From the *Euthyphro* to Theodicy:
The Problem of Language and God

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Beginning with the Euthyphro and continuing with reference to the Cratylus, Plato's Socrates introduces and repeatedly confronts the problem of defining terms that humans—specifically, his fellow Athenians—use every day, without considering what the terms really mean. The aporetic outcome of the Cratylus underscores the abiding problematic of language as an instrument for the dialogue necessary to philosophy. The particular focus of the Euthyphro, on piety/ holiness (hosiotes) and its definitionally desperate connection to divinity, offers a turn from philosophy to theology and carries the discussion from Plato to the text of Ex 3:14 and the problematic of God's name. In turn this leads to the discussion by Levinas in his essay "God and Philosophy" of the juxtaposition and hierarchy of philosophy and theology—by way of the question of whether human language can ever function as well as we hope or imagine it might or does in conveying what the sort of God in which the Abrahamic faiths believe is, and whether It can ever be effectively expressed or understood. This also leads down a path parallel to that of Socrates by way of Genesis 6 (the problem of evil and thus of divinely-ordained ethics) and all the way to Job and the problem of theodicy (why the innocent suffer in a world made by such a God)—and to the challenge and obligation to ask questions, even—especially—those without answers.

In one of Plato's earliest dialogues, *Euthyphro*, Socrates encounters the sophist[1] for whom the dialogue is named on the courthouse steps in Athens and confronts the self-proclaimed wise man with a question: what, exactly, is *hosiotes*—translatable either as "piety" or as "holiness" (for the purposes of this particular discussion either translation into English will do). As usual in such Socratic conversations, the two characters parry back and forth; Euthyphro feints in this direction and that, and each time Socrates deflects with a simple explanation of why his interlocutor is not leading toward a viable answer. With one last thrust, Euthyphro offers what he imagines to be a solid answer: *hosiotes* is what is pleasing to the gods. Alas, for him, Socrates counterthrusts twice: he asks whether something is *hosios* because it pleases the gods or whether it pleases the gods because it is *hosios* (to which a flummoxed Euthyphro has no real answer)—and observes, furthermore, that, as they have noted earlier in their conversation, the gods often disagree about things;

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[1]This term (Gk: *sophos*) simply means "wise (man)," but is used in Plato to refer to individuals who not only claim wisdom and specific kinds of knowledge, but typically claim to be able to impart it to others, for a fee—in contrast to Socrates, who is eager to share wisdom with and even more so, to gain it from others, simply for the intellectual satisfaction that such an exchange can offer. If the Euthyphro of the dialogue by that name (who is also referenced in the *Cratylus*) is Euthyphro the Prospaltian, we know of him as a self-proclaimed *mantis*—as kind of prophet, which would make him different from, say, Hippias or Gorgias or Protagoras, but part of the larger category of *sophoi* with whom Socrates is often in conversation. The main issue in so-labelling him is his pretense of wisdom. See, inter alia, Debra Nails, *The People of Plato*.

so, what if a given action pleases one god but displeases another: could it then really be called *hosios*, based on Euthyphro's definition?

At that point, Euthyphro suddenly remembers that he needs to be elsewhere. He walks away from the courthouse steps as Socrates himself prepares to enter the building and face a charge—of impiety. We thus understand that the discussion—and many others like it—is not only about the abstract issue of definition, or even about the intellectual problem of Euthyphro-like characters, who abound in Athens. It is about how one actualizes the consequences of thinking and not thinking about these matters. How will a jury of Socrates' peers—several hundred of them—in a democracy shaped so that all of those jurors are everyday citizens, judge whether or not he is impious, if none of them has really ever thought about what "piety" is. If a renowned wise man hasn't thought about it, how likely is any of them to have ever done so? It is not only, in the end, about how one thinks; it is about how one lives.

Plato's *Euthyphro* ends in *aporia*: Socrates has failed to elicit an effective definition of *hosiotes*. This early dialogue is a harbinger of inconclusive endings in Platonic works over the next nearly four decades, as Plato furthers the search initiated by Socrates for absolute definitions of diverse aspects of the Good. One of the most important of Plato's efforts is the *Cratylus*—coming about midway through his writing and teaching career—which is the fullest of his explorations of the problem of language as a medium for accessing the truth regarding the Good and the entire realm of Ideas. Included among the many kinds of words examined by Socrates, Hermogenes, and Cratylus are the names of gods, but the essences conveyed by these names are not perceived as more problematic than those of other names and nouns: in the end *this* dialogue's *aporia* pertains to the fundamental *inadequacy* of language: using *words* to apprehend words of any sort.

