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Divine Invisibility and Ethical Epistemology in Late Modernity: Heidegger, Jonas and Levinas

Abstract: In diesem Aufsatz geht es um eine spätmoderne Konfiguration des Wissens, die auf der Ethik beruht. Diese Konfiguration verbindet eine Kritik der Vision oder Theoria als Paradigma allen Wissens mit dem alternativen Verständnis von Wissen als existentiell, praktisch oder ethisch. Diese Verlagerung von der Theorie zur Ethik bezieht sich auf biblische Vorstellungen von Theologie als Anthropologie. Dieser Aufsatz befragt diese Konstellation einer anti-visuellen pro-ethischen Erkenntnistheorie in den Werken von drei Philosophen des 20. Jh.: Martin Heidegger, Hans Jonas und Emmanuel Levinas.

Keywords: Epistemology, ethics, Heidegger, Jonas, Levinas

1 *tzelem elohim*: Knowledge as Ethics?

This volume examines the relations between two central notions of the historical discourse that is based on the biblical canon: the notion that the human cannot see the divine, God, and the notion that the human is created in God's image. These two notions concern seeing, optics. Considering that vision has been a central paradigm of knowledge within Western civilisation, the same civilisation that has incorporated the Bible as canon, these two notions may be said to be two epistemic or epistemological premises, namely premises concerning the nature of knowledge.

The hypothesis that this volume seeks to explore is accordingly that the combination of these two notions creates an epistemological constellation, which intimately links between our knowledge (vision) of the divine, *theology*, and our knowledge (vision) of the human, *anthropology*. More specifically, it suggests a conception of theology *as* anthropology: God cannot be seen directly, but is also not simply invisible, not unknowable; rather, since Man is created in God's image, the contemplation of Man is at the same time and somehow – indirectly – also the contemplation of God: our knowledge of the divine passes through our knowledge of the human, knowing the human *is* somehow knowing the divine.

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Already at this point, we may note the deep ambivalence of this – indeed daring – proposition. *On the one hand*, it suggests a divinisation of the human, in the sense of elevating, of sanctifying the human being above the realm of objects, also above animate nature. This suggestion, deeply ingrained in biblical traditions, has in itself become, in our contemporary era of increasing critique of anthropocentrism, in many ways problematic. But also within the biblical discourse itself, coupling theology with anthropology, inasmuch as it sanctifies the human, *on the other hand*, it also carries the ambivalent implication of humanising the divine, namely of identifying God with something that is not God, which might open the way to a false sense of knowledge, and to a misplaced form of worship, namely to idolatry.

The question of idolatry is once again a question of optics. Would idolatry, a fundamental epistemic transgression against the invisible God, consist in the worship of all images, of all visible things, or would *some* images transcend the realm of idolatry, would constitute no *idol* but *icon*, for instance the image of man? This question leads deep into central disputes within the history of theology, articulating, among others, a basic theo-aesthetical conflict between Christianity, on the one hand, and Judaism and Islam, on the other.

Be that as it may, in this essay I wish to reflect on the affinity of theology and anthropology, the knowledge of the divine and the knowledge of the human, through a different question, which does not interrogate potential distinctions within optics, but rather a potential distinction between optical and non-optical, visual and non-visual paradigms of knowledge. The point of departure is a question on the exact nature of our knowledge of the human, so-called “anthropology.” Is this concept, however, appropriate or primary? Is our knowledge of the human primarily “anthropological”? What I mean: is human knowledge of the human, namely human *self-knowledge*, primarily an objective, discursive knowledge (*logos*) of a certain objective entity (*anthropos*)? Is human self-knowledge primarily predicated on a distant relation of contemplation and observation, on *vision*? Would not our knowledge of ourselves, namely our self-conscious or self-awareness, be better described as based primarily not on contemplation, but on action, namely as something like existential or performative knowledge, less as theory and more as ethics?

