Speaking of Love
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*

Franz Rosenzweig[1]

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

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1 *The Star of Redemption* (Galli Transl), 255.
2 In Daniel Dobbels, *On Robert Antelme's The Human Race. Essays and Commentary*, 168.

Spiritually Human

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

Emmanuel Levinas[3]

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, 'chiming' with the cosmos, or having radiant feelings inside. It means caring for others and refusing violence - in short, *responsibility*.[4] 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 that is used so loosely and with such indiscretion, whose meaning is more slippery. People say they love football, fried fish, their friends, and their children.[5] 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

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

4 Such an incipiently *moral* dimension decisively differentiates this sense of the spiritual life from those sentimental, petit-bourgeois notions of psychology and psychological interiority, which make possible all manner of irrationalism, mythologism and determinism. In short, spirituality is the mark of human *intelligence* - the capacity, that is, for knowledge and judgement, which translates immediate experience "into intelligible notions, relations and laws" (Pietro Terzi, *Rediscovering Leon Brunschvicg's Critical Idealism. Philosophy, History and Science in the Third Republic*, 42). Thereby spiritual means "everything that is opposed to the purely sensible level of nature" (ibid.). In which case, the emphasis is placed "on the epistemological and ontological primacy of the mind (*espirit*), as reflective and active principle with regard to matter and physiological, biological and social processes" (ibid., endnote 45, 234).

5 "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).

human emotion or sentiment. Perhaps this is why virtually every psychological, sociological or historical account of love fails to grasp its significance.[6]

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?[7] 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".[8] But is this enough? Nowadays, plenty of people are convinced about all kinds of crazy and far-fetched notions. Surely that's the last thing we need at the moment!

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".[9] Something like love is obviously quite real and quite important. But where do we find those "enduring intuitions"? In a letter of Franz Rosenzweig to his fiancé just before their bethothal, he wrote: "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".[10] 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

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6 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.

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

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

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

10 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).

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 human 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, I'd suggest, is speech. The connection of a spoken word is distinctive and unique because through it, "one person enters into emotional solidarity with another person".[11] 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 Musil[12]

An ancient wisdom says that the human is a thinking and speaking being.[13] 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.[14] Now, if the fabric of spiritual life could be said to be woven out of all three of these elements

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11 Heschel, *The Prophets*, Volume 2, 98.
12 *Precision and Soul*, frontispiece.
13 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 "excellance" of the human creature resides in a twin capacity for "reasoning and speech".
14 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.

- thought, speech, and personal responsibility - it is speech which draws together the threads.[15] 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.[16] 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".[17] Human speech is distinguished from the communication of all other living creatures insomuch 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 is living and this felt-life is bound up with a sense that there exists within oneself a certain unplumbable depth, an *inner immensity*.[18] 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*.[19]

Thanks to the word, I can reveal something of myself, of this inner immensity which constitutes me, to another person. But what if the word is not only that which reaches down into the depths, like a bucket lowered into a well bringing up water; what if, in fact, the word that reaches down into depths *is also this depth itself?* In short, perhaps this infinite interiority, which is what I am, is *language?*[20] Thus in the

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15 Thus Emmanuel Levinas wonders if speech should be "thought uniquely as the communication of an idea or as information, and also not - and perhaps, above all - as the fact of encountering the other as other, that is to say, already as a response to the other person? Is not the first word, 'good-day'? . . . Good-day as a benediction and as my being available for the other man. It doesn't mean: 'what a beautiful day'. Rather: 'I wish you peace, I wish you a good day'; this is the expression of one who worries for the other. Such an expression of ethical concern underlies all the rest of communication, underlies all discourse" (In Jill Robbins [ed.], *Is it Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, 47)
16 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.
17 Adriana Caverero, *For More than One Voice. Towards a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, 190.
18 As H. G. Adler put it, "How can a person protect his inner life from what happens to that life?" (Quoted in Peter Filkins, *H. G. Adler. A Life in Many Worlds*, 117).
19 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.
20 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). -

Biblical *Targum Onkelos*, the Hebrew word for the first human created by God, *Odom*, means "a speaking spirit". Likewise, there is an old Talmudic saying: "the soul is full of words".[21] But what kind of words are they? Words locked up in an internal realm, unarticulated, without a "voice". That is, for an undisclosed soul, language is latent, existing as the limit of an "un-said".[22] Here soul is still only *Self*, not a vitally living, that is, *human* being. I only become living, individual soul,[23] a person, when I bring these words out into the light of day - specifically, when I speak to another.[24]