That inadequacy derives from two fundamental problems. The first pertains to how language functions, in the grammatical and syntactical sense: what does a word that we call a noun *do* so that we call it a "noun," whereas we call a verb a "verb" and an adjective an "adjective"? That sort of parsing of language's constituent parts, it turns out, was being understood and diagrammed, and the various parts of speech accordingly labeled in terms of their function, in India, by Panini (ca 520-460 BCE), some time before Socrates was prowling the streets of Athens and Plato the corridors of his Academy. The Hellenic world would become familiar with Panini's work through the conquests of Alexander the Great (ca 330-25 BCE) and it would be in the following generation that the Stoic philosophers would recast Panini's Sanskrit descriptives of what words do in a sentence into Greek (which would later be translated into Latin by the Romans; we use anglicized versions of those Latin terms: noun, verb, adjective, preposition, infinitive, subjunctive, optative, imperative, et al.).

Plato's vocabulary does not—*cannot*—distinguish between a word, a common noun, a proper noun, a name—or between names like Socrates, Cratylus, Hermogenes, Ajax, or Agamemnon, of which there could be many instances, and the names of gods like Zeus and Hermes, of which there is only one exemplar. The same word—*onoma*—is used to refer to all of these types or categories of words. Moreover, *onoma* is also used to mean "subject," whereas *rhema* is used to refer to "predicate"—but also "verb" and also "phrase" (where *onoma* refers to a single word). *Logos*, in turn, is used to refer to a sentence—composed of an *onoma* and a *rhema* (or more than

one of each) but also to refer to an account of indeterminant length—it could be a paragraph or five pages long—but which is a *reasoned* argument. In this quality, *logos* is opposed to *mythos*, which is an account shaped by something other than reason—inspiration from a divine source, for instance.[2]

The very phrases *peri onomaton orthotes* and *peri onomatos orthotes*—the first used as a subtitle to the *Cratylus*, but both found early on within the dialogue—are ambiguous as to their meaning. The first means "on the correctness of *onomata* (plural)" and the second, "on the correctness of an *onoma* (singular)." They are ambiguous both because of the ambiguities of "*onoma*" and because of those of "*orthotes*": does "correctness" refer to word-*usage* or to the *creation* of *onomata* in the first place, and then: is this last issue the same when we ask whether Hermogenes was correctly named by his parents and when we ask whether "table" is the correct word for the object to which I refer by that term? In this last instance, are we confining our query to Greek, which would be difficult enough? Or do we mean to filter it through a wider lens, which recognizes the existence of many languages with diverse phonemic structures and diverse phonemic agglomerations for objects? Thus, "table" is *trapeza* in Greek but *mesa* in Spanish, *Tisch* in German, and *shulhan* in Hebrew, for instance.

The *Craylus* sets out, in essence, to ask the question of whether language is an instrument fit for the needs of philosophy: if we are trying to define "tableness" or "piety" or justice" can we be sure that in our discussion we are all starting from the same point of understanding, or is the notion of dialogue undercut from the very beginning because we can never arrive at a definitive common starting point with the words that we use to engage in our dialogue?

The array of issues raised in these last few paragraphs are the tip of a larger iceberg.[3] The enterprise seems doomed to *aporia* from the start—and certainly end ups there. Moreover, most of Plato's discussion—even including that which pertains to the names of gods—doesn't even arrive at the second complication, which pertains to discussions *of* divinity. Simply put: we are human and divinities are divine. They don't grow ill or grow old or die and we *do*. These are just the most obvious distinctions between divinity and humanity—but the point is that the gods are the ultimate *other*. Their realm is of an entirely different order (pun intended) from ours. It doesn't operate in time and space as ours does; the closest approximation we experience is in our dream reality, with its stunningly unpredictable twists and turns in time and space and circumstance.