The idea that I wish to explore in this essay is that the biblical notion of man as *imago dei*, or as the Hebrew text goes *tzelem elohim*, may be interpreted epistemologically not as positing the human as the primary object for the contemplation of the divine, namely not as positing Man as the visible manifestation for the invisible God; on the contrary, the notion of *tzelem elohim*, according to this interpretation, would rather predicate the knowledge of the divine, theology, which is the highest and therefore the seminal knowledge, on human self-knowledge, which is *not* primarily objective, theoretical and contemplative, but ethical. Could *tzelem elohim* be understood as the epistemological foundation for knowledge not as theory but as ethics?

2 Late Antiquity and Late Modernity

The aforementioned categories, each in itself and in their combinations, interrelations and implications raise numerous questions, including the one that I wish to analyse here. One way of raising and analysing these questions, as many contributions in this volume do, is to look at how these biblical categories were understood, applied, configured and reconfigured in the various constellations of post-biblical discourses in Late Antiquity, which developed broad epistemological and ethical frameworks based on the reception of the biblical archives, such as Hellenistic Judaism, Early Christianity and Neoplatonism. My own contribution – as its title makes clear – concerns what may be called late modern thought. Like everything in the history of thought, these two different periods, Late Antiquity and Late Modernity, are not unrelated. More specifically, it is possible to indicate obvious similarities between Late Antiquity and Late Modernity, both post-classical times, which mark simultaneously the canonisation of an era and its decline. In any case, the late modern notions that I wish to discuss in this essay feature not only typological similarities to late antique thought, but as I will show, they were all developed in direct reference to late antique corpora. With *imago dei* in mind, we may say that the relevant late modern concepts were created in the image of late antique ones.

The basic observation that this essay sets out to formulate, develop and reflect on concerns a late modern constellation of thought that combines two elements, which are akin to the two abovementioned notions at the centre of this volume, and whose combination generates the same epistemological configuration that I suggested above, namely of knowledge as based on ethics. The first element I have in mind is a critique of vision, contemplation or *theoria* as the paradigm of all knowledge. The second, interrelated element, is a shift, in the understanding of knowledge, from theory to non-theoretical paradigms, which may be characterised as existential, practical or ethical. This shift in the modern and still contemporary conception of knowledge, so to speak in the knowledge of knowledge (or in more technical, disciplinary terms, in *epistemology*), from theory to ethics, so I will show, echoes and has *explicitly referenced* bible-based notions of theology as anthropology, with more or less obvious references to the specific ideas of the invisible God and the Human as created in God's image.

This essay renders visible and interrogates this constellation of anti-visual pro-ethical epistemology in the works of three 20th-century European philosophers: Martin Heidegger, Hans Jonas and Emmanuel Levinas. This combination may seem paradoxical, unseemly, especially in the present context. Contemporary doxa commonly features Heidegger as a Nietzschean, secular, neo-pagan thinker, whose thought is anti-monotheist, anti-theological, anti-Christian, anti-Jewish and – as we know now, after the publication of his *Black Notebooks* – also anti-Semitic, at any rate

non- or even anti-ethical.¹ Jonas and Levinas, in contrast, are commonly presented as assimilated Jewish philosophers, who as students were lured by the master-philosopher Heidegger, but who after the Holocaust developed, in explicit critique against Heidegger's pagan ontology, their famous projects of ethics – Jonas, environmental ethics and Levinas, interpersonal ethics – both inspired by a return to the Judeo-Christian tradition.²

I state at the outset that I think this narrative is inaccurate and misleading. I have discussed elsewhere various aspects of this issue.³ My present contribution will provide some indications, within the context of the themes in question here, as to why I think the story is more complex. My hope is that this reflection on late modern thought will contribute to understanding the meanings and the implications of the late antique notions that this volume examines within the broader

