Michael Fagenblat

The Genesis of *Totality and Infinity*: The Secret Drama

"It is forbidden to interpret the Act of Creation in front of two people."
Mishnah Hagiga 2.1

"No stories will be told here."
Husserl, *Ideas I*, fn. 1

"One must unroll the *Archē* like a genesis."
Jacques Derrida, *Heidegger: The Question of Being and History*, 35

1 Behind the Scenes

In the first substantive footnote to *Totality and Infinity* Levinas proposes that his thought might be understood as a type of drama, were drama not usually bound to the notion of action.

> In broaching, at the end of this work, the study of relations which we situate beyond the face, we come upon events that cannot be described as noeses aiming at noemata, nor as active interventions realizing projects, nor, of course, as physical forces being discharged into masses. They are conjunctures in being for which perhaps the term "drama" would be most suitable, in the sense that Nietzsche would have liked to use it when, at the end of *The Case of Wagner*, he regrets that it has always been wrongly translated by action. But it is because of the resulting equivocation that we forego this term.
>
> (Levinas 1971, 13–14 n. 1; Levinas 1969, 28 n. 2)[1]

The prospect of a drama behind the scenes of action coincides with the overarching goal of *Totality and Infinity*, which consists in discerning a structure of subjectivity – "ethics," as Levinas calls it – *prior to its enactment* as consciousness, Dasein, or incarnate existence. The footnote points to a drama that takes place in the backstage of the intelligible activity of being or consciousness. This chapter attempts to expose the drama behind the stage of meaning. I begin by presenting the philosophical reasoning that motivates Levinas's recourse to "essentially nocturnal events"

1 My interest in this footnote was sparked by Simon Critchley's lively book *The Problem of Levinas* (2015).

Note: Research for this chapter was generously supported by Israel Science Foundation Grant 698/16

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110668926-007

(Levinas 1971, 13; Levinas 1969, 28) behind the scenes of meaning. The way toward such "nocturnal events" consists of two stages, a critique of the correlation between intelligibility and activity (section 2), and a way of approaching the drama behind the activity of meaning (section 3). Levinas's usual way of approaching the subterranean ground of meaning is via "ethics." Our footnote, however, suggests another way: a drama or holy story that is structured without action or plot. What does it mean to think of drama without action or plot? The footnote cited above points to this possibility of a nocturnal drama whose events provide "conjunctures in being" (Levinas 1971, 13 n. 1; Levinas 1969, 28 n. 2) that do not form a story but a structure. My argument is that Levinas not only implicitly alludes to such a drama but indeed *produces* it. The "defense of subjectivity" that *Totality and Infinity* undertakes consists not only in phenomenological descriptions of how meaning is constituted in relation to the Other but also of a dramatic backstory comprised of *fragments* of the holy history of Genesis 1–11 (section 4). While Genesis 1–11 is of course a *narrative* (indeed several) of divine and human *acts*, the fragmented allusion that *Totality and Infinity* makes to this story prevents such fragments from becoming acts in a story behind the scenes. The fragments point to ways of beginning without acts that begin "once upon a time" or "in the beginning . . ." In similar fashion the rabbinic tradition points to interpretations of creation concealed behind the acts of creation:

> "In the beginning God created" – R. Jonah said in R. Levi's name: Why was the world created with a *beth* [the first letter of *bṛ'šyt*, "in the beginning"]? Just as the *beth* [ב] is closed at the sides but open in front, so you are not permitted to investigate what is above and what is below, what is before and what is behind. (*Midrash Rabbah: Genesis* 1939, 9)

The midrash suggests that behind the Act of Creation lies a secret teaching, which is prohibited, according to Mishnah Hagigah 2:1 cited in the epigraph above, from being expounded before more than two people. The rabbinic texts point to the possibility of a secret teaching behind the Act of Creation, prior to its narrative form. It is in this esoteric sense that one can approach the relation between *Totality and Infinity* and the narrative form of Genesis 1–11.[2] Levinas's text extracts

2 Critchley proposes that in *Totality and Infinity* "Levinas is trying to write a drama, a holy story" (Critchley 2015, 10) and finally locates this drama in the *Song of Songs*, which he thinks Levinas *should* have relayed but did not. Critchley favours a mystical interpretation of the *Song* in which the enjoyment (*jouissance*) of God displaces the tyranny of egoism and thereby gives way to ethical subjectivity (Critchley 2015, 115–132). Instead of *contrasting* enjoyment and ethics, then, as Levinas does, Critchley wants them to commingle. His reading of the *Song* as "a staging of the erotic" (Critchley 2015, 12) seeks to bring to light the eros which, he proposes, remains *backstage* in Levinas's thought, an eros that founds ethics and thereby founds society. But even as Critchley, following Lacan, avows that eros is "not a matter of fucking," he offers no account of how mystical eros might distinguish between *jouissance* and justice.

fragments of the narrative of Genesis which it then orders, without a plot, into the "nocturnal" form of subjectivity. This production does not consist in telling a story that can be acted or embodied but in de-forming the plot of Genesis 1–11 in order to expose the "conjunctures in being" that make meaning possible. This dramaturgical "structure," precisely because it precedes the subject of experience in order to render experience intelligible, does not lend itself to action or imitation by a subject.[3] It is a drama produced, as it were, in the folds – in the binding – of Levinas's text, illegible in itself but able to be glimpsed when the text is looked at from a certain angle. In view of the subterranean aspects of this drama subtending Levinas's text, I conclude by considering the idea, rarely entertained, that *Totality and Infinity* is an *esoteric* work (section 5).[4] Levinas's is an unusual esotericism, which reverses the conventional structure of the secret. Whereas esotericism usually conceals a secret teaching deemed inappropriate for widespread consumption, in the case of *Totality and Infinity* there is an exoteric philosophical meaning that conceals the secret truth of the childlike "story" of Genesis 1–11. This amounts to an inverted form of esotericism that conceals a *critical naiveté*,

---

Without in the least wanting to forgo the *jouissance en plus*, I am not convinced that mysticism makes for morality. It is perhaps preferable, with Heidegger, Bataille, and Lacan, simply to prize ecstasy over ethics. Critchley reads the *Song* in line with the Christian tradition as a *lock* that can be opened, allegorically, to reveal the theological core of human eros, in the hope that this will make us all one. But I imagine Levinas reading the *Song of Songs* not as a lock to be opened but as a *key* that opens a backstage door to the theatre of life as it is lived less in its mystical ecstasies than in the banality of respect for difference. For a nuanced reading of this Jewish/Christian difference see Daniel Boyarin, "The Song of Songs: Lock or Key? Intertextuality, Allegory and Midrash" (1990). In any case, it may be premature to determine Levinas's precise relation to the *Song*. According to Salomon Malka, there is a "handwritten reading and translation of the Song of Songs" among Levinas' unpublished material (Malka 2006, 284), but these have not yet appeared. Critchley's reading is stimulating and suggestive, though too speculative to succeed as an interpretation of Levinas's text. If there is a holy story or a sacred drama concealed in *Totality and Infinity* is that of Genesis 1–11; the *Song of Songs*, I would suggest, is more likely to provide a key to interpreting *Otherwise than Being*.

