

Levinas Between Monotheism and Cosmotheism

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We are now, I think, in the midst of a sea change in Levinas interpretation. Increasingly in the course of the last third of the twentieth century, Levinas's phenomenological ethics was seen as a resource for intellectuals to protest a certain kind of, shall we say, methodological naturalism in philosophy. Not only scientific positivism but also existential phenomenology with its apparent emphasis on immanence¹ were feared to be terminally infected with neopagan or proto-fascist elements. If the result of these movements was an embrace of (or a failure to adequately critique) modern secularized civilization and its bureaucratized projects — problematic because such a dimension of modernity was a necessary but not sufficient condition of the Holocaust, as Zygmunt Bauman has argued² — then the putative solution was to bend the stick toward the opposite pole. Scholars could invoke either the broadly monotheistic overtones of Levinas's discourse of the Infinite or the specifically Judaic texts of the Bible and Talmud that Levinas saw himself as translating into philosophy, in the hope that these acts of citation would persuade scholars' audiences that a return to monotheism or the Judaeo-Christian tradition could get the West past its embarrassing century-long flirtation with human-made mass death. This

reading of Levinas would be coherent with a broader trend in American thought from the 1950s onward that would include Abraham Joshua Heschel, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Martin Luther King Jr., wherein secularism (especially as evidenced by communism) is the problem, religion is the solution.³

Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century — whether we date it as beginning with the second intifada, the 2000 United States presidential election, the 9/11 attacks, or the beginning of hostilities in Iraq — the Levinasian model has come to be seen by some as holding less promise than might have at first appeared. A search for the reason why this has occurred seems to suggest monotheism as the culprit, insofar as monotheism necessarily takes on a certain political form that goes against Levinas's description of God as the Infinite. One might narrate this shift briefly as follows. In his 1983 article "Jewish Existence and Philosophy," Adriaan Peperzak could comment on Levinas's association of the otherwise-than-being with divine glory by writing, "Who would not recognize this God as the God of Moses and the prophets?"⁴ The unwritten answer to this rhetorical question was "No one; Levinas's God is the God of the Hebrew Bible." By 2002, when Howard Caygill published *Levinas and the Political*, the answer to Peperzak's question had become, surprisingly, "Levinas." Caygill there patiently describes the way in which for Levinas, the otherwise-than-being, i.e. illeity, is unrecognizable, precisely because it is excluded from being and thus from any and all religious and political systems (including those of Moses and the prophets).⁵ It is for this reason, Caygill argues, that Levinas's remarks about the State of Israel are so frustrating for interpreters and border on incoherence. On the one hand, Israel becomes for Levinas the figure for that which is inspired by that which is otherwise than being; it is "a State where the prophetic moral code [*la morale prophétique*] and the idea of its peace will have to be incarnated [*devra s'incarner*]."⁶ On the other hand, Israel undoubtedly and irrevocably *is*, and it is a place and a people held up as exemplary by a philosopher who describes subjectivity as "called to leave . . . the concept of the ego [and] its extension in the people" and, thus, presumably, also called

to leave behind notions of autochthonous places (*OB* 185/*AE* 232–33). A politics rooted in a God articulated in terms of an inapparent illicity thereby turns on a Jewish identity that is “at once both diasporic and tied to a nation-state.”⁷ Such a politics is therefore doomed, for as soon as a monotheistic politics — the articulation of a politics inspired by that which is otherwise than being — comes on the scene, it is already ripe for critique in the name of . . . monotheism.⁸

Caygill solves this problem by relegating monotheism to a memory that can become, by virtue of its distance from the present, purely an edifying discourse as opposed to an ideology that risks an explosive politics. In his closing analysis of Levinas’s talmudic readings on fire, Caygill reads Levinas as “advocating” in a 1963 essay on Hanukkah “a withdrawal from the blaze of glory and its cycle of consuming, protecting and avenging fire in order to find the glory of the presence in an ember or ‘a little flask of pure oil’ that keeps alight ‘our failing memory’ for the future.”⁹ Monotheism: little, cute, sentimental, and now promising 100 percent less risk of violence and ethnocentrism! *Now* how much would you pay? Caygill is not alone in thinking that monotheism is a key problem in Levinas’s thought. More recently, in an article in *Political Theory*, Simon Critchley explicitly cites “the idea that political community is, or has to be, monotheistic” as one of the five problems of Levinasian politics; for him, this affects not only the issue of Israel on the global stage, but also what he describes as “the neoimperial project of the US government [which] is intrinsically linked to a Zionist vision.”¹⁰ For Critchley, only a nonmonotheistic reading of Levinas can produce a Levinasian politics that recognizes “the people in their irreducible plurality.”¹¹

There is something wrong with these critiques, but it is not that they say anything that is *prima facie* false. (Even Critchley’s diagnosis of the either covert or overt Zionism of contemporary American governance — highly unsavory on the surface — is evidenced by the recent remarks of former Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith about the roots of his political vision in the death of his father’s siblings in the Holocaust.)¹² It is rather that these critiques are imprecise