1 Among the important works published in recent years on Heidegger's anti-Semitism: Peter Trawny, *Heidegger und der Mythos der jüdischen Weltverschwörung* (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 2014); Donatella Di Cesare, *Heidegger, die Juden, die Shoah* (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 2015); Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann and F. Alfieri, *Martin Heidegger: Die Wahrheit über die Schwarzen Hefte*, trans. Pascal David (Berlin: Duncker & Humbolt, 2017); Elliot Wolfson, *The Duplicity of Philosophy's Shadow: Heidegger, Nazism, and the Jewish Other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018). To name also some of the collected volumes: Joseph Cohen and Raphael Zagury-Orly, eds., *Heidegger et "les juifs"* (Paris: Grasset, 2015); Peter Trawny and Andrew J. Mitchell, eds., *Heidegger, die Juden, noch einmal* (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 2015); Marion Heinz and Sidonie Kellerer, eds., *Martin Heideggers "Schwarze Hefte": Eine philosophische-politische Debatte* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2016); Ingo Farin and Jeff Malpas, eds., *Reading Heidegger's Black Notebooks 1931–1941* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016); Walter Homolka and Arnulf Heidegger, eds., *Heidegger und der Anti-Semitismus: Positionen im Widerstreit* (Freiburg: Herder, 2016); Hans-Helmuth Gander and Magnus Striet, eds., *Heideggers Weg in die Moderne: Eine Verortung der "Schwarzen Hefte"* (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 2017); Mårten Björk and Jayne Svenungsson, eds., *Heidegger's Black Notebooks and the Future of Theology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). For a good review of some of these volumes, see Jan Eike Dunkhase, "Beiträge zur neuen Heidegger-Debatte," *H-Soz-Kult*, 13.03.2017, <https://www.hsozkult.de/publicationreview/id/reb-25610>. For my own critical analysis of the debate, see Elad Lapidot, *Jews Out of the Question: A Critique of Anti-Anti-Semitism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020).

2 On Jonas and Heidegger, see Lawrence Vogel, "Hans Jonas's Diagnosis of Nihilism: The Case of Heidegger," *IJPS* 3 (1995): 55–72; Avishag Zafrani, "Hans Jonas or How to Escape from Heidegger's Nihilism," *ArPh* 76 (2013): 497–509. For different approaches to the relations between Levinas and Heidegger, see John E. Drabinski and Eric S. Nelson, eds., *Between Levinas and Heidegger* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014); more recently see Michael Fagenblatt, "Levinas and Heidegger: The Elemental Confrontation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Levinas*, ed. Michael L. Morgan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019): 1–36. For a broad perspective, see most recently Daniel M. Herskowitz, *Heidegger and his Jewish reception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

3 Most recently, Elad Lapidot, "Heidegger as Levinas's Guide to Judaism beyond Philosophy," *Religions* 12 (2021): 477; Lapidot, *Jews*.

range of Western intellectual as well as ethical, social, cultural and political history, to our present time.

3 Martin Heidegger's Paul

We begin, as Jonas and Levinas did, with Heidegger. Martin Heidegger began as a student of Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, which has become one of the most influential philosophical currents in the 20th and 21st centuries, some say the essence of “continental philosophy.”⁴ In our present context, “phenomenology” is an ambiguous constellation. On the one hand, it is conceptually concerned with phenomena, appearance, and is therefore vision-based, centred on intuition – *Anschauung* – as the paradigm of knowledge and human conscience in general. However, one of Husserl's basic intentions was the resistance to empiricism and positivism, namely to modern science that claims to merely observe objects. Phenomenology, the science of appearance, is precisely the critique of “naïve” conceptions of vision, which demonstrates that what we perceive is not simply what we see; rather, the objects that we perceive are made of infinite “aspects” that are constructed into one coherent perception by our own intentionality: the object is made by our own image, of our own, as Husserl later called it, *Sinngebung*, “attribution of meaning.”⁵

Heidegger radicalised Husserl's critique of vision. Interestingly for our present context, one of the earliest sites where he did so, was his lecture course in Freiburg in 1920–1921 “Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion”, which deals with the letters of Saint Paul.⁶ Heidegger's relation to theology is notoriously complex.⁷ He started as a theology student and later on became an opponent of theology, to the point of bluntly disregarding the theological tradition in his comprehensive analyses of Western intellectual history. His thought nonetheless remained till the end imbued with theological and even biblical motifs, and some scholars already

4 Edward Baring, *Converts to the Real: Catholicism and the Making of Continental Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019).