So if the word is the medium that gives another person a brief, fleeting glimpse into this inner immensity that I am, and if my interiority is linguistic, then whilst language is "all there, all created from the beginning, nevertheless . . .[it] awakes to real vitality only in revelation".[25] It's when I reveal something of who I am through a spoken word 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".[26]

Put simply, the word is a power of self-disclosure, reminding us that to be human is to have an *inner life*. Yet this interiority - which really is the essence of my

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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.

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

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

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

24 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.).

25 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).

26 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 phenemenality, I've deliberately tried to avoid using overtly theological language, only because I'm aware that many people find such language offputting.

personal being - could only become meaningful to someone else to the extent they're able to relate this fragment of the inner being which I am and have revealed to them in verbal form, to the inner world *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 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 infinitude[27] (which is indeed what the vulgar psychology of petit-bourgeois people does constantly, through its obsequeious prattle and indiscretions).

At this point, I feel I owe my reader an apology. No doubt all this sounds like something from a primer on Quantum Physics. I don't mean it to. It's just that 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"[28] is a task for "creative minds", who will be "more anxious to save what they sense than refine and protect what they say".[29] I also think of Robert Musil, who observed that perhaps due to 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".[30]

So I'm asking my reader for their indulgence, to bear with what might seem like semantic gymnastics. 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

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28 Heschel, *The Prophets*, Volume 2, 53.
29 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).
30 *Precision and Soul*, frontispiece.

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".[31] And so, human speech, a 'binding separation', a "differential interruption which also connects",[32] 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.

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 Rella[33]

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.[34] Of course, 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

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31 *The infinite Conversation*, 63.
32 Martin Crowley, *Robert Antelme. Humanity, Community, Testimony*, 34.
33 Quoted in Francesco Dal Co, *Figures of Architecture and Thought*, 163, n. 131.
34 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.

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".[35] We might say the same about academic psychology. Presenting itself as a "universal program designed to remedy human frailty and the ills besetting it",[36] psychology is a technique which "masters and computes emotions, pleasures and pains, and the human existence that feels them".[37] 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.[38] Yet what kind of concepts are these really?

Psychology is the popular science of the modern age. When concepts are popularized, they become *phrases*.[39] The latter supply people with a standardized language and stardardized meanings, stripped of all specificity and nuance.[40] Whilst genuine language uncovers the complexity of reality and makes a person receptive to it, the phrase "informs without communicating".[41] In the process, "language takes on a function separate from any direct communication through a concentration on phrase-making for its own sake".[42] 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. In the process, 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

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35 'The Metaphysical Poets', in *Selected Essays*, 287.
36 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).
37 Ibid., 63.
38 For all its pretensions to being scientific, psychology is really pseudo-science.
39 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.
40 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.
41 Massimo Cacciari, *Europe and Empire. On the Political Forms of Globalization*, 55.
42 Anthony Phelan, *Reading Heinrich Heine*, 9.

part, become quite accustomed to not having any kind of personal involvement with what they say.[43]

Genuine dialogue is in the "animation" of a "real, lively to-and-fro connection of a conversation that goes back and forth".[44] In this way, human language is, as Enzo Paci put it, "a complex of signs that involves a life"[45] - the life, that is, of living speakers.[46] 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 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".[47] This is precisely what occurs when people mindlessly rehash word-slogans. The vital life-energy of the word "is now imprisoned in language".[48] Nevertheless, this energy can, at any moment, be "revitalized into what it was when it was presence".[49]

That the word can, in this way, come back to life is one of the most marvelous - I'm tempted to 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 enunciation, words charge the space of dialogue with an energy that draws each participant into the round dance of language.[50] Thereby we become part of the way meaning is created *in the very act of speaking*.