about what monotheism is, largely because Levinas himself did not offer an account of anything opposed to monotheism except a vaguely described “paganism” or “atheism.” In Levinas, these words are not philosophically or historically grounded concepts; their force is rhetorical. Even more distressingly, Levinas’s own accounts of monotheism are usually quite thin; it seems to be defined only as the voice of Israel — “the monotheism which the Jewish Bible brought to humanity” (*DF* 25/*DL* 44) — which, when heard, produces fraternity. The articulation of this voice is both what Levinas does and what Levinas analyzes. Monotheism is thus ethics. But in assuming this longstanding position in liberal Jewish thought,¹³ Levinas also makes this equation between monotheism and ethics ahistorical. He assumes that monotheism is *naturally* ethical when one could easily show that this equation had to be *historically produced* through philosophical labor, most notably that of Hermann Cohen. Indeed, I know of only one place where Levinas’s deployment of “monotheism” is significantly more complex. It can be found in the analysis of Neoplatonism that is repeated both in “From The One to the Other” and “Philosophy and Transcendence”: “Neoplatonism, exalting that consummate unity beyond being and knowing, *better* than being and knowing, offered the monotheism that conquered Europe in the first centuries of our era an itinerary and stations capable of corresponding to mystical tastes and the needs of salvation.” (*EN* 135; *AT* 10) Therefore, monotheism can conquer in a way that forgets the illeity of its ground and requires supplementation from outside, although to be sure, Neoplatonism only gets the form of the ground as beyond being correct, and misses out on the concern for neighbor-love and justice that is original to monotheism.¹⁴

So scholars on Levinas know that they have the right to think of monotheism in a more nuanced manner, but Levinas’s own tendency to think of monotheism as purely redemptive, and of consisting of nothing but other-centered ethics, leads scholars writing on Levinas to analyze monotheism simplistically. What is at stake in this word, anyway? the number of divine beings? the nature of the divine? the value and

ground of empirically observed nature? Claims about the role of monotheism in Levinas must depend upon an account of monotheism's history, as well as a history of the enemies that monotheism has conjured up for itself. But as I will argue in the remainder of this essay, when such an account is given — turning to the work of the Egyptologist Jan Assmann — Levinas as monotheist shows itself to be only half of the picture. Levinas is both a representative of monotheism and what Assmann has termed “cosmotheism”; or perhaps better, Levinasian thought mixes the two in such a way that it ends up somewhere between the two poles. But this is not simply an argument of Levinasian apologetics; indeed, I would like to think that given my frustration with Levinas's vague use of religious categories, it does not even rise to that level. But admittedly, it is also an apologetic argument, because I close with some remarks attesting that this space between monotheism and cosmotheism is not simply something that can be found in Levinas. It also exists in what one might ordinarily think of as a purely monotheist text, namely the Hebrew Bible, as well as in what one might ordinarily think of as a purely cosmotheist text, one from the Ramesside period of ancient Egypt (between the thirteenth and eleventh centuries BCE). It is in such a turn to the ancients that I believe the role of religion in Levinas becomes clarified outside the bounds of the Jewish and Christian traditions, and outside the contemporary politicization of a “Judaean-Christian tradition,” as the articulation of both a conjunction and a disjunction between the visible world and its invisible transcendent ground.¹⁵ There is manifestation, a conjunction between the visible and the invisible that seems pagan or cosmotheist. But there are also good philosophical reasons to avoid predicating anything of that which manifests itself, a disjunction that is closer to monotheism.¹⁶

MONOTHEISM AND COSMOTHEISM

What makes monotheism problematic has little to do with the number of figures that are or are not seen as divine beings; the debates about pantheism in the seventeenth century had pointed out that the notion

of one supreme God was not foreign to polytheistic cultures. Rather, as Jan Assmann has written, it has to do with the distinction between true and false religion, what he has termed the “Mosaic distinction.” Even though scholarship can date such a distinction between true monotheistic religion and false religion to the Egyptian ruler Akhenaten (who, in the fourteenth century BCE, abolished polytheistic cults and limited worship only to the sun-god Aten), Assmann still insists on referring to it as the “Mosaic distinction,” since “tradition ascribes it to Moses.”¹⁷ To say that this distinction is merely imaginary in the Hebrew Bible would be untrue. The protest against idolatry throughout the Five Books of Moses, the command to the Israelites to make themselves distinct from the other nations, the strict boundaries between monotheistic Israelite culture and the other cultures of the ancient Near East that are heightened in the biblical writings associated with the Deuteronomistic Reform during the reign of King Josiah in the seventh century BCE — all of this supports the claim that the Mosaic distinction is indeed something that can be found in the Hebrew Bible. (That being said, Assmann is quite explicit in *Die Mosaïsche Unterscheidung* that the Hebrew Bible displays both the ideology of the Mosaic distinction and the ideology that the Mosaic distinction seeks to overthrow. Monotheism should thus be understood as an ideal type that appears, but does not exhaust, real texts at the basis of Western religion.)¹⁸ Now, the original Egyptian institution of such a distinction was a violent one; it was not a natural outgrowth out of any previous system (*pace* the positivist accounts of Comte, or Hume). Assmann describes it as a “revolution from above” that rendered the cults and temples empty and upended the customary observance of festivals: “the new religion was not promoted, it was imposed. Tradition was not questioned, it was persecuted and forbidden.”¹⁹ For this reason, Assmann describes monotheism in his work as a “counter-religion,” because one of the rhetorical strategies by which monotheism dismissed earlier traditions was by recasting them as heresy or idolatry. This strategy — which is rooted in a reconceptualization of nature — has effects on epistemology, intercultural communication, and theopolitics. I will now

detail this primary move and these philosophical and political effects in order.