3 The category of "experience" is ambiguous in *Totality and Infinity*. On the one hand, the approach and sense of the Other falls outside the subject's capacity for action and understanding. On the other hand, this exteriority affords access to "absolute experience" (Levinas 1969, 219). For example: "Metaphysics approaches without touching. Its *way* is not an action, but is the social relation. But we maintain that the social relation is experience preeminently" (Levinas 1969, 109).

4 Esoteric in the sense of a coded text which conceals meanings that are only appropriate for a subset of readers. The Jewish tradition is replete with esoteric approaches to Torah and in particular to the Act of Creation. For a conceptual and taxonomic overview, see Moshe Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation: Esotericism in Jewish Thought and its Philosophical Implications* (2009).

what Levinas elsewhere calls "the secret of angels," behind the transparent philosophical sophistication of the text. The philosophical meaning of the texts masks a truth that exceeds the meaning of philosophical analysis. This truth is conveyed by allusion to the *"holy story"*—the *heilige Geschichte* of Genesis 1–11 reconfigured as a structure without a plot.

Admittedly, the argument of this chapter does not find confirmation in Levinas's explicitly stated intentions. It is nevertheless supported by significant textual evidence from *Totality and Infinity* and the posthumous notebooks and is, it seems to me, consistent with Levinas's view on the relation between phenomenology and Scripture. His confessional account of the "holy history" of the Jews illustrates this consistency, as do his subsequent descriptions of ethics as an "intrigue" or "divine comedy," which likewise intimate the drama-like character of "ethics." Even so, I do not claim that Levinas *intended* to convey the secret of the holy story of Genesis 1–11 in the interstices of his phenomenological argument. It is possible that such a secret was not only kept by him but also from him. Just as the meaning of a great work exceeds the intentions of its author, so a wise man bears more wisdom than he knows.

2 Critique of "thought as act"

The footnote cited above opens the gates to an interpretation of *Totality and Infinity* that takes seriously a certain drama-like quality of Levinas's work, if only we think of drama in Nietzsche's anti-Wagnerian fashion. For Nietzsche, Wagner's infatuation with *Handlung*, the action or plot around which the work is organized, betrays a type of aesthetic idolatry of the visible: "he begins with a scene that will *knock people over* [*umwirft*]," Nietzsche notes sardonically, "*eine wirkliche Actio*." In contrast to this potent sense of dramatic action, Nietzsche proposes an older, subtler notion:

> It has been a real misfortune for aesthetics that the word *drama* has always been translated "action" [*Handlung*]. It is not Wagner alone who errs at this point. . . Ancient drama aimed at scenes of great *pathos* – it precluded action [*Handlung*] (moving it *before* the beginning or *behind* the scene). The word *drama* is of Doric origin, and according to Doric usage it means "event" [*Ereignis*], "story" [*Geschichte*] – both words in the hieratic sense. The most ancient drama represented the legend of the place, the "holy story" [*heilige Geschichte*] on which the foundation of the cult rested.[5]
>
> (Nietzsche 1997, 174; Nietzsche 1988, 32)

5 Judith Norman's more recent translation for Cambridge University Press renders *Handlung* as "plot." Levinas translates it, as did Kaufman, as "action," which accords better with the philosophical contrast he draws between his position and philosophies of action. Nietzsche's

Alluding to this passage, Levinas implies that *Totality and Infinity* can be understood as a drama that form a holy history – so long as one does not confuse such terms with a sequence of actions that form a plot. *Totality and Infinity* aims at a different, more ancient drama behind the scenes of action, resistant to plot, indeed behind the stage of thought. This ancient alternative contrasts not only with Wagner's brawny conception of drama but also with the Aristotelian construal of drama as *mimesis praxeôs*. Following Nietzsche, Levinas aims at a drama or story that does not lend itself to mimetic action and for that reason can take place *only* off-stage, beyond the presence of the visible, as a type of broken backstory that cannot be plotted into a series of actions. Aristotelian drama gives narrative form to the likeness between idea and act, but the drama Levinas has in mind conveys an inimitable, inactive sense that can neither be displayed on the stage of "consciousness" or "world" nor represented through signs, symbols, or metaphors referring to another dimension of ideality. It is a matter, rather, of accessing the way intelligibility opens in the first place, as the curtain of the real is drawn, at the threshold of consciousness, worldhood, and ideality, as formlessness takes form. The scene of Alençon in Levinas's aborted novel, superbly analysed by François-David Sebbah,[6] is in the final analysis another example, in literary form, of the idea that drives Levinas's entire project: Events on the stage of meaning are *in truth oriented* from behind the curtain of intelligibility. "Ethics" affords *orientation* – *sens* – toward the backstage of meaning, where there is a *structure* that cannot be converted into action or plot: "the irreducible structure on which all other structures rest" (Levinas 1971, 77; Levinas 1969, 79), "the ultimate structure of being" (Levinas 1971, 104, Levinas 1969, 102). The structure here invoked has nothing to do with structuralism, whose formal holism lacks reference to subjectivity. For Levinas, rather, the structure of subjectivity consists in the way of individuating oneself as for-the-Other, being-answerable to- and for-the-Other. The structure of subjectivity consists of the way one opens (to meaning) by being oriented (to the Other). Subjectivity is structured as being-answerable to the claims of meaning in virtue of being exposed to the Other. Like the content of the note itself, the footnote points from behind the stage of Levinas's philosophical argument to a drama of an entirely different order. It is here that the "real action," the *inimitable inaction*, of "ethics" takes place.

The way toward the "nocturnal events" behind the stage of meaning consists of two stages. The first involves a philosophical critique of the correlation

"Doric" alternative to *Handlung* refers to a different type of plot/action, a plot without action, akin to what Levinas will later call an "intrigue."

6 See his chapter to this volume.

between intelligibility and activity. The critique holds that intelligibility – the experience of meaning, of something *as* something – cannot be explained on the basis of the possibility of activity but requires recourse to another ground, beyond the horizon of all possible action. To this critique, however, there must be added a second, positive stage that not only legitimates or even necessitates resort to such nocturnal events but also approaches them. Let us take each stage in turn.

Levinas's novel sense of ethics distinguishes itself from similar projects that attempt to ground meaning in action, whether through *acts* of consciousness (Husserl), the *activity* of being (Heidegger), or the *enactive* body (Merleau-Ponty). As Levinas construes it, "ethics" consists of a way of grounding the possibility of meaning or intentionality – the experience of something *as* something, such that it is available as an object of perception, thought, talk, imagination, and so on – *prior* to the intelligibility that shows up in acts of consciousness, the activity of being, or the embodied enactment of existence. Against his nearest philosophical rivals, Nietzsche's critique of Wagner is invoked in order to put distance between his and the dominant approaches to transcendental phenomenology, each of which seeks to ground the conditions for the possibility of meaning in modes of pre-reflective activity. In the final analysis, Levinas proposes that despite its compelling explanatory and descriptive power, transcendental phenomenology begs the question concerning the possibility of intentionality. It helps itself to the fact of intelligibility merely in virtue of being, in the lifeworld, incarnate; but it never answers the question of how intelligibility is possible. Like a speculative realist *avant la lettre*, Levinas takes his stand against the correlation of thought and the pre-reflective activity that wraps itself around the real. Indeed, he goes further, for he does not merely speculate but proposes a metaphysics that is *concretely produced* through the relation with the Other. The metaphysical claim is that meaning, mind, intentionality, and subjectivity are founded in a relation to the Other that comes from beyond the horizon of the synchronic totality of one's own existence, beyond implicit acts of consciousness, beyond the horizons of phenomenological evidence – "beyond the face," as he indicates in our footnote, alluding to the title of Section IV of *Totality and Infinity*.

