America's Promise: Emmanuel Levinas between Marburg and Manhattan

ORIGINS OF THE OTHER: EMMANUEL LEVINAS BETWEEN REVELATION AND ETHICS[1]

By Samuel Moyn
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On January 6, 1904, the philosopher Hermann Cohen presided over a most unusual gathering in Berlin. As one of the first meetings of the newly founded *Society for the Advancement of Jewish Scholarship*, it provided Cohen, by then one of the most famous academic philosophers in Europe, with the opportunity to praise the new "modern Jewish studies" as an emerging field of scholarly inquiry and to articulate a grand vision for its further development. Cohen, who had recently completed the first two books of his developing system of neo-Kantian philosophy, urged his colleagues toward a most improbable conclusion–that academic philosophy should play a leading role in the educational formation of the modern Jew (Cohen 1904a; Bernstein-Nahar 1998, 26-32).

We have no way of knowing the reaction of the assembled to what Cohen had to say that day, but we know more or less precisely the words he uttered. They were published in their German original as the lead article in the first volume of the Society's journal, and even reprinted in Hebrew as far away as Cracow, for the edification of the growing readership of the Zionist monthly, *Hashiloah* (Cohen 1904b). Moreover, Cohen's 1904 proposal was for him no passing fancy. He put forward a similar one in 1907, and again in 1918. In the last, Cohen joined his younger philosophical colleague, Franz Rosenzweig, in advocating an Academy for Jewish Studies. Significantly, the men called for the organization of cross-disciplinary working groups within the field of academic Jewish studies. According to the Cohen–Rosenzweig plan–which was never put into practice–scholars from history, sociology, political science, philology, and theology would collaborate under the visionary leadership and with the critical input of philosophers for the sake of nurturing Jewish life (Myers 1992).

It is striking that after the Weimar historian Ismar Elbogen's tribute (1922) to modern Jewish studies, standard histories of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* regularly began omitting Cohen's vision and disregarding the commanding position he had maintained, for a brief moment in time, in the rise of academic Jewish studies. Is it any coincidence that Cohen's disappearance from scholarly accounts coincided with the consolidation of a powerful historian's guild in Israel and America, a guild disinclined to attend to philosophy, much less to yield to its leadership in tackling practical tasks?[2]

In this context, the publication of Samuel Moyn's book, *Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas between Ethics and Revelation*, is symptomatic of the dynamic and shifting landscape of contemporary academic Jewish studies. Moyn, a student of the Berkeley intellectual historian Martin Jay, and an up-and-coming star in the Columbia University history department, has written a book that defies disciplinary classification and treats philosophical ideas with genuine interest as well as historical curiosity. By the time Moyn was in graduate school, Levinas had become an icon of the academy, a member of a small and honored coterie of theorists including Juergen Habermas, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault. At times, during the last twenty years of the last century, the devotion of graduate students and faculty to these figures–the canonization of their writings, the sacralization of their vocabulary–reached religious heights; and indeed, for some, Levinas himself became a "postmodern saint."

To his credit, Moyn is skeptical, and, after considering the matter, unimpressed. Indeed *Origins of the Other* is basically Moyn's account of the human motives that drove Levinas to develop his mature philosophy as an "ethics of the other" and an earnest and searching indictment of his actual achievements.

This is not to say that *Origins of the Other* is a great book. The writing is uneven; long, almost unreadable sentences punctuate often trenchant prose. The argument is difficult to follow and parts of the book are simply unconvincing. As I will explain later, Moyn's perspectives on Levinas are more a series of half-starts than a threaded and sustained argument.

What is his conclusion and how well does Moyn make his case?

In the very best passages, a refreshing ambition shines through. In these, it is clear that Moyn is interested not only in the prosaic details that provide a living context for Levinas's ideas; the young–and recently tenured–Columbia professor has philosophical questions himself, and is passionately interested in pursuing them. In the annals of Heidegger scholarship, Moyn brings to mind the likes of George Steiner and Richard Wolin, nonphilosophers who brought their distinctive disciplines to bear on Heidegger *without* robbing the reader of a sense of philosophical adventure. The classic problem Moyn most urgently wants to understand is *intersubjectivity*; in plain English, the freighted question of just how connected we really are.

