

Speaking of Love

Meaning and Phenomenology of the Human

A word is never final, never merely spoken; it is always speaking as well. This its own life is, after all, the actual mystery of language: the word speaks

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Spiritually Human

*human emotion and its spirituality begin in the
for-the-other, in being affected by the other*

Emmanuel Levinas¹

In this essay, I want to ask after what it means to be human. I know that sounds ridiculously ambitious. Perhaps I could qualify it by saying that what I have in mind is the human as a *spiritual* being. Spirit: this horrible word is like a refuge, like hell itself, for every good intention and unkind action. Let us, then, try to understand what's at stake here. That the spiritual life is a life devoid of the striving for salvation, a striving which is egocentric and ultimately egoist like animality, that outflanks even the celebrated "death of God" of the intellectuals, since it remains a prisoner of perception: this is perhaps the most important inheritance of what we now know as the West.

So spirituality is not about all kinds of weird and wonderful ideas. It means caring for others and refusing violence. Another word for it is *love*. But this seems to get us into even deeper water. For again, like the word, spiritual, there's probably no word whose meaning is more slippery, which tends to be used so indiscriminately. People say they love football, fried fish, their friends, and their children.² Finally, there are all the popular enquiries into its interpersonal meaning. So how to find one's way through this inveterate tangle? First of all, I want to suggest we're liable to miss what is fundamental to love if we reduce it to a particular species of human emotion or sentiment. Perhaps this is why virtually every psychological, sociological or historical account of love fails to grasp its significance.³

1 In Robbins [ed.], *Is it Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, 53.

2 "Undoubtedly the clearest illustration of the helplessness and awkwardness of language, when it comes to expression of the infinite shades of emotion, is the curious word 'love'. There are countless words for colours, there are scales for music, but for all shades of love we have the one word. 'I love nice clothes', says one. And another says, 'I just love baked potatoes'. We also love our friends, we love our parents, we love our children, and we love love itself. A very extraordinary word, surely" (Shamyra Levin, *The Arena*, 111. This work is the third part of Levin's three-part autobiography).

3 Nowadays, apart from historical-sociological studies, literary treatments of the theme of love generally fall into two categories. Firstly, psychological approaches. These generally follow broadly psycho-dynamic methodologies and focus on a process of self-analysis. The second category is what might be called spiritualistic. Here the approach ranges across the gamut of personalized to traditionalistic-from the crypto-psychology of New Age philosophies to those treatments that seek to update orthodox theological doctrines on love, casting them into a language more palatable to contemporary readers, who are generally lacking in any familiarity with traditional devotional literature.

In the pursuit of rational discourse, people will generally seek to prove an assertion on basis of a conceptual demonstration. However, where love is concerned, could it really be a matter of proof?⁴ After all, isn't love completely intangible? In Dostoyevsky's, *The Brothers Karamazov*, the Othodox Elder says to Lise, that when it comes to love "it is not possible to prove anything; it is, however, possible to be convinced".⁵ But is this enough? Nowadays, plenty of people are convinced about all kinds of crazy and far-fetched notions. In this respect, surely such conviction is the last thing we need!

Saul Bellow once said the job of the fiction writer is to "find enduring intuitions of what things are real and what things are important".⁶ Something like love is obviously quite real and quite important. But where do we find those "enduring intuitions"? In a letter to his fiancé, who was troubled by the intensity of the feeling between them and what it meant, Franz Rosenzweig advised her: "Do you know why you were unable at the time to know 'the meaning of love'? Because one only knows it when one loves and is loved".⁷

So our sense of what love is depends on one's *own* living and loving. And insomuch as we love, we live in a human way. Thereby love is inseparable from the dynamic of our personal, individual human existence. If, then, it's through living in a human way that we understand what love is, then perhaps the link between spirituality and love emerges in the midst of life - particularly, through encountering others. I've suggested that spirituality is the inter-human - care and respect for the other person (that is, ethics). Now, when I care for someone, I'm bound to them by an intimate sense of concern. Hence the care of concern, of love, implies a *relational* situation. And insofar as there is relation, there is also connection.

Love is one form of connectedness. Yet is love the only way I can be connected to others? Of course not. There is connection in social associations, work environments, fitness groups, bonds of friendship or filiality, and feelings of belonging and loyalty to a nation or an ethnic group. However, there's something indispensable to this entire range of such social connections and encounters, and that something is speech. The connection of a spoken word is distinctive and

4 The same applies to God: "God cannot be described by definitions because He cannot be defined" (Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*, Volume 2, 47).

5 Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 77.

6 *There is Simply Too Much to Think About. Collected Non-Fiction*, 75.

7 Quoted in Nahum Glatzer, *Franz Rosenzweig. His Life and Thought*, 90. Likewise, the Elder of the Monastery replies to Lise's question as to how exactly, "by what means", she can feel convinced about the reality of love: "By the experience of active love. Try to love your fellow human beings actively and untiringly. In the degree to which you succeed in that love, you will also be convinced of God's existence, and of your soul's immortality" (ibid., 77-8).

unique because through it, “one person enters into emotional solidarity with another person”.⁸ But what exactly does this solidarity entail? How and why does it arise? And, perhaps most importantly, what does it tell us about the nature of the human being?

Precision and Soul

*There exists a certain abiding
miscommunication between the intellect and
the soul. We have not too much intellect and
too little soul, but too little intellect in matters
of the soul*

Robert Musil⁹

An ancient wisdom says that the human is a thinking and speaking being.¹⁰ However, there’s another wisdom, far more ancient, which reminds us that this formulation misses one vitally important ingredient. To be human is to be incapable of indifference when it comes to the fate of one’s neighbour. In other words, to be human is to have a conscience, to feel *personally* responsible for others.¹¹ Now, if the fabric of spiritual life could be said to be woven out of all three of these elements - thought, speech, and personal responsibility - it is speech which draws together the threads. What gives the word this power?

We miss the significance of human speech if we regard it merely as a vehicle to convey information. It’s well known that certain mammals are able to transmit quite complex information to other members of their own species, often in very sophisticated ways.¹² Whereas what is particular to human speech is that it represents “the self-revelation of speakers who express and communicate their uniqueness through speaking - no matter the specific content of what is said”.¹³ Human speech is distinguished from the communication of all other living

8 Heschel, *The Prophets*, Volume 2, 98.

9 *Precision and Soul*, frontispiece.

10 For instance, the Ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle, defines the human as a being with *logos* - that is, speech and thought. The Hebrew tradition contains a formulation that parallels the Greek conception. Thus the medieval Rabbinic commentator, Rashi, in his commentary to Genesis 2:7, remarks that the “excellence” of the human creature resides in a twin capacity for “reasoning and speech”.

11 I deliberately emphasize this personal element. The Ancient Greeks had a concept of responsibility, but it was civic rather than irreducibly personal. Unlike the Greek idea of *isonomia*, the notion that the responsibility of each individual is personal, that is, *unlimited*, is the unique contribution of the Hebrew Bible.

12 See the discussion of communication between bees in the hive, in Jacob Bronowski, *The Visionary Eye: Essays in the Arts, Literature, and Science*, 6-7.

13 Adriana Caverero, *For More than One Voice. Towards a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, 190.

creatures inasmuch as the spoken word, beyond being just a medium for the transmission of a certain verbal content, enables a person to *express how they feel*.

That sounds warm and fuzzy. The challenge is to find a measure of precision when it comes to human phenomena generally regarded as not amenable to exact specification. So what exactly is it to feel? Feeling, which means living, is bound up with a sense that there exists within oneself a certain unplumbable depth, an *inner immensity*. So to express what I feel through the word means to draw up something from this infinite depth, to bring it into the light, to *reveal* it to another person. In this way, words not only externalize an emotion, a thought, an idea. They also draw attention to the sheer fact that there is, in each and every one of us, a *hidden realm*.¹⁴

Thanks to the word, I can reveal something of myself, of this inner immensity which constitutes me, to another person. But could it also be that the word, reaching down *into* depths, *is also this depth itself* - in short, that this infinite interiority, which is what I am, is *language*?¹⁵ Here I'm reminded of an old Talmudic saying: "the soul is full of words".¹⁶ But what kind of words are they?: locked up in an internal realm, immanent, unarticulated, without a "voice". That is, for an undisclosed soul, language is latent, existing as the limit of an "un-said".¹⁷ Here soul is still only *Self*, not a vitally living, that is, *human* being. I only become living, individual soul,¹⁸ a person, when I bring these words out into the light of day - specifically, when I speak to another.¹⁹

14 Yet contrary to what the tradition of modernity holds, this concealed dimension is not 'tragic', since it is a 'reservoir', as it were, which sustains all human, present-moment existence.

15 I don't mean this literally. When I say that this interiority is language, I'm suggesting, rather, that this linguistic being which we are exists in the form of what Giorgio Agamben calls an "unpresupposable non-latency" (*Infancy and History. Essays on the Destruction of History*, 9). - unpresupposable, because if my being could be presupposed, then it could be known, since knowledge is always dependent upon presuppositions; and non-latent, because if our being were latent, it would exist as potentiality, and hence be open to being appropriated in power relations. But whether as potentially knowable or assimilable to the All, a person could no longer exist as irreducible singularity.

16 Quoted in Adin Steinsaltz, *Simple Words. Thinking About What Really Matters in Life*, 18.

17 Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History*, 4.

18 As opposed to the depersonalized, anonymous 'world-soul' of Oriental thinking.

19 The paradigm for such an inward realm where the soul of the human is not yet a living being, is the self-sufficient world of *art*, a "world of mute accord which is not a world, not a real, lively to-and-fro connection of a conversation that goes back and forth, and yet capable at every point of being animated for moments with life" (Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption* [Galli Trans.], 90). In this sense, "The realm of art provides the soil where the Self can grow everywhere; but every Self is again an entirely solitary singular Self; art nowhere creates a real plurality of Selves, although it creates everywhere for Selves the possibility of awakening: the Self that awakens knows still only of itself. In other words: in art's world of appearances, the Self remains always Self, it does not become - soul" (ibid.).

So if the word is the medium that gives another person a brief, fleeting glimpse into this inner immensity that I am, and if the latter is language, then whilst language is “all there, all created from the beginning, nevertheless . . . [it] awakes to real vitality only in revelation”.²⁰ It’s when I reveal something of who I am through a spoken word²¹ to another human being that language, existing from creation and its eternity, springs into life and is thereby able to give life to our humanity, in the form of person-to-person relatedness, which is always, I’d suggest, like Revelation itself, “in the present, and indeed . . . is the present par-excellence”.²²

Put simply, the word is a power of self-disclosure, reminding us that to be human is to have an *inner life*. Yet this inner life - which really is the essence of my personal being - could only become meaningful to someone else to the extent they’re able to relate this fragment of the inner being that I am, that I’ve revealed to them in verbal form, to the inner world which *they themselves are*. What occurs, then, in human encounter, is a situation in which two infinities *encounter* each other and *recognize* each other. And, again, the medium of this encounter and recognition is the word.

Still, we might ask: is such encounter really possible? An encounter implies some kind of proximity, no matter how momentary. But if my inner being is indeed infinite, in order to *get close* to the infinity of that other person, the infinity which I am would then need to traverse an infinite space. Furthermore, by drawing close to the infinity which is the other, the infinite that I am could not but cancel out and erase them; for if something is indeed infinite, should it come into proximity to another infinity, it would constrain or limit it. And to limit something infinite is to destroy it (or, at the very least, deprive it of precisely its infinitude²³).

At this point, I feel I owe my reader an apology. The above no doubt sounds like something from a primer on Quantum Physics. I don’t mean it to. It’s just that

20 Ibid., 200. Hence “speech is truly humankind’s morning gift from the Creator, and yet at the same time it is the common property of all the children of humanity, in which each has their particular share and, finally, it is the seal of humanity in each and every individual person” (ibid). Or as Giorgio Agamben put it, “the speaking and the spoken with which we measure ourselves in the *experimentum [lingue]* are neither a voice nor a *gramma*” (*Infancy and History*, 9).

21 Thus in the Biblical *Targum Onkelos*, the Hebrew word for the first human created by God, *Odom*, means “a speaking spirit”.

22 Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption* (Galli trans.), 200. Of course, Revelation is a *religious* figure in Monotheistic spirituality. However, in the hope of capturing its meaning in the order of phenomenality, I’ve deliberately tried to avoid using overtly theological language, only because I’m aware that many people find such language offputting.

23 Which is indeed what the vulgar psychology of petit-bourgeois people does constantly, through its multiple indiscretions.