3 Deduction to Drama

Following the critique of transcendental phenomenology comes the positive alternative, usually called "ethics" but here called "drama." In Levinas's view, the grounding of meaning in action misconstrues the role of subjectivity as a power

able to constitute intelligibility, even if it does so in implicit, passive, or receptive ways. In his alternative view, subjectivity has access to meaning only on the basis of an antecedent "production" of sense, the idea of infinity or the sense of the Other, imposed from outside and beyond the transcendental horizon of possible acts of thought. The intelligibility I access is not only grounded in acts of consciousness, the activity of being, or the enactments of my embodied existence; its origin also requires separation from all such activity, for only such separation makes it possible to experience the difference between how things appear and how they ought to appear. Only the distance between the activity I undergo and its intelligibility makes it possible for such activity to be measurable, be it as valid, erroneous, sufficient, illusory, or whatever. Separation makes intentionality possible. My own access to meaning is illuminated from beyond the horizon of my possible activity. It is produced in and from the dark. "No prior disclosure illuminates the production of these essentially nocturnal events," Levinas says in the paragraph that concludes with the footnote guiding our study, before avowing that this recourse to the nocturnal constitutes his *departure* from phenomenology to another origin of intelligibility: "Phenomenology is a method for philosophy, but phenomenology . . . does not constitute the ultimate event of being itself" (Levinas 1971, 13; Levinas 1969, 28).[7] The phenomenological and ontological reduction to the grounds of meaning are thus supplemented by a "deduction" (Levinas 1971, 14; Levinas 1969, 28) to another, *metaphysical* origin that cannot be accessed through evidence, intuition, consciousness, experience, flesh, or being.[8] This other, metaphysical locus of meaning which lies behind the stage of "thought as act" (Levinas 1971, 12; Levinas 1969, 27 (translation modified)) has a structure appropriate to its nocturnal truth.[9] The "deduction" consists in finding the right fit in the dark.

7 Disclosure refers to *Erschlossenheit*, as Heidegger uses the term in *Being and Time* and related texts. Disclosure opens the horizon of possibility within which beings can be discovered.

8 Levinas uses "deduction" in the context of the Preface where he speaks of deducing "ethics" from the structure of the approach he is analysing. Deduction here is compatible with Kant's use of the term in that it seeks to justify the use of the concept, in this case "ethics," as appropriate to the sense of transcendence, which strictly speaking falls outside the horizon of experience and thus strictly speaking falls outside the phenomenological reduction. The distinction between a deduction and a reduction in nevertheless not entirely stable, as the remarkable admission by Jacques Taminiaux implies; see his "La genèse de la publication de *Totalité et Infini*" (2012, 81).

9 Levinas's critique of "thought as act" in this passage alludes to Heidegger, Husserl, and Merleau-Ponty; indirectly to Gabriel Marcel too. The notion of intelligibility as "incarnation" is announced by Merleau-Ponty's in "La philosophie de l'existence (1959, 307–322), where it is explicitly derived from Marcel's work yet modified, in view of the work of Husserl, Scheler, Heidegger, and Sartre, in the direction of his emerging conception of "the flesh of the world,"

Such a deduction, Levinas proposes, is "necessary yet non-analytical . . . it is indicated by expressions such as 'that is,' or 'precisely,' or 'this accomplishes that,' or 'this is produced as that'" (Levinas 1971, 14; Levinas 1969, 28). This crucial admission requires scrutiny. The claim is that the critique of the sufficiency of transcendental phenomenology *amounts to* – is accomplished as, is produced as, implies – "ethics." One may doubt, however, whether "ethics" is the *only* way of concretizing the nocturnal events in virtue of which the structure of subjectivity can be deduced. There seems no prima facie reason why some other way of rendering concrete the backstage of meaning could not be conveyed. Later, in *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas will admit that the structure he seeks is independent of "moral experience" and therefore that the privilege he gives to "ethics" involves a certain contingency, a looseness of fit or a certain distance between the sense of "ethics" and its concretion in "moral experience." Ethics is no longer deemed "necessary" but "adequate" to the structure of subjectivity.

> The ethical language we have resorted to does not arise out of a special moral experience, independent of the description hitherto elaborated. The ethical situation of responsibility is not comprehensible on the basis of ethics. [. . .] The tropes of ethical language are found to be *adequate* for certain structures of the description: for the sense of the approach in its contrast with knowing, the face in its contrast with a phenomenon.
>
> (Levinas 1991, 120 (emphasis added))

Might there then be other structures that are also "adeqaute" for approaching the backstage of meaning *without* converting this approach into an *act* of thought? Might the "essentially nocturnal events" that supplement acts of thought be concretized by other means? In the eulogy Derrida delivered many years later we glimpse such a possibility in the words relayed in Levinas's name: "what really interests me in the end is not ethics, not ethics alone, but the holy, the holiness of the holy" (Derrida 1999, 4). Here, again, the deduction from a critique of transcendental phenomenology to ethics no longer seems "necessary." This does not make it arbitrary; there must be an adequate fit from the structure of subjectivity, called into being from behind the scenes of its own activity, to its concretion. Such a structure can be "multiply realizable." It can be realized concretely in "ethics," but also in the approach to the holy, or the holiness of the holy. It is not surprising, then, that a certain construal of Revelation would likewise be

---

intelligibility as it is given "charnellement, *leibhaftig*" (Merleau-Ponty 1959, 312). Marcel was a member of the committee that judged and accepted *Totality and Infinity* as Levinas's *doctorat d'état*. Merleau-Ponty was scheduled to be there but died unexpectedly shortly before the committee convened.

"adequate" to the sense of the structure of subjectivity behind the stage of its activity as being-there, consciousness, or enactive body. Admittedly, Levinas argues that ethics, holiness, and Revelation all exhibit the same structure of being answerable one-for-the Other, the primordial *me voici* that his work constantly seeks. But rather than assume that there is only one pure or true name name – "ethics" – for rendering this primordial answerability concrete, one should acknowledge the essential ambiguity that constitutes answerability as such. After all, "ethics" is not restricted to *moral* accountability but concerns the grounds of answerability as such.

Let us gather our findings so far. We have seen (1) that Levinas develops a critique of transcendental phenomenology, and in particular of the correlation it assumes between intelligibility and activity, including acts of consciousness; (2) that this critique motivates him to search for a "structure" that is adequate to the nocturnal access of subjectivity to the claims of meaning; (3) that such a structure is ordinarily but not always or exclusively concretized as ethics; (4) that these nocturnal events *could* be articulated in the form of a drama or holy story, so long as such a drama was dissociated from *Handlung*, action or plot. Such, in brief, is the reconstructed rationale for Levinas's postphenomenological deduction to the possibility of a drama in which the nocturnal advent of meaning is conveyed.