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43 Cf. the remarks of Pier Paolo Pasolini: "Thus the slogan is the example of a type of 'expressivity' so far unknown. It's premise is, in fact, expressive, but through repetition its expressiveness loses every characteristic of its own, is fossilized, and becomes totally communicative, communication to the most brutal finality" (*Heretical Empiricism*, 15). The media and advertising represent forms of language whose absolute 'maximalization' of the communication function, as the transmission of a 'message', corresponds to a total absence of expression, content and meaning.
44 Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption* (Galli Trans.), 90.
45 *The Function of the Sciences and the Meaning of Man*, 207.
46 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).
47 Cacciari, *Europe and Empire*, 55.
48 Enzo Paci, *The Function of the Sciences and the Meaning of Man*, 207.
49 Ibid.
50 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

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. Geniuine speech is a primordial donation, the "power to welcome and to give".[51] With the phrase, on the other hand, meaning is already complete well before it has a chance to be spoken. The *saying* adds nothing.[52] Rather than opening onto the plentitude of shared being, thereby 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 (but 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).

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 becoming detached from life itself. This is language as *ideology*, which, as Saul Bellow observed, signifies "not thinking for oneself".[53] 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 an enormous virtual 'Tower of Babel'. People are online to promote themselves or some 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

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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".
51 Cacciari, *Europe and Empire*, 53.
52 Emmanuel Levinas called this the preeminence of the *Said* over the *Saying*.
53 *There is Simply Too Much to Think About. Collected Non-Fiction*, 386.

aesthetic attractiveness of an intellectual proposition, not the consistency of the argument which formulates it. As a result, ideas take on an independent existence. 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 both propaganda and the internet, the most important thing is the 'format' of an idea, its coherence both in abstract and operational terms.

Propaganda radically separates thinking from the one who thinks, language from the person who speaks.[54] Propaganda relies not so much upon the development of an argument as "the naked imperious power of its own affirmation".[55] 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".[56] And so, "there is neither knowledge to establish, nor thought to overcome. There is only an already acquired, already available truth to declare".[57]

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 Fassbinder[58]

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 governents? 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 which just wants to 'have its say' but is uninterested in listening.

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54 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.*
55 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.
56 ibid..
57 ibid..
58 *The Anarchy of the Imagination*, 173.

In fact, one finds the voice of propaganda everywhere that 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".[59]

We've already seen how psychological discourse works wholly in terms of phrases, that is, 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.[60] Disconnecting the word from its personal 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.

Of course, people generally believe psychology provides them with a language that will enable them to share their deepest thoughts, feelings and emotions.[61] However, when there's a ready-made psychological phraseology which "thinks and speaks"[62] 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

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59 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.

60 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 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)

61 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.

62 The phrase is from the German Romantic poet, Schiller, and is quoted in Viktor Klemperer, *The Language of the Third Reich*, 15. .

more to life than what the phrase says.[63] 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"[64] from the onslaught of stock-standard phrases?

Here we must work with great determination to restore the "original power and meaning"[65] 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".[66] Not "sound and smoke"[67] 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

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63 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.
64 Levin, *The Arena*, 60.
65 Ibid.
66 Philippe Nemo, *Job and the Excess of Evil*, 146.
67 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).

'without', it is no different from language as it echoes the 'without' from our 'within'".[68]

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 Levinas[69]

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. On the contrary, it is basic to being human being, 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. When it comes to the 'God-word', 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 most obsessed by God[70] (apart from maybe a small handful of

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68 Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption* (Hallo trans.), 151.
69 Emmanuel Levinas, quoted in Claire Katz, *Levinas and the Crisis of Humanism*, 67.
70 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

religious fanatics or terrorists, who in actuality represent only a small minority of the population of religious believers, something people are 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'[71]). 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 managable. Discussion thematizes and objectifies, turning the issue into an 'area of investigation' - an object of knowledge. When God becomes a topic for discussion, discomfort is transmuted into ideology, whereas the 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".[72]

In times past, thematization of the Divine 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

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Rosenzweig quoted in Glatzer, 'Introduction', Franz Rosenzweig, *Understanding the Sick and the Healthy. A View of World, Man, and God*, 25).

71 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 tournements, 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 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.