I'm trying to describe certain experiences and phenomena that, whilst I'd never think of them as anything but real and concrete in an existential sense, are also quite elusive (indeed, like the universe the Quantum Physicist attempts to get a handle on!). Here I'm reminded of a remark of Abraham Heschel, that "translating insights into words"²⁴ is a task for "creative minds", who will be "more anxious to save what they sense than refine and protect what they say".²⁵

I also think of Robert Musil, who observed that perhaps due to a general apprehension as to the supposedly 'dehumanizing' effect of technical reason in our world, for modern people there exists a certain "abiding miscommunication between the intellect and the soul". As a result, he suggests that we "do not have too much intellect and too little soul, but too little intellect in matters of the soul".²⁶ So I'm asking my reader for their indulgence, to bear with what might seem like semantic gymnastics. For in order to "save" this sense of something ineffable I'm trying to describe - to bring an element of intellectual "precision" to questions that might otherwise be regarded as inherently ambiguous and not amenable to precise description and examination - I find myself having to resort to rhetorical or metaphorical devices which admittedly stretch the limits of language. But perhaps this is what's required if we're to get closer to attaining some of that "intellect in matters of the soul" which Musil suggests we are sorely missing.

Keeping the above in mind, let us now return to those two personal beings, two sovereign immensities, relating to each other across an unbridgeable distance. And this is where, I'd suggest, we discover the marvel of language. For the word has a remarkable capacity: to *connect without connecting*, to make contact without effacing the distance. In the words of Maurice Blanchot, even as "speech affirms the abyss that there is between 'myself' and 'the other', it passes over the impassable, but without abolishing or reducing it".²⁷ And so, human speech, a 'binding separation', a "differential interruption which also connects",²⁸ both crosses over and maintains an absolute divide. It is this feature that gives the word both its stringency and its power as absolute non-power.

24 Heschel, *The Prophets*, Volume 2, 53.

25 *Ibid.*, 53. Cf.: "Translating insights into words is not done in the light of conceptual criteria, but under the impact of incomprehensible facts. Ignoring the tension of the moment and the paradox of the endeavour, one would retain the concepts but lose the facts" (*Ibid.*, 55).

26 *Precision and Soul*, frontispiece.

27 *The infinite Conversation*, 63.

28 Martin Crowley, *Robert Antelme. Humanity, Community, Testimony*, 34.

All Power to the Phrase

In losing the concrete immediacy that resided in the Word, man falls headlong into a process of abstraction, which is the abyss of the mediacy of all communication, of the word as means, the empty word.

Franco Rella²⁹

Loving, thinking and talking as the spiritual life: is that all there is to it? Could it really be so simple? But it only appears simple because we've long been accustomed to and familiar with thinking of spirituality in precisely these terms.³⁰ The problem, however, as the philosopher Hegel once observed, is that what is familiar is not known, exactly because it's familiar. For instance, everyone reckons they know what love is. However, just let people try to say something sensible about it and see how quickly it all degenerates into a series of clichés. Perhaps that's because no-one is really willing to determine for themselves what things mean - that is, individually, using their own judgement and discernment. But the danger is that if we don't do this - that is, find a way to think and speak about love on our own account - then a thought and a speech with no interest in what we personally and individually think and feel will end up dictating to us our very own thoughts and feelings. Here I'm referring to psychology.

Almost a century ago, in his essay on the "metaphysical" poets of the Elizabethan age, T. S. Eliot remarked that "the poets of the seventeenth century . . . possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience".³¹ We might say the same about academic psychology. Presenting itself as a "universal program designed to remedy human frailty and the ills besetting it",³² psychology is a technique which "masters and computes emotions,

29 Quoted in Francesco Dal Co, *Figures of Architecture and Thought*, 163, n. 131.

30 For example, in Christianity, God is referred to as *Logos*, an ancient Greek term that means word but also thought. Likewise, the connection between spirituality and love is evident in the whole Christian tradition. For instance, who has not heard of that old maxim- 'God is love'? But even whilst most people would be able to affirm the sentiment in general terms, few would be able to articulate precisely what it means.

31 'The Metaphysical Poets', in *Selected Essays*, 287.

32 Philippe Nemo, *Job and the Excess of Evil*, 44. In the discussion that follows, with the term, psychology, I'm referring to "the most modern manifestation of technique, the now 200-year-old ambition of intervening with the 'human' itself, with the human spirit and the secret in the human heart, for the sake of mitigating all those evils which, prior to these last two centuries, found their best refuge in religion" (ibid., 44). It's because psychology regards "the Beyond as a pleat to be unfolded from this world" (ibid., 65) that it will always be unable to fathom the spiritual. The problem is that psychology is completely unable to acknowledge the existence of anything which "does not accede to the order of the world" (ibid., 69).

pleasures and pains, and the human existence that feels them”.³³ In this respect, it is a form of science - cognitive science. Now if the medium of science is the concept, the natural tendency of psychology, as a science of cognition, will be to frame its understanding in terms of concepts.³⁴ Yet what kind of concepts are these really?

Psychology is the popular science of the modern age. When concepts are popularized, they become *phrases*.³⁵ The latter supply people with a standardized language and standardized meanings, stripped of all complexity and subtlety.³⁶ Whilst genuine language uncovers the complexity of reality and makes a person receptive to it, the phrase “informs without communicating”.³⁷ In the process, “language takes on a function separate from any direct communication through a concentration on phrase-making for its own sake”.³⁸ The problem with phrases is they make people lazy. Instead of attempting to craft their understanding of life and the world using their own, intelligent resources, the individual gets used to passing on a meaning that is conveniently ready-to-hand and ready-made. Then they lose any personal connection to the words they speak. Deposited in well-rounded slogans, meaning now circulates like cash currency amongst speakers who have, for the most part, become quite accustomed to not having any kind of personal involvement with what they say.

Genuine dialogue is in the “animation” of a “real, lively to-and-fro connection of a conversation that goes back and forth”.³⁹ In this way, human language is, as Enzo Paci put it, “a complex of signs that involves a life”⁴⁰ - the life, that is, of living speakers.⁴¹ Yet no matter how powerful the life-blood which courses through the word, when meaning is articulated within a system of signs, it has a

33 Ibid., 63.

34 For all its pretensions to being scientific, psychology is really pseudo-science.

35 Phrase-making and sloganeering are the inevitable effect when the conceptual language of science is made into an item of mass consumption; with psychology, science becomes propaganda.

36 It's this complex language that one finds in great works of literary fiction. The fact that no-one reads genuine literature anymore might explain the hegemony in our culture of the phrase.

37 Massimo Cacciari, *Europe and Empire. On the Political Forms of Globalization*, 55.

38 Anthony Phelan, *Reading Heinrich Heine*, 9.

39 Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption* (Galli Trans.), 90.

40 *The Function of the Sciences and the Meaning of Man*, 207.

41 James Muilenberg, in *The Way of Israel. Biblical Faith and Ethics*, discusses the resonances of the Hebrew term for word, *dabar*: “The word (*dabar*) is the most elemental form of speech . . . The *dabar* is alive because it is born within the self of the speaker, and bears within it the vitality and power of the speaker. The word becomes alive in speaking; it initiates dialogue, invites response, calls to action, and registers its effect upon the one addressed by the uniqueness of the spoken name” (31-32).

tendency to petrify in lifeless configurations. In this circumstance, words “designate only facts and will not set in motion new modes of communication or communicate new perspectives”.⁴² This is precisely what occurs when people mindlessly rehash word-slogans. The vital life-energy of the word “is now imprisoned in language”.⁴³ Nevertheless, this energy can, at any moment, be “revitalized into what it was when it was presence”.⁴⁴

That the word can, in this way, come back to life is one of the most marvelous - one might almost say, miraculous - of its properties. And it's able to do this because it is akin to a great reservoir. Having previously absorbed into itself the life-energy of all those living speakers whose lips it passed through, the word stands ready to re-radiate this energy upon those who are present and willing to hear, but also to themselves speak and thereby enter into the life that the word bestows. In the 'being-spoken' of their enunciation, words charge the space of dialogue with an energy that draws each participant into the round dance of language.⁴⁵ Thereby we become part of the way meaning is created *in the very act of speaking*.

When I speak the word, I speak meaning, and thereby reality and life, into being. And because the situation of dialogue gathers together separate existences, uniting them in speech or in song, the spoken word leads us into shared life. Genuine speech is a primordial donation, the “power to welcome and to give”.⁴⁶ With the phrase, on the other hand, meaning is already complete well before it has a chance to be spoken. The *saying* adds nothing.⁴⁷ Rather than opening onto the plentitude of shared being, and allowing us to share with others the inner life that is our humanity, the phrase prescribes ready-made, conditioned responses. It gives rise to a language that does not invite the person to speak from their own depth. Rather, it speaks for them, and ultimately without them.

The phrase is received meaning. As such, it leads people to express themselves in ways that are uncreative and sterile, and thus unable to impart life to those who speak. Then words emerge still-born from our mouths, falling to the ground in the space between us like blocks of stone. A language based on received meanings is a dead language. So a person who spends all their days spouting phrases ends up

42 Cacciari, *Europe and Empire*, 55.

43 Enzo Paci, *The Function of the Sciences and the Meaning of Man*, 207.

44 Ibid.

45 Reflecting on a poem of his friend, Bertold Brecht, Walter Benjamin remarked that “Friendship does not abolish the distance between people, but it makes it vibrant . . .” (quoted in Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt. For Love of the World*, 161). A spoken word is the signature of friendship, loyalty, “a sign of truth”.

46 Cacciari, *Europe and Empire*, 53.

47 Emmanuel Levinas called this the preeminence of the *Said* over the *Saying*.

becoming detached from life itself. This is language as *ideology*, which, as Saul Bellow observed, signifies “not thinking for oneself”.⁴⁸ Ideologies represent a prefabricated system of signification in which meaning, through a process of systematization and “concentration”, becomes infinitely reproducible but also dumb and inert.

The classic format of ideological language is *propaganda*, which is, of course, the preferred linguistic format of totalitarian and authoritarian political regimes. But not only them. Indeed nowadays, on social media, everyone is a propagandist, whether or not they wish to be. The internet is like an enormous virtual ‘Tower of Babel’; people are online to promote themselves or some of idea of theirs, to get their name ‘out there’, or assist others to do the same, to make an impression, no matter how unassuming they appear. Everyone wants to cajole, convince or seduce you into thinking they’ve got something that might help you, empower you, make you more productive, more confident as to your own strengths (or even weaknesses!), more likeable, or, at the very least, more effective at finding your ‘true self’.

One reason the internet as a social medium is so powerful is that it’s essentially a system that detaches ideas from the person who thinks them. What counts is the *intelligibility* of an intellectual proposition, not the consistency of the argument that formulates it. The same applies to our entire scientific, industrial and technical world, which is all too ready to borrow our minds and souls for its own purposes. As a result, ideas take on an independent life. No wonder that on social media, ideas have a tendency to ‘go viral’. But this is also why anything that appears on the internet is liable to turn into propaganda. Because with the latter, the format of an idea is more important than its substantive content.

Propaganda radically separates thinking from the one who thinks, language from the person who speaks.⁴⁹ Propaganda relies not so much upon the development of an argument as “the naked imperious power of its own affirmation”.⁵⁰ It is like a machine which hammers out the idea, “supporting it with whatever seems to fit, without any analysis, without any discussion of objections, without any references”.⁵¹ And so, “there is neither knowledge to establish, nor

48 *There is Simply Too Much to Think About. Collected Non-Fiction*, 386.

49 interestingly, Buddhism does the same. Indicative in this respect is the title of a recent book by a prominent Buddhist psychologist: *Thoughts Without a Thinker*.

50 Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘The Nazi Myth’, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Winter 1990), 304-5. Here one thinks of the ‘Newspeak’ about which George Orwell wrote so many penetrating analyses.

51 *ibid.*.

thought to overcome. There is only an already acquired, already available truth to declare".⁵²

Psychology and Language

You can't talk about the meaning of life without using phony words, imprecise ones. But the trouble is there aren't any others.

Rainer Werner Fassbinder⁵³

Propaganda, then, is the death of the living, spoken word, and thereby the death of any possibility of real connection between human beings. But isn't propaganda just an odious product of authoritarian governments? In a 'free society', are we not at liberty to speak as individuals, to think whatever we wish to think, despite the 'hidden persuaders'? Not necessarily. To be sure, propaganda makes its presence felt in the official voices of political and social rhetoric. Yet it can also lurk in the most intimate of settings - when people speak in earnest, with the best of intentions, yet without actually committing themselves, without genuine vulnerability, hiding behind platitudes and 'right-thinking', or pushing forth opinions which rather than expressing any a desire for real communication, are just the 'shout out' of an ego that wants to 'have its say', but is uninterested in listening.