So, when Euthyphro resorts to "that which is pleasing to the gods" the problem with that reference is not only what Socrates points out, but more fundamentally: what does it mean to say that a god is "pleased" or "displeased"? Do we—*can* we— know what gods "feel" or "think"? If we speak of divine power or mercy, can we know what such turns of phrase really mean for a god? We can only infer what those

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[2]Thus in the *Phaedo*, Socrates offers a succession of *logoi* to prove the immortality of the soul, each of which is shown to be flawed, and then reverts to *mythos*, telling a tale that he strongly believes, but which cannot be validated by reason. In the end, his convictions are validated by *ergon*—action— when he drinks the hemlock as if it is fine wine, corroborating at least the notion that he *fully believes* that he is going to a better place, where his soul can more effectively pursue the knowledge of truth and the Good.

[3]For a fuller discussion see Ori Z Soltes, *Plato's* Cratylus *and The Relation of Language to Truth in the History of Philosophy* (The Edwin Mellen Press, 2007).

feelings and the words referencing them actually are and mean for gods from our own *human* experience. Everything that we say about them is functionally a metaphor, an allegory—an analogy drawn from what we experience as humans.

Given that the Greeks understand divinities as anthropomorphs—bigger, better, eternally youthful and swifter and stronger versions of ourselves—their inferences regarding their gods have a certain weight and can be conveyed by language. We see this in Greek literature, most obviously in epic and tragic poetry, where gods physically interact with humans—whether fighting on the battlefield before Troy or speaking out to various characters from a *makhina* (crane) above the stage.

By the time of Socrates and Plato, the Greeks themselves had become less convinced of direct divine involvement of this sort in human affairs. The gods still interact with us, but almost exclusively through a unique handful of individuals, known as priests. Even where priests are concerned, as divine-human interaction settles mainly on a few sites, such as Delphi, the god (in this case, Apollo) inspirits a sybil, whose semi-incoherent mumblings and rants are interpreted by priests (thus only indirectly receiving words from the god)—and even at that, the individual seeking advice from the god may end up *further* interpreting the message mediated through the sybil and the priests, correctly or incorrectly.[4]

This problem of divine-human communication intensifies as Western religious thinking shifts its understanding from that of many divinities of limited power, knowledge, and vision to the sort of God worshipped by Jews, Christians, and Muslims: singular, all-powerful, all-knowing, all-merciful, all-good, and interested and interventionist in human affairs. For Jews and Muslims, God is also always absolutely formless and non-physical, and thus inaccessible to the senses. To begin with, can we know what descriptives like "all-powerful" really mean, in God's terms? Our verbal instruments won't suffice to describe God beyond our own vocabulary and experience; they fall short of being true descriptives of God—far shorter than is the case with Greek anthropomorphic gods.

This complication is exemplified in part by the brief dialogue between Moses and God (Ex 3:14) in which, when Moses asks who to tell the Israelites has sent him, God responds: "I am/will be that I am/will be." Rather than being coy, God is asserting to Moses that the divine essence is Being itself, which cannot be defined by the essence-confining box of an ordinary name. One might turn back to the Greeks to understand what God is saying to Moses. The idea that a name is understood by most cultures and traditions—including that associated with Homeric literature—to encompass the essence of its bearer, is nicely exemplified in Book 19 of the *Odyssey*. When the hero returns home after 20 years of war and wandering, disguised, thanks to Athena, as an old beggar, his unsuspecting wife offers the old man hospitality. She instructs the old nurse, Eurykleia—Odysseus' own nurse from childhood—to wash the traveler's feet and legs. Rolling up the tattered robe of the beggar, Eurykleia sees,

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[4]Arguably the most famous example of that process leading an individual astray through his misinterpretation of what the god told him through the priests is related in Herodotus I.53ff. in which the Lydian King Croesus consults the god Apollo through the sybil at Delphi, asking whether he should attack the Medo-Persian Empire, whose ruler was Cyrus II. The sybil's response that, if Croesus does so, he "will destroy a great empire" is mistaken by him as an affirmative—which it was, except that the empire that he destroyed was his own.

with a shock, the scar on his thigh that identifies him to her immediately as Odysseus.