Martin Heidegger created a revolution in modern thinking on precisely this issue. In fact, Heidegger's virtuosity as a philosopher of the subject creates the dramatic action in Moyn's story. Levinas, Moyn teaches us, had once hailed Heidegger as "the greatest philosopher in the world." And, even after he rejected Heidegger's existentialism as "the philosophy of Hitlerism"–Heidegger joined the Nazi party in 1934–Levinas found himself substantially in agreement with his erstwhile mentor's view of the human condition and his vision of the philosophical vocation. Indeed, for Levinas, *because* something about Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* struck him as so deeply right, the project of warning against his errors became all the more significant.

Saving the world from Heidegger would mean *correcting* Heidegger's existential analysis of the human situation, fixing it *morally*, while holding fast to its genuine insights about human finitude and the illusions of the idealistic tradition. One of the many virtues of Moyn's illuminating and sometimes exasperating book is how clearly Levinas shows up as a flesh and blood French Jewish intellectual, overcome by the apostasy of his teacher and desperate to find a way to live on as the student of Heidegger he truly was.

I. THREE WAYS TO HUMBLE EMMANUEL LEVINAS

Everything Foreseen?–Heidegger's Prescient Children

For Moyn Levinas is no postmodern saint. He makes his case for Levinas's decanonization in at least three different ways. The first is an effort to show that Levinas must choose between being a theologian and being a relativist. This point is pursued in an ingenious chapter early in the book entitled "*The Controversy over Inter-subjectivity*," an examination of the work of two of Heidegger's students.

With prescience, these young writers posed the intersubjectivity problem to their teacher shortly after the publication of *Sein und Zeit* in 1927. Was their teacher driving them toward moral relativism in accentuating the local and primordial ties binding each and every finite human being? Would their teacher offer a universal foundation for human solidarity that could redeem their ties to the larger human cosmos? Moyn's suggestion is that these two, later to become known worldwide as Hannah Arendt and Karl Loewith, plumbed the depths of Heidegger's existential analysis, and analyzed it so exhaustively that they anticipated Levinas's dilemma in the 1930s with exactitude. He would either have to face up to the consequences of being a moral relativist or escape into the netherworld of theology.

Loewith chose the former and became a precursor to the "communitarian" option–as Moyn names it–that continues to occupy us today. Our natures are social, but the ties that bind us are limited in scope. Our sense of membership is always grounded in a locale–born in some particular circumstances and expressed in cultural norms whose validity is bounded by time and space. In this paradigm, then, universalism–any perspective that presumes universal ethical demands on a homogeneous human society–is cultural imperialism by another name; paradoxically, universalism is as provincial an ethic as any tribal one, but more pretentious in its aspiration to overcome its origins. For Loewith, even the most thoroughgoing universalist was fated to play out a local script for local reasons. We are all bit players and there is no single world stage.

The young Arendt, on the other hand, took the theological fork in the road. In so doing, her *jugendschrift*–oddly theological given the secular tenor of her subsequent celebrated intellectual career–becomes emblematic of the other horn of the dilemma confronted by a reader of *Sein und Zeit*. Theology, if compelling, might save Heidegger's genuine insight into our social nature from the jaws of relativism, a fate even more fearsome after Heidegger joined the Nazi party than in 1928 when Arendt was writing. Quoting contemporary philosopher Charles Taylor, Moyn evokes Arendt's thinking: through introspection we can discover "our dependence on God in the very intimacy of our presence to ourselves, at the roots of those powers which are most our own" (Taylor 1989, 138-9). One of these distinctive "powers" is love, a relation to all persons *through* the divine person. Deep self-understanding, then–one that reveals our dependence on God–can defeat the moral relativism that threatens to engulf us when we accept our finitude. In the depths of the fleshy self, Arendt thought (for a time) she had found a universal Other, adequate to motivate a superabundant solidarity, a love so powerful that it could transfigure our natural inclinations and expand our attachments in the human world.