In fact, one finds the voice of propaganda in everywhere the language of the phrase stands ready and available to sugar-coat the violence of the ego. Because for the latter, there can be no limits to its mastery and power, even when it expresses itself with the false modesty of self-abnegation and altruism. In this respect, we might say that the the language of the phrase, of propaganda, is the language of *psychology*, here understood as a spiritual 'technique' that "invokes words in general as objects which can be counted, and counted upon".⁵⁴

Psychological discourse works wholly in terms of received meanings. Deaf to anything which transcends the horizon of the world, it supplies the individual with a ready-made lexicon of the inner-life, an *encyclopaedium* of the emotions. But whilst it might claim to put people in touch with their feelings, in reality its concern for the inner life is mere lip-service.⁵⁵ Disconnecting the word from its personal

52 *ibid.*

53 *The Anarchy of the Imagination*, 173.

54 Nemo, *Job and the Excess of Evil*, 70. Hence Raymond Aron's observation that the methodologies of social psychology are often the same as those used by authoritarian political regimes for the purposes of psychological manipulation.

55 Whilst the medium of cognition is the concept, the medium of transcendence is the word. Psychology might be very adept at manipulating concepts. But it is entirely deaf to that

source, psychological language detaches the individual from themselves, fostering ersatz emotion in place of real feeling, histrionics and manipulative behavior in place of probity and directness. In the long run, it makes straightforward and emotionally honest relations with others difficult. As a consequence, individuals end up more isolated and alone than ever.

People generally think psychology provides a language that will enable them to share their deepest thoughts, feelings and emotions with others.⁵⁶ However, when there's a ready-made psychological phraseology which "thinks and speaks"⁵⁷ for the individual, how could anyone know what they really think or feel, let alone communicate it to others? With their mouths continually stuffed full of empty clichés, it's not long before people start to believe there could be nothing more to life than what the phrase says.⁵⁸

As far as spirituality and love are concerned, the problem is particularly serious, because here the meanings are already acutely over-determined. Indeed, what more could possibly be said about these two topics? Why bother trying to examine them again? Have not the words themselves, by now wholly drained of significance, become "banal and base"⁵⁹ from the onslaught of stock-standard phrases? Here we

resonance of transcendence which shines through the word. Is it any wonder, then, that the vast bulk of psychological literature in our age is virtually unreadable? The appalling rape of language perpetrated by the discourse of psychology, a discourse that fills libraries and research institutes with millions of pages of turgid, pseudo-scientific drivel, should be evidence enough of psychology's "blunt refusal of everything that comes from the heart of silence" (ibid., 65); this is why there is "no meaning . . . when one objectivizes words as simple media of communication between two subjects in the world. It is always *for a soul*, torn between good and evil and floating before the engaged commitment, that there is, or there is not, a meaning in a sign" (ibid., 146)

56 They are also likely to see it as modern, whereas as Nemo shows in *Job and the Excess of Evil* through his analysis of the Biblical legend of Job - in particular, in those religio-moralistic constructions of Job's 'guilt' that his 'friends' use to berate him - the "reductive enterprise" of psychology has been with us for a long time. Indeed, it is as old as humanity itself.

57 The phrase is from the German Romantic poet, Schiller, and is quoted in Viktor Klemperer, *The Language of the Third Reich*, 15. There's probably never been an age in which certain linguistic habits and ways of speaking are so effective in shaping how we understand the world and ourselves.

58 Again, much of this is a product of laziness. The fact is that nowadays, most people are not prepared to try to think for themselves. Psychology aids and abets this trend, since it aims to console rather than provoke any kind of serious reflection. The vast bulk of popular psychological language oozes with all kinds of anthropological pathos. In this respect, it indulges to the full what is, in contemporary people, another typically vulgar petit-bourgeois trait: sentimentality. In its popular format, psychology is the language of consolation. Here it takes over in a secular form many traits of Christian religiosity.

59 Levin, *The Arena*, 60.

must work with great determination to restore the “original power and meaning”⁶⁰ of words. But this is not as difficult as it might seem. It all depends on us.

The first thing is to put aside received meanings and open ourselves up to the word itself, really listening out for what it has to say. Only then does one discover how words, compelling yet ineffable, have the ability to touch us deep within. A word is not just a neutral ‘label’. And certainly, it’s always something more than a “simple media of communication between two subjects in the world”.⁶¹ Not “sound and smoke”⁶² but spirit and fire, words resonate within us, thereby reattaching us to the feeling, sensing and emotional beings that we are. And yet, as much as words reconnect us with our own inner being, they also draw us *out of ourselves*. Thus speech breaks down ego-barriers and connects us to others.

One hears a lot of talk nowadays about how impoverished language has become. There is, however, nothing wrong with language. It fails when we no longer have any desire to relate to it. The word wants relationship, for without involvement on our part, words keep to themselves. Our inability to be open to words and to the spiritual dimension of their truth is more than a psychic blockage; it’s a thoroughgoing spiritual affliction. Yet the wonderful thing is that to be liberated from this affliction requires nothing more simple, modest and wholesome than trust. And language is “easily trusted, for it is within us and about us; as it reaches us from ‘without’, it is no different from language as it echoes the ‘without’ from our ‘within’”.⁶³

60 Ibid.

61 Philippe Nemo, *Job and the Excess of Evil*, 146.

62 The notion that words, conventional names for things, are mere “sound and smoke”, and as such obscure higher, spiritual realities, is the age-old conviction of mysticism: “Call it happiness! Heart! Love! God!/ I have no name/ for it! Feeling is everything / The name is sound and smoke/ Enshrouding heaven’s glow” (Goethe, *Faust I*, lines 3454-3458).

63 Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption* (Hallo trans.), 151.

Desire and Exteriority

Paganism is not the negation of spirit, nor the ignorance of a unique God . . . Paganism is a radical powerlessness to get out of the world.

Emmanuel Levinas⁶⁴

Humans are peculiar. As much as we are pragmatic, practical and immensely intelligent beings, we are never satisfied with that, always feeling a hankering for something beyond the satisfaction of a small circle of physiological, emotional and intellectual needs. This is not some folly or ridiculous fancy of certain odd individuals. Neither does it derive from a mistaken apprehension about the nature of reality. Every living human being, I would suggest, has an innate desire for it. Thus it is an entirely natural, normal and completely healthy kind of emotion, whose validity and truth is attested to by an immense variety of human experiences. In this essay, I will refer to this desire by way of a word that is, today, either unpopular or controversial: God.

I use this word quite freely, without scholarly reservations, and certainly without any sort of ironic intent. That's because I see no good reason why it should be treated as taboo. Still, it needs to be acknowledged there's probably no word that people are liable to find so disconcerting. Some words have the ability to set off a kind of explosion in the soul. And the emergency measures individuals put into place in order to keep themselves afloat in the wake of such a psychic disturbance potentially tells us a lot about what's at stake.

One of these emergency measures is the whole discussion nowadays around the topic of *atheism*. What I find curious about those who loudly and publically proclaim their atheism is that of all people, they are perhaps the one's who are most obsessed by God,⁶⁵ apart from maybe a small handful of religious fanatics or terrorists (who in actuality represent only a very small minority of the population

64 Emmanuel Levinas, quoted in Claire Katz, *Levinas and the Crisis of Humanism*, 67.

65 I'm thinking here of contemporary Rationalist Humanism, most varieties of which invariably contain arguments regarding the existence of God. That there should be this connection between Atheism and Rationalism has never ceased to puzzle me. It is interesting that in the Hebrew Bible, atheism is never regarded as a problem or an issue. It is more likely to regard a person who believes that, by working things out conceptually, they could arrive at a judgement about the existence or non-existence of God as failing to understand certain basic and fundamental aspects of human existence. As Franz Rosenzweig put it, "The chief thing is not whether or not a person 'believes' in the good Lord; what matters is that he open all five senses and see the facts - at the risk that even the good Lord may be found among the facts" (Franz Rosenzweig quoted in Glatzer, 'Introduction', Franz Rosenzweig, *Understanding the Sick and the Healthy. A View of World, Man, and God*, 25).

of religious believers, something one's liable to forget because they attract so much attention).

On the one hand, for the atheist, the 'God question' seems to function as a proxy for the 'religion question' (in particular, that bogey known as 'socially organized religion'⁶⁶). On the other, if religion is the "opium of the masses", then surely atheism is the opium of the intellectuals. Regardless, however, of what actually motivates the committed atheist, the irony is that through intensive preoccupation with the 'God question', their intricately clever arguments end up bestowing meaning and existence precisely upon that whose meaning and existence is so doubtful for them. But it seems they just cannot leave the subject alone.

One way to deal with something which causes discomfort is to turn it into a topic of discussion, like the plethora of talk people use to tame every topic under the sun (the most obvious instance here is sex). If it can be discussed, it becomes less confronting, more manageable. Discussion thematizes and objectifies, turning the issue into an 'area of investigation'. When God becomes a topic for discussion, discomfort is transmuted into ideology, whereas other way "begins in embarrassment, and, rising from insight to insight, arrives at a vision of one transcendent Being, whom one acknowledges as a source of embarrassment".⁶⁷

In times past, the reduction of the Divine to a theme went by the name of theology. But who bothers with the latter anymore? Nowadays, to whip up a stirring evocation of the 'question of God', it seems all you need to capture the average person's attention is a quick race around the globe on the track of world religions and a smattering of comparative mythology. Throw in some pseudo-existential philosophy, along with a bit of cynical psychology for good measure, and most people will be happy with that. And for those who aren't? Well, it's

66 Strange that such people don't seem to have a problem with many other things which are "socially organized" (i.e., sport, entertainment events, tennis tournaments, etc.) That might be because, in my experience, the source of most individual greivances when it comes to religions are intimate rather than societal. Is it a coincidence that the great majority of 'lapsed Catholics' I've come across seem to have had problems with their father from their childhood? (i.e, the 'bad father' becomes 'God the Father'). Likewise, one doesn't need to be a Freudian to notice a certain correlation between strenuous rejection of the personal, monotheistic God and formative negative emotional experiences with a paternal parental figure. On the other hand, I rather suspect that for most atheists, their concern is not so much God *per se* as a peculiarly modern event: the collapse of all theodices. This collapse, an undeniable objective fact, is partly an outcome of historical events of the 20th century, and its influence on the reputation of organized religions has been immense. It is pity that the whole discussion of atheism rarely if ever delves into this. That might be due to the mostly completely a-historical character of the great majority of atheist thinkers.

67 Heschel, *The Prophets*, Volume 2, 54.

always possible to organize some debates. After all, what could be more satisfying than a stimulating clash of opinions?

In our society, there must be “interesting events and even important events”, yet at the same time, “nothing should take place that would disturb us”,⁶⁸ because that would threaten one’s precious equilibrium. The latter is crucial to the bourgeois, who seeks a life of comfort and security.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, some diversions are nice every now and then, as long as to enjoy them not too much need be risked personally. Thus individuals can keep themselves distracted with whatever happens to be the flavor of the moment. So if God can be turned into a theme for talkfests and meet-up groups, all the better, for then people have the opportunity to busy themselves with all kinds of absorbing intellectual conundrums.

“We have a fear of being nothing and a fantasy of being everything”, observes Leon Wieseltier, “but we do not see that everything is a busy version of nothing”.⁷⁰ Such energetic busyness is a sure sign of anxiety. But an anxiety about what exactly? I would suggest it’s an anxiety about *meaning*. A contemporary philosopher-psychologist⁷¹ tells us that we’re in the midst of a tremendous “meaning crisis”. In this respect, that today’s atheists expend such an inordinate amount of time and energy trying to wrestle with the ‘God-existence’ question might be less because they’ve a genuine desire to know if, in fact, God exists, and more because they’re more broadly troubled by the question of *what things mean*. Or even - horror of horrors! - if there is any meaning at all.

Again, the ‘God-existence’ question is a proxy, this time for the ‘meaning-existence’ question. For surely, the idea of God must rank as the *ne plus ultra* of all questions about meaning. Is this because, lurking in the background of the question, ‘does God exist?, is the question, ‘Does *existence* exist?’. Or, in other words, ‘does existence have any *meaning*?’. No wonder that modern atheism and

68 *Friendship*, 67.

69 Henry Kissinger, in *A World Restored*, 327, notes that a “quest for security” is fundamental to the bourgeois. Cf. also Emmanuel Levinas’s masterful symptomology: “The bourgeois admits no inner division and would be ashamed to lack confidence in himself, but he is concerned about reality and the future, for they threaten to break up the uncontested equilibrium of the present where he holds sway. He is essentially conservative but this is a worried conservatism. The bourgeois is concerned with business matters and science as a defence against things and all that is unforeseeable in them. His instinct for possession is an instinct for integration, and his imperialism is a search for security . . . He demands guarantees in the present against the future, which introduces unknowns into those solved problems from which he lives” (*On Escape*, 50).