Embedded within the dramatic pause—the hero's leg suspended in mid-air as his old nurse gasps for breath—the narrator tells us that when Odysseus was a small boy, he killed a boar, which at the same time gored him in the leg, leaving that scar.[5] We are led to understand that his name comes from that moment and from the Greek verb *odyein*, meaning "to give or receive pain"—for his essence was *captured* in that moment: he gives and receives pain. Odysseus is constantly referred to as long-suffering, but he is also constantly administering suffering to others—anyone involved with him feels pain: whether the wife or son left alone without him for 20 years, or the mother who died of heartache while he was gone, or the father who went off to live as if in semi-poverty out on the old family farm; or the city of Troy, destroyed through his ruse of the wooden horse; or the crew of his ships—not a single one of whom made it back to Ithaka alive; or Polyphemos, the Kyklops whom he blinded, or the Phaiakians who ferried him safely home—whose ship and crew were then turned to stone within sight of their home harbor, by Poseidon; to the goddesses Kirke and Kalypso, no less, both of whom would have loved him to stay longer with them—Kalypso wanted to immortalize him and spend the rest of eternity with him—to the suitors whom he slaughtered when he finally returned home, and all the families who grieved for them.

So, the name of Odysseus conveys his essence, but where the Name of God is concerned, its essence is essence—*being—itself*, and offers no appropriate linguistic instrument to express, since pure being is beyond the human capacity to grasp. This is what God asserts to Moses in response to the prophet's name-question: you and the Israelites cannot grasp what I am—and was and will be—*isness itself*, that cannot be bound by human understanding, or confined by human terminology: I cannot be defined (from the Latin root, *fin-*, meaning boundary), which is what a name *does*. Ultimately, the common name for God—the tetragrammaton, *YHVH* (for, as a Semitic language, Hebrew focuses only on the consonants, as far as word-roots are concerned)—is not only viewed as inarticulatable (for the vowels become uncertain), but is pronounced as *Adonai*, the phonemic content of which bears no relationship to those four consonants. So, the Name that God doesn't give to Moses (although God *does*, since the root consonants of the tetragrammaton, *YH*, are the root consonants of the verb "to be") is ineffable.[6]

Moreover, God's *Name* is still not *God*—just as Odysseus' name, while it may convey his essence, is not Odysseus actually standing before me: if I pronounce his name—or the name of anyone I know either through literature and history or my own life—there is a sense in which that person enters the room, but it is not the same as if s/he actually entered my physical space in flesh and blood form. How much the more so where God and God's Name are concerned! So the problem of understanding God encompasses both the ineffable divine Name and every divine attribute that we assert. From "all-powerful" to "engaged" we do not and cannot

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[5]*Odyssey* 19:359-469.
[6]The rabbinic tradition will further underscore that even the Name such as it is, is ineffable—it cannot be said—and eventually, traditional Jews won't even pronounce "*Adonai*" in any non-prayer context. They substitute the word *HaShem*, meaning "The Name." God's name is approached by increasing circumlocution between the time of Moses at the Burning Bush and our own era.

know what such concepts really mean in divine terms. We use them as a convenience and because we lack better instruments; we apply them from our own realm of experience, but they all fall short, offering at best metaphors for a God whose actual essence and attributes are beyond human knowledge.

This is the problem engaged, and carried further, by Emmanuel Levinas in his 1974 essay, "God and Philosophy." We not only cannot effectively speak of God with language, we cannot know how God speaks to us through prophets when our sacred texts use the phrase "God said" or "God spoke." Levinas argues that in the West, philosophy has emerged since Socrates and Plato as "an all-encompassing structure or of an ultimate comprehension" under which "rational theology" is subsumed as a vassal.[7] However, this makes the *discussion* of God, much less the *understanding* of God impossible, since the ultimate concern of philosophy is ontology—the study of being—and the biblical God is *beyond* being: "the God of the Bible signifies the beyond being, transcendence."[8] Moreover, "Rational theology, fundamentally ontological, strives to take account of transcendence in the domain of being by expressing it with adverbs of height applied to the verb being; God is said to exist eminently or par excellence. But does the height, or the height above all height, that is expressed belong to ontology? And does not the modality which this adverb expresses, borrowed from the dimension of the sky over our heads, modify the verbal meaning of the verb to the point of excluding it from the thinkable as something inapprehendable, excluding it from the *esse* showing itself, that is, showing itself meaningfully in a theme?"[9]