5 For a good introduction to Husserl's project, see Edmund Husserl, *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2009).

6 Martin Heidegger, “Einleitung in die Phänomenologie der Religion,” in *Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens*, ed. Matthias Jung and Thomas Regehly, Gesamtausgabe 60 (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 1995), “Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion,” in *Phenomenology of Religious Life*, trans. Matthias Fritsch and Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

7 See, for instance, Björk and Svenungsson, *Notebooks*.

noted that a constant endeavour of his thought was to identify these motifs, which he completely detached from the Jewish-Christian tradition, as subversive elements within Greek thought, and this by deconstructive hermeneutics of the philosophical canon.⁸

Be that as it may, Heidegger's 1921 lectures on Saint Paul are an early instance where Heidegger applied Husserl's critique of the visual, objectifying paradigm of modern science and used it to criticise Husserl himself. Husserl's phenomenology, Heidegger argued, even as it shifted the philosopher's gaze from the perceived object to the perceiving conscience, to "intentionality," nonetheless remained committed to the visual paradigm, inasmuch as Husserl's paradigm of conscience is perception and his paradigm of knowledge is theory and science, which only describes, only observes. In contrast to theory, Heidegger famously asserted the paradigm of existential knowledge, what he called in these lectures "factual life experience," "*das faktische Dasein*" as "the entire active and passive position of man vis-à-vis the world,"⁹ which he will later call "*Seinsverständnis*," our "understanding of being."¹⁰ For our present discussion it is crucial to note that Heidegger, in his lecture course on Saint Paul, identified knowledge as theory with the "Platonic" tradition,¹¹ whereas the conception of knowledge as existential, as *Dasein*, he read in a text of late antiquity, namely in Paul's letters in the New Testament.

Six years later, Heidegger's *magnum opus*, *Sein und Zeit* of 1927, continued and elaborated his critique of Western thought as based on Platonic and Aristotelian ontology. This ontology, this "understanding of being," Heidegger argued, gives priority to the being of things as *vorhanden* ("present-at-hand"), namely as objective presence. Accordingly, this ontology fosters a conception of knowledge as vision of objectives, as distant contemplation, as *theory*, all the way to the mathematical formalism of modern science. The problem with this vision-based epistemology, Heidegger argued, is existential: the subject's self-forgetfulness and immersion in the world of things, to the point of understanding oneself – *uneigentlich*, "inauthentically" or "inappropriately" – not as a subject, but as an objective thing.

⁸ See most famously Marlène Zarader, *La dette impensée : Heidegger et l'héritage hébraïque* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), *The Unthought Debt: Heidegger and the Hebraic Heritage*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

⁹ "Die ganze aktive und passive Stellung des Menschen zur Welt," Heidegger, *Phänomenologie*, 11. The translation here and elsewhere are mine.

¹⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 1977), *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper Row, 1962).

¹¹ Heidegger, *Phänomenologie*, 46–48.

Against this self-reification of human self-knowledge, Heidegger posited our basic relation to the world not as vision, not as *hinsehen* (looking at something from distance, staring) but as *umsehen*, namely as care. Man's basic understanding of being, namely the seminal human knowledge, is based on human self-knowledge, which is not theoretical but existential. Heidegger famously wrote of the human being, which he ontologically called *Dasein*, "existence", that "*es diesem Seienden in seinem Sein um dieses Sein selbst geht*,"¹² "this entity [i.e., the human], in its very being, is concerned with this very being." In other words: in our very being, whatever we do, whatever we know, this knowledge always arises not from a theoretical position, but from our *concern* with existence. Seminal knowledge, which for Heidegger was ontology, and for Aristotle and the Bible was theology, would accordingly arise from human non-theoretical (and not "anthropological") but *existential* self-conscience.