70 *Against Identity*, section 18. It’s also part of what Martin Heidegger so aptly called the “industrious activity of mere ‘busyness’” (‘The Age of the World Picture’, in Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, 138).

71 John Vervaeke. See his 50 part series of talks on this theme available for free viewing on *Youtube*, ‘Awakening to the Meaning Crisis’.

existentialist philosophies make such cosy bedfellows. After all, the existentialist question par-excellence is ‘does *my own* existence have any meaning? And surely, if one’s own existence is doubtful, why should any credit be given to the idea that God might exist? As Nietzsche put it, “If God really did exist, how could I bear not to be God?” (here the atheist seems not to have noticed a deep irony, insofar as their egoistic preoccupation with their own salvation is merely a substitute for the old soteriological God).

Not that existentialism doesn’t contain a grain of truth. But it’s only that - a grain, something very small, which people are mostly inclined to make far too much out of. Certainly, it hardly necessitates an entire philosophy. Sure, we are undoubtedly thrown into this life and this being without much choice in the matter. That is self-evident. However, rather than thrashing about and making such a big fuss about this exigency of our ‘thrownness’ (pro-ject), perhaps we might just recognize that as human beings, we “simply appear”. In which case, we can only “make what we can of our condition with the means available. We must accept the mixture as we find it - the impurity of it, the tragedy of it, the hope of it”.⁷²

But for some, such an attitude of acceptance just won’t do. They will persist in their restless hunt for meaning, probably feeling that if only they could ‘wrap up’, once and for all, all those nagging doubts about God,⁷³ they might be closer to resolving *every* issue of meaning. In the meantime, they overlook that one is never ‘finished’ with meaning, the reason being that as soon as meaning is regarded as a *problem*, one will never come to the end of it.⁷⁴ It’s probably a safe bet that before

72 Saul Bellow, *There Is Simply Too Much to Think About*. *Collected Non-Fiction*, 117.

73 And how wonderfully this is done, for example, on a website called *The Rational Realm*. Here one finds a very helpful section where the entire ‘God existence’ question is deftly disposed of in a couple of pages, with a series of easy-to-follow arguments that reveal a most superficial kind of under-graduate knowledge of philosophy. It’s all very neat, business-like, tidy, and - dare I say it - petty-bourgeois. Indeed, the wholly ‘business-minded’ approach of the author of *The Rational Realm* shows just how anxious they are to make sure no-one should be so stupid as to waste any of their precious emotional time and energy with the question of God. How ridiculous it would be to let such a trifling matter get in the way of one’s powering to success in all areas of profession and life! After all, the “bourgeois is concerned with business matters and science as a defense against things and all that is unforeseeable in them. His instinct for possession is an instinct for integration, and his imperialism is a search for security. . . He demands guarantees in the present against the future, which introduces unknowns into those solved problems from which he lives” (Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, 50).

74 John Vervaeke explains very clearly why the meaning question tends to be endless, in terms of a ‘feedback loop’ which operates within human consciousness between attention and salience: “you can *direct* your attention to something and *make* it more salient (noticeable); and because it is then more salient, it will tend to capture your attention. And because you are then paying attention to it, it becomes even more salient and visible (to you), which means that it will be more likely to capture your attention. Do you see what is happening here? These

the modern era, no-one apart from a small coterie of theologians bothered to ask the question, ‘does God exist?’, not because back then people were stupid or unintelligent but because abstract enquiries into the ‘existence’ of something would have struck them as absurd and pointless.⁷⁵ Whereas nowadays, individuals frantically search for the meaning of existence in absolutely everything.

So the cardinal sin for the modern person is to be unconcerned as to what things mean; as for those who are quite untroubled as to whether their own existence has any meaning - well, they would be the worst offenders! Does this obsession with meaning have something to do with the contemporary compulsion to open up all things to investigation, probing, and analysis? We might see it as a typically a petty-bourgeois trait, derived from an overarching feeling of insecurity. As Francois Furet observed, the bourgeois “is a class without status, without a definite tradition, without established outlines; its title to dominate is owed to a single, fragile thing: wealth . . . In a world where no position is determined in advance or acquired in perpetuity, anxiety about the future stirs in every breast and finds no lasting relief . . . Bourgeois society is thus animated by a corpuscular agitation, constantly driving it forward”.⁷⁶

There’s also the excitement people feel when they believe they belong to the vanguard of the enlightened, a sense of being ‘in the know’, smartly up-to-date, confirmed in judgements thought to be one’s own. One then can enjoy the illusion of having seriously thought about life. For in our hyper-aware society, no-one wants to be taken for a fool. It’s necessary to justify one’s views, and certainly the meaning one ascribes to things, to appear informed as to what’s going on in the world, and to be sure (or at least, come across to others as being sure) as to what one thinks about it all.

two things feed off each other, in a self-reinforcing cycle: I pay attention to something, and it becomes more noticeable to me; it becomes more noticeable, so it captures my attention; insofar as it gains my attention, I’m much more likely to find it attractive. And it spins around and around in an endless loop, until your attention is rivetted to something, which seems super-noticeable and super-salient and highly relevant to you, and then you lose the capacity to notice anything else” (free transcription from the series, ‘Awakening from the Meaning Crisis’, Episode 4, February 9th, 2019; 43.10 mins, accessed on *YouTube*, 29/04/2022)(.

75 Cf. the following anecdote jotted down by Vasily Grossman as he followed the Red Army as a war correspondent on its march through Eastern Europe fighting the Nazi’s: “An old woman says, ‘Who knows whether God exists or not. I pray to Him. It’s not a difficult job. You give Him two or three nods, and who knows, perhaps He’ll accept you” (Vasily Grossman, *A Writer At War*, 27). What this woman recognizes is that God is an existential not a conceptual problem.

76 *The Passing of an Illusion*, 4-5.

Meaning and its Discontents

Philosophy is really homesickness. It is the urge to be at home everywhere.

Novalis⁷⁷

The ‘meaning-crisis’ sparks off a desperate yearning for who-knows-what, impelling people to chase after fads and devour copious quantities of perceptual and intellectual stimulation. This yearning might even be called a hunger, only it’s a craving for something no amount of food could possibly satiate, hunger on a *metaphysical* level. Gnawing away on the inside, people feel it as a burning pain (thus Karl Krauss writes in his essay, ‘In These Great Times’, of “the empires bereft of imagination, where man is dying of spiritual starvation while not feeling spiritual hunger”⁷⁸).

The yearning for meaning is a mighty power. It drives the wheels of the media, which is really a vast ‘meaning factory’, churning out mind-numbing quantities of images in which people see semblances of their own wishes and dreams, but distorted and manipulated in all kinds of grotesque ways. Does it matter that most of what the media-machine produces is actually rubbish? Not in the least. Since “any meaning is better than none at all”,⁷⁹ people will quite happily devour it in any shape or form, even when it verges on meaningless. To track it down, some are prepared to go, quite literally, to the ends of the earth. A good example here is the fad for ‘doing the El Camino’ - that is, walking the old Christian pilgrimage route to Santiago De Compostela.

Have the people who today flock from all parts of the world to trek hundreds of kilometres in the burning Spanish sun suddenly become good Christians? Of course not. What they’re looking for is meaning with a capital M, meaning de-historicized and de-contextualized - in other words, meaning as a sort of personal fetish. But as the hunt for meaning becomes an end-in-itself, the reality that might ground it evaporates. After all, being continually on the lookout for the novel and the surprising hardly demonstrates any genuine interest in the world. It’s more like indifference, perhaps even a *negation* of the real. Like the Delmore Schwartz

77 Quoted in Gyorgy Lukacs, *The Theory of the Novel*, 29.

78 Quoted in Manfredo Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, 274. Krauss probably had in mind the following passage of the Bible, from Amos, 8:11 - “Behold days are coming . . . when I will send a hunger into the Land; not a hunger for bread or a thirst for water but for hearing the words of the Lord” (on this passage see also the Midrash of *Genesis Rabbah*, chapter 25, section 3).

79 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, 162.

character who was always “moving forward to fresh arenas of frenzied activity”,⁸⁰ the restless hunt for meaning is indicative of a mentality: perpetually on the move, dissatisfied at every turn, continually looking for something to give life direction, worth and value.

Yet in case you are tempted to feel sorry for a person whose search for meaning leaves them perennially ‘homeless’, it’s worthwhile recognizing that their own, restless mental economy is to blame for all their privations.⁸¹ What sustains them is precisely a compulsion to negate every fixed relation and every life circumstance which might potentially turn into a situation of responsibility or commitment.⁸² Insofar as the search for meaning takes shape as a consciously-willed negation of everything which exists, it creates a homelessness that is not contingent but transcendental. Only this is a false transcendence. The compulsion to search (and that means to negate) is what must be resisted. *We already are where we must be.* Reality, that which we want to know, is self-evident. Hence the subtitle of this essay: a *phenomenology* of the human.

The word phenomenology comes from the Greek *phainomai*, meaning how things appear, and *logos*, logic. A phenomenology is a logic of appearances, a form of description; Emmanuel Levinas summarizes the basic method as a way of “approaching an idea by asserting the concreteness of the situation in which it originally assumes meaning”.⁸³ Reality is coherent when we’re attentive to the *manner* in which we ourselves concretely experience things.⁸⁴ A phenomenology of the human would thereby be an investigation of what it means to exist as a human being *through recognizing exactly how our own existence appears and makes sense to us* - that is, as we apprehend it in the midst of “the quiet, pure, inoffensive fact”⁸⁵ of our own being.

80 ‘New Years Eve’, from the collection, *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities and Other Stories*, 106.

81 It is important to underline this willed element. For again, in Nietzschean terms, the will to negate, this desire for the nothing, is the foremost expression of a consciousness that would “rather will *nothingness* than not will” (*The Genealogy of Morals*, 163).

82 In fact, experiencing a feeling of homelessness, of disconnection, is the only way such a person is able to feel ‘at home’.

83 Robbins [ed.], *Is it Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, 204.

84 Phenomenology is a “systematic discussion of what appears”. This definition is from Henri Frankfort’s illuminating study of ancient concepts of kingship and the divine in Egypt and Mesopotamia, *Kingship and the Gods*, x.

85 Emmanuel Levinas, *Unforeseen History*, 68. To this extent that, as Levinas explains in his primer on Husserlian Phenomenology, “we study the way things manifest themselves”, this is because “the only existence of which we can reasonably speak is the existence that reveals itself to consciousness and that is grasped in consciousness exactly in its ways of revealing itself” (ibid, 34).

Reason and Intelligence

As soon as thought exits from the illusory world of the purely thinkable . . . then it is plain that every thought and all knowledge are inseparable from the life of language

Massimo Cacciari⁸⁶

Joseph finds that philosophy is often refuted by life, which is full of contradictions and cannot be separated from them by any approach, though it doesn't entirely rest in these contradictions, even if it cannot be free from them

H. G. Adler⁸⁷

As the appearing of what appears, reality is self-evident. It requires us neither to seek nor to think. Rather, we are called upon to give our attention to what which is concretely happening, right in front of us, since it's in such attentiveness to the immediate and the concrete that "all true comprehension takes place and through which every object must be grasped if it is to have any sense".⁸⁸ That's why this essay is not a work of 'philosophy'. Philosophical analysis proceeds by assimilating everything which exists to a method of thought, whereas what I'm concerned with "has no need of thinking in order to be".⁸⁹

When someone tries to *think* their way into reality, they interpose themselves as a 'subject' between their experience of a thing and the thing itself. But as Levinas points out, the drawback with this approach is that it misses how, in fact, it is "the relation to the object that is the primitive phenomenon".⁹⁰ In short, if we truly wish to *get in contact with things*, it's important not to make our 'going towards' an object into "a problem"⁹¹ (that is, into our primary concern). This might seem like a subtle distinction, however it's crucial.

There are plenty of people who are so enmeshed in 'managing' their own gigantic and unruly subjectivity that they never encounter anything. Again, we might see this as a petty-bourgeois trait, of those who are overly (intellectually)

86 *Europe and Empire*, 51.

87 *Panorama. A Novel*, 435.

88 Levinas, *Unforseen History*, 59.

89 Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption* (Galli trans.), 27.

90 Levinas, *Unforseen History*, 36. This 'going towards' the object on the part of a subject has always preoccupied philosophical enquiry in all its many different schools (i.e., Empiricism, Objectivism, Idealism, etc.) since ancient times.