Levinas is engaged in two processes here. One is to underscore the distinction between philosophy as it has evolved in the West and (rational) theology: philosophy pertains to the matter of our own reality and theology to a reality beyond our own. One might note that Western philosophy did not necessarily begin that way, but encompassed what is beyond our own reality in Plato's discussion of the Forms/Ideas, (particularly in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*). The Good and its concomitants are understood to transcend our reality with its many instances of acts and expressions that we label as "good." There is an assumed relationship between these inaccessible, transcendent Forms/Ideas that Plato's Socrates is depicted as desperate to know by truly defining them, and these acts and expressions, understood to be in a direct imitative relationship to the Forms/Ideas. Yet no matter how many instances of justice or piety or goodness Socrates and his interlocutors are represented as investigating, they consistently fall short of defining the Forms/Ideas of Justice, Piety or the Good—*inter alia*. They always end up in *aporia*.

Plato's Forms/Ideas bear a conceptual relationship to the evolving Israelite-Judaean-Jewish/Christian/Muslim notion of a transcendent God; the key difference pertains to God's directive interaction with humanity through prophets like the Moses who has such a difficult conversation with God before the Burning Bush, whereas the Forms/Ideas simply *are*, their role in our reality is simply to be there as the metaphysical and transcendent realities in which every act of justice and piety—

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[7]Emmanuel Levinas, "God and Philosophy," in Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, edited by Adriaan T. Peperzak, et al, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 129.
[8]Ibid, 130.
[9]Ibid,130. "*Esse*" is the Latin infinitive, "to be."

and table-construction and house-building—participates.

Once Aristotle succeeded Plato as the pre-eminent Western philosopher, certain as he was that all that we need in order to understand reality is *within* our own reality, then Western philosophy begins the divergence to which Levinas alludes. While, from Aristotle to Heidegger, Western philosophy becomes obsessed with being, whether simply seeking to define it or parsing it into constituent uses—existential, essential, copulative—even that, *pure being*, is conceived as within our reality. Levinas understands theology to address a God even *beyond* that sort of (understanding of) being—beyond even what God asserted to Moses.

The second process in which Levinas is engaged is to underscore the impossibility of describing God because all the terms that we use derive from our reality, whereas God, in being beyond that reality, is not susceptible to terms such as those referring to space—height, for instance—both because God is beyond the highest imaginable sky and also because the very concept of height is relative to our own reality and perspective: the sky is high, which is to say that it is placed in an upward direction because that is how we perceive it from our point of view and relative to our place, whereas God defies any such limited perspective and point of spatial view; there is no up or down or in or out where God is concerned.[10] Thus, undergirding the discussion of God is the *problematic* of discussion: that it uses words, *our* words, drawn and developed from our own experience, understanding, perspective, point of view—words that are, by definition, confined and confining and thus incapable of functioning as real instruments for describing God or defining divine attributes or even referencing them (because they are beyond confinement).

So, we have returned to where Plato left off at the end of the *Cratylus*—not circled back to the same place, but spiraled back to a slightly different iteration of that place: the inadequacy of language not only for philosophy, but even more so for theology, the object and subject of which is God. And Levinas has, more than incidentally, liberated theology from its condition of enthrallment to philosophy, in recognizing the reach of theology beyond even where philosophy seeks to go: toward "the beyond the beyond."

There is another important implication for all of this, given the role that theology comes to play in defining a moral and ethical code imposed by a metaphysical superstructure—by God. Levinas inches toward but does not quite arrive at this problem, in the last section of his "God and Philosophy" essay, entitled "Prophetic Signification." If our language is inadequate for defining God, is it capable of understanding *God'*s language when God commands and prescribes particular behavior? Even within the confines of the words comprising human language that we think we understand, the presumed revelation deriving from prophetic intermediation leads to a distinctive kind of interpretational *aporia*: Do we know what it means to "have no other gods before Me"? or what it means to "not commit murder"? If we

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[10]While this is not the point of this essay, one might note how this problematic of describing God is cognate with that proving that God in fact exists—which is mirrored by the problematic for the atheist who wishes to prove that God does *not* exist. Neither the believer nor the non-believer can prove his/her point to someone of the opposite perspective, since God is beyond not only absolute description but beyond full-proof existential proof—as is clear from Anselm to Descartes (who wish to prove God's existence) to Hitchens (who wishes to disprove it).

consider the further possibility that we may not even have correctly received the words as they were originally transmitted—even before we are skewered on the horns of trying to interpret the words that we assume have been correctly transmitted in our language—the *aporia* deepens.