It is, however, around the same time, in the late 1920s, that Heidegger distanced himself ever more decisively from the theological and biblical traditions as a viable alternative to Greek vision-based epistemology. Similarly to Nietzsche, he seems to have considered Jewish-Christian theology as popular Platonism, which culminated in Thomas' merger of theology with Aristotle. This merger produced what Heidegger calls "ontotheology," namely the conception of God as a supreme object, which is perhaps a Heideggerian understanding of idolatry.¹³

4 Hans Jonas's Gnosis

It is around the same time of Heidegger's lectures on Paul, that Hans Jonas, having studied one semester with Husserl in Freiburg in 1921 and two semesters at the *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* in Berlin in 1922–1923, went in 1924 to the University of Marburg to become – together with Hannah Arendt – a student of Heidegger in philosophy and of Rudolf Bultmann in Christian theology. Heidegger and Bultmann were the two supervisors of Jonas' dissertation on the Gnostic movements of late antiquity,¹⁴ which he submitted in 1928 and then developed to a

¹² Heidegger, *Sein*, 12.

¹³ On "ontotheology," see Iain Thomson, "Technology, Ontotheology," in *Heidegger on Technology*, ed. Aaron James Wendland, Christopher Merwin, and Christos Hadjioannou (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2018): 174–193; see also Laurence Paul Hemming, "Heidegger's God," in *Heidegger Reexamined. Vol. 3: Art, Poetry, and Technology*, ed. Hubert Dreyfus and Mark Wrathall (New York: Routledge, 2002): 249–294.

¹⁴ Their reports on Jonas's dissertation were very recently published in Rudolf Bultmann and Hans Jonas, *Briefwechsel 1928–1976. Mit einem Anhang anderer Zeugnisse*, ed. Andreas Großmann (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020): 111–115.

larger book project, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*, Part I published in 1934, and Part II published 20 years later, after the war, in 1954.¹⁵

Jonas' work turned Gnosticism into a figure of thought in 20th-century intellectual history, later used by authors such as Gershom Scholem, Hans Blumenberg, Jacob Taubes and Eric Voegelin, and more recently Elliot Wolfson. According to the common reading, which is largely based on Jonas's own account after the war, he identified in Gnosticism an "oriental" paradigm of knowledge. This oriental epistemology entered Hellenistic discourse in late antiquity to contest classic Greek epistemology and ethics. If the latter was predicated on basic harmony between man and world, Gnosticism, so goes the common account on Jonas's work, was based on a-cosmic dualism, estrangement between man and world, which undermined all knowledge and values, and later on led to the nihilism and value-free destructive technology that plague modern humanity and the entire planet.¹⁶

I think this account is inaccurate.¹⁷ If we look at Jonas' early writing, we see that, as a matter of fact, he endorsed Heidegger's critique of classic Greek, Platonic epistemology as vision- and theory-based and therefore existentially and ethically problematic. The alternative paradigm of knowledge, which Heidegger initially found in Saint Paul, Jonas found in the concept of *gnosis* as it was used not only by the so-called Gnostics, but in the theological and biblical Hellenistic discourse. In contrast to *theoria*, objective knowledge, *gnosis*, Jonas observed, was existential, ethical knowledge. This observation is supported by the very first appearance of this category in the Hellenised biblical discourse, which is also the first appearance of the concept of knowledge in the constitutive biblical narrative, namely in the (second) creation story, which tells about the famous tree of *ha-da'at tov va-ra*, "the knowledge of good and bad" (Gen 2:9), which the Septuagint translated γνωστὸν καλοῦ καὶ πονηροῦ, *gnoston kalou kai ponerou*.

15 Hans Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist. Die mythologische Gnosis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1934); Hans Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist. Von der Mythologie zur mystischen Philosophie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1954).

16 For this narrative, see most famously Hans Jonas, "Gnosis, Existentialismus und Nihilismus," in *Zwischen Nichts und Ewigkeit. 3 Aufsätze zur Lehre vom Menschen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963): 5–25 (originally published as "Gnosticism and Modern Nihilism," *Social Research* 19 (1952): 430–452, and later as "Gnosticism, Existentialism, Nihilism," in *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1958]: 320–341).