For Moyn, Arendt's early foray into theology and Loewith's youthful embrace of relativism anticipate Levinas's predicament after the War. A drive to redeem the hope of universal human solidarity exerted a strong pressure on the traumatized Jewish intellectual; a deep-seated desire to save the existential analysis of his brilliant and charismatic

teacher operated as well, an analysis that would allow acculturated European Jewry to affirm its own primordial ties to itself. But what price would Levinas be willing to pay to reconcile universalism and particularism, objectivism, and relativism? Far too costly, in Moyn's view: the price was the philosophy's intellectual coherence and the philosopher's personal integrity as a secular intellectual.

Levinas's intellectual itinerary after 1934 provides the scaffolding for Moyn's first attempt to humble Levinas. According to *Origins*, Levinas passes through a theological phase in the period after Heidegger's *coup de grace*; and indeed, the philosopher's early enthusiasm for Franz Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption*, a highly theological text, is well known. Less well known, but no less relevant, is the way Levinas's interest in the God-idea of religious liberals like Hermann Cohen deepened after Heidegger's flirtation with Hitler, at a time when ethical monotheism of the neo-Kantian variety was very much out of fashion. Here we are in Moyn's debt: who would have thought that one of the great French phenomenologists of the twentieth century would have been so dedicated to the neo-Kantian direction after phenomenology's ascendency in Europe? There was a push-and-pull dynamic that operated on Levinas at this stage, Moyn demonstrates. The push toward Cohen and Rosenzweig was apparently Heidegger's outrageous moral blunder, the deep dark hole into which the great phenomenologist fell; the pull toward Cohen and Rosenzweig was the tantalizing possibility that *Jewish theology* could show a way out for Heidegger's disciples.

Moyn's argument turns on what happens next in Levinas's subsequent intellectual development. Midway through his career, according to *Origins*, Levinas simply abandoned God-talk in his philosophical writing. Moyn draws the figure of an aging Levinas, in the grip of something like Arendt's aspirations (i.e., universal human solidarity), but having renounced her youthful theological impulse (i.e., theological foundations for human solidarity). In 1962, Levinas claimed that his moral philosophy was "absolutely non-theological. I insist upon this," he said. "It is not *theology* that I am doing, but *philosophy*" (13). The bulk of Moyn's book is devoted to showing that this is nonsense.

The mature Levinas famously understands human selves as connected and duty bound to one another because the concept of the other (or The Other) is inextricably bound up with the very existence of the self. But, according to Moyn, this way of talking is simply unintelligible without appreciating how seriously Levinas borrowed from *theologians* like Kierkegaard, Barth, and Rosenzweig in order to develop this mature point of view.

Here then we come to the denouement of indictment number one in Moyn's brief, Levinas's predicament, as it shows up, somewhat obscurely, in *Origins*. As "the other" is essentially of theological provenance, an honest accounting of Levinas's philosophy will disclose it. But because "the other" is an answer to *the* pressing problem of citizen solidarity in heterogeneous, somewhat secular societies, its theological character must be denied or suppressed. Perhaps you or the stranger among you is an agnostic, or an atheist. Solidarity, broad and deep enough to prevent the Hitler catastrophe, cannot, therefore, be made to depend on a theological premise, on faith in God.

There is a problem with this analysis, however–a problem that Moyn's oblique *historical* way of proceeding almost succeeds in occluding. The furrows plowed by Loewith and Arendt do *not* exhaust the lines available to the theorist who wants to "evade" Heidegger's politics without "avoiding" his insights about our sociality, and anyone familiar with philosophical discussion of this issue since 1928 should know as much; consequently, the analysis of Loewith and Arendt's youthful Heidegger reception is more a snare in which Moyn entraps Levinas than a tool with which to probe whether Levinas chose a promising direction to a thorny human problem.

Is it possible to have a dyadic ontology of the subject–no self without the other–and avoid the Scylla of theology as well as the Charybdis of moral relativism? In order to begin to tackle a question of this magnitude, Moyn would have needed to place Levinas in the *current* discussion in which he belongs as a philosopher, in the thick of a debate inhabited by neo-Aristotelians and expressivists like Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor who are theists; and amid communication ethicists like Juergan Habermas and Seyla Ben-Habib who are not. None of these philosophers think they have embraced a debilitating moral relativism, and, indeed, none think that their arguments stand or fall on theism.