Before Akhenaten (or before the Amarna period, to refer to the name of the city that Akhenaten founded), Egyptian religion had articulated nature as an interlocking drama of forces, the agents of which were various divine beings; humans could maximize the gain from such forces through cultic acts.²⁰ As a result, the world of gods “does not stand opposed to the world of cosmos, the human individual, and society” as a supernatural realm that orders the natural world, existence, and politics. Instead, the world of gods both inaugurates and is manifested in the cosmos as a process of continual renewal through the acts of the gods. For Assmann, “the cosmic process would have lost its synergistic character, if it were thought of as organization of a single, unique [*einzig*] God.”²¹ Such a claim seems somewhat doubtful when Assmann goes on to oppose it to monotheism; after all, many monotheists claim that God renews the work of creation on a daily basis. Even taking into consideration Assmann’s claim that monotheism is an ideal type, it turns out that renewal is not the main issue separating Egyptian religion from biblical monotheism. Rather, it is that of whether the divine exists over and above the world. Assmann clarifies this point:

[Polytheism] certainly has to do with multiplicity, but what is decisive is not the numerical principle of multiplicity, but the lack of distinction [*Nichtunterscheidung*] between God and world, from which multiplicity necessarily results. The divine has entered the world in the three dimensions of nature, state, and myth. Polytheism is cosmotheism. The divine cannot be liberated from the world. But monotheism is about such a liberation. The divine emancipates itself from its symbiotic tie with cosmos, society, and destiny and faces the world [which is understood] as a self-reliant magnitude.²²

What is at stake in the distinction between monotheism and cosmotheism, then, is the relationship between God and nature. Cosmotheism involves an intimate nearness between the gods and social order, which makes the world a home for both the human and the divine in a way that, for Assmann, is not the case in monotheism, in which

the independence or distance of God from the world means that the world can only be conceptualized in terms of its lack of the divine. In cosmotheism, nature is something to be embraced as the realm in which the gods are manifest; in monotheism, nature is something to be conquered, and the material world is understood in terms of privation.

Even with these broad brushstrokes, Assmann's characterization of monotheism parallels much in the history of Jewish philosophy²³ (and, I believe, Christian philosophy as well). Furthermore, it is implicit in the doctrine of holiness in the Hebrew Bible. Holiness is found in the divine — as Leviticus 19:2 says, "You shall be holy, as I, the Lord your God, am holy," implying that holiness is the result of a teleological process of becoming godlike, of becoming something different than what one already is. In the Hebrew Bible, holiness is pursued by separating oneself from the notion of the world as a home, as a place in which stable foundations are present at hand. Assmann associates this with a turn from cultic life to scriptural text; the book gives what nature no longer possesses.²⁴ The life of the monotheist is an uncanny one: "whoever stands on the ground of the Mosaic distinction does not feel totally at home in this world."²⁵ In *Moses the Egyptian*, Assmann codifies this distinction of nearness and distance as one between a "paradigm of manifestation" and a "paradigm of creation." The former is typical of Egyptian cosmotheism, in which at least the elements (and in some post-Amarna texts, even animals and the king) are material in which divine power is manifest, and thus animates the world. The "paradigm of creation," on the other hand, which one finds in texts of the Amarna period and especially in biblical monotheism, asserts that which the visible world "proceeds from God, but is not itself divine."²⁶ In the paradigm of creation, the world is ontologically independent of God, and thus distant from God; in the paradigm of manifestation, the world is ontologically bound up with God, and thus near to God.

As stated earlier, the revolutionary move of monotheism and its inauguration of the so-called "Mosaic distinction" has both philosophical and political consequences. First, there is a new theory of truth. By virtue of the nearness of the divine to the world, the gods were thus

“known”²⁷ by both the elites and the populace in nature; we can say that nature was *prima facie* evidence for the gods’ existence. During the Amarna period, nature loses this evidentiary status and becomes something that is molded by the sun-god Aten according to his will. At the end of the “Great Hymn,” a text from the Amarna period, we read that “The world becomes on your hand, as you made them / When you dawn, they live / When you set, they die / You yourself are life-time, one lives by you.” Assmann describes this text as embodying the disenchantment of the world during the Amarna period, in which the world is denied “its own sources of life, meaning, power, and order, which means for the Egyptians the world’s own divinity.”²⁸ One could gloss the Amarna text that leaves the world disenchanted as follows: there is no evidence that nature works according to some non-natural or supernatural mechanism, and therefore the proposition that nature and humanity lives be the sun-god (as opposed to the dramatic interplay of natural forces) is one that has to be taken on *faith*. It is this notion of belief in a god — as opposed to knowledge — that leads Assmann to claim that the Mosaic distinction “introduces a new type of truth: the absolute, revealed, metaphysical or faith-truth.”²⁹

This conception of truth strongly affects intercultural communication, making impossible the translation of concepts across cultures. The polytheistic systems of the ancient Near East, because they assigned determinate characteristics and functions to various deities in the pantheon of divine beings, allowed for a deity in one culture to be translated to a deity with similar characteristics in another culture; there are lists of such translated divine names from ancient Mesopotamia. This allowed for a certain globalization of religion — or whatever phrase one might use to describe the process by which interethnic bonds are formed — to take place without a theologically grounded violence.³⁰ Religion did not institute boundaries between peoples, but was the ground for communication between them. Assmann claims that the Mosaic distinction, however, “blocked this translatability,” because the forms of worship of other cultures were not recognized as being equivalently true.³¹ Because Yahweh, for example, could not be translated

into the personae of Amun or Zeus — in other words, because the divine name in monotheism is not conventional, but is essentially bound up with the transcendent to which it refers — the nonmonotheist neighbors of the ancient Israelites could not understand Israelite religion. As a result, anti-Judaism, or what Peter Schäfer has termed “Judeophobia” insofar as the Jews are assigned the characteristics of xenophobia and misanthropy, begins. While stopping short of Assmann’s assertion that the Mosaic distinction “brought a new form of hate into the world — the hatred of the heathen, the heretic, and the idolator,”³² — an assertion that can be extrapolated to blame antisemitism on its victims — one can at least say that the institution of boundaries between peoples accomplished by monotheism creates the real possibility that interethnic violence will be justified by the claim that the boundary between two peoples has no right to exist, because what lays on the other side of it (wherever one stands) is simply untrue.