91 *Ibid.*.

self-conscious, who in keeping themselves busy carefully tracking each and every ‘impingement’ upon their experience, fail to actually engage with whatever it is they’re experiencing.⁹² That occurs when people ‘overthink’ things. Then they’re liable to miss what’s concretely real and present to their own experience - that is, to not see that which is happening right in front of them, this ‘happening’ of something being precisely what is meant by *revelation*.⁹³

As an *event*, revelation breaks into and disrupts the serene flow of history, taking the person unawares, shaking them out of their torpor. Unfortunately, however, such a disruption is something the atheist - and in this respect, they are the petty-bourgeois par excellence⁹⁴ - is unlikely to ever experience. Nothing can disturb their sleepwalking existence, and certainly not a realization as to how surprisingly anachronistic is the terrible, stultifying question - ‘do you believe?’ - that sparked off their long, incorrigible and pointless ‘journey’. For as Franz Rosenzweig observed, the modern person is “neither a believer nor an unbeliever. He believes and he doubts. And so he is nothing, but he is alive. Better: he has neither belief nor unbelief, but both belief and unbelief *happen* to him. His only obligation is not to run away from what happens, and, once it has happened, to pay it heed”.⁹⁵

My focus in this essay, then, is precisely all those things which, as soon as they’re seen as a ‘problem’ or a subject for thinking, are rendered arcane and inaccessible. So if God, love, and existence are not at all difficult to understand, it’s because, insofar as they are already inserted “into conscious life, into the individuality and indivisibility of our concrete existence”⁹⁶, we instinctively know what they mean, since as part of reality, they’re *always* happening, around us, *at every moment*, if only we could just wake up and notice them.⁹⁷

92 Indeed, the very term - ‘impingement’ - indicates that what is at issue here for such a person is not the content of what they engage with so much as a defensive reaction to something they perceive as threatening to disturb the equanimity of the ego.

93 To be sure, revelation is not *something* which happens; rather, it is *very happening* of what happens.

94 In the sense that the bourgeois, as Emmanuel Levinas put it, is a creature of comfort and familiarity, whose repose is the equanimity of a “being founded in itself, in its identity as an ego”, who never wants to be disturbed, who is “at home with himself behind closed doors, rejecting the outside that negates him” (Levinas, *Basic Writings*, 165).

95 Rosenzweig, ‘Scripture and Luther’, in Glatzer, *Franz Rosenzweig*, 257 (italics in original).

96 *Ibid.*, 58.

97 “The dangers are not to be underestimated, but as long as it exists, a person should not doubt that the present is a continual source of renewal. In this sense, memory is of no use, no matter how good and helpful it can be, but the present is something else, it being full of surprise and the unforeseeable, such that one should even dispense with any notion of free will, the desire for a view of the future that reveals all being unacceptable, Joseph searching for the right words and finding, yes, this desire is in fact destructive and debilitating, although he cannot deny that the horrible present circumstances prod each of us, day in, day out, to

Don't misunderstand me. I'm not against thinking. It's just that the latter is often far more thoughtless than we're led to believe. Indeed, even the most scrupulously rigorous kind of thought can be quite unsystematic. We know this from the accounts by famous modern scientists of their working methods. It's often by taking an oblique path that momentous discoveries are made. Moreover, the links between intellect and imagination are complex and not easy to describe.⁹⁸ In a perceptive reading of the films of French director, Robert Bresson, Raymond Durnat suggests that cognition is far more bound up with the contingency of the lived moment than most people would care to admit:

Thoughts often strike us, like a physical jolt, but we're not so sure what the specific message is. Or we feel a broad splash of emotion, plus a mish-mash of half-ideas, as a whole network of association fires off. Or a mood poleaxes us, for no reason we're aware of . . . This applies even to the so-called conscious mind. It's 'stream of consciousness' is typically chaotic, irrational, even absurd. So much so that ninety-five percent of the time we ignore it for a much narrower kind of 'conscious thought' - the 'systematic' thinking that follows the decision, or attempt, to think about something. Such thinking is usually rational, in a very loose sense, but it's rarely tightly logical. It's a fairly directed use of some of our consciousness. Insofar as it's learned, it's artificial, but it's not unnatural.⁹⁹

I think that what Durnat has in mind is a non-abstract type of thought, intimately linked to how things seem and appear, which rides the waves of appearance, making itself home in the world of concrete experience. Relevant here is a distinction Michael Wyschogrod makes between *reason* and *intelligence*. Whereas "reason is a philosophical construct with definite theoretical implications", Wyschogrod suggests that intelligence is more a "working endowment rather than a theory and can be active in the absence of a philosophical theory about the rationality of the universe and the structure of the mind".¹⁰⁰

conjure up such a wish, at which Simon asks him, 'Do you have any hope, Joseph?'. No, not hope, that's not what he'd call it, but instead a readiness to accept whatever might happen, it's probably life itself that we should accept at any moment without fear" (H. G. Adler, *Panorama. A Novel*, 350-1).

98 On this relationship between intellect and imagination, see the beautiful, rigorous and insightful treatments in Jacob Bronowski, *The Visionary Eye: Essays in the Arts, Literature, and Science*.

99 'The Negative Vision of Robert Bresson', *Robert Bresson*, 444.

100 *The Body of Faith*, 5.

Wychozrod characterizes intelligence as “a quality of brightness that enables all normal human beings to some extent, and some to an extraordinary extent, to grasp relations and implications in complex situations”.¹⁰¹ In this respect, enmeshed in life, intelligence follows the cues provided by actual existence;¹⁰² if it seeks direction from “the individual, the immediate, the concrete”, this comes from a realization that such “profane attention”¹⁰³ contains “the very atmosphere of comprehension”.¹⁰⁴ Not that this relieves us of the need for rigour. The path of intelligence is no easy ride. Exactly insofar as it’s committed to engaging with the complexity and ambiguity of real situations, intelligent intellect must be more exacting and adaptable than the highly-informed ignorance of the educated.¹⁰⁵

The issue with intellect, narrowly conceived, is that it’s liable to miss the nuance and singularity of actual experience, partly because it has a tendency to become smug and conceited.¹⁰⁶ Intelligence, on other hand, is never satisfied with itself. This sense of dissatisfaction gives rise to an outward-moving impulse, a characteristic *yearning for something more* - in particular, for that which a person is *unable to supply from within themselves*. Such a yearning would be scandalous, however, to the bourgeois, since the notion they might lack something would be intolerable for them.¹⁰⁷ In this respect, the bourgeois is “at home with himself behind closed doors, rejecting the outside that negates him”,¹⁰⁸ whilst their repose is the equanimity of a “being founded in itself, in its identity as an ego”.¹⁰⁹ Whereas the excellence of intelligence is precisely that it’s committed to the world despite never feeling completely at home in it. Capable of tolerating dissatisfaction, never satisfied with what it knows, intelligence always has doubts as to its comprehension of things.

101 Ibid.

102 This was Franz Rosenzweig’s approach in his masterwork, *The Star of Redemption*.

103 The term is Robert Musil’s.

104 *Unforseen History*, 60. Thus “the immediate, the individual, and the human [is] the sphere where all true comprehension takes place and through which every object must be grasped” (ibid., 59).

105 To this extent, it’s remarkable how much intellect “can be invested in ignorance” (Saul Bellow, *To Jerusalem and Back. A Personal Account*, 162).

106 Here I’m thinking, again, of that website, *The Rational Realm*.

107 As Emmanuel Levinas makes clear, this is because the “bourgeois admits no inner division and would be ashamed to lack confidence in himself” (*On Escape*, 50).

108 Levinas, *Basic Writings*, 165.

109 Ibid..

Are We Obsolete?

Being prepared to admit one's own understanding might be imperfect means recognizing all human knowledge is *fallible*,¹¹⁰ that one may have failed to comprehend something. In its turn, acknowledging failure entails admitting one doesn't have a handle on everything. No-one is self-sufficient. Nor can perfection be a goal.¹¹¹ Whereas because of its tendency to become trapped in the "illusory world of the purely thinkable",¹¹² reason is liable to believe everything it does is perfect from the start. In which case, nothing more need be asked. Then thought comes to a full-stop with itself. Whilst for intelligence, such a terminus does not exist, since it's aware that reality is something which constantly exceeds the powers of thought, that reality, like revelation itself, is what "challenges us and strikes us".¹¹³

Unlike the self-satisfied intellectuality of reason, genuine intelligence is unable to say, 'okay, I'm finished thinking about that particular problem. I have worked it all out, laid out the proofs for all to see on my website. No more needs to be done. Case closed'. Rather, it recognizes that any act of thought is "always tentative, partial, incomplete, subject to correction by life processes that no theory can forecast but only follow".¹¹⁴ In effect, a person committed to an intelligent life is continually asking themselves, 'but do all the arguments and "proofs" I've outlined really get to the bottom of the problem, of the experience I'm trying to understand? Does my thinking actually make sense of things, not just in terms of what I'm able to work out in a manner that is objectively and rationally coherent, but as the reality I concretely experience, and as others might concretely experience it?'.¹¹⁵

In *The German Ideology*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels observed that for "philosophers, one of the most difficult tasks is to descend from the world of thought to the actual world".¹¹⁶ But then, what precisely can bridge between our thinking and reality? Language can, because the word is "the immediate actuality of thought",¹¹⁷ the true medium and life-blood of intelligence.¹¹⁷ Even so, the

110 The great philosopher of science, Karl Popper, wrote a great deal about knowledge and fallibility, especially in relation to authoritarian political regimes.

111 Michael Wyschogrod suggests that an ability to live with failure is the first step on the road to genuine spirituality. See *The Body of Faith*, 14-16.

112 Cacciari, *Europe and Empire*, 51.

113 *Ibid.*, 52.

114 Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith*, 33.

115 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, 118.

116 *Ibid.*, 118.

117 Of course, words are not the only medium in which a person may communicate to others what they see. They may, for example, choose to express themselves in the form of music or

correspondence between language and thinking is by no means simple or mechanical. Words are more than merely an instrument to express our thoughts; and certainly, they are never just a means of passing on ideas or information to others.

Words belong in the world, just as our thoughts belong in the world.¹¹⁸ Yet the word is not reducible to the world, for even as they exist along with everything else in the world, words *have their own life*.¹¹⁹ In this respect, from out of this life which they are, they want to tell us something. If only we could allow words to speak, rather than always imposing a meaning upon them, we might learn a lot. For one thing, unlike pure reason, words are never definitive; they do not supply us with logical axioms, nor should we expect them to. What we *can* expect from the word is a certain responsiveness to the “complexity of relations, and therefore to distinctions and to the inherent ambiguity of the human situation”.¹²⁰

From this comes a realization that there is no ‘final sense’. Yet even if words are never definitive in logical terms, they *are* able to serve as a guide, leading us along the paths of life. Indeed, words are “unable to do anything but lead . . . but not to the end, to the goal”. Rather, they lead us “from chance to chance, from event to event”.¹²¹ However, they’ll only be able to lead in this way if *we ourselves* are open to the guidance they offer. It is then that one discovers the marvel of words, and their unique promise, which is that when we move in their company, we discover what is real - or again, as Saul Bellow put it, what is “fundamental, enduring, essential”.¹²²

Let us now return to that troublesome word, God. Over all the many ages of humankind, so many people have said so many things when it comes to this ‘God word’. Yet how much of this ceaseless chatter allows the word to tell its own story? Every new exposition on the subject appearing in the media or in on-line chat groups wants to be definitive. Finally, so we’re led to believe, the question will be settled, once and for all. And what a relief that would be! Yes, everyone wants to

art. But the particular media through which a person chooses to express themselves is not innocent and carries with it certain important implications.

118 “neither thoughts nor language in themselves form a realm of their own . . . they are only *manifestations* of actual life” (Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 118; italics in original).

119 The notion of language *as a form of life* was common to many early 19th century European historians, writers and philosophers, such as Herder and Schlegel, and more generally the thought of the Romantic movement.

120 Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith*, 7.

121 Cacciari, *Posthumous People*, 19. As Cacciari puts it, the word leads us *irgendwohin*-to “some place”, a ‘somewhere’ that is always occluded, however, when we try to reduce language to concepts.

122 Saul Bellow, *There is Simply Too Much to Think About*, 300.

solve the problem for themselves, and so they should. But it seems that none of this is truly satisfying.

Is this because such things are never settled by debates? Or is the 'God-question' really the unconscious reflex of a certain collective anxiety in relation to a question which, it seems, just won't go away? Or perhaps it's because we live in what might be called an 'eschatological' age. Thus for the contemporary person, whole worlds have become light as Ping-Pong balls. At lunch or over coffee we talk about good and evil, death and immortality; over cocktails, we solve all the problems of the universe. Metaphysical questions are raised as if the world, like the wine in our bottles, might be empty by dinnertime. As a result, a lot of things have been called *obsolete*.