No Right to Be a Star?

Moyn holds a second brief against Levinas as well, the philosopher's misappropriation of Franz Rosenzweig's hieroglyphic classic, *The Star of Redemption*. In *The Star*, as Moyn rightly suggests, Rosenzweig had offered his readers a description of what he took to be the modern human predicament, extreme solitude. Famously, Rosenzweig had a theological prescription for this disease–our existential invulnerability to others is to be breached by a "love as strong as death," the love of the Divine Other. If they only would have the good fortune to participate in such a divine experience, Rosenzweig promised his readers, their capacity to give and receive human love would be forever deepened as well.

Moyn engages in some pretty impressive *Rezeptionsgeschichte* to demonstrate that Levinas took on board commitments he could not account for by the time he became *the* philosopher of the other. This painstaking philological and

contextualizing work comprises some of the most valuable pages of the book (113-94). Moyn finds Levinas guilty here as elsewhere of a failure in self-knowledge or, at the very least, self-transparency.

Moyn, following many others, finds the *Star* a decisive influence on Levinas's trajectory toward "the other." What irks Moyn, in a striking use of judicial language, is the "extortion of ethics from revelation" that Levinas effects in borrowing selectively from the *Star* (116). (Insult leads to injury as Levinas's Rosenzweig reception is entangled in obscure and self-obfuscating interpretations of Kierkegaard as well, according to Moyn.) But, misprision being common currency among philosophers, what provokes Moyn to impose a verdict of "extortion," which is harsh, unforgiving and perhaps even unfair?

For Rosenzweig, Moyn urges, "human ethics depends on a prior . . . divine revelation" (155). This dependence is critical to Rosenzweig's whole project in fact, the very crux of his rebellion against his elders' liberal Judaism, and its theoretical articulation in neo-Kantianism; especially Hermann Cohen's, where God is an axiom, and religion a subordinate office within an encompassing department of moral philosophy. Cohen's kind of liberal Judaism, Rosenzweig called polemically "Atheistic Theology." In contrast, Rosenzweig's own "new thinking" aimed to turn back the clock on the nineteenth century's corruption of rabbinical tradition and its supposed devitalization of Jewish life.

In the course of reading *Origins of the Other* and at first blush, it is easy to be captivated by Moyn's skeptical judgment. Levinas, he tells us, tried to transfer "to man what remained [in the *Star*] God's prerogative: to inspire humanity's humiliation before and obedience to the supernatural in this world" (155).

But why exactly does Levinas give offense? What more precisely is at stake in Moyn's suspicious *Rezeptionsgeschichte*? Why should we care if Levinas violated the letter or spirit of *The Star*, or repudiated Rosenzweig's peculiar brand of neo-Orthodoxy? If Levinas was inspired in reading *The Star* to see that *some kind* of revelatory experience of otherness was necessary in order to purify our hearts and that *some kind* of humiliation before otherness was required to make us walk humbly, why is this not a sufficient debt to Rosenzweig? Levinas, after all, has the right to his decisions about what would pass metaphysical muster in the very different climate of post-Weimar, post-Shoah Europe. He was either right or wrong in his own time, yes? Levinas has as much right to a partial and idiosyncratic reception of Rosenzweig as any reader, does he not? Any other formulation invites the charge of the very kind of historical reductionism and hermeneutical naiveté that Moyn claims elsewhere in this study to abjure.

Incorrigible Historicism?

Moyn's third half-start at indicting Levinas as philosopher manqué expresses a particularly surprising objection: Levinas's philosophy does violence to the Jewish tradition. Levinas's liberal Judaism emerges in mid-career, to Moyn's eyes, as a "confusing and confused" mix of particularism and universalism (232), and he finds that Levinas often treats Judaism in an ahistorical manner. This is perhaps Moyn's oddest detour in his effort to discredit Levinas. The bulk of *Origins of the Other* is animated by an admirable impatience with the Levinasian shibboleths of the academic left. As I approached the book's end, nothing had prepared me for this new twist in the story; according to Moyn, Levinas had been duped by the false allurements of ethical monotheism, nineteenth-century style, into misreading rabbinic texts for his own philosophical purposes.