4 The Genesis of *Totality and Infinity*

Levinas's allusion to Nietzsche's alternative conception of drama not only precludes action, it also founds the cult. "The most ancient drama represented the legend of the place, the 'holy story' [*heilige Geschichte*] on which the foundation of the cult rested." We find an analogy to the founding cult in the concept of "religion" deployed throughout *Totality and Infinity*. For Levinas, religion is a way of relating to the Other as inaccessible source of the intelligibility that I am able to access. The drama or holy story of religion founds the cult of humanity, the cult of those who are able to experience meaning (something *as* something). The cult of humanity rests on "ethics." But before "ethics" becomes conflated with "moral experience," before its foundational status converts into the *ritual* of banal moral conventions and courtesies – *Apres vous!* and so many other everyday acts – the cult is founded on the holy story, the

drama of Genesis 1–11, the "primeval history" from creation to the election of Abram.[10]

In one sense, such an interpretative proposal will come as no surprise. Some will no doubt be disappointed, suspicious, as happens when the obvious suddenly appears. That Levinas could be suspected of having disseminated the old oracle of "creation" is indeed hardly surprising. As word and theme, "creation" is rife in *Totality and Infinity*, where it is interlaced with an elaborate lexicon of scriptural metaphors and secularized theological concepts that Levinas discerns in multiple, concrete phenomenological form.[11] But it is one thing to invoke the terms and themes of creation; it is quite another to convey (without narrating) *all the main elements* – episodes, stories, and motifs – of the primeval history of Genesis. Much more than the idea of creation, it is the major elements of the entire primeval history of Genesis 1–11 that constitute the nocturnal drama produced in *Totality and Infinity*. These all too familiar yet apparently still generative elements include:

- Genesis 1 – creation *ex hylus* (from *tohu wa'wohu*); "separation" from the primeval, "mythic elements" of water, wind, earth, and sky; the creation of the human, male and female; the separation of sexual difference; the injunction of fecundity;
- Genesis 2–3 – the paradisiac enjoyment and satisfaction of the "egoism" of terrestrial life; the problem of knowledge as it emerges from the point of view of egoistic existence; the ambiguous transcendence of erotic union; the productive value of exile from paradise; the possibility of "sabbatical existence" outside paradise;
- Genesis 4, the story of Cain and Abel – the temptation, prohibition, and banality of murder;
- Genesis 5, the genealogies, "this is the genealogy of *Adam* from the day he was created in the divine image" – a redoubled emphasis on the sense of transcendence accomplished through "fecundity";

10 The notion of a primeval history has been a mainstay of higher criticism of the Pentateuch for generations, where it is conspicuously, though by no means only, associated with Priestly authors. Joel Baden offers a recent recap: "The primeval history in P comprises the genealogy of humankind from Adam through Abraham . . . primeval history for P is the basic presentation of the state of nature and humanity. The elements established in this section are unalterable and serve as the background for the rest of P's history" (Baden 2012, 170).

11 I sought to elucidate this in *A Covenant of Creatures: Levinas's Philosophy of Judaism* (2010). At that stage, however, I did not see how the full array of the major episodes of Genesis 1–11 enter into the structure of *Totality and Infinity*. The present essay, along with another on the allusion Levinas makes to the Kabbalistic concept of *tsimtsum* (Levinas 1971, 107; Levinas 1969, 104), constitute additional excavations of the secularized creation theology at work in *Totality and Infinity*.

- Genesis 6–9, the flood – a dramatization of the possibility of reverting to the pre-created chaos of "existence without a world";
- Genesis 8 – a vision of postdiluvian peace as a plurality of creatures;
- Genesis 10 – the human kinship issued from monotheism;
- Genesis 11, the tower of Babel – the dystopia of monolingual humanism and the utopia of cacophonous peace among the plurality of creatures; the election of the father, Abram, called to journey to an unknown land.

What we see, in rough outline that I will presently augment, is the primeval history of Genesis 1–11 arrayed *without plot or action* behind the stage of *Totality and Infinity*. The holy history of Genesis splayed, not displayed; the narrative form of its plot and action (*Handlung*) broken apart like beads of a necklace and reworked into the subterranean *structure* of his philosophical work. The holy story, broken into nonnarrative fragments, constitutes the "essentially nocturnal events" that form the "conjunctures in being" behind the stage of the transcendental activity of signification and so too behind the scenes of the text of *Totality and Infinity*. By breaking the holy story of Genesis 1–11 into episodic fragments, *Totality and Infinity* disseminates it esoterically, in nonnarrative form. This constitutes its nocturnal drama, behind the stage of the phenomenological argument. Let us briefly elaborate on the more salient of these nocturnal events.

Consider first the major arc of the philosophical argument of *Totality and Infinity*, summarized by Levinas in the 1963 version of "Signature." "Light and *meaning* (*sens*) are born with the emergence and positing of existents in this horrible neutrality of the *there is*. They are on the road that leads from existence to the existent and from the existent to others – a route that delineates time itself" (Levinas 1966, 31).[12] Thus summarized, *Totality and Infinity* consists of the "ontogenesis" of meaning, to borrow a phrase Ricoeur used in a related context.[13] *In the beginning . . . il y a l'existence* (Levinas 1947, 99), "before the light comes" (Levinas 1995, 61), as Levinas said in 1947, "before creation," as he later put it (Levinas 1985, 48), as in Genesis 1:2, where creation takes place against the background of the mythic elements of primordial *tohu wa'wohu* – "welter and waste," as Robert Alter translates it (Alter 1996, 3) – the primordial dark and the abyss (*tehom*). In *Totality and Infinity*, the genesis of meaning is not constituted in a linear fashion but consists in deformalizing the experience

12 This 1966 translation of Levinas's "Signature" differs somewhat from the version published in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (see Levinas 1990, 292). Levinas's original article appeared in the volume *Les Philosophes Francais d'aujourd'hui par eux-mêmes: Autobiographie de la philosophie française conternporaine* (1963).

13 See Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (1967).

of separation from formless, elemental existence "prior to discourse" (Levinas 1969, 190). It consists of a "deliverance from the horror of the *there is*" (Levinas 1969, 191) that amounts to the continuous creation of subjectivity.

By the same token, such a deliverance attests to the spectre of decreation, reversion to the formlessness of "existence without existents." The biblical text dramatizes this possibility in the story of the flood, where creation reverts to the primordial abyss (*tehom*) before creation (Gen. 7:11). The arc of Levinas's account of the *genesis of meaning* recapitulates fragments of the Act of Creation in Genesis, which likewise involves a deliverance from the nocturnal elements and can equally revert to the primordial condition of elemental existence. In *Totality and Infinity*, as in Genesis, creation *is* the fragile deliverance from the "mythical format" of "existence without a world."[14]

Zooming in from the broadest arc of *Totality and Infinity* to Section II, "Interiority and Economy," we find a series of allusions and phenomenological recapitulations of Genesis 2–3, the garden of Eden, where Levinas develops a phenomenology of being "innocently egoist." "At the origin there is a being gratified, a citizen of paradise" (Levinas 1969, 145). The idea that basic needs such as hunger are not merely the function of lack or need but are constitutive of the *jouissance* through which one is affectively individuated *within* the indeterminacy of existing renders the experience of selfhood innocently materialist, carnal and sinless. "It is not that at the beginning there was hunger; the simultaneity of hunger and food constitutes the paradisal initial condition of enjoyment" (Levinas 1969, 136). The references to paradise are not incidental. Unpublished notes from the *Inédits* make the biblical allusion clear. "An egoist movement irreducible to negation: *paradisal subjectification of Adam, innocent egoism,* immanence: dwelling in oneself while borrowing from the world only a place for being in oneself" (Levinas 2009, 245, emphasis added). The phenomenological descriptions of the egoism of enjoyment, of satisfaction without sin, point backstage to the paradisiac life of Genesis 2, the edenic egoism where the subjectification of Adam begins.