For instance, in Stalin's way of thinking, the Kulaks were obsolete, whilst for Hitler, all the various breeds of inferior human beings. In certain academic and critical circles, we often hear it said that a particular kind of imagination - maybe even the human being themselves? - is obsolete. And we all know how frequently God has been called obsolete. I don't mean to deny there are certain things which are genuinely no longer relevant. I just wish to indicate that the notion of obsolescence, derived from modern evolutionary thought, has a place of some importance in the history of modern tyranny - in particular, that tyranny which either insists on finding a meaning in everything, or, to the extent that it's definitively established something does not have any meaning, insofar as the 'objective conditions' necessary for its existence are gone, can then readily and efficiently dispose of it.

Simone Weil once said that "to believe in the existence of human beings *as such* is love". Perhaps this is the only thing that makes any difference. For of course, it's always possible, all-too-possible, when one has read yet another wildly convincing 'theory of everything', yet another nihilistic diagnosis of the death of God, or money, or genuine affection, to just say, 'Well, so what? What do I care? No-one anyway really cares'. It's too often like that. However, I'd suggest that this caring or believing or love, whatever you want to call it, is alone what matters, whilst everything else - obsolescence, historical themes, orthodoxies and anti-orthodoxies, agreed views of the universe - is really non-sense and trash.

Metaphor and Infinity

*We are joined together
by all the words,
whose desire we are*

Edmond Jabes

And yet, through all of this, the atheist obstinately sticks to their question: ‘does God exist?’. To get out of this dead-end, it might be useful to try a little thought-experiment. Would it make any sense to ask, for instance, if King Lear exists? (I mean the character in Shakespeare’s play of the same name). Of course not. And this is because the figure of Lear is a *metaphor*; that is, he represents an aspect of the human condition. Understanding this, no-one in their right mind would then try to prove or disprove Lear’s ‘existence’. Whether or not Lear actually existed as a real person has no relevance whatsoever to our ability to find meaning in the play. But if Lear is a metaphor, might we say the same for God?

God is a metaphor.¹²³ But a metaphor of what exactly? As with *King Lear*, the human condition? Metaphor, comes from the Greek, *metaphora*, meaning to ‘transfer’ or ‘bridge across’. A metaphor transfers (or transports) from something we understand to something we don’t, but also the other way: from incomprehension to comprehension. Alternatively, we might understand the metaphor as a *transfer of attributes*. But whichever the sense one chooses to focus on, the point, as Jacob Bronowski explains, is that a metaphor “links the different fields of our experience and seek[s] out the likenesses between them”.¹²⁴

So by using a metaphor, a person is “joining one area of experience to another, illuminating and enriching each with each”.¹²⁵ In this respect, Bronowski - who was, by the way, both a professional mathematician and a poet - stresses that metaphors are not just devices of poetic and literary language. Rather, they show more generally how our minds work - in particular, the human faculty of *imagination*. On these terms, metaphors are intrinsic to and the basis of intellectual activity of every sort. In fact, Bronowski goes so far as to argue that they’re as relevant to scientific work as to poetry. For before the scientist will even be able to formulate a scientific hypothesis, they must first use their imagination to make connections between unlike phenomena.

123 In his masterwork, *The Star of Redemption*, Franz Rosenzweig describes God in precisely these terms: “What might be before the beginning, that vitality of God in itself . . . we could describe only by comparison, only as a metaphor” (Galli trans., 405).

124 *The Visionary Eye*, 15.

125 *Ibid.*.

But what has all of this got to do with God? At the start of this essay, I ventured to suggest that to exist as a person is to exist as an infinite depth. As long as one doesn't take it too literally, this notion of limitless interiority offers a way of understanding something about the mystery of personal being; that is, it provides an insight, metaphorical to be sure, as to what it means to be human. On the other hand, in the Hebrew Bible, man is said to be created "in the image and likeness of God". Now if likeness is another word for metaphor, this would then suggest that *the human is a metaphor of God*. But doesn't this precisely invert things? We wanted to know something about God, and now it appears that we ourselves are 'likenesses' of God!

One is inclined to dismiss such a suggestion. Isn't it yet another case of 'projection'? I mean that notion beloved of educated idiots who like the trite sayings one finds in the wrappers of fortune cookies - such as that all our metaphysical notions are 'human inventions'. But then, isn't this precisely the way of the metaphor? By joining, linking and drawing connections between unlike things, it often leads us to surprising places, and then beyond. On the one hand, a personal being is an infinite interiority. On the other, a long-standing theological 'figure' in the Western tradition refers to God as "infinite being". In which case, given that man is created in the image of God, might we not view the 'infinite' of God as a *metaphor* for the 'infinite' interiority of a person? But is such an attribute really 'transferrable'?

We don't need to be too literal about this. I'm not suggesting we have somehow directly 'inherited' a substantive quality from the Divine (in any case, God is no substance). Let us, rather, stay close to the sense of what the metaphor is: firstly, a *linguistic* category, and secondly, a form of language that is unique and particular to human beings (since, again, that whilst all living creatures can transmit information using a variety of forms of non-verbal communication, only humans use metaphorical language). If no other living being is able to communicate in metaphors, one reason for this is only humans can think *imaginatively* - that is, by using symbols to represent things and worldly situations (again, science and art are essentially alike in this respect, as Bronowski makes clear¹²⁶).

Even so, this capacity we have for metaphorical communication would not amount to very much unless there were something about words that make them

126 "Many people believe that reasoning, and therefore science, is a different activity from imagining. But this is a fallacy, and you must root it out your mind. . . Reasoning is constructed with movable images just as certainly as poetry is. You may have been told, you may still have the feeling, that $E = mc^2$, is not an imaginative statement. If so, you are mistaken. The symbols in that master equation of the 20th century - E for energy, m for mass, and c for the speed of light - are images for absent things or concepts of exactly the same kind as the words, 'tree' or 'love' in a poem" (*The Visionary Eye*, 21).

fundamental to our being human. That is to say, if it's indeed the case that our interiority - which, as I've suggested, is what we *are* as personal beings - is constituted as *language*, it makes perfect sense that the metaphor is able to function as a kind of 'lightning rod' or conductor for this infinite depth which is the essence of our being, connecting us to other beings likewise constituted, and also to God.

Maybe this is why people keep returning, again and again, over the centuries, to Shakespeare's play, *King Lear*, simply because not only the character of Lear himself but the play as whole is a powerful metaphor containing an *infinite depth of significance*, an inexhaustibly rich exploration of what it means to be a human being.¹²⁷ That might be all good and fine, but then what of those who just shrug and say, 'well, I really don't see *anything at all* in Shakespeare's *King Lear* - or for that matter, in any work of literature - let alone some kind of infinite depth of significance'. Sadly, not much can be done for someone who thinks like that. Yet why should this be a problem? After all, does it really matter that some people have no taste for literature? Not in itself. However, if one understands literature as but a species of imaginative life, and if imagination is basic to existing as a human being - as basic, in fact, as food, shelter, a sense of warmth, etc. - then those who think they are able to exist without the imaginative life are fooling themselves. Perhaps their imaginative needs are met in other, sublimated ways, but they're still there.

Even so, what would it mean if someone cannot come to terms, consciously, with what imagination demands? What if they are unable to get into contact with their own imaginative capabilities? Because the latter relies upon and draws upon that infinite depth of interiority which is our humanity, such a person will also quite likely have difficulty recognizing the existence of this infinite depth within themselves. At the same time, however, not recognizing it within, they will also probably not be able recognize it in others. But in that case, they most likely will also find it difficult to see that they themselves, just like every other person, is a being of *infinite importance and worth*. And from here, from this blindness to such a basic trait of our humanity - that is, the *fact of the inner life* - there's not such a long way to travel before one ends up at Auschwitz.

127 Here I'm thinking of Harold Bloom's study, *Shakespeare and the Invention of the Human*.

Bridging Over an Abyss

speech is truly humankind's morning gift from the Creator, and yet at the same time it is the common property of all the children of humanity, in which each has their particular share; and, finally, it is the seal of humanity in each and every individual person

Franz Rosenzweig¹²⁸

Let us assume, however, that there *do* exist individuals who possess a sensitivity to the dimension of personal interiority. Then exactly as such individuals feel within themselves an infinite depth of interiority, they're also liable to feel a sort of infinitude 'at work', as it were, in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Thanks to the metaphor and its capacity to 'transfer', they will recognize in Shakespeare's play - but really, it could be *any* work which is born of the imaginative spirit - a *semblance* of that infinite depth which is their own personal being.

This might be the right moment to get back to the admittedly contentious sounding proposition I introduced in the previous section: that God is a metaphor. Again, I want to emphasize I'm not talking about metaphor as a linguistic device particularly to certain kinds of literary works. Literary critics will often say that such-and-such a word in a certain writers' oeuvre functions as a metaphor of a certain idea or theme. God, however, is not metaphor *of* something. Rather, *God is himself metaphor*. And if, as we've seen, the metaphor 'transfers', then given God is not *a* metaphor but *is* metaphor, we might say that *God is that which effects transferal*. Or, putting it slightly differently: *God is the very event of transferring*.

But again, it could well be asked: *what exactly* is being transferred by way of this metaphorical being of God? Or, if you like - what does God, as metaphor, actually transfer? The answer is: *we ourselves*. So whenever there is God, for the individual human being there is always some kind of 'transfer' going on. But if it is we who, situated with respect to God, are transferred - shifted, moved, transported - *from* where *to* where are we transferred? From one space of being human to another, from one space or sphere of human experience to another, from one encounter to another.

For this, I would suggest, is precisely what goes on in all human encountering: I speak, and a word flies from me to another, from person to person, so that the lively 'to-and-fro' of this 'transfer' and movement of words becomes the measure and articulation of our human interaction, both at its most superficial and most profound. Thus we are transferred in the medium of speech, which transports or

128 *The Star of Redemption* (Hallo transl.), 110.

carries not only a meaning or a signification but the *entire sense of who and what we are as unique, personal beings* (hence Adriana Cavavero's definition of speech quoted earlier: "the self-revelation of speakers who express and communicate their uniqueness through speaking - no matter the specific content of what is said"¹²⁹).

And yet, we can find still more in the metaphor. For aside from *transfer*, the word also has the sense of *carrying a burden* over or across (for instance, a mountain range or an abyss). Yet what precisely is this burden? The burden of *meaning*. And when it comes to God, how very onerous a burden it is! Hasn't humankind struggled with it for an eternity? For instance, it is implicit in the *new name* which Jacob receives - 'Israel' - after his all-night struggle with the Angel, this name being henceforth the name of the Jewish People as a whole (a name which means in Hebrew, significantly enough, "they who struggle with God"). And so, this burden, this arduous struggle, must indeed be carried a *very long way*, both existentially and concretely, over all kinds of rocky and difficult terrain, if we are to become human.¹³⁰

Consider, now, what all this adds up to: firstly, God is a metaphor; then metaphor as that which transfers, bridges between things, and also *carries across*; finally, a metaphor is quite simply an element of human speech, a word, yet also the most human of words, since no other living creature speaks in metaphors. In effect, then, to say that God is metaphor is to recognize that God embodies something particular to words, what we might call their *transferential power*. In the word is a capacity to connect, to displace, to make contact, to separate, to bring together and hold apart, and all of this in the space of human life, and which *makes* our experience of life human.

So if only we could recognize how central to this human living of ours is the spoken word, we might also see that God is *always already part of the actuality of our human experience*. We can go yet further. For if God is metaphor - and here I draw upon a Jewish understanding of things, as this is what is closest to me - since God cannot be *approached*, this metaphor, which is what God *is*, this metaphor which is transferal and 'carrying across', is necessarily a *bridge over an abyss*. But haven't we already encountered something like this miraculous leap in the course of this discussion? What else transfers in this sense - that is, joins without linking, relates without itself entering into relation, so as to be the very medium and spirit of any kind of relationship? A spoken word.

129 Adriana Caverero, *For More than One Voice. Towards a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, 190.

130 In this sense, we might say that the historical saga of the Jewish People is the becoming human of humanity, at least in its messianic aspect.

We've already seen how speech has a remarkable capacity to connect across an unbridgeable gulf, *to connect without connecting*. Could it be, then, that it is this "specifically human faculty of connectedness as lack"¹³¹ which is the vital clue as to how God might be significant for life? Again, I refer to the Jewish view, for which there can be no contact with God in the form of that comprehension given by concepts or conceptual understanding.¹³² With any kind of human knowing, the mind *enters into* things. However, if God cannot even be approached by our concepts, let alone entered, there could be no knowledge of God as such. And if there's no knowledge, then likewise there is no *logos*, and thus no theology. In which case, what could possibly be left? Not *knowing* but *experiencing*.