Surely, Moyn does not want to criticize Levinas for failing to read Judaic texts like a modern historicist? To the extent that Levinas's exegesis of Jewish texts was governed by a disciplinary paradigm, it was a *philosophic* one, a descendent of Cohen's *Religion of Reason* and Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption*. Surely, Moyn does not want his readers to draw hasty conclusions about the viability of Jewish exegesis in a modern philosophic mode from the paltry discussion he provides near the end of his book?

Truth be told, it is tempting to see *Origins of the Other* as not one book but two. The first, and less sophisticated, is, simply put, antiphilosophical, a child of the orthodoxy of the historian's guild. Philosophical exegesis has no place in this book and is summarily rejected. The second book, however, is philosophical and historical at once, an inquiry into the idea of human solidarity, a product of the human sciences.

The first "genealogical" book is suspicious of Levinas *just because* he is a philosopher, and not because of *the kind* of philosopher he is. This is Moyn's "postmodern" book, characteristically animated by references to Nietzsche, and full of distrust for philosophical truth-claims. As Isaiah Berlin is recruited to suggest late in the book (239),

> The deepest convictions of philosophers are seldom contained in their formal arguments: fundamental beliefs, comprehensive views of life, are like citadels which must be guarded against the enemy. Philosophers expend their intellectual power in arguments against actual and possible objections to their doctrines, and although the reasons they find, and the logic they use, may be complex, ingenious, and formidable, they are defensive weapons; the inner fortress itself–the vision of life for the sake of which the war is being waged–will, as a rule, turn out to be relatively simple and unsophisticated.

In this postmodern paradigm, genealogy is what historians will always need to do in the face of philosophers. Through careful and suspicious philological and contextual inquiry, they will need to reveal the real–that is to say, the

"relatively simple and unsophisticated" motives for philosophical writing.

In this "first" book, there is never any question about whether Levinas has an adequate theory of intersubjectivity, or whether God is on its side; such would be an achievement, *per impossibile*, because God is dead, and philosophical truth gone with Him to the grave. In this "first" book, we are made witnesses to "the end of a tradition," in fact; a tradition so decisively concluded that its destruction "is now an accomplished fact. It is neither the result of anyone's deliberate choice nor subject to further decision" (Hannah Arendt, quoted in Moyn's opening epigram).

The litmus test for Levinas's cogency and the diagnosis of his failure turns out to be of Nietzsche's devising. "[O]ne of the hallmark features of philosophy after Nietzsche," Moyn explains in his postmodern voice, is the recurrent but "illegitimate" impulse to prosecute argument by "appeal" to a world outside language. Rest assured such recidivism into old representational habits of mind is as illegitimate for the postmodern Moyn as it was for Nietzsche himself. Indeed, Moyn takes the trouble to remind us that the original master of the hermeneutics of suspicion condemned appeals to the world as retrograde thinking because they are (in Nietzsche's own words) "rooted in the old habit of supposing that the goal must be put up, given, demanded *from outside*–by some *superhuman authority*. Having unlearned faith in that, one still follows the old habit and seeks another *authority* that can *speak unconditionally* and *command* goals and tasks"(Nietzsche, quoted at 257). Levinas's problem is insufficient atheism, giving up God without breaking the habit of "hankering" after "God's command."

But Moyn's assumption that "the world" has been well lost and good riddance!–this is not *the* hallmark of all philosophy after Nietzsche, but *the* hallmark of tendentious Nietzsche enthusiasm after philosophy; after philosophical inquiry has been summarily ended and Nietzsche enthusiasm has replaced it.

Moyn knows better, and there is another book buried underneath the postmodern one, and expressing a different voice. Moyn, after all, is sometimes an author who is allergic to orthodoxies, including today's postmodern one. He tells us as much in the introduction, where he explains that he writes against the Levinas "vogue," a fatal development for the life of inquiry, one that always "forestalls criticism and . . . innovation" (6). These words of his should be more than ample to rouse us–and him–out of the stupor-inducing blend of guild historicism and Nietzschean perspectivism on some of his own pages. A philosopher's opinions can become "articles of faith," Moyn warns us. Precisely my point as well.