For example: in Gen 6:5ff, we are told that all of humanity had become evil—except for Noah, who was "a righteous man within his generation"—and so the Lord purposed to destroy them all, except for Noah and his family. There is no explanation whatsoever, however, as to what "evil" means to the God who will soon bring a massive flood: what exactly did they all do that constitutes "evil"? There is no indication all the way back to the beginning of Genesis 1, in fact. We may *interpret* Adam and Eve to have committed *evil* in abrogating God's command not to eat from a certain tree, for example—but for this they were punished with banishment from the Garden of Eden, and it is in any case, our interpretation.[11] The only other thing that they were commanded was to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 1:28)—but this commandment they clearly fulfilled, which is why there are so many people for God to drown by Noah's day. So, we are not only left with the problem of trying to interpret the word "evil" but we might even consider among the underlying problems embedded within this interpretational challenge, the (rather heretical) possibility that God's prophetic scribe—Moses, by tradition—who was writing down the Torah, altogether misunderstood something: that he missed a word or phrase or whatever it is that might explain "evil". Or might this possibility, if we entertain it, derive from the fundamental problem of *language*: that Moses did not always *understand* God's language—and we, farther away from that direct relationship, are even farther from having a secure and absolute understanding of it?

The implications of all of this intensify when, in the aftermath of events like, say, the Holocaust, we pose the question of *theodicy*—that is, the question of how it is that a God deemed all-powerful and all-good and all-merciful, and also interested and involved in human affairs throughout history can have allowed a million and a half children to be fried in ovens. The problem of understanding what God is and how God operates comes to ground level with such a question, overwhelming both philosophical and theological speculation. A legion of Jewish and Christian thinkers has tried to explain God's action—or inaction—in spite of our fundamental inability even to know God's Name or the divine parameters of the words we use to describe God.[12]

The only ones who may claim to have found some sort of answer to the question have done so by redefining God. Thus Rabbi Richard Rubenstein's "God of Nature," as opposed to "God of (involved directly in) History," solves the theodicy question by eliminating key aspects of the traditional Abrahamic understanding of God.[13] Jewish

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[11]It is, incidentally, not clear that the labelling of the tree "of the knowledge of good and evil" from which they eat is even intended to suggest "good and evil" in the common parlance moral and ethical sense, since that biblical Hebrew phrase can mean, rather, "full knowledge of a subject, derived from seeing it from all sides."

[12]A concise discussion of what about a dozen Jewish and Christian theologians have come up with as answers to the post-Holocaust theodicy question is take n up by the Jewish rabbi and psychoanalyst, Richard Rubenstein, in his path-breaking 1966 (revised and expanded in 1992) volume, *After Auschwitz: History, Theology, and Contemporary Judaism*).

[13]Richard Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*, 172-6. Incidentally, Rubenstein confuses "pantheism" with

philosopher Emile Fackenheim's "614th Commandment" derives from his assuming a kind of prophetic stance in order to redirect a traditional understanding of God—bifurcating God's interface with humanity, and in particular with "Israel" (and thus, in his terms, Jews), into a dual salvational and commanding presence.[14] Protestant theologian Paul Tillich—and subsequently, with slightly different turns, he is followed by Thomas J. J. Altizer—found an answer by turning God the Father into a tyrant (extending a long Christian tradition of regarding the Hebrew Biblical God as angry, versus the New Testament God as loving) and rejecting Him, turning exclusively to the Son.[15] All of these viewpoints try to explain God by reformulating an understanding of God, which won't help traditionalists—and, of course, the Protestant formulation will be of no help to Jews, for whom there is no Father-Son understanding of God, much less a sense of God as tyrannical. Rubenstein, in fact, in reviewing these and a range of other, more traditional perspectives, ultimately asserts that "the term 'God' is very much like the unstructured inkblot used in the Rorschach test."[16]

Some recognize that this may be the wrong question—that humans, not God, devised the gas chambers and crematoria—that perhaps we should be questioning what *we* are as a species, anthropologically, sociologically, and psychologically, and not trying to reason out what God is, *theologically*. Aside from the obvious fact that humans, not God, created the gas chambers and the crematoria, this seems a more than reasonable proposition given our inability to even know God's true Name or to describe God's attributes. Can we be sure that we have ever really understood what God's imperatives for us are as a species—and thus the "purposes" for God's actions?