Finally, in the wake of the monotheistic revolution, the nature of politics also shifts dramatically. Here Assmann stops associating the monotheistic revolution of Akhenaten with biblical monotheism; his critique is aimed wholly against biblical theopolitics. The Mosaic distinction that associates false religion with Egypt also associates false politics with with Egypt, and uses divinely given law (a novum in religion) as “the instrument of deliverance from Egyptian and every other bondage,”³³ including that of the state, which had been understood in Egypt as guaranteeing the reciprocity between persons that was seen to be the base of a well-functioning society and that was the core element of the Egyptian concept of right (*Ma’at*).³⁴ Biblical monotheism makes all politics essentially a theopolitics:

While people become free of the hand of Pharaoh and his debasing oppression, at the same time the divine, or grace, is emancipated from its political representation and becomes an exclusive matter of God, who here for the first time takes the scepter of historical action in hand and withholds well-being [*Heil*] from the order of worldly violence. From now on, religion and politics are different things, the interplay of which must

be negotiated with difficulty, and the unity of which can be obtained only through violence.³⁵

In other words, when sovereignty is displaced from the king to God, the risk is that the law governing society becomes anti-natural (because the ground of the law is no longer in the interhuman or the natural realm). This leaves two options for the nature of the relationship of the monotheist to the state. Either the power of the state expresses itself as grounded in monotheism and thereby foists a particular and non-natural understanding of justice on the populace, or monotheism lies opposed to the state and thereby casts state agents as unethical because they practice false politics. This latter point seems to be the most relevant: what Assmann sees as the disjunction of right and nature in monotheism means that, at least in the Torah, laws are “the laws of the people of God, and they establish the justice of the people of God, not a general ethic.”³⁶

This suggests that monotheism is one in which the risk is that the monotheist is unable to live with the nonmonotheist. It would be easy to show how Assmann’s claim that monotheism begins this conflict leads his arguments to overlap with classic anti-Judaic rhetoric (the suffering of Jews is the fault of their own maintenance of difference, etc.). Peter Schäfer has moved in this direction, charging Assmann with implicitly blaming Jews for the Holocaust in a review that appeared in the *Süddeutscher Zeitung*.³⁷ But despite what one might (over)charitably describe as a lack of felicity in Assmann’s prose, I invoke Assmann because he gives the most expansive account of the worries that Caygill and Critchley express only obliquely with regard to Levinasian thought. They are good worries to have, I think (although I cringe at some of Assmann’s language), because sacred texts contain troubling elements. And scholars whose work resides in or touches on the discipline of modern Jewish thought have been exceptionally blind to these troubles until recently. Too often, they assume that simply conjuring up an idealized Judaism — say, one that, because of its focus on midrash, is essentially pluralist — can solve the problems of the West.³⁸ But think of the student

who falls — and falls hard — for the utopian element of Levinasian thought, and then, after reading Levinas's remarks in the 1982 radio interview with Salomon Malka hinting that the Palestinians are not Israelis' others, wonders whether Levinasian philosophy can only articulate a utopia, but not do anything to come nearer to realizing peace.³⁹

But on Assmann's terms, it makes little sense to describe Levinas as a monotheist; indeed, the risks of monotheism are minimized — but certainly not eliminated — in Levinas precisely because he is careful to articulate both the distance and nearness between the world and God in his thinking. This seems a bit counterintuitive; after all, an account of Levinas's philosophy in 25 words or less would state that Levinas finds the good *beyond* being, and so recapitulates the very problems that Assmann sees in classical monotheism, coming out of the paradigm of creation. In addition, to talk about a simultaneous distance and nearness seems incoherent, and the temptation to pick one paradigm (creation and its distance) is strong. But there are good reasons not to think of Levinas solely in this language, but to think of Levinas in terms of the paradigm of manifestation as well.

THE MANIFESTATION OF THE TRACE OF THE OTHER

Perhaps surprisingly, I want to defend this claim with recourse to Levinas's thinking about the face of the other and the trace. The argument for the centrality of alterity in phenomenological thinking seems to be quite clear. Most succinctly in the 1951 "Is Ontology Fundamental?" Levinas argues that every conversation depends upon the exteriority of the other to me. Exteriority is the condition of the possibility of language taking place, as it does, between a donor and a recipient of a speech-act: "The person with whom I am in relation I call *being*, but in so calling him, I call to him. I do not only think that he is, I speak to him. . . . I have spoken to him, that is to say, I have neglected the universal being that he incarnates [we should understand an implicit "allegedly" here] in order to remain with the particular being that he is."⁴⁰ Conversation thereby shows there is no "we" that is already

constituted before and outside of speech-acts; rather, the “we” is what language can achieve — perhaps through a process of giving and taking of reasons and testimonies — but persons are naturally monads, with language as their window. The exteriority of the other to me, in the self-attestation of his or her expression, is what Levinas calls “face” (*TI* 201ff/*TeI* 176ff).