One's liable to believe that experience is something rather trivial. Isn't it more important to *know* something? In this sense, are we not right to think of philosophy in the classical sense of the term, *theoria*, as the highest vocation of the human being? Yet perhaps experience only strikes us as trivial because the inheritance of modernity essentially consists of an utter and thoroughgoing "Destruction of Experience".¹³³ Here I'm not referring to those who wish for 'better times', for a period of human history when experience, enshrined in fixed, stable forms, could teach us enduring 'lessons about life'. Such notions are only ever myths, and as such, are as evanescent as the nostalgia which gave birth to them.

We need to see past the false eternities which the destruction of experience itself creates; to see, in short, that there is actually something to experience, something that we've failed to recognize. For if we've become blind to experience, unable to take it seriously, maybe it's because we have *too much of it*, such that, through this 'too much, it becomes 'as nothing'. The nihilistic 'as nothing' of experience perhaps comes from wanting experience to be *everything*. Whereas experience is never everything; it is always only *something*, a something which people are tempted to reduce to *nothing*, probably through a sense of frustration that one can never completely grasp or hang onto experience. And the reason one cannot hang onto it is that it's an *event* (like speech itself).

So if there really is something between God and the human, it will be not so much a *knowing* or a *wisdom* as the chance event of a *meeting*. For a meeting is precisely something I experience. Can I know whatever it is that I experience? Only in retrospect. Indeed, those who want to know too much about that which

131 Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History*, 7.

132 In this way, the Jewish relation to God entails maintaining a relation "to that which excludes all relation: the infinitely Distant, the absolutely Foreign" (Sarah Kofman, *Smothered Words*, 34).

133 On this theme, see Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History. Essays on the Destruction of Experience*.

they experience are likely to miss out on it entirely, precisely because they're too busy trying to master the happening of what happens with their knowledge, their *theoria*.¹³⁴ So by the time they've gotten a handle on the event, it has already passed them by.

Experience as Event and as Encounter (Speech and Human Singularity)

*for hundreds of thousands of years, language
has constituted humankind*

Francois Dominique¹³⁵

This, then, is what we've come to: the human experience of God concerns "meetings between God and man".¹³⁶ And, as is the case in any inter-human situation, this will be a meeting of two immensities, two infinities, since the human is, in their interiority, as infinite as God.¹³⁷ Here again, also, encounter and meeting correlate with the notion of God as metaphor or transfer. For the important thing about an encounter is that it is transitive. Because an encounter *happens*, it is evanescent, something we cannot take possession of or control. Essential here is the fact that the beings who encounter each other remain *separate*; they do not merge, otherwise there would be not so much *meeting* as *fusion*.

And so, as an *advent*, encounter occurs 'between' beings whose separateness is maintained and preserved through the encounter. We might almost say that an encounter *is this 'between'*. On these terms, in this meeting of God and humans, God is not *what* or *who* we meet. Is God *in* the event of meeting? Is he one of its participants? But this is not a colloquium or a counselling session. Does it make sense to speak of God as 'participating' in something? If the meeting is an event, maybe *God himself is this event*? But perhaps the most we can say is that there is encounter, and that God is a *presence* in relation to this event of encounter, of meeting.

Still, it might be asked: how exactly is such meeting or encounter, this experience and happening of a 'between', to occur? Once again I refer to the Judaic conception, for which the relation to God is never some kind of mystical merging;

134 Just as 'Cognition of the All' has been the overriding preoccupation of all philosophy, from Thales to Wittgenstein.

135 In Daniel Dobbels, *On Robert Antelme's The Human Race. Essays and Commentary*, 168.

136 Franz Rosenzweig, 'A Note on Anthropomorphisms in Response to the *Encyclopaedia Judaica's* Article', in Rosenzweig, *God, Man, and the World. Lectures and Essays*, 138.

137 Hence a famous remark in the Talmud, which says that each and every individual human being is like an entire world, so that the who kills another person has, in effect, destroyed a whole world.

we Jews quite happily leave that to mythological religions. For us, the primary reality when it comes to the Divine is neither epistemological, metaphysical, nor ontological but linguistic.¹³⁸ Thus the format of the link between the person and God is essentially same as that between one person and another: a spoken word.¹³⁹

Moreover, the fact that the human-God encounter, as for the inter-human itself, involves language indicates that we're dealing with *communication*. The latter, however, is not merely a transfer of information. Rather, such human-divine 'meetings' and 'encounters' draw attention to that feature which makes language human. This feature has two aspects. The first is immediacy and *directness*. Whenever there is an encounter or a meeting, something is *present* to me, in the sense that meeting or encounter is always *of the moment*, and *in the moment*.¹⁴⁰ And the foremost locale of such present-moment existence is speech. As Rosenzweig observed, "what is present, be it human beings or God, cannot be spoken of in the third person; they can only be listened to and addressed".¹⁴¹

Hence the moment-ousness of a spoken word: it is really the essence of all present-moment experience, just as one can only be alive in a human sense in the present. Walter Benjamin's friend, Gershom Scholem, stated it succinctly: "There is no time in the living sense other than the present".¹⁴² The past and the future are not places of human life, modalities of actual existence. A person who wants to live in the past is lost in their memories; a person who lives in the future lives in the anticipatory anxiety of something that might never be. In both cases, they miss out on that which is of fundamental importance for human existence. I don't mean enjoying 'hear-and-now' material pleasures; I mean encountering real, living human beings. For one cannot be human without such encounters. And there is no

138 As the *Talmud* puts it, God speaks "in human language"; likewise, as Edmond Jabes remarks to Marcel Cohen, for the Jew, "God is invisible and . . . His Word is the only possible link with Him" (*From the Desert to the Book*, 73).

139 In this respect, it's no accident that in the Hebrew Bible, creation is not pictured in mythological-cosmological-ontological terms, as some kind of 'production' or 'fabrication'. Rather, God creates things by *speaking*, in the form of the *decree* (i.e., "Let there be . . .", etc.). The latter is unique to Biblical religion, insofar as non-Biblical or mythological religions tend to think of creation as some kind of *fatum*. Whereas the concept of decree carries with it the sense of a *choice* - that is, a determination or a judgement which is specific, personal and 'deliberative' (in the juridical sense). The biblical account of the nature of being is thus not about an *is* but an *ought*. In this sense, the entire framework of Biblical religion is oriented towards justice rather than ontology, towards an idea about how humans beings might live in the world as personal beings who bear an unevadable responsibility for each other.

140 As Edmond Jabes put it, "We can live only in the event's reverberation. We cannot live in a frozen moment - we would be dead" (*From the Desert to the Book*, 41).

141 Rosenzweig, 'The New Thinking', Rosenzweig, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 125. Thus whilst Creation is eternal, Revelation is 'of the moment'.

142 'Franz Rosenzweig and His Book *The Star of Redemption*', in Mendes-Flohr, *The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig*, 37.

way to experience such encounters except by living in the present - that is, by being *personally* present to whatever is happening right in the midst of life's unfolding.¹⁴³

The second aspect of the human character of language concerns an attribute that we might call personal singularity. It is the latter which the spoken word upholds, preserves and protects. In this sense, one might say that we only exist as personal, individual human beings when and insofar as we speak.¹⁴⁴ Thus Philippe Nemo points out that there "is no meaning" in language when one merely "objectivizes words as simple media of communication between two subjects in the world".¹⁴⁵ In short the meaning which is of issue in human-to-human or human-divine communication is not much *psychological* as *spiritually personal*.¹⁴⁶ Hence it is only when the communication is "for a soul, torn between good and evil and floating before the engaged commitment, that there is, or there is not, a meaning in a sign".¹⁴⁷

But what does this "meaning in a sign" actually designate? An "engaged commitment" - that is, a commitment to be *responsible for the other*, and in particular, to be responsible *for the other's existence*. Yet how could I possibly be responsible for another person's existence? After all, I did not bring them into being. In one sense, then, I cannot be responsible for another's existence. But in another sense, perhaps I can. For a word spoken to another is able to do two things: it can *negate* or *affirm* the other's existence. So I have a choice. With a word, I can affirm or I can deny, I can *give life* or I can *kill* (as the Book of Proverbs puts it, "Life and death are in the power of the tongue"¹⁴⁸).

143 We can understand this exigency in Biblical terms. Thus the past is *Creation*, the Future is *Redemption*. Yet neither of these modalities has any reality without a mid-term, this being the temporal present, the being-in-the-moment of *Revelation*. And for the Bible, the format of Revelation has its locus, significantly enough, in human speech. For more on this, see Franz Rosenzweig's masterwork, *The Star of Redemption*.

144 Of course, again, this is the classical Greek conception of the human as *logos*, the being who has speech.

145 Philippe Nemo, *Job and the Excess of Evil*, 146.

146 To be a *spiritually* rather than merely *psychologically* personal being means I am unable to evade my obligation to the other person. In short, it's in the form of the spiritually personal that human individuals enter the realm of ethical existence.

147 *Job and the Excess of Evil*, 146.

148 18:12; Cf. the following Talmudic parable: "Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel told his servant, 'Go buy me something good from the market'. He went and bought a tongue. Rabbi Shimon said: 'Go buy something bad from the market'. The servant returned with another tongue. Said Rabbi Gamliel: 'I told you to buy something good and something bad and you returned with the same thing. How is this possible?'. Answered his servant, 'From the tongue comes good and bad. When it is good, there is nothing better than it, but when it is evil, there is nothing more evil than it'" (from *Vayikra Raba*). Cf., also Sarah Kofman, in her meditation on Robert Antelme's narrative of imprisonment and torture, *The Human Race*, and her remark that Antelme's affirmation of the shared character of humanity is founded not on the "denial of

I will not dwell on the second option, for it is the very meaning of every possible inhumanity (or non-humanity), of every violence and injustice. Likewise, the word which kills is not really a human word, since here no-one actually speaks. Thus Hannah Arendt observes how “violence is the only kind of human action which is mute by definition; it is neither mediated nor operated through words. In all other kinds of action, political or not, we act in speech and our speech is action”.¹⁴⁹ To this extent, if we want to remain not only within the sphere of words but also in the human domain as such, the first option, the choice for life, is really the *only* option.

To speak to a person is to affirm their existence. Here we might paraphrase the above quotation from Simone Weil. To address another with a word in effect says to them: “I *believe* in your existence *as such*”.¹⁵⁰ A spoken word is hospitality, primordial greeting.¹⁵¹ To speak to another, regardless of the *content* of whatever is actually said, is to *welcome them into the realm of personal existence*. To encounter a person, to greet them, is to affirm their existence - as if one said to them, ‘you are my fellow human’. The same applies when it comes to God: to encounter God or meet God is *to affirm God’s existence*.

I know this sounds surprising. After all, why should God need *us* to affirm *his* existence? Isn’t he beyond all that? Such a notion seems to run counter to the entire philosophical tradition of Western culture, which, after the Greeks, found a way to

differences” but on “a shared power to choose, to make incompatible though correlative choices, the power to kill *and* the power to respect and safeguard” (*Smothered Words*, 70).

149 *Essays in Understanding*, 376.

150 Or, if you like: ‘I’m glad that you exist’ (a line from St. Augustine that Hannah Arendt was fond of quoting).

151 As Heine apocraphally put it, “God has given us tongues that we may say something pleasant to our fellow-men”. For the Bible, the ethical act of speech, which welcomes the other into the space of existence, *precedes* ontology. Hence the original meaning of the Biblical category of *creation* is quite different to how Christianity would later understand it. In the Hebrew Bible, YHWH first creates a *world* in all its concreteness and then a *created being* who inhabits this realm. But the very appearance of the creature called human indicates that the purpose of YHWH’s bringing into being of a material world is to serve as a *place* in which ‘meeting’ and ‘encountering’ can happen. Because obviously, how could the other one, my neighbour, be welcomed if there were not some *actual realm* in which such welcoming could occur? In short, there must first be a *space of meeting* in which this *primordial hospitality*, *this welcoming of the other into reality and existence*, can ‘happen’. Thus creation exists not on its own account, but for the sake of revelation, and as the *scene* for the *happening event* of revelation, revelation being exactly what is meant by welcoming the other into existence. Creation, then, in Biblical terms, does not designate some ‘originating’ cosmological determination, interpreted either theologically, ontologically or naturalistically. Rather, it is the condition of possibility for the *ethical event*, the phenomenological locus of potential meetings (for the latter is, again, what revelation is). In this sense, we might say that the world was created proleptically, for the sake of revelation, so that redemption could happen within it.

save the idea of divinity, but in the form of a God who must lack all possibility of condescension (certainly, this is the case for the Spinozian conception, according to which “he who loves God cannot endeavour that God should love him in return”¹⁵²). Whereas if one is not to end up in the dead end of both atheistic and theistic thinking, perhaps the challenge for us today is to approach this problem *otherwise* than theology. Again, this is where the Jewish understanding of things can be of assistance.