Emblematic of what I am calling the second book, written in Moyn's more discerning voice, is another quote, one that appears alongside Arendt's manifesto declaration about "the end" of philosophical tradition. This second quote, also on the frontispiece to *Origins*, expresses a quite different attitude and must also be appreciated, if we are to size up correctly the promise of the book under consideration.

> How does a man take on the face of the faceless other thought to command the destiny of all things–and bring himself to be recognized by others as such? How does what is above and beyond men come to take human form?

What is crucial to me here is the interrogative form. These words, by Marcel Gauchet, are questions. Moreover, they are about the problem of intersubjectivity and solidarity, a pair of concepts central to Western philosophy from Kant and Hegel to Richard Rorty and Charles Taylor (e.g., Rorty 1982, 1989). A philosophical-political question, in other words, is posed by our young historian, whose answer is of genuine interest, even urgency, and whose disposition is clearly *not* subject to *historical* adjudication alone.

It is Moyn who insists on this. He is at pains to reassure the reader that philosophy, on the one hand, and historical-mindedness, on the other, are, in fact "complementary" attitudes (7). In the closing paragraphs of both his introduction and epilogue, our historian of French intellectual history combines a professional humility with an earnestness about pursuing philosophical interests seldom displayed by his peers. "It is not clear whether truth is historical," explains Moyn. "The quest for it, however, certainly is" (20).

> Philosophers still attempt to grapple with the challenge of intersubjectivity, and continue to attempt to translate and extend many ethical principles originally rooted in monotheistic religion into a secular moral and political faith . . . The point of this book has (of course) not been to contribute to the resolution of these debates, though it presupposes their importance and may place them in a new and helpful light" (258, 260).

The author of these pages reveals that he has been fixed on a problem worthy of his considerable talents. As importantly, he has granted philosophy a measure of leadership in academic inquiry–philosophy, now viewed as a task-setting and tradition-constituted debate with a long and sometimes worthy history, and no summary resolutions.

II. A RENEWAL OF COHEN'S HOPES FOR JEWISH STUDIES?

Jewish studies in the paradigm of Hermann Cohen did in fact set scholarship a practical task; the task of articulating the foundations of human solidarity in multiethnic, multireligious regimes (Wiedebach 2003). It is no wonder that we find Moyn confessing in his acknowledgments that if he had never met critical theorist Roberto Unger at Harvard Law School, he might never have written *Origins*. Moyn's interests are in their own way quite philosophical and in an admirably practical and political register: he wants to know

how to ground the dignity underlying our concept of the modern individual and establish the solidarity underlying our concept of the liberal constitutional regime. This is not a question the guild historian asks, but it is central to the Marburg-inspired tradition of Jewish studies that sometimes has Moyn in its grip (Bernstein-Nahar 2004).

We may take the measure of just how philosophically interested Moyn is by briefly comparing his *Origins* with another recent and related work of intellectual history, Peter Eli Gordon's *Rosenzweig and Heidegger Between Judaism and German Philosophy* (Gordon 2003). *Rosenzweig and Heidegger* is a deeply learned account of contexts and ideas shared by this unlikely pair of Weimar German philosophers. As Gordon points out, Rosenzweig is remembered for his philosophy of Jewish renaissance, one that leans hard on notions of human vitality and Jewish authenticity. Heidegger, *the* pioneering existential philosopher of Rosenzweig's time, will be remembered, especially by Jews, as a Nazi; hence the uncanniness of the Rosenzweig–Heidegger association.