In order to explain the origin of the other’s apparent visitation to me from the beyond, Levinas in the middle of his career invokes the category of the “trace” to signify the anarchic origin of alterity, both outside the horizon of my own world and outside the horizon of any concept that I could generate by the patterns of my own thinking. If the origin of the other were a concept — say, a realm of being in which I participate as well — there would be no need to talk to another at all; we would all have the talent to read each others’ minds. For this reason, it is necessary to think of the beyond in which alterity has its origin as rigorously as possible. In the 1963 essay “The Trace of the Other,” Levinas writes that “the other proceeds from the absolutely absent. But the other’s relationship with the absolutely absent from which he comes does not indicate, does not reveal this absent.” The other cannot even motivate a surmise about the nature of its ground (as Husserl argues is the case with indicative signs); it does not give any confidence in its referent, and so Levinas concludes that the face “is in the trace of the utterly bygone [*révolu*], utterly passed absent”⁴¹ and that “a trace consists in signifying without making appear.”⁴² One might do well to conclude, then, that the Levinasian rhetoric of the face and the trace obeys the logic of Assmann’s paradigm of creation, in which one might be able to state that the world is created by God, but in the final analysis, the world is utterly profane and bereft of God (at least in the framework of all humanly made history). Edith Wyschogrod seems to make such a move when she writes that “it is a mistake to assume that the elsewhere that is evoked by the face can yield a meaning for investigation; to assume that is to assume that the elsewhere is world.”⁴³

Nevertheless, this cannot be the end of the story. The face appears, as Wyschogrod goes on to note, even though it does not appear as other phenomena do. And earlier in “The Trace of the Other,” Levinas describes the appearance of the other with recourse to the language of manifestation. Ordinarily, I would be reluctant to hang too much on this point; after all, there is no assurance that Levinas means by “manifestation” what Assmann means by it. But by reconstructing the argument here (and expanding it to cover some key passages from *Otherwise than Being*), I believe that the full stakes of Levinasian manifestation can be shown to have more in common with Assmann than one might expect.

In “The Trace of the Other,” the other is described as manifesting him- or herself: “the other manifests himself in the face.” And Levinas means for this word to have all the overtones of presence with which the phenomenological tradition endows it: “[the] mundane signification of the face is found to be disturbed and shaken by another presence, abstract, not integrated into the world. His presence consists in coming unto us, making an entry.” It is this irruption into the horizon of my world from the outside that distinguishes the other as face from other phenomena. Nevertheless, this still raises the question of what exactly is made manifest in the other; after all, if Levinas and Assmann are to be brought together, then the Levinasian other will have to manifest something else besides itself. Levinas continues to describe the difference between the face and other phenomena as follows:

The other who manifests himself in the face as it were breaks through his own plastic essence, like someone who opens a window on which his figure is outlined. His presence consists in *divesting* [se *dévêtir*] himself of the form which, however, manifests him. His manifestation is a surplus over the inevitable paralysis of manifestation.⁴⁴

It is perhaps easiest to make sense of these sentences by concluding that Levinas is here speaking of the relation between two different types of manifestation. One kind of manifestation, that realized by the face, consists in breaking through the limits of the other kind of manifestation, ordinary “immanent” manifestation. In this latter type of manifestation,

claims about the nature/being of an object overlap with claims about how the object appears or is given.⁴⁵ Only against the backdrop of immanent manifestation would it make sense to speak of the face appearing as something that transcends the horizon of my world.

In the sentences from “The Trace of the Other” quoted above, it is key to see that Levinas is not arguing here that the appearance of the other takes place in two phases, the first in which the other manifests itself like other immanent objects, and then a second more reflective phase in which the philosopher understands that for the other to remain other, there can be no manifestation at all. “Divestment,” which should be understood as literally as possible in terms of undressing or denuding, does not undo manifestation. The striptease is made manifest in the manifestation of the other. This is the surplus: while immanent objects are given, as it were, having already dressed themselves up in accordance with our intentional aims, the face is not given in accordance with such an as-structure. With the face, we get something more, something undressed, raw. As a result, surplus should not be understood as the attribute of some transcendent being that the other manifests in its face; all one can say about the ground of alterity is that it is a force that has the power to disrupt the contours of the world — what Levinas calls “illeity.” Yet this surplus still appears in some way; otherwise, there would be no way to justify calling it a surplus at all. How does this surplus appear?

Levinas is simply not as clear as we might want on this issue. There are, to my mind, two possible ways of answering such a question. The first would be to say that “surplus” is really only a figure of speech. On such an account, what Levinas is really saying is that the other, not signaling anything at all, manifests even less in its appearance than other objects do, and therefore calls forth the idea of a surplus — an imagined version of the object that does not lack anything. (One thinks of the way in which a raw vegetable, a carrot for example, gives intimations that its flavor could be stronger. And so we cook, and discover caramelization.) Levinas’s citations of Plotinus support such a claim. As is well known, the sections in the *Enneads* on the soul as containing

a trace (*ikbmos*) of the good provide one of Levinas's sources for his own thinking of the trace, as evidenced by the brief mention of Plotinus near the end of "Trace of the Other," repeated at the close of "Meaning And Sense" almost a decade later.⁴⁶ The stakes of such a citation become clearer in the 1989 essay "Philosophy and Transcendence" (in a section duplicated from the 1983 essay "From The One to the Other"), in which Levinas points out that in the *Enneads*, the intellect aims at the One yet is relatively impoverished by being able only to think of multiple Platonic ideas. It cannot get to the one simple ground of various forms (beauty, tallness, etc.). As a result, the intellect is "a state of privation, compared to the unity of the One." Nevertheless, there is the semblance of positivity here: "And yet, [it is] as if the One were *sensed* in [presenti *par*] that very privation, as if knowledge, still aspiration by the fact of the dispersion of its seeing, went *beyond* what it sees and thematizes and were precisely thereby a *transcendence*."⁴⁷ So it seems that the very knowledge of the limits of consciousness implies that there is something beyond those limits. After all, every limit sets a boundary, and there is space on both sides of that boundary. The *terra incognita* on the other side of the boundary must always remain unknowable; for this reason, Levinas writes that it is only *as if* the One were sensed. All one can do is wait, aspire, and pray.