Levinas might have found inspiration for this phenomenology of paradisiac life in the writings of the ultra-Catholic thinker Léon Bloy, whose *Lettres à sa fiancée* provided an example of how to generate philosophical anthropology on the basis of religious categories (Levinas 2009, 151). The conservative writer's way of deriving a non-confessional spiritual anthropology on the basis of his understanding of Catholicism impressed Levinas profoundly: "Same work to be undertaken for j[udaism]," he anticipates for himself (Levinas 2009, 151). One wonders,

14 As Ricoeur says of Ancient Near East cosmologies, "salvation is identical with creation itself" (Ricoeur 1967, 172).

then, if section II of *Totality and Infinity* has Genesis 2–3 behind the stage on which Levinas unfolds the problem of objective knowledge in terms of "the lust of the eyes," the role of labor, dwelling, and eros on the way to knowledge, and the implied exile from the innocent "frisson égoïste" (Levinas 2009, 245) of paradisiac life that is finally required to account for the experience of meaning that we in fact already possess. Bloy's retrieval of Genesis was clearly the inspiration for the rich account of the ambiguity of the erotic, equivocating between alterity and possession, veneration and profanation,. In the *Carnets* we read: "The second chapter of Genesis where one finds terrestrial paradise described is, in my eyes, a symbolic figure of *Woman*. This is one of the discoveries of which I am most proud" (Levinas 2009, 153, citing Bloy's *Lettres* 3 November 1889). *Time and the Other* acknowledges "the admirably bold pages of Léon Bloy in his *Letters to his Fiancée*" (Levinas 1987, 86), which were subsequently elaborated in *Totality and Infinity* into a phenomenology of eros and, I suggest, of the edenic quality of innocent egoism independent of knowledge.

To Genesis 4, the story of Cain and Abel, *Totality and Infinity* makes explicit reference in the phenomenology of hatred that accounts for the will to annihilate, rather than merely defeat, the Other. Whereas phenomena can be opposed, circumvented, destroyed, and so forth, just as the manifest, empirical other can be contested, ignored, and even killed, the Other, as the transcendent source of my own subjectivity as being-answerable, cannot be annihilated. One can kill and thus reduce the other to nothingness, but the Other, as non-phenomenological source to whom one is finally answerable, "expresses my moral impossibility of annihilating" (Levinas 1971, 258; Levinas 1969, 232). Ontically facile, murder is ontologically impossible since the sense of the Other as origin of my answerability cannot be reduced or eliminated. "The face resists possession, resists my powers" (Levinas 1969, 197), because it consists in a way of being that falls outside possibilities of possession or horizons of understanding. Defying appropriation, the Other introduces "the temptation of murder, not only as a temptation to total 'destruction,' but also as the purely ethical impossibility of this temptation and attempt" (Levinas 1969, 199). While murder is one of the banalities of history, it is ethically impossible to annihilate the Other, for that would amount to *justifying the negation of one's own access to justification*. The transcendence of the Other consists in this irreducible source of normativity which founds subjectivity. The thought, central to *Totality and Infinity*, implies an almost indiscernible but pervasive reference to Genesis 4, for the ethical impossibility of murder "looks at me from the very depths of the eyes I want to extinguish, looks at me as the eye that in the tomb shall look at Cain" (Levinas 1969, 233). In his commentary on *Totality and Infinity* Blanchot puts it well: "man facing man like this has no choice but to speak or to kill . . .

Cain killing Abel is the self that, coming up against the transcendence of *autrui* (what in the other exceeds me absolutely and that is well represented in biblical history by the incomprehensible inequality of divine favor), attempts to confront it by resorting to the transcendence of murder" (Blanchot 1993, 61).[15]

Just as the implied thematics of Genesis 4 stand behind the stage of the phenomenology of hatred and the temptation of murder, so too the notorious genealogies of the Priestly author, recurring throughout primeval history, find their correspondences in the decisive notion of fecundity and its associated concept of election. In Genesis, the genealogies of primeval history are explicitly linked to the divine likeness. "When God created mankind, he made them in the likeness of God . . . .When Adam had lived 130 years, he had *a son in his own likeness*, *in his own image*; and he named him Seth" (5:1–3). Levinas renders concrete this notion of being in the likeness of God by describing it as a way of being oneself diachronically, across the discontinuity of generations, thus being unlike oneself. Subjectivity is concretely founded on the temporality of fecundity through which one *is* for the sake of the Other. "Paternity is a relation with a stranger who while being Other . . . *is* me, a relation of the I with a self which is yet not me. . . . In existing itself there is a multiplicity and a transcendence. In this transcendence the I is not swept away, since the son is not me; and yet I *am* my son. The fecundity of the I is its very transcendence" (Levinas 1969, 277). To be oneself is to be *fecund and multiple* by being temporally oriented beyond oneself, for the sake of the Other to come. On this view, it is not the case that an individual as such *is* an image of God but that the divine image is rendered concrete through the transcendence of the self in its being fecund and multiple. This way of being oneself by transcending oneself for the sake of the Other distinguishes Levinas's "defense of subjectivity" from rival accounts that ground subjectivity in its transcendental activity. Accordingly, although we discern elements of primeval history throughout *Totality and Infinity*, fecundity constitutes a privileged access to the "conjunctures in being" of the drama behind the activity of intelligibility, as we will see in the next section.

From Genesis 5, primeval history moves into a lengthy account, or accounts, of the deluge, whose narrative premise is that the covenantal structure of creation can collapse into the primordial formlessness of mythic elemental existence.[16] In the Deluge, the worldhood of creation reverts to the primordial abyss (*tehom*) before there was Saying (Gen. 7:11). This is, as it were, the primal

15 Cf. *Totality and Infinity* (Levinas 1969), pages 198–201 and especially 232–236.

16 For a classic explication see Jon. D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (1994). I have written about this at greater length in "The Ethics of Creation: Biblical and Post-Biblical Views" (2012).

scene of the "epoché of debacle" that obsessed Levinas from his ruminations on the *il y a* in the mid-1940s to the narrative form he gave it in *Sad Opulence* to his location of its historical traces in radical evil, the "total chaos" of a world "fallen apart," as happened in "a world put in question by Hitler's triumphs," "as if being itself had been suspended" (Levinas 1996, 119).[17] The Deluge *is* decreation, existence without existents, a possibility not only for myth but also for historical existence, indeed a spectre accompanying the egoist enjoyment of life (Levinas 1971, 160ff.). Once again, then, a major axis of the arc of *Totality and Infinity* is anticipated by the primeval history of Genesis. Levinas occasionally makes this explicit, as for example when describing the return of the primordial *il y a* as a reversion to a mythic time "before the light" (Levinas 1947, 99; Levinas 1995, 61) or "before creation" (Levinas 1985, 48).

The final episode in primeval history is the Tower of Babel, which is found in Levinas's critique of the monolingual universalism of impersonal reason, whose ideal is the Hegelian state. "In accomplishing its essence as discourse, in becoming a discourse universally coherent, language would at the same time realize the universal State, in which multiplicity is reabsorbed and discourse comes to an end, for lack of interlocutors" (Levinas 1971, 239; Levinas 1969, 217). The first name of the Hegelian state is Babel, whose towering ambition implies a suppression of the multiplicity of singular voices that constitute the original possibility of communication.