Levinas approaches, but doesn't quite reach, the discussion of this last series of complications, beginning with his reference to "*hineni*"—"Here am I"—which is Abraham's response in Gen 22:7 to what takes shape as a commandment to kill his own son; and Moses' response in Exodus 3:4 to what eventuates as a commandment to return to Egypt and command the Pharaoh, on God's behalf to "let my people go."[17] He further notes that this offers "ethical signification [that] signifies not *for* a consciousness which thematizes but *to* a subjectivity, *wholly an obedience*, obeying with an obedience that *precedes understanding*. Here is a *passivity* still more passive than that of receptivity in *knowing*…."[18] Put otherwise—in rather Platonic terms—Abraham and Moses follow the divine orders without hesitation because they "know" with seamless faith that the orders must be part of the *Good*.[19]

Further, "the ethical moment is not founded on any preliminary structure of theoretical thought, on language or on any particular language. Language then has over signification only the hold a form has, clothing matter…. There is here a break-

"panhenotheism/panentheism," but that confusion does not affect the issue that I am raising here.

[14]Emil L. Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections*. (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc, 1997). The volume was first published in 1970.

[15]Their views, together with that of William Hamilton, are succinctly summarized by Rubenstein, Ibid, 247-52.

[16]Rubenstein, 251.

[17]Ibid, 146.

[18]Ibid, 148.

[19]It is Abraham's seamlessness of faith, of course, to which Kierkegaard calls attention in his coinage, "The Knight of Faith," as that idea is discussed in his 1843 work, *Fear and Trembling*, (ascribed to his pseudonymous alter ego, Johannes de Silentio).

up of the omnipotence of the logos… Transcendence… requires the blinking and dia-chrony of *enigma*…" [emphasis added].[20] The power of a reasoned argument—a *logos*—has been reduced—as Plato himself clearly recognized in his frequent falling back onto *mythos*—in favor of insoluble enigma.

Moreover, as the word *logos* itself evolves from Plato's time and usage to that of the New Testament, we are reminded anew—even when *mere prophecy* is superseded by God Itself assuming human form—that our understanding of God cannot be encapsulated with words, even *if* they assume physical form. "In the beginning was the word (*logos*)… and the word was God…" (John 1:1)—underscores the idea that all of reality begins with the issue of words—of language— but also raises the question: whose reality? whose words/language? God's or our own? And how are the two connected, aside from the late-in-the-game transformation of the word into flesh?

Given the limitations of human language and understanding—however the attempt to engage, explore, understand, explain, or express God or God's actions are concerned, from Plato to Moses to John to Levinas to ourselves—how can we anticipate anything other than an *aporia* that is both Socratic and *Jobian* when we enter from philosophical into theological inquiry, with its presumptions regarding divine Being and divine ethical prescriptions, actions and inactions?[21]

If on the on hand we cannot avoid those limitations in wrestling both with the reality around us and even more so with a transcendent reality, yet on the other hand—and this is certainly Plato's Socrates' view—those limitations are not, per se, a liability. On the contrary, we can and should be mentally and morally invigorated by the challenge—by the sense of obligation, if we are to be fully *human*—of using the uniquely human instruments of language and inquiry to address both divinity and all of the "lesser" issues that flow from divinity as the source of our reality. To be fully human is to embed ourselves in the problematic posed to Euthyphro by Socrates and to thinking readers by Levinas on the one hand and by words, phrases, and direct divine comments in Genesis, Exodus, and Job on the other.

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[20]Levinas, 148.

[21]By "Jobian" I am referring to the fact that a) Job doesn't know what we know, since we, artificially, have been witnesses to the debate between God and the satan regarding his faith, and thus to the initiation of what proves to be a test of his faith; and b) when God finally answers the long-suffering hero of the story beginning in Chapter 38 of the book, the essence of the divine response is that Job is presumptuous in trying to understand why he, innocent of sin, has suffered so (and by extension anyone who is innocent but made to suffer). For there are things that humans are not equipped to understand. So the conclusion is absolutely aporetic if the goal of the narrative is to find an answer to the question regarding the suffering of innocent people.

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