But this is quite a bit more minimal than another account that one could make; here, one might point to *Otherwise than Being*. There, Levinas gives a far more extensive version of the argument made in "Is Ontology Fundamental?" that being and comprehension are not fundamental. As in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas in *Otherwise than Being* points to the phenomenon of enjoyment as an exemplar of sensibility.⁴⁸

Gustative sensation is not a knowing accompanying the physico-chemical or biological mechanism of consuming, a consciousness of the objective filling of a void, a spectacle "miraculously" interiorized in the "*tasting*"; it is not an epiphenomenal echoing of a physical event, nor the "reflection" of the spatial structure of filling, not the idealist constitution, in the psyche involved in sensation, of an object that would be the tooth that bites on the bread. To bite on the bread is the very

meaning of tasting. The taste is the way a sensible subject becomes a volume . . . Satisfaction satisfies itself with satisfaction. (*OB* 73/*AE* 92)

The immediacy of pleasure is not bound up with representation; someone who said “I enjoy chocolate because of its predicates” would be thought to have a more warped sense of pleasure than the person who simply bites into a piece of chocolate cake and begins to moan.⁴⁹ The immediate enjoyment we have of things around us, without a care for understanding, is evidence that the philosophical moment of cognition is not essential to selfhood. Once sensibility has been detached from representation and from conceptualized accounts of sensation as intuitive knowledge, it makes more sense to understand sensibility — now the most basic stratum of subjectivity — in terms of vulnerability or exposure (*OB* 75ff/*AE* 94ff).

This argument about enjoyment plays a key role in Levinas’s protest against limiting manifestation simply to its immanent meaning. Again, Levinas is vague, but in the midst of his account of enjoyment in *Otherwise than Being*, he shifts from a thoroughgoing critique of manifestation to a veritable rescue of it.

Philosophy tries in the course of its phenomenology to reduce the manifest and the manifestation to their preoriginal signification, a signification that does not signify manifestation. There is room to think that this preoriginal signification includes the motifs of origin and appearing. Yet it is not thereby shut up in a present or a representation. If it also signifies the dawning of a manifestation in which it can indeed shine forth and show itself, its signifying is not exhausted in the effusion of dissimulation of this light. (*OB* 65/*AE* 82)

Levinas’s philosophical articulation of the way in which the sensible signifies is an argument for this new dawn of manifestation. Insofar as the phenomenology of enjoyment shows that consciousness is not fundamentally engaged in cognitive pursuits, the robust notion of the knowing subject is shown to cover over the stratum of sensibility or affectivity that, for Levinas, is situated at the base of selfhood. As in Levinas’s earlier writings, there is desire before there is conceptualization; the self is exposed or stretched out into its environment before it gathers

it back up in the frame of that system of significations that Heidegger defined as “world” in *Being and Time*.⁵⁰ The self is for that which lies outside it — alterity — before it is a subject with an essence. These claims break with the order of immanent manifestation because they call attention to the fact of manifestation (before which the subject is passive) over and above the object that is made manifest (which consciousness can understand in the light of its intentional aims).⁵¹ In contrast with the Husserlian discourse of sensation, which reduces sensation to a simple matter that is only given soul by the intentionality of the subject (“sensuous data present themselves as stuffs for intensive formings or sense-bestowings”),⁵² Levinas sees that what Husserl has really uncovered is sensation as the ground of consciousness having any aims at all; data, not intensive form, is primary. The analysis of sensibility is more disclosive than the analysis of consciousness. By switching the focus of phenomenological analysis away from consciousness to its ground, manifestation can itself appear — raw, undressed — outside of the objects manifest themselves, and outside of the rationalist dissimulation of perception as subject-centered. The surplus of manifestation is the fact of manifestation itself, a fact that gets occluded by intentional consciousness.

But why talk about manifestation in terms of enjoyment? Why not simply talk about manifestation in terms of the face as Levinas does in *Totality and Infinity* (*TI* 66/*TeI* 37)?⁵³ It would seem to make sense that the new dawn of manifestation would have to do with alterity, and not the ipseity of the pleased subject. The answer to these questions therefore cannot be simply that the analysis of enjoyment serves to describe that realm of ego-satisfaction that can be interrupted by alterity. It seems to me that, more fundamentally, the link between enjoyment and the manifestation of manifestation itself shows that ipseity is not really real; it is conjured on top of a sensibility and vulnerability that consciousness then forgets. This means that the Levinasian analysis of sensibility cashes itself out in its grounding the possibility of the ethic of substitution. Levinas wants to prove that an ethic in which the subject is “passive to the point of becoming an inspiration, that is, alterity

in the same, the trope of the body animated by the soul, psyche in the form of a hand that gives even the bread taken from its own mouth” (*OB* 67/*AE* 85) is not a utopian ethic, but rather is really possible despite its supererogatory appearance. Such a supererogatory ethic is really possible because this is what the self has been doing *all along*; “alterity in the same” is simply another name for sensibility, the desire for some X that is not me, a desire that is immediate and unthematized. If sensibility is the most fundamental stratum of subjectivity, then it would be bad faith for the self *not* to act supererogatorily.⁵⁴ In other words, Levinas is making a more radical argument than one that would say that claims about what persons *ought* to do are senseless unless they are rooted in claims about what persons *can* do. While it is true that the ethic of substitution is groundless without the account of sensibility, it is also the case that sensibility is not simply a capability of the self. We sense whether we want to or not; sensibility is the most basic fact about who we are. Levinas is making what one might best describe as an attenuated natural law argument, in which claims about the basic nature of persons are grounds for claims about what ought to be the case; the factual ground of subjectivity in sensibility is also a norm. (There are a couple of ways of extricating Levinas from the is/ought problem that some interpreters will think he falls into here; I leave some tentative remarks about these to a footnote.)⁵⁵