17 For my detailed argument, see Elad Lapidot, "Gnosis und Spätantiker Geist II," in *Hans Jonas: Handbook*, ed. Michael Bongardt, Holger Burckhart, John-Stewart Gordon, and Jürgen Nielsen-Sikora (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2021): 88–95; also Elad Lapidot, "Hans Jonas' Work on Gnosticism as Counter-history," *Philosophical Readings* 9 (2017): 61–69.

Following Jonas, I suggest that this notion of knowledge as *gnosis* – which is at the heart of the original sin – should be placed, first and foremost in view of its *textual* locus in the biblical narrative, next to the first two biblical notions around which our discussion revolves, as I described in the beginning of this essay: the notion of God's invisibility and the notion of the human being created in the image of God. According to Jonas's original project, *gnosis* was used in the Hellenised Bible to denote the non-visual, non-theoretical and instead ethico-existential epistemology that in late antiquity was developed *within Greek discourse* as a counter-conception to classic Greek *theoria*. This Gnostic epistemology, which would have been, according to Jonas's thesis, at the basis of the Jewish, Christian and largely Western traditions, was accordingly what Jonas identified as the historical manifestation of what Heidegger (originally inspired by Paul) identified as the *eigentliche*, namely the authentic or proper form of knowledge.

Jonas' original project was dedicated to showing how Gnostic epistemology became corrupted by Gnostic sects and neo-Platonic systems, from Philo to Plotinus, which, according to his analysis, took the non-visual, non-theoretical, anti-Platonic conception of Gnostic knowledge and re-interpreted it in Platonic categories of seeing. The result, on Jonas' account, was the perversion of individual ethics in contemplative mysticism. This so-to-speak "bad" ancient Gnosticism is what Jonas, in his later writings, considered to be the precursor of the Gnosticism of modernity, which radically detached the human (and the divine) from the world, thereby de-sacralising nature, be that by way of existential philosophy (such as Heidegger's), or by way of technological science. For the young Jonas, the original Gnostic principle of ethical knowledge was preserved from the Platonic perversion of theory in Christian theology through the idea of faith, *pistis*, and in Jewish tradition through the institution of law, *nomos*.

5 Emmanuel Levinas's Talmud

My discussion of Emmanuel Levinas will serve as a conclusion for this reflection on – a certain constellation in – late modern philosophy, by accentuating the similarity and the difference between the non-theoretical epistemology of Hans Jonas and Martin Heidegger. Like Jonas, Levinas too studied with Heidegger in the late 1920s and learned from him the critique of the visual and theoretical paradigm of Philosophy from Plato to Husserl. Whereas Jonas, after World War II and the Holocaust, opposed Heidegger by renouncing Gnosis and converting back to Plato and Husserl, namely to nature and life, to *physis*, Levinas sought to oppose Heidegger by radicalizing the Heideggerian critique. Similarly to what Heidegger himself

had done to Husserl, namely using Husserl's critique against Husserl, Levinas used Heidegger's critique against Husserl for criticizing Heidegger himself as the perfection of Greek visualism in ontology. Whereas Jonas reproached Heidegger's Gnostic epistemology for fostering modern nihilism, Levinas reproached Heidegger's Platonism, and commitment to knowledge as theory and "light", for grounding modern totalitarianism.¹⁸

In support of Levinas's critique, and in the context of my attempted apposition of late modernity and late antiquity, it should be noted that Heidegger's critique of theory in the name of praxis-oriented thought, inasmuch as it echoes the combination of the two biblical notions of divine invisibility and human divinity, and despite its early emergence in Heidegger's lectures on Paul, later never again led Heidegger away from the corpora of classic Greek tradition towards any archives of biblical tradition. His only proclaimed attempt to displace thought from the classic sites of Western philosophy to a different textual site, was his readings in Friedrich Hölderlin in the 1930s and 1940s.¹⁹ In other words, the epistemic alternative to theoretical knowledge that Heidegger sought to develop was not so much ethics, but more precisely poetics, *Dichtung*.²⁰ Indeed, Hölderlin's work and especially Heidegger's interest in it very often concern the foundational themes that are central to the biblical and post-biblical traditions – the holy, the divine, the people, prophecy –, to feature what one may call something like secularised theology. Nonetheless, and all the more, Heidegger was adamant in dis-associating or even contrasting his poetic ponderings from the Judeo-Christian tradition of text and thought, which he understood as "onto-theology". One wonders how exactly this rejection is connected to the fact that the only actual, historical, ethico-political manifestation of non-theoretical epistemology that Heidegger was ever able to discern in reality