For the Jew, God is dependent upon his creature. Hence the words of the ‘Kabbalistic Master’: “when you are my witnesses, I am God, and when you are not my witnesses, I am not God”.¹⁵³ If this sounds like an *inversion*, that’s because it is. For in this moment, “the commitment of human beings” has become “indispensable to God”.¹⁵⁴ Thus the relation between the human being and God is a “unique relationship”, since it involves “dependence of the creature on the creator, yet, at the same time, game, freedom, distance. We might almost say it all comes down to *an incredible reciprocal interest*”.¹⁵⁵ Likewise, Stéphane Moses remarks that in the Jewish tradition, “Revelation is the movement through which God entrusts His own being to the experience that man has of him . . . The principle of revelation is that God limits His being to the affirmation that man makes of Him, and this to the extent of man’s self-effacement through the affirmation of his dependency: God denies His own being for the benefit of man at the moment when the latter affirms the being of God by denying his own autonomy”.¹⁵⁶

I realize this sounds quite convoluted. But just try, if you will, to hang on to the *notional* sense of what’s occurring here: I’ve suggested that affirming another person’s existence is crucial for one’s own humanity. And this affirmation carries the sense not merely of some kind of ‘feel-good’ chiming together, sympathetic attraction, or erotic fusion (all which remains incipiently egoistic). Rather, as I’ve already suggested above, affirming the other means assuming *personally responsibility* for them. There is here, then, a non-sentimental stringency which, far from precluding intimacy, is the precondition for the latter. Yet it’s also this kind of radical responsibility which has the potential to bring us close to God in a more difficult - we might even say ‘atheist’ - but also more spiritual way.

And so, the affirmation which is at the same time the onerousness of an infinite responsibility for the other, for my neighbour, brings us into the domain of the

152 Spinoza, *Ethics*, part 5, prop. 19, quoted in Franz Rosenzweig, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 60-61, n. 31.

153 Quoted in *ibid.*, 23, n. 24

154 Nemo, *Job and the Excess of Evil*, 135.

155 *Ibid.*, 123; italics in original.

156 *System and Revelation. The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig*, 102, 108.

supra-human, yet without, for all that, requiring that we leave behind the here-and-now condition of our finite existence (for instance, as against the Platonic recommendation, that “we ought to try to escape from the earth to the dwelling of the gods as quickly as we can”¹⁵⁷). In which case, what of a person who refuses to speak to others, to welcome or greet them? Not only do they forfeit their humanity. They also can have no inkling of the Divine, no matter how much they might seek to cultivate their ‘spirituality’. For it is only *in the face of the neighbour* - or, as it appears in that more complete specification given by the *Tanakh*, the “orphan, the widow and the stranger”¹⁵⁸ - that God appears.¹⁵⁹

Metaphor, contact across an infinite space, a connection which respects the integrity and separateness of the other, which neither seeks to control nor to dominate, a relation, therefore, which is essentially pacific - all of this is particular to a human, spoken word. But as I’ve already remarked, speech is also the framework in which the human-divine encounter occurs. However, this fundamental feature of language, both as the organon par-excellence of human

157 Plato, *Theaetetus*, 176a; the quotation continues as follows: “and to escape is to become like God, so far as this is possible, and to become like him is to become righteous and holy and wise”. Cf. Michael Wyschogrod’s commentary on this passage: “The tendency of the spirit is to rise away from the earth toward a more ethereal environment. And the higher it wishes to rise, the more ballast it must shed in its ascent. The result is that many religions are affairs of the spirit with little regard for the everyday world in which men are entrapped. This is true of much oriental religion but is also true of Christianity. Jesus’s relative lack of interest in the political order, his absolutist and uncompromising ethical demands, the absence of law (which embeds the moral vision into the soil of the created order) in the New Testament are among the symptoms of Christianity’s liberation from the darker side of reality. Christianity therefore shuns the darkness, from which it attempts to escape into the light of redemption and sinlessness. Judaism, on the contrary, does not shun darkness. It, too, has been illuminated by a great light that has transformed its existence into a standing before God. But Judaism will not be unfaithful to the darkness of human existence, which remains cut off from the light but which is not therefore beyond the perimeter of divine concern” (*The Body of Faith. Judaism as Corporeal Election*, 9).

158 Emmanuel Levinas explains that insofar as the face of other is a revelation of weakness and vulnerability, the experience of the Divine is indissociable from the onus of personal responsibility.

159 This epiphany of the Divine in the face of the other stands for a universal exigency which ultimately is foreign neither to philosophical thinking nor to the Greek wisdom that forms its foundation, pointing in effect to a language which is “without prejudice, a way of speaking that bites reality without leaving any marks - capable of unsaying and resaying”, a language which is “at once a metalanguage, careful and able to protect what is said from the structures of language itself, which might lay claim to being the very categories of meaning. A language which intends to translate -ever anew - the Bible itself, a language which in the justice that it allows to take root, cannot forever offend the uniqueness of the other, nor the mercy that this uniqueness appeals to, at the very heart of the subject, nor the responsibility for the other, which requires the adversary to loosen their clenched teeth in order to respond to God’s word which appears in the face of the other” (Emmanuel Levinas, ‘The Bible and the Greeks’, in Levinas, *In the Time of the Nations*, 135).

finitude and the link between creature and Creator, will only be recognized to the extent that we allow words to take their place in the life which becomes human inasmuch as it is *the life of words spoken and listened to*.¹⁶⁰

Words are our humanity, that echo of the spiritual life by which the divine appears in the midst of human encounters, neither in the violence of a thaumaturgy nor as sacral ephiphany but in the uprightness (*temimut*) of the inter-human, as responsibility for one's fellow-being. Nowhere does this apply more than with the word love. As with anything genuine and real, love is self-evident. Rather than try to ground love on the basis of a knowledge, it's enough to testify to its reality. In this respect, my focus on the subject of love, as with everything else, has been quite completely concrete and practical rather than abstract. Not that this essay is a 'self-help' manual for those wanting to improve the quality of their intimate relationships. Of course, it would be difficult to talk about love without at some point addressing certain psychological considerations. Even so, I'd suggest that a phenomenology of love leads us down paths that are neither psychological nor sociological but ethical.

Love is part of the enduring adventure of the inter-human which is spiritual life. By loving, an individual reaches out to others, becomes vulnerable, and also agrees to be *responsible* for an existence separate from their own. In this way, they go beyond the egoism of the 'natural attitude', of what Spinoza calls the *connatus* - that is, the "brutal perseverance of beings in their own being".¹⁶¹ To this extent, there can be no relation to God outside of society with the other.

160 I.e.: "What is present, be it human beings or God, cannot be spoken of in the third person; they can only be listened to and addressed" (Rosenzweig, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 125).

161 Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Writings*, 162. Accordingly, each and every existent struggles to secure its own exclusive "place in the sun" (the phrase is from Pascal, *Pensees*, #295). Such an egoistic striving for personal salvation persists under the cover of numerous disguises, be it a psychology of altruism or philosophies of virtuous behaviour, whether Stoic, Christian or Buddhist.

Conclusion: From Words Into Life

*What had revived them was love, the heart of
the one containing an infinite source of life for
the heart of the other*

Fyodor Dostoyevsky¹⁶²

The point of this essay is that all questions of spirituality are ultimately questions of living - that is, *human* questions.¹⁶³ And yet, even as the spiritual belongs in the world, it should not be reduced to the worldly. Obviously, there's a tension here, but it's a matter of *holding* this tension, rather than regarding it as something that needs to be removed or resolved. Moreover, I want to suggest such a state of tension is intrinsic to that modality of being which goes by the name of *relating*.

To relate to someone, I will need to get out of myself. This might be uncomfortable, because it entails putting myself into situations where I may not be able to control everything or be self-sufficient. Again, there's a risk of vulnerability. And finally, there is a chance of encountering difference, something that I cannot incorporate or reduce to something familiar. Relating thus involves what is too flippantly and casually called tolerance, which is really the obligation to respect another person even if I happen not to agree with their views or opinions. And so, in the situation of relating to others, in the inter-human situation, there is *fracture* and *connection*, an awareness of difference which is unable, however, to become indifference without incurring a certain loss of human dignity. Massimo Cacciari summarizes this modality of the inter-human as a "being-together-in-the-distance, but in a distance [that is] acted upon, crossed through, suffered, never simply measured or contemplated".¹⁶⁴

Such a dialectic of closeness and distance, of proximity and separation, is inherent to the inter-human situation; in particular, it is the condition to which we're opened by the transcendence inherent to a spoken word. But again, since this is a transcendence which, even in its absoluteness, is neither static nor rigid but alive, it cannot be represented, remarks Giorgio Agamben, "as a language, as a state or a patrimony of names and rules which each people transmit from generation to generation". Rather, it points us towards that "unpresupposable non-

162 *Crime and Punishment*, 629.

163 Here I am thinking of Franz Rosenzweig's remark in his essay, 'The New Thinking', that "theological problems want to be translated into human problems, while human problems want to be driven into the theological" (Rosenzweig, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 129).

164 *Europe and Empire*, 66.

latency in which men have always dwelt, and in speaking, they move and breathe".¹⁶⁵

Yet the problem, according to Agamben, is that in "all the forty millennia of *Homo sapiens*, man has not yet ventured to assume this non-latency, to have the experience of his speaking being".¹⁶⁶ He then quotes Wittgenstein, who suggests that "the correct expression in language for the miracle of the existence of the world, albeit as expressing nothing *within* language, is the existence of language itself".¹⁶⁷ Agamben then asks how human beings *could* live in such a manner that they might do justice to this miraculous 'being-there' (*Dasein*) of the world, without lapsing into either ontology or the violence of totalizing ideologies. To which he suggests that the "only possible answer to this question is: human life as . . . ethical way".¹⁶⁸

But is it truly the case that one does not find in all of history any evidence for the existence of a human grouping which has succeeded in living as this "unpresupposable community",¹⁶⁹ who've managed to maintain a hold on being in a "void" which is neither the "absence of a voice nor a *gramma*"? They have indeed existed, only they've perpetually been passed over in silence, perhaps because their humanity was always regarded as suspect or doubtful. I mean the Jews. Surviving for the greater part of their history with neither a land nor any way to secure a 'purchase' on Being, the Jewish people have truly lived their communal existence in the condition of a presuppositionless non-latency to which Agamben refers.

But why, we might ask, is this double condition - freedom from presupposition and non-latency- so important if the humanity of the word is to be maintained? The word must exist beyond presupposition, because if it did not, it could be mastered in the form of a knowledge (since all knowing is founded upon presuppositions); and it must be non-latent, since otherwise this feature of latency would mean its reduction to an element in a calculable totality, ontological, political or societal. Whether as potentially knowable or as assimilable to the All, language is in danger of losing that which makes it human - that experience of a "pure exteriority"¹⁷⁰ through which the subject finds themselves "cast into language without the vehicle

165 *Infancy and History*, 9.

166 *Infancy and History*, 9.

167 *Ibid.*.

168 *Ibid.*, 9-10.

169 *Ibid.*, 10,

170 *Ibid.*, 6. But perhaps God, too, insofar as he can neither be mastered nor known, is this "unpresupposable non-latency".

of a voice”,¹⁷¹ into the “void” of an “*aphonia*”.¹⁷² Only thanks to this radical exteriority, in the form of the word’s fundamental *spontaneity*, are individuals able to resist ideological capture by the forces of totalization, whose experiments, invoking the rigours of deduction, administration and violence, have always worked to destroy the irreducible singularity of the person.¹⁷³

So Franz Kafka was quite right when he noticed how the deforming power of ideologies creates a “speech” which is “blurred”.¹⁷⁴ Thus there are many people who “prowl around Mount Sinai”, who are “garrulous or they shout, or they are taciturn”. Yet none “comes straight down a broad, newly made, smooth road that does its own part in making one’s strides long and swifter”¹⁷⁵ - this smooth, broad road being the way of ethical monotheism. For only with the latter can the transcendence of words be completed in the very movement of life, thereby propelling the self out of the narcissism of thinking and egoistic self-enmeshment towards real existence, by way of the two-fold miracle which is speech and love. In this sense, we might say that it is the Jews who have showed humanity how to be human.

171 Ibid., 9.

172 Ibid.. And if there is “no articulation between *phone* and *logos*” (ibid., 8), perhaps this is because such articulation could only belong to the speech of God, a speech which is precisely not *logos* but *command* - the undeclinable call of personal responsibility.

173 Ibid., 7.

174 ‘Mount Sinai’, in Kafka, *Parables and Paradoxes*, 45.

175 Ibid..