Levinas describes such supererogatory ethics in terms of the “psyche” or “animation,” an ensouling. The visible sign of the ethics of nonindifference to the other is “an animate body or an incarnate identity” (*OB* 71/*AE* 89). The body displays its having-been-ensouled by the other — animation is “the other in the same” (*OB* 70/*AE* 88) — through its ethical acts. But Levinas can only make this claim about action not being grounded in a robustly described self-sufficient subject because the ethic of substitution recapitulates the basic position of the vulnerability of the self that was already shown in the analysis of enjoyment. Therefore, readers of *Otherwise than Being* have every right to conclude that this ethical animation could not take place without a prior animation, that of the world of enjoyment by what we can

call *soul*. Insofar as something in the world can affect us immediately, it entrusts anima/soul to us.⁵⁶ Soul is what alienates the self from its ego.⁵⁷ What animates — the agent of soul — is not human, and not sexed.⁵⁸ The frequent references to maternity in Levinas's discussion of sensibility and ethics in *Otherwise than Being*⁵⁹ are figures of the ethic that sensibility makes possible. In acts for another to whom I am exposed (the other in me, wounding me), what is performed in a new key is the acknowledgment of the animation or ensoulment of an object (the tasty piece of bread with its fresh flavor that wounds me, because only a porous "wounded" self can taste) by something which I cannot describe.⁶⁰ The origin or nature of this soul we do not know, but it can be figured in many ways, including (but not limited to) maternity.

Speaking of the ethics of substitution makes no sense without speaking of vulnerability. This, in turn, makes no sense without a world in which manifestation manifests itself outside of and alongside those manifested objects that are given to consciousness in its cognitive adventures. As a result, we have the right to talk about the world as manifesting something like soul, which is manifest along with objects but separable from them, both in and beyond the world. Soul would not simply be something in the world that irrupts my horizon, but would also be something beyond the world, the possibility of my having a horizon at all. But is not such talk about the simultaneity of "in" and "beyond," immanence and transcendence, incoherent? It seems to me that this dual language is the best way to talk about the surplus that is manifestation itself, a surplus that philosophy can uncover in every conversation (as Levinas showed in "Is Ontology Fundamental?"). For while we can affirm that there is manifestation, we also cannot conceptualize what manifestation is. Soul is not given in the same manner that bread is. Bread, the flavor and odor of which is sensible, can be given a list of predicates. The same cannot be said of soul, the flavorless, odorless, clandestine companion of bread. But soul is as near to us as the smell and taste of freshly baked (or week-old, rock-hard, stale) bread. As a result, one should speak of both of Assmann's religious paradigms when discussing Levinas's philosophy of religion. Insofar as manifestation

manifests itself, soul is near, in accordance with the cosmotheistic paradigm of manifestation. Insofar as it cannot be given proper predicates (and is the ground of making any predications at all), it is far from the world of ordinary objects, in accordance with the paradigm of creation. This duality is implicit in Levinas's arguments about God as illeity manifesting in its traces (which are other than God). A thinking that we assume to be strictly monotheistic — simply for biographical reasons — can be shown to be far nearer to the cosmotheistic model than one might conclude at first glance.

COSMOTHEISM IN EGYPT AND ISRAEL

Finally, I would like to take some steps toward showing that this move of uncovering the cosmotheistic potential in Levinas actually gets us closer to the Egyptian material that Assmann treats, and is consonant with at least a strand of the Jewish tradition that underlies Levinas's own work.

First, the Egyptian materials. For Assmann, the most developed statement of the paradigm of manifestation is in a hymn from the Ramesside period, dating from some years after the monotheistic revolution of the Amarna period and continuous with the solar theology that developed before Akhenaten's revolt. In the first part of this hymn, the Amun, associated with the One, is seen as manifesting himself in the form of other gods: the Ogdoad, the eight creator gods associated with reptiles; Re, the god of the sun; and Atum the earth god. These other deities are described as forms or embodiments of Amun: "Another of his forms is the Ogdoad/Primeval one of the primeval ones, begetter of Re. He completed himself as Atum, being of one body with him. He is Universal Lord, who initiated that which exists." Yet, as Assmann points out only two stanzas later in this hymn, these claims about manifestation take on a different form, since Amun is now described as truly existing beyond manifestation: "[Amun] hides himself from the gods, no one knowing his nature / He is more remote than heaven / He is deeper than the underworld. / None of the gods knows his true

