdurate husbands no longer apply in secular societies where the bet din (rabbinic court) has no temporal authority. The ethical challenge of the Agunah cannot be resolved on a case-by-case basis or be argued on the grounds of individual injustice. Justice for the Other must be accomplished in community.

A Jewish feminist ethic of alterity needs to be attentive to the asymmetrical nature of ethical relations while being sensitive to diverse particularities within

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[63] In Sephardic culture, polygyny is still officially permitted though rarely permitted in current practice. One must add "rarely" because there are atypical examples of rabbis allowing men to marry a second wife in order to avoid issuing a *Get*.

community. Although an ethic of alterity clarifies the dynamics of ethical obligation specified by an ethic of relationship, and further highlights the areas in which the principle of alterity can reveal lacunae in our ethical accounts, a Jewish feminist ethic must more precisely outline ethical praxis within the context of a lived community. An ethic of presence, as indicated by a feminist critique of Emil Fackenheim's thought further deepens and enriches the development of a Jewish feminist ethic.

An Ethic of Presence: Fackenheim

Fackenheim asks us to think about Jewish identity and its relationship to one's ethical orientation after the Holocaust. Specifically, he challenges us to replace ourselves within our Jewish identity. In 1968 Fackenheim wrote:

> Today, no Jew, however deeply involved in universally human
> concerns, can go on pretending that he is a man-in-general. The
> universal and the particular are inextricably intertwined; he cannot
> be present at Selma and Hiroshima unless he is present at Auschwitz
> and Jerusalem. How then could a Jewish theologian go on
> perpetuating the unreal categories of "universalism" and
> "particularism"? How could he avoid the question of what it means,
> after Auschwitz and Jerusalem, to be a Jewish witness to the world?
> (1970:4)

After the Holocaust Jews must respond to ethically commanding events, but they cannot be present for others, without first being present in their own history.

To be "present" at Selma, Hiroshima, Auschwitz and Jerusalem is to ethically respond to the events that each of these places represent *in terms of the ethical imperatives that proceed from those events*. When Fackenheim argues that the events of the Holocaust thrust the Jewish people "into the flesh-and-blood history of men, women, and children" (1994:33) he is arguing not only that Jews are thrust into past history but into present history as well. Jewish identity, as shaped

by a communal history is at issue whenever one is confronted by injustice because that communal memory is a memory of injustice. To be a "Jewish witness to the world" is to reframe the ethical imperative *"Do not do unto others what you would not have done unto you"* into *"I/You/We will not do unto others what was done unto me."* Every universal position is ultimately particular; every particular position is ultimately universal.

Fackenheim asks me as a Jew to stand at Auschwitz in order to be authentically Jewish. From many Jewish perspectives, standing at Auschwitz requires that I also be present in other moments/spaces where injustices occur. This command recalls the Jewish ethical imperative to care for the stranger in our "midst" because "we too were strangers in Egypt." For a large segment of north-American Jews this demand is seemingly uncomplicated and self-evident. Jews have been disproportionately active in civil rights, feminist, peace and various other social justice movements. Clearly, for many Jews in Canada and the United States, "never again" refers not only to the attempted genocide of the Jewish people, it also applies to all other forms of oppression and victimization. More problematically, how then to understand the history of Israel and the Palestinian people? If standing at Auschwitz also involves standing at Jerusalem, does not standing at Gaza become even more fraught with ethical peril? I do not want to equate the question of the history of Israel's treatment of the Palestinian people with the Holocaust any more than I wish to make comparisons with Selma or Hiroshima. Such equations are obscene and distort the particular experiences of each. However, the ethical anguish that many Israeli and non-Israeli Jews feel at witnessing the ongoing violence between the State of Israel and the Palestinians cannot help but also be understood in terms of the biblical ethical demand to remember that we too "were

strangers in Egypt." If a Jew must willingly stand at Selma and Hiroshima, how can a Jew stand at Auschwitz and not at Gaza? What would it mean to do so? The horrors of Auschwitz are invoked by those who voice competing demands. Some invoke Auschwitz in order to safeguard Israel's security. They point to suicide bombers as yet another attack on the future survival of the Jewish people. Others invoke Auschwitz in condemning the internment of generations of Palestinians as an injustice that should be unthinkable to a people who had suffered the deportations and eventual "liquidation" of the Warsaw Ghetto. The global tendency to conflate criticism of Israeli State actions with anti-Semitism and anti-Zionist rhetoric within pro-Palestinian activism, and the general unwillingness to examine the particular political and historical realities that shape the history of this conflict, has so dominated the discourse surrounding these issues that it seems to be a Sisyphean task to try to reconfigure its interlocution. But such a reconfiguration is essential to an ethic of presence. An ethic of presence sometimes requires standing on a precarious precipice.