What is striking is not only the philosophical rendering of this or that episode in the primeval history of Genesis but their accumulation. All the main elements of the primeval history of Genesis 1–11 can be discerned within the texture of *Totality and Infinity*. Crucially, the presence of these traces of Genesis does not amount to a repetition of its narrative structure, as if it were a matter of repeating the plot of the biblical story. Beginning with a critique of the primacy of action, one could hardly progress by repeating the ancient plot. What we find, rather, is that the "holy story" of Genesis 1–11 has been stripped of

17 See also Levinas, "Tout est-il vanité?" (1946). Later, in the historical event of Destruction, the created world again reverts to the primordial state of elemental existence, before the light and without the individuation of creatures, this time on account of war. Jeremiah bears witness to this reversion:

> I look at the earth,
> It is unformed and void [*tohu wa'bohu*];
> At the skies, And their light is gone.
> I look at the mountains, They are quaking;
> And all the hills are rocking. I look: no human [*eyn ha'adam*],
> And all the birds of the sky have fled [*nadadu*]
>
> (Jer. 4:23)

potent acts and disemplotted. Produced in its nocturnal profile, *Totality and Infinity* records a drama that Nietzsche called "hieratic," in accordance with the priestly writings that are so prevalent in Genesis 1–11, recording those "conjunctures of being" behind the stage of meaning and behind the scenes of Levinas's phenomenological descriptions.

5 Holy History

In Nietzsche's comment on Wagner, the drama without action is called *heilige Geschichte*. Holy history is not to be confused with a "sacred drama," if the word sacred connotes participation in, or the possibility of imitating the holy. The *heilige Geschicte* to which Levinas alludes does not consist of the familiar narratives of Genesis 1–11 in their canonical form but in fragments of episodes from primeval history whose re-contextualization supports the backstage structure of Levinas's argument. The fragments of holy history lie broken behind the stage on which subjectivity becomes consciousness and agency, before one becomes an ability to act and thereby enter the theatre of life, before psychological stories and the plot of secular history are played out. Yet Levinas often speaks of *histoire sainte* in a manner that seems to diverge from the pre-philosophical sense we have discerned in *Totality and Infinity*. In the philosophical work, it refers to fragments of the backstage structure of subjectivity, but elsewhere it quite explicitly refers to the history of the Jews, which prima facie seems to transpire empirically where it is registered in terms of action. In fact, however, the two conceptions are not so distinct.

Levinas's *explicit* notion of "holy history" emerges in 1947 in critical dialogue with Sartre's view of Jewish history before it becomes a recurring feature of his essays in Jewish thought.[18] Here, holy history marks the difference between Sartrean "facticity" and Levinas's understanding of Jewish "election." Whereas facticity enables the free reception of one's past, election is yoked to a metaphysical sense that no act of freedom can overcome. Facticity converts into freedom and *amor fati*, but to be elected is to be answerable to someone else, from another time, to the Father, whose call is constitutive of who one is – "personhood as a son and as elected" (Levinas 2007, 2010). To be elected is to be bound to the time of the Other; it is to *be* metaphysical, that is, to maintain

18 See especially Levinas "Being Jewish" (2007) and "Existentialism and Anti-Semitism (1999), both published in 1947. For a fine commentary see Schonfeld 2006.

oneself at a distance from historical existence, to be answerable beyond the horizon of the present and thus to be oneself in virtue of holy history. Through election, "the very mystery of personhood" (Levinas 2007, 210), subjectivity, enters holy history. Accordingly, as Eli Schonfeld observes, it is not only the case that the concept of holy history belongs to Levinas's confessional writings, as if it were simply a matter of describing and vindicating Jewish history. Rather, the concept of holy history undergoes "philosophical translation" into *Totality and Infinity*, where it takes form of the "election" of subjectivity in the mode of "fecundity" – being oneself in virtue of being answerable to the time of the Other, "while occluding the Jewish reference" (Schonfeld 2006, 142).

The "confessional" appeal to the holy history and election of being Jewish thus translates into descriptions of the structure of subjectivity as individuated or elected through fecundity, which means being answerable to a time beyond the horizon of political and historical existence. This explains why the footnote we have been explicating refers the notion of drama, which Nietzsche identifies with the drama of a holy history, to "the end of this work, the study of relations which we situate *beyond the face*." The reference points to Section IV of *Totality and Infinity*, "Beyond the Face," where Levinas describes the individuation of subjectivity as elected in virtue of its fecundity, as being oneself answerable to the time of the Other. Whether as the "election" of the Jews into "holy history" or, philosophically, the individuation of subjectivity through "fecundity," in both cases it is a matter of maintaining subjectivity in its temporal being for the sake of the Other, standing under the judgement of those of a different time, the Father and the Child. This temporal structure of subjectivity, which *Totality and Infinity* calls fecundity, being answerable "beyond the face" and thus beyond the horizon of the present, translates and secularizes the holy history of Jewish election. It refers subjectivity beyond the horizon of historical existence and thus beyond the category of historical *agency*. Ultimately, it refers subjectivity from its constitution as an historical agent to its election under the judgement of holy history, to "the story of *Genesis* . . . of the transmission of the blessing" (Schonfeld 2006, 147). The prospect of a drama "beyond the face" implied by Nietzsche's appeal to *heilige Geschichte* as a drama behind the scenes of action thereby points to a notion of holy history consonant with Levinas's conception of Jewish election as metaphysical rather than empirical and its transposition into an account of subjectivity as founded on the temporality of the Other, the elected structure of fecundity. Here too, then, the primeval history of Genesis is concealed amid the phenomenological descriptions of *Totality and Infinity*.

Moreover, like the opening eleven chapters of Genesis, and so too like the metaphysical "holy history" of the Jews to which Levinas appeals in his confessional writings, *Totality and Infinity* recalls the drama of humanity at large. One

can thus view Levinas's writings as a recapitulation of the work of the ancient Priestly authors, recording a "drama . . . in the hieratic sense," as Nietzsche proposed. In both cases, it is a matter of a "universal" drama that founds the cult of humanity: "ethics," as Levinas calls it, or "the Noahide laws," as rabbinic Judaism calls those seven basic laws given to pre-diluvian humanity, among them the prohibition on murder and the injunction to establish institutions of justice. Finally, one should note that the primeval genesis is ritualized by the priestly cult of the Israelite sanctuary described in Exodus 39–40, which provides a "microcosm" of the creation story from Genesis 1.[19] The priestly cult of Israel and its sanctuary thus become an icon of the drama of the creation of the world, just as, for Levinas, the holy history of the Jews is an icon of the drama of subjectivity at large. The priestly enactment of the holy story of Genesis in the Tabernacle of the Book of Exodus well illustrates the "hieratic" drama that Nietzsche discerned in Doric antiquity. It is a drama that founds the cult, performed *behind the curtain* and in *silence*, intimating the Act of Creation without imitating it, without the pretence of *mimesis praxeos*.[20] *Totality and Infinity* effects a transposition of this logic. The cult of humanity–the cult of the experience of meaning–is founded on the primeval history of Genesis and ritualized in moral experience.