¹⁸ See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et infini: Essai sur l'extériorité* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), 33, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 43. For the most famous critical discussion of Levinas's critique against Heidegger, see Jacques Derrida, "Violence et métaphysique: Essai sur la pensée d'Emmanuel Levinas," in *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967): 117–228. Recent literature on Levinas and Heidegger is abundant, see for instance the various contributions in Drabinski and Nelson, *Levinas*.

¹⁹ See, for instance, Martin Heidegger, *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung*, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, Gesamtausgabe 4 (Frankfurt a. M., Klostermann: 1981), *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, trans. Keith Hoeller (Amherst, MA: Humanity Books, 2000); Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymnen "Germanien" und "Der Rhein"*, ed. Susanne Ziegler, Gesamtausgabe 39 (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann: 1980), *Hölderlin's Hymn "Germanien" and "Der Rhein"*, trans. William McNeill and Julia Ireland (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

²⁰ For an attempt to indicate nonetheless a foundational project of ethics in Heidegger's poetical thought, see Charles Bambach, *Thinking the Poetic Measure of Justice: Hölderlin–Heidegger–Celan* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013).

was National-Socialism, and this for a limited period, before he judged Nazism as still too Judeo-Christian.²¹

Jonas, as already noted, before the war, before converting back to Plato, recognised the alternative epistemology of non-vision in a common Gnostic principle of late antique theologies, and – against bad Gnosticism – he identified the positive traditions of gnosis in Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism. Emmanuel Levinas, even as he too, like Heidegger, tried to expose non-visual ethical thought as a subversive current within the tradition of Greek and later modern philosophy, at the same time also clearly indicated the proper historical location of this thought in the discourse of the “Prophets”, namely the ancient biblical canon. Unlike early Heidegger, who tapped into the biblical archive through the late antique letters of Paul, through the New Testament, Levinas subscribed to the specifically non-Christian reception of the prophetic discourse, namely to the post-biblical *Jewish* reception and deployment of this discourse in the rabbinic literature, and more specifically in the Talmud. If Heidegger countered Greek philosophy with readings of Hölderlin, Levinas performed a similar trans-epistemic move by developing, next to his philosophical works, a significant corpus of “talmudic readings.”²²

In these talmudic readings Levinas most explicitly grounded his alternative, non-visual, non-theoretical epistemology in the biblical discourse. However, many hints for this biblical grounding are also found in Levinas’s philosophical writings, inasmuch as these writings strategically remain within the traditional discourse and references of classic and modern Western philosophy, from Plato to Heidegger, and seek to interrupt or deconstruct the visual paradigm of philosophical knowledge so to speak from within philosophy. Levinas’s famous alternative to objecti-

²¹ See Lapidot, *Jews*, 290–297.

²² See in Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficile liberté : Essai sur le judaïsme* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1963), *Difficult Freedom*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990); Emmanuel Levinas, *Quatre lectures talmudiques* (Paris: Minuit, 1968); Emmanuel Levinas, *Du Sacré au Saint. Cinq nouvelles lectures talmudiques* (Paris: Minuit, 1977); *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Emmanuel Levinas, *L’au-delà du verset. Lectures et discours talmudiques* (Paris: Minuit, 1982), *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, trans. Gary D. Mole (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Emmanuel Levinas, *A l’heure des nations* (Paris: Minuit, 1988), *In the Time of the Nations*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994). All the translations below follow the published translations, with my adjustments. Citations to Levinas’s work specify the page in the original and then in translation.