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

that. And for those who aren't? Well, it's 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",[73] because that would threaten one's precious equilibrium. The latter is crucial to the bourgeois, who seeks a life of comfort and security.[74] 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. If God can be turned into a theme for talkfests and meet-up groups, so much 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".[75] 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-psychologist tells us that we're in the midst of a tremendous "meaning crisis".[76] In this respect, that today's atheists expend such an inordinate amount of time and energy wrestling 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 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, to put it slightly differently - 'does existence have any *meaning*?'. No wonder modern atheism and existentialist philosophies make such cosy bedfellows. After all, the existentialist question par-excellance 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 a 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

73 *Friendship*, 67.
74 Henry Kissinger, in *A World Restored*, 327, notes that a "quest for security" is fundamental to the bourgeois.
75 *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).
76 John Vervaeke. See his 50 part series of talks on this theme available for free viewing on *Youtube*, 'Awakening to the Meaning Crisis'.

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 - something very small, that people are then 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. As human individuals, we "simply appear".[77] 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".[78] 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,[79] they might be closer to resolving *every* issue of meaning. In the meantime, they overlook one can never 'finish' with meaning, the reason being that as soon as meaning is regarded as a *problem*, one never comes to the end of it.[80]

It's probably a safe bet that before 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

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77 Saul Bellow, *There Is Simply Too Much to Think About. Collected Non-Fiction*, 117.
78 Ibid..
79 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).
80 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 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)(.

'existence' of something would have struck them as absurd and pointless.[81] Whereas nowadays people frantically search for the meaning in just about everything. 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, they would be the worst offenders! This obsession with meaning is no doubt related to the contemporary compulsion to open up all things to investigation, probing, and analysis. In this respect, it expresses a deep-seated sense of insecurity, a typically petty-bourgeois trait.

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".[82] 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. 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. One must be informed as to what's going on in the world, or at least appear informed, just as one must come across as being sure as to what one thinks about everything, even if that means being skeptical about everything.

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81 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).
82 *The Passing of an Illusion*, 4-5.

Meaning and its Discontents

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

Novalis[83]

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".[84]

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",[85] people will quite happily devour it in any shape or form, even when it verges on being 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-contexturalized - 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 character who was always "moving forward to fresh arenas of frenzied activity",[86]

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83 Quoted in Gyorgy Lukacs, *The Theory of the Novel*, 29.
84 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).
85 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, 162.
86 'New Years Eve', from the collection, *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities and Other Stories*, 106.

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.[87] 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.[88] 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".[89] Reality is coherent when we're attentive to the *manner* in which we ourselves concretely experience things.[90] 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"[91] of our own being.

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87 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).

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

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

90 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.

91 Emmanuel Levinas, *Unforseen 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

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. Adler[92]

As the appearing of what appears, reality is self-evident. It does not necessitate a search for meaning. Rather, it calls us to give our attention to that 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".[93] 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".[94]

When someone believe that access to reality necessarily requires some cognitive process, they interpose themselves as a 'subject' between their experience of the world and the world 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".[95] 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"[96] (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) 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.[97] That occurs when people 'overthink' things. Then they're liable to

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92 *Panorama. A Novel*, 435.
93 Levinas, *Unforseen History*, 59.
94 Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption* (Galli trans.), 27.
95 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.
96 Ibid..
97 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 disturbs their equanimity.

miss what's present to their own experience - that is, to not see that which is happening right in front of them, this 'happening' being precisely what is meant by *Revelation*.[98]

Revelation is an *event* that breaks into and disrupts the serene flow of history. As Robert Gibbs put it, the "core" of revelation is "the interruption of my world".[99] Taking us unawares, it disrupts the ordinary course of things, shaking us out of our torpor.[100] Revelation thus refers, in every here-and-now, to the coming of an eminently real happening, that is, to a most irreducible and heterogenous otherness or foreign-ness. Yet this disruptive, 'anarchic' moment is anything but destructive. On the contrary, in highlighting the gap between perception and judgement, it leaves room for the "intelligence to intervene with its creative and productive power".[101]

Above all, the 'happening event' of reality highlights that the traditional anti-thesis between belief and knowledge is essentially false. For as Franz Rosenzweig suggests, 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".[102] So if God, love, and existence are not at all mysterious or obscure, it's because they're already inserted "into conscious life, into the individuality and indivisibility of our concrete existence".[103] And thus, as part of reality, they're *always* happening around us *at every moment*, if only we could just wake up and notice them.[104]

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

99 In Steven Kepnes, Peter Ochs, Robert Gibbs, *Reasoning After Revelation. Dialogues in Post-Modern Jewish Philosophy*, 95.

100 Such a disruption is something the atheist will always attempt to block out, to prevent. In this respect, they are the petty-bourgeois par excellence. Nothing is allowed to 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'.