6 As if we were children

A drama or holy story founds subjectivity from behind the stage of its transcendental activity. Levinas calls it ethics, but we have seen that it is constituted in no small part from the fragmented primeval history of Genesis 1–11. This does not mean that ethics depends on, much less reduces to, the stories of Genesis. For one, the validity of the descriptions depends only on the eidetic evidence they exhibit to a subject, including the sense of the limits of experience that such evidence provides. Scripture exercises no authority over these descriptions it merely provides allusions to how such "conjunctures in being" beyond the horizon of evidence might be "formally indicated," much like Heidegger's allusions to St Paul or Kierkegaard show how ontological structures might be indicated. Moreover, in the backstage of *Totality and Infinity*, the allusions to holy history never amount to telling a story behind the visible. The episodes from

19 The microcosmic reiteration of the drama of creation in the priestly cult is a common feature of ancient near eastern ritual. For a lucid account of the biblical case, see Levenson (1994, 78–99).

20 On the Priestly drama see Knohl 2007.

Genesis have been disemplotted from the biblical narrative and placed in a new structure behind the curtain of the activity of signification. Recourse to fragments from the primeval history of Genesis behind the stage of the activity of being does not amount to recourse to a primordial story of the genesis of being.

Accordingly, *Totality and Infinity* does not violate the founding gesture of phenomenology, which consists in distinguishing between the validity of meaning and the genetic stories that explain our access to meaning, whether through evolutionary biology and cognitive science or through historical accounts of the development of concepts, values, institutions, and so forth. Husserl opens *Ideas 1* by declaring: "No stories will be told here. Neither psychological-causal nor historical-developmental genesis need be, or should be, thought of when we speak here of originality (*Ursprünglichkeit)*" (Husserl 1983, 5 n. 2).[21] The originality of meaning or intelligibility – that consciousness is always intentional, that there is always already meaning – is not explained by appeal to a causal story, for such stories always presuppose other antecedently valid meanings. For the same reason Heidegger brings the question of being to light by emphasizing the difference between the transcendental-ontological account of being and alternative, ontic ways of understanding entities. Alluding to *Sophist* 242c, he proposes that "our first philosophical step consists in not *mython tina diēgeisthai*, in not 'telling a story' [*keine Geschichte erzählen*] – that is to say, in not defining entities as entities by tracing them back in their origin to some other entities, as if Being had the character of some possible entity" (Heidegger 1962, 5). Since being – the ways of being in virtue of which a being is intelligible as what it is or might be – is not itself a being, it cannot be explained by appeal to entities that cause and materially constitute it. No developmental story, whether naturalistic or historical, can account for the fact that there is sense to being. The hermeneutic circle of intelligibility is "primordial" (*ursprünglich*) (Heidegger 1962, 195).

Even so, what is gained by this elaborate allusion to fragments of primeval history behind the scenes of transcendental phenomenology? Two points in particular, and with them we can conclude. First, by appealing to a drama or holy history behind the philosophical scene while refusing the narrative form of a story, *Totality and Infinity* invites the reader to recover a pre-philosophical sense of wonder without resorting to pre-philosophical naiveté. It is not just Husserl and Heidegger who refuse to tell stories. Philosophy begins by breaking with mythos and refusing to tell stories. Plato makes the point against his precursors who try to explain being by telling a story of its origin in another being.

21 This discussion is indebted to Jacques Derrida, *Heidegger: The Question of Being and History* (2016).

"Every one of them seems to tell us a story (*muthon*) as if we were children" (*Sophist* 242c), he objects.

Elsewhere, however, Plato concedes that the philosopher is not always true to his or her ambitions, for the philosopher needs a good story as much as the common run of people: in *Timaeus*, he states that "we should bear in mind the fact that I and all of you, the speaker and his judges, are no more than human, which means that on these matters we ought to accept the likely account [*muthos*] and not demand more than that" (Plato 2008, 18). Derrida puts forth two ways of understanding this concession to story or mythos. First, philosophers, being mortal, must resign themselves to a likely story about the origins of meaning:

> Very remarkable in this respect is the *Timaeus*, in which, when it comes to explaining the origin of the *world*, the origin of the beings that appear to us, the origin of the ordered system (*Cosmos*) of phenomena, Timaeus, responding to Socrates who was asking for a true story (*alēthinon logon*) at last, and not a *muthon*, announces (29 c-d) that, when it is a question of the origin of beings, a philosophical discourse adequate to the origin is impossible, a true and exact discourse is impossible, and so one must be content to recite, to unroll like a genesis, like a becoming-real of things, something that is not becoming, but the origin of things. One must unroll the *Archē* like a genesis. One must produce a discourse, a narrative in terms of becoming, in what is already here, already born, even though one would need to speak of the origin and of the birth of the world.
>
> (Derrida 2016, 35)

No less than ordinary people, philosophers cannot live without stories. They too find themselves always already within the domain of meaning. They cannot pull themselves up by the bootstraps, they were not witness to the genesis of meaning, and so they too must surmise a likely story about the origin of meaning. They speak, for example, about the "emergence" of intelligibility from biological life, the "emergence" of biological life from chemical elements and of chemical elements from physical forces – a likely story, but "emergence" only obscures the enigma of intelligibility, as transcendental phenomenologists since Husserl have insisted.

Alternatively, even if the philosopher is able to avoid telling a story of the origin of meaning, there may be reason, Derrida proposes, to tell such a likely story – not to console philosophers but to control the non-philosophical mass of people. The philosopher may have need for an "esotericism," for plausible stories whose "expository necessity" unroll the inaccessible origin like a genesis in order to justify basic exigencies of social and political life, such as answerability, accountability or responsibility, in short, ethics (Derrida 2016, 36).

The elaborate allusion *Totality and Infinity* makes to the holy story of Genesis 1–11 brings these two alternatives to converge in the form of an inverted esotericism. On the one hand, it unrolls the *Archē* like a genesis; more precisely, it

unrolls the *archē* of intelligibility like a Genesis. The story it articulates, without plot, action or narrative, adheres to the primordial orientation of the Good, which every child knows. In a radio talk from September 25, 1945, reflecting on his experience as a Jewish prisoner of war Levinas marvelled at this recovery of a childlike reception of Revelation. Old biblical stories, "unlearned" since the age of Bar Mitzvah, suddenly reappeared "true in their elementary truth, their truth for children . . . their popular truth . . . And this truth itself, this truth taught from childhood that the unjust and the strong succumb, that the weak and the poor are saved and triumph appeared marvelous in its simplicity . . . . seeing it confirmed by world events – it takes your breath away, it grabs you by the throat. Good becomes Good; Evil, Evil. The dismal masquerade is over" (Levinas 2009, 214). With immeasurably more sophistication, the defense of subjectivity that *Totality and Infinity* produces behind the stage of meaning provides the philosopher with a likely mythos, the story that he or she needs to be oriented within the activity of being. But at this point one should ask, with Derrida, "Why the value of philosophical discourse is spontaneously measured by the yardstick of adult maturity is a question to which it is not so easy to reply seriously. Why, fundamentally, is an *adult's* discourse better than a *child*'s discourse? And why would philosophy make common cause with maturity?" (Derrida 2016, 34). Elsewhere Levinas calls the primordial orientation to the Good "the secret of angels," a "childlike trust," the "reception of Revelation" (Levinas 2019, 46–48). It consists in affirming the structure of subjectivity as being-for-the-Other, prior to knowledge, without guarantee, and before the success or failure of one's actions, a childlike trust in the Other without naiveté. This has nothing to do with blind deference to the authority of other people. The recursion from philosophy to the backstage structure of subjectivity does not revert to naïveté but to integrity, an affirmation of the orientation of subjectivity, prior to the knowledge of good and evil, toward the Other. "The question is not to transform action into a mode of understanding but to praise a mode of knowing which reveals the deep structure of subjectivity . . . *Temimut* [integrity]" (Levinas 2019, 43). "Integrity, taken in its logical meaning and not as a characteristic of a childlike disposition, indicates, if it is thought through to the end, an ethical configuration" (Levinas 2019, 48). Integrity consists in maintaining one's answerability to the Other in the course of one's everyday activities, even when no one is around, or in the face of the dishonesty of others, or under pressure from economic, social, or biological factors. This ethical configuration is the subterranean structure of subjectivity, its adherence to the Other from behind the stage of its active ways of being in the world. *Temimut*, or integrity, maintaining one's answerability to the Other in the face of the temptation to yield to the pressures of life, is structured as fecundity, an orientation to some*one* still to come. At issue, then, is a *critical naiveté*, the integrity