An ethic based on the paradigm of presence must reflect not only the ethical significance of presence but complicate accounts of presence such that those who have been rendered invisible are recognized as present. Since Judith Plaskow's influential *Standing Again At Sinai*, the rhetoric of presence cannot help but be heard as ironic. It is one of the painful paradoxes of Jewish feminism that in Biblical accounts of the giving of the covenant at Sinai, arguably the most important moment in the constitution of Israel's identity and community, women were not addressed. That later talmudic accounts insist on women's presence does not mitigate the problem because the problem is not merely the words that describe this exclusion but the myriad ways in which the Jewish tradition consistently and

cumulatively reinforces its own androcentrism. How has the construction of women's agency within these root experiences, or more precisely the *memories* of these root experiences contributed to that matrix of interconnected descriptions, prescriptions and proscriptions that continue to marginalize women within Jewish cultures? How have these root experiences continued to project the fantasy of an economy of being where the masculine is normative and the feminine is Other?

Until this point, I have focused on examples that illustrate how modern Jewish thought might enrich Jewish feminist ethics when applied to contemporary issues. With my last example, I'd like to reinforce my argument that women's history should be integrated as a category of ethical analysis.

Modern Jewish philosophical responses to the Holocaust are grounded in the history of the Holocaust. A Jewish feminist ethic of presence that proceeds from modern Jewish thought must not only address the Holocaust, it must do so in a way that recognizes women's presence within that history. Our memory of the Holocaust is very much the memory of men. When those of us who did not live through the Holocaust think of *Kristalnacht*, the terrible night of Shattered glass, we think of the destruction of Jewish property, the burning of synagogues, the broken glass which gives that night its name. But if you read accounts of *Kristalnacht* by women, there is a very different memory. It is a memory of a night of flying feathers. Women remember how mattresses and blankets were torn from their homes and shredded, with a blizzard of white feathers falling like snow, softly in the night air.

My memory, learned from history books and countless community programs is a memory of communal destruction. Women's memory is a memory of personal violation, the violation of their homes and everything they had ever done to make their homes places of comfort and security for their loved ones. Does it matter that

our memory has been shaped to exclude women? I believe that this is not merely a matter of different gendered historical perspectives. Our historical memory has the quality of chiaroscuro, darkness and light, we see only the light which illuminates the history of men. The responses that proceed from that memory are equally distorted and flawed. What can we learn from the night of flying feathers? That an ethical response to the Holocaust must not only address the memory of communal destruction and individual assaults and murder, it must also address the profound trauma of having one's home violated, of having everything that had ever symbolized family, safety, comfort, security, be defiled. We must hear this history as a Midrash that retells the story of *Kristallnacht*. The night of flying feathers teaches that we require a "thick" description of injustice that establishes a discursive space where personal narrative ever expands our understanding of the dynamics of injustice. Such a description allows us to open up the discourse to include other experiences that have been marginalized or silenced.

A Jewish feminist ethic of presence requires that we stand in relationship to persons and places where we were not permitted to be present and where we were not acknowledged, where we, and others, suffered and suffer injustice. It depends on the ethical principle of relationship that we are in obligation to each other. It is further grounded in an ethic of alterity, where it is the Other that commands ethical responsibility and justice.

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I began by speaking of the need for ethical attentiveness to the disciplines of modern Jewish philosophy, feminism and Jewish feminism in the development of this project. Reciprocal attentiveness involves not only listening to the other but

also in responding. This response constructively disturbs the boundaries between these disciplines. But it is appropriate that the "the circle of communication" expands as new audiences recognize additional insights into the nature of ethical relationship. This task becomes a type of translation in reception, where in listening attentively to these thinkers we hear opportunities for our own concerns. To do so is not to do violence to their thought, instead it is to open up the boundaries of how those texts can be heard and respoken.

This project is wide ranging in that it involves a reconfiguration of not only the purview of these disciplines but also of their relationships to each other. My key points, that this project must be interdisciplinary, that women's history must be an essential component, and that modern Jewish philosophy is the appropriate site for this response, invite further exploration of the ways in which this ethic must be developed.

I think of other histories where women and other marginalized groups have enacted change. In her prose-poem, "My Black Mothers and Sisters or on Beginning a Cultural Autobiography," Bernice Johnson Reagon writes:

> When you look at Black American history, you see skirmishes and
> battles in the war. In between are mending periods, even some
> slipping back periods...[But] keep in mind the natural flow of things.
> Waves go out. When they come in there is always a rock-back. It is
> not the same wave in the same place and the sands have shifted to
> never again be the same. (1982:82)

The conversation that this project enters into is historical; occurring against the backdrop of the particular intellectual and cultural histories of the disciplines of western philosophy, modern Jewish philosophy, feminism and Jewish feminism. It is a conversation that until now has sometimes been characterized by battles; but more often by silences. It is my hope that it will be a viable conversation; one which engages the imaginations of many committed persons. If this conversation is part of

a wave, I hope that through the participation of many that it will not be "the same wave in the same place."

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