101 Pietro Terzi, *Rediscovering Leon Brunschvicg's Critical Idealism*, 33.

102 Rosenzweig, 'Scripture and Luther', in Glatzer, *Franz Rosenzweig*, 257 (italics in original).

103 Ibid., 58.

104 "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 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).

Don't misunderstand me. I'm not against thinking. The problem arises when people fail to recognize that genuine thought "consists in an endless inter-linking of judgements, that is, a work of reflection".[105] Insofar as thinking involves a "hand-to-hand combat of reason with experience",[106] actual thought is a work of "progressive emendation and correction",[107] a dialectic of "affirmation and negation, doubt and certainty",[108] a dialectic which recognizes that experience itself is, more often than not, "contradictory and dramatic".[109]

We know all 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.[110] In a perceptive reading of the films of French director, Robert Bresson, Raymond Durgnat 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.[111]

I think that what Durgnat has in mind is a non-abstract type of thought which rides the waves of contingency and appearances, making itself home in the world of concrete experience, and recognizing the necessity of translating the "world into intelligible notions, relations, and laws".[112] Also relevant here is a distinction

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105 Terzi, *Rediscovering Leon Brunschvicg's Critical Idealism*, 32.
106 Ibid., 4.
107 Ibid., 42.
108 Ibid., 33.
109 Ibid..
110 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*.
111 'The Negative Vision of Robert Bresson', *Robert Bresson*, 444.
112 Terzi, *Rediscovering Leon Brunschvicg's Critical Idealism*, 42.

Michael Wyschogrod makes between *reason* and *intelligence*. In contradistinction to reason, which is a "philosophical construct with definite theoretical implications", Wyschogrod suggests 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".[113]

Wychogrod 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".[114] In this respect, enmeshed in life, intelligence follows the cues provided by actual existence.[115] If it seeks direction from "the individual, the immediate, the concrete", this comes from a realization that such "profane attention"[116] contains "the very atmosphere of comprehension".[117] 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, the intelligent intellect must be more exacting and adaptable than the highly-informed ignorance of the educated.[118]

The issue with intellect, narrowly conceived, is that it's liable to miss the nuance and singuality of actual experience, partly because it has a tendency to become smug and conceited.[119] 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.[120] In this respect, the bourgeois is "at home with himself behind closed doors, rejecting the outside that negates him",[121] whilst their repose is the equanimity of a "being founded in itself, in its identity as an ego".[122] 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,

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113 *The Body of Faith*, 5.
114 Ibid.
115 This was Franz Rosenzweig's approach in his masterwork, *The Star of Redemption*.
116 The term is Robert Musil's.
117 *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).
118 To this extent, it's remarkable how much intellect "can be invested in ignorance" (Saul Bellow, *To Jerusalism and Back. A Personal Account*, 162).
119 Here I'm thinking, again, of that website, *The Rational Realm*.
120 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).
121 Levinas, *Basic Writings*, 165.
122 Ibid..

intelligence always has doubts as to its comprehension of things. It recognizes that the "sting of reality is the true spur of any intellectual activity".[123]

Are We Obsolete?

Being prepared to admit one's own understanding might be imperfect means recognizing all human knowledge is *fallible*.[124] In its turn, the ability to acknowledge one may have failed to comprehend something is tantamount to admitting one doesn't have a handle on everything. No-one is self-sufficient. Nor can perfection be a goal.[125] Whereas because of its tendency to become trapped in the "illusory world of the purely thinkable",[126] 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".[127]

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".[128] In effect, a person commited 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?'.

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".[129] But then, what precisely can bridge between our thinking and reality? Language can. The word is "the immediate actuality of thought",[130] the true

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123 Terzi, *Rediscovering Leon Brunschvicg's Critical Idealism*, 4.
124 The great philosopher of science, Karl Popper, wrote a great deal about knowledge and fallibility, especially in relation to authoritarian political regimes.
125 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.
126 Cacciari, *Europe and Empire*, 51.
127 Ibid., 52.
128 Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith*, 33.
129 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, 118.
130 Ibid., 118.

medium and life-blood of intelligence.[131] Even so, the 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.[132] 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*.[133] 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".[134]

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".[135] 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".[136]

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? Instead, everyone wants to 'have a go', whether it is in the media