form / His image is not unfolded in books / Nothing certain is testified about him.”⁶¹ In this text, the manifestation of the One in the world is understood as both occurring and not occurring: there is a manifestation of a surplus by which the deity associated with the One exceeds the pantheon, as well as a stratum in which all claims about the nature of this surplus are de facto rejected because the One exceeds all language (“His image is not unfolded in books”). In the oscillation between cataphatic and apophatic moments in this Egyptian, there is a logic that is analogous to Levinas’s account of the structure of the relationship between the other understood as a trace and that in whose trace the other lies. The analogy is strong enough, despite the vast difference in content, to say that a philosophy described as monotheistic, such as Levinas’s, is not necessarily or resolutely opposed to its apparent contradictories. Furthermore, this same Ramesside hymn mediates between the visibility and the invisibility of Amun in the world with recourse to the concept of soul. The final line of the hymn states that Amun “has the quality of *ba* [soul] hidden of name like his secrecy.” It is certainly odd to say that the soul of Amun is hidden at the same time that one asserts that Amun has the quality of soul. How can one name that which is purely hidden? Assmann interprets this last line of the stanza as evidence for the Egyptian worldview in which “the visible world has a soul that animates and moves it, just as it did for the Neoplatonists.”⁶² In other words, it seems that the language of soul is how the Egyptians name this indeterminate surplus that is manifest in the world as that which both grounds the world (and joined to it as an animating force that is given alongside worldly forms), and lies apart from the world (disjoined from the world, radically separate from Amun’s forms, and unknowable). Through recourse to the concept of animation, God is understood as both one and many, as nowhere in itself and everywhere in its traces, both in ancient Egypt and, I submit, in Levinas.

I would want to invoke this resemblance between Levinasian “monotheism” and the “cosmotheism” of Ramesside Egypt — these terms must always have scarequotes around them — as a premise in a

larger argument that Jewish philosophy, at least in the heritage that stretches from Spinoza through Levinas, is composed of a set of reasoning practices by which the risks of monotheistic philosophy are minimized (but certainly not extirpated). Such a claim, however, is meaningless if these practices take one far away from the texts at the base of a religious tradition. So let me close with one brief reference to the Hebrew Bible. Assmann is clear, especially in *Die Mosaische Unterscheidung*, that the political risk of Judaic monotheism is that divinely given law makes it impossible for political structures to effect anything; the king is, at least structurally albeit not necessarily historically, subservient to Torah.⁶³ In Egyptian cosmotheism, on the other hand, “kingship is a cosmic energy, like light and air: the power of god that animates, takes care of, and orders the human world is manifested in it”; “the Egyptian king is, as the son of God, at the same time the mediator of well-being and the incarnation of the divine turning to the world.”⁶⁴ But this is exactly how the Hebrew Bible understood its kings as well, as sons of God who mediate the divine. In the so-called “royal ideology” of 2 Samuel 7 and Psalms 2 and 89, we have a definition of the king of Israel as the one who, by virtue of being anointed as king, is seen as the son of God.

I will raise up your offspring after you [David], one of your own issue, and I will establish his kingship. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish his royal throne forever. I will be a father to him and he shall be a son to Me. (2 Sam. 7:12–14)

“I have installed My king on Zion, My holy mountain!” Let me tell of the decree: the Lord said to me, “You are My son, I have fathered you this day.” (Ps. 2:6–7)

My [God’s] faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with him [the king]; his horn shall be exalted through My name. I will set his hand upon the sea, his right hand upon the rivers. He shall say to Me, “You are my father, my God, the rock of my deliverance.” (Ps. 89:25–27)

In these texts, it is difficult to determine the difference between Israel and the other civilizations in the Ancient Near East as seeing the king

in terms of sonship. Here, too, God is accessible, manifest in the world through the actions of the king. Kingship means the manifestation of the animating force of an unknowable God.

Now these are also violent texts; the king in these passages is also a warrior who defeats the nations of the world. Remembering them is risky. But this risk takes us further than the risk of Caygill's memory. As stated earlier, at the end of *Levinas and the Political*, Howard Caygill invokes Hanukkah as the proper figure for thinking Levinas's relationship to Judaism, claiming that despite Levinas's equivocations on the relationship between monotheism and violence, there is a minor strand in Levinas that exhorts Jewish readers "to find the glory of the presence in an ember or a little flask of pure oil that keeps alight our failing memory for the future."⁶⁵ Memory must always be kept on the verge of failing (one thinks here of Simon Rawidowicz's diagnosis of a common view of Jews as "an ever-dying people")⁶⁶ so that its ember does not becoming an all-consuming fire. But how can Hanukkah ensure that such memory remains bedridden, terminal? Does Caygill propose that Jews throughout the world stop singing "Ma'oz Tzur" at Hanukkah, with its anticipation that God will have prepared the slaughter for the blaspheming foe (and that's just in the first stanza!)? The memory of Hanukkah as the memory of a military success in the name of the untranslatable God — an example of everything that Assmann sees as threatening in monotheism — cannot be extirpated. The space between the robust memory of Hanukkah as a military success and the failed memory of Hanukkah as a Jewish adaptation of Christian consumerism⁶⁷ is not nearly as stable as Caygill (and Levinas) imagines. So if less memory is unstable, then why not side for *more* memory? Would it not be better to use the cosmotheistic potential of Levinas and other Jewish philosophers as sources for a vibrant memory that articulates the contingency of the boundary between allegedly asymmetrical religious systems such as monotheism and cosmotheism? And could not the strength of such a memory, in part because its tensions call out for a philosophical referee, engender (unlike "failing memory") the possibility of thinking that a historically grounded philosophy could prevent

certain monotheists from believing, for example, that God *really* endorses the Hebrew midwives' claim in the opening chapter of Exodus that "the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women" (Exod. 1:19) — no matter what the text goes on to say?⁶⁸