For introductory texts on the Talmudic readings, see Ethan Kleinberg, “Levinas as a Reader of Jewish Texts: The Talmudic Commentaries,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Levinas*, ed. Michael L. Morgan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019): 443–457; Samuel Moyn, “Emmanuel Levinas’s Talmudic Readings: Between Tradition and Invention,” *Prooftexts* 23 (2003): 338–364; Annette Aronowicz, “Translator’s Introduction” in Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, ix–xxxix.

fying visual knowledge was not invisibility, but, as he liked to call it, the “optics of ethics”. What this expression means is that ethics does not just feature an alternative *to* knowledge, *to* vision, but an alternative conception *of* knowledge, *of* vision, or more precisely, that the ethical relation *is* the very foundation of all optics and of all epistemology.

In this sense, Levinas offers a conception of seminal, foundational knowledge that is akin to Heidegger’s existential “understanding of being” and to Jonas’s notion of *gnosis*. Unlike Heidegger and similarly to Jonas, Levinas too, as noted, traces back his conception of ethical knowledge to the biblical, “prophetic”, and even explicitly theo-logical tradition. In fact, the basic epistemological configuration offered by Levinas ties a tight knot between knowledge of the human and knowledge of the divine, and this very much in the way that I described at the beginning of this essay. God’s invisibility is expressed in Levinas’s thought through the (Cartesian) notion that our foundational knowledge or, in more general terms, our constitutive relation to anything, is a relation to infinity or the Infinite. Accordingly, as relation to infinity, our knowledge of the invisible God is not lesser but greater than any other knowledge, since it demands infinite attention, requires endless intentionality, which never reaches its term, never rests on a finite object. This kind of infinite knowledge is therefore no distant observation, no static subject-object relation, no theory, but rather a never-ending *demand* on the subject to endless response, a never-ending call to infinite “responsibility”.

Our seminal form of knowledge, our foundational state of conscience, which consists in relation to (divine) infinity, is therefore not perception, but responsibility: optics as ethics. This fundamental responsibility does not, as already noted, simply contradict perception and visibility – on the contrary, it grounds visual perception. Levinas’s work provides two basic perceptions, two basic manifestations or “revelations”, as he terms it, that arise from and enact our seminal knowledge of infinite responsibility to the Infinite. Both these perceptions are human, both are described, portrayed and summoned by Levinas – not in this talmudic, but in his philosophical writings – by way of direct reference to the prophetic, biblical text. Accordingly, I conclude by offering them here as two different performances of the ethico-epistemic divine-human drama that this essay seeks to render visible in late modern thought.

The *first* revelation is offered by Levinas in his earlier philosophy, most notably in *Totality and Infinity*. Here, my infinite relation to the divine manifests itself in my perception of the other person, which is originally perceived not by an act of objective seeing, but by an acknowledgment of obligation, of responsibility, of commitment or commandment towards the other person. The “face” of the other person is accordingly originally revealed, Levinas argues, in the revelation or reception of the commandment of not harming the other, a commandment of non-violence,

which Levinas renders present, re-presents or presentifies in his text by quoting the divine revelation on Sinai in Exod 20:12, “you shall not commit murder.”²³ The *second* revelation is offered by Levinas in his later philosophy, most notably in his second major philosophy book, *Otherwise than Being*.²⁴ Here, the infinite relation to the divine, which generates my infinite responsibility, manifests itself most originally not in the face of the other person, not in the revealed commandment, not on Sinai, but rather in my own *self*-positioning, *self*-presentation as the bearer of this responsibility, namely in my placing and revealing of myself as a visible and already responsible entity in the world. Levinas presentifies this seminal revelation in his text through another biblical quote, this time not from Exodus, but from Genesis, not a Sinaitic, Mosaic revelation, but an Abrahamic one, namely Abraham’s response to God’s calling him to sacrifice his son: *hineni*, “here I am” (Gen 22:1, 11).

²³ Levinas, *Totality*, 217.

²⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), 233, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1978), 149.