of a vision that sees beyond the needs of the instant, an integrity that is therefore "different from that which would consists in a return to childish naiveté . . . It is a perfectly adult effort" (Levinas 2019, 42).

Thus, on the other hand, the numerous evocations and allusions that *Totality and Infinity* makes to the most likely of all stories, the primeval history of Genesis, as orienting subjectivity from behind the stage of its activity, suggests the possibility of an esotericism of the Good hidden from philosophers. For in making common cause with maturity, philosophers not only forgo stories but also risk forgetting the angelic secret of a critical naiveté that is answerable to the Other beyond the horizon of knowledge. To return to the zero-degree of answerability is to awaken philosophers from the great midday slumber of reason. It is to convey a secret way of being answerable in the dark. Traditional esotericism conceals the truth from the mass of people by secreting it within a holy story where it can be disclosed by those 'in the know'. But *Totality and Infinity* conceals fragments of the holy story from the philosophical elite in order to awaken an integrity that is dispelled by the light of knowledge. In an intellectual climate pervaded by the ideal of total disclosure, where nothing is as sacred as harsh truth, *Totality and Infinity* orients the philosopher back to that primordial trust, adherence to the Other, as if philosophers were not only rational mortals but also children.

Bibliography

Alter, Robert. 1996. *Genesis: Translation and Commentary*. New York: Norton.

Baden, Joel S. 2012. *The Composition of the Pentateuch: Renewing the Documentary Hypothesis*. The Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Blanchot, Maurice. 1993 *The Infinite Conversation*. Trans. Susan Hanson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Boyarin, Daniel. 1990. "The Song of Songs: Lock or Key? Intertextuality, Allegory and Midrash." *The Book and the Text: The Bible and Literary Theory*. Ed. Regina M. Schwartz. Oxford: Blackwell. 214–230.

Critchley, Simon. 2015. *The Problem of Levinas*. Ed. A. Dianda. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Derrida, Jacques. 1999. *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*. Trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Derrida, Jacques. 2016. *Heidegger: The Question of Being and History*. Trans. Geoffrey Bennington. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Fagenblat, Michael. 2010. *A Covenant of Creatures: Levinas's Philosophy of Judaism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Fagenblat, Michael. 2012. "The Ethics of Creation: Biblical and Post-Biblical Views." *Monotheism and Ethics: Historical and Contemporary Intersections among Judaism, Christianity and Islam*. Leiden: Brill. 107–140.
Halbertal, Moshe. 2009. *Concealment and Revelation: Esotericism in Jewish Thought and its Philosophical Implications*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Heidegger, Martin. 1962. *Being and Time*. Trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper.
Husserl, Edmund. 1983. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*. Trans. F. Kersten. Dordrecht: Springer.
Knohl, Israel. 2007. The Sanctuary of Silence: The Priestly Torah and the Holiness School. 1st Edition. Winona Lake, Ind: Eisenbrauns.
Levenson, Jon. D. 1994. *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Levinas, Emmanuel. "Tout est-il vanité?" *Bulletin Intérieur* de l'*Alliance Israélite Universelle* 2.9 (July 1946): 1–2.
Levinas, Emmanuel. 1947. *De l'existence a l'existant*. Paris: Vrin.
Levinas, Emmanuel. 1963. "Signature." *Les Philosophes Francais d'aujourd'hui par eux-mêmes*: *Autobiographie de la philosophie française conternporaine*. Eds. G. Deledalle and D. Huisman. Paris: Centre de Documentation Universitaire. 325–328.
Levinas, Emmanuel. 1969. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totalité et Infini : Essai Sur l'extériorité*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1971 [1961].
Levinas, Emmanuel. "Signature." *Philosophy Today* 10.1 (1966): 30–33.
Levinas, Emmanuel. 1985. *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. Trans. Richard A. Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
Levinas, Emmanuel. 1987. *Time and the Other*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
Levinas, Emmanuel. 1990. *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*. Trans. Séan Hand. London: Athlone. 291–295.
Levinas, Emmanuel. 1991. *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Dordrecht: Springer.
Levinas, Emmanuel. 1995. *Existence and Existents*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic.
Levinas, Emmanuel. 1996. "Nameless." Proper Names. Trans. Michael B. Smith. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 119–123.
Levinas, Emmanuel. "Existentialism and Anti-Semitism." Trans. Denis Hollier and Rosalind Krauss. *October* 87 (Winter, 1999): 27–31.
Levinas, Emmanuel. "Being Jewish." Trans. Mary Beth Mader. *Continental Philosophy Review* 40.3 (2007): 205–210.
Levinas, Emmanuel. 2009. *Oeuvres complètes*, Vol. 1: *Carnets de captivité et autre inédits*. Eds. Rodolphe Calin and Catherine Chalier. Paris: Grasset.
Levinas, Emmanuel, 2019. "The Temptation of Temptation." *Nine Talmudic Readings*. Trans. Annette Aronowicz. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 42–72.
Malka, Salomon. 2006. *Emmanuel Levinas: His Life and Legacy*. Trans. Michael Kigel and Sonja M. Embree. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "La philosophie de l'existence." *Dialogue* 5:3 (1959): 307–322.

Midrash Rabbah: Genesis, Vol. I. Trans. H. Freedman. London: Soncino, 1939.
Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1988. *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Einzelbänden,* Vol. 6. Eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari. Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag.
Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1997. *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*. Trans. W. Kaufmann. Toronto: Random House.
Plato. *Timaeus and Critias*. 2008. Trans. Robin Waterfield. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Ricoeur, Paul. 1967. *The Symbolism of Evil*. Trans. Emerson Buchanan. Boston: Beacon Press.
Schonfeld, Eli. "Histoire et facticité juive: À propos d'un dialogue entre Lévinas et Sartre." *Cahiers d'Études Lévinassiennes* 5 (2006): 137–151.
Taminiaux, Jacques. "La genèse de la publication de *Totalité et Infini*." *Levinas: au-delà du visible. Études sur les inédits de Levinas des* Carnets de captivité *à* Totalité et Infini. Eds. Emmanuel Housset and Rodolphe Calin. *Cahiers de philosophie de l'Université de Caen* 49 (August 2012): 69–85.