The salient comparison between Moyn's work and Gordon's is this: Gordon is simply not alive to the field of contemporary interests that descend from his own subject matter–*fin de siècle* existentialism and phenomenology. To Gordon the very notion of authenticity–being true to one's "ownmost identity"–borders upon absurdity (Gordon 2003, 308-09). The phenomenological tradition native to North America, for instance, whether in its neo-Aristotelian or expressivist variety, evidently does not engage him (MacIntyre 1981, 1988, 1990; Taylor 1984, 1985a,b, 1989, 1992, 1993a,b, 1994, 1995, 2007). While we should be quick to concede Gordon's main point–the retrieval of a horizon of meaning shared by Rosenzweig and Heidegger has been neglected in scholarship–his study is, nevertheless, hobbled by its limited interests; indeed, much of its dramatic force derives from its author's innuendo that he is at last unmasking Rosenzweig as an author who trades in the politically dangerous and ontologically dubious notion of authenticity. But is the quest for authenticity what Gordon presumes it to be?

Put thus, it should be clear that Gordon's hermeneutics of historical retrieval are tightly bound to a contemporary debate with the power to unravel his entire project; and to which he nevertheless is not in the habit of attending. One could make the parallel point about many other interesting historical and sociological works in the modern Jewish studies field, including David Nathan Myers's account of antihistoricism in modern Jewish thought, which remains nevertheless disengaged from contemporary philosophical critiques of historicism (Myers 2003; Bernstein-Nahar 2004, 179-85); and Arnold Eisen and Steven M. Cohen's book on the autonomous Jewish self in contemporary Jewish society, which nevertheless remains indifferent to contemporary philosophical discourse on autonomy (Eisen and Cohen 2000).

No such charge can be leveled against Moyn, whose historical range and philosophical curiosity is manifest throughout *Origins* and has been demonstrated elsewhere (Moyn 2003, 2004). What are the transcendental conditions, should such exist, for establishing intersubjective understanding and political solidarity? In recognition of the fact that this is a subtext of *Origins*, Moyn, in fact, concludes his study with a meditation on contemporary political theory, and thus, crosses the boundary between a hermeneutics of historical retrieval and contemporary theorizing. For a fleeting moment, the reader comes face to face with Moyn's reflections on Habermas's ethics of communicative action, Rawls's theory of justice, and Richard Rorty's ironic historicism. However uncertain in theory, in practice the author of *Origins of the Other* has kicked the historian's *habitus* (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).[3]

Could Moyn have found this voice throughout–written a book not freighted with ambivalence about nonhistorical modes of inquiry? To do so, he would have needed to be clear with himself that his historical discipline, however valuable, does not provide a stable "exterior point of view" from which to judge philosophical writing qua philosophy, a hubris he allows himself early on in the book (7). The more modest standpoint on Levinas's philosophy he actually achieves proves valuable enough–a sober and skeptical eye, a determined contextualizing impulse, an insistence that Levinas's own self-estimation may not always withstand scrutiny. This brand of historical consciousness is surely sufficient to chasten excessive Levinas-enthusiasm.

Even in the midst of its ambivalence, *Origins* is a new and important beginning, a glimmer of life for academic Jewish studies' old *fin de siècle* hopes. Against the backdrop of the historicism of his guild, Moyn has cleared some ground, a place where collaboration, even interdisciplinary working groups, might grow. This marks *Origins of the Other* as more than an interpretation of a French philosopher, produced by a young American scholar of Jewish studies. It not only recalls the practical ambitions of Hermann Cohen circa 1904, and, Cohen and Rosenzweig, circa 1918; it also points to the as yet unrealized educational potential of a vast multidisciplinary Jewish studies academy in America.

NOTES

1. This essay is dedicated to two of my first teachers, John "Jock" Reeder and Jeffrey Stout. Both introduced me to methodological questions in the human sciences and inspired me to seek out philosophical conversation within the academic field of Jewish studies. I would like to thank Mara Benjamin, Steven

Grosby, Jacob Meskin, Alan Mittleman, and David Starr for comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

2. Ritterband and Wechsler (1994, 1-19, 201-10) detail the marginal status of philosophy on the American Jewish Studies scene against a European background of its inclusion.
3. Pierre Bourdieu has famously described the way in which disciplines become entrapped in their *habitus* and insisted that "transgression of disciplinary boundaries is a prerequisite for scientific advance." For a lucid exposition of Bourdieu's views, see Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, 149). Taylor has explained Bourdieu's *habitus* in his own phenomenological terms in Taylor (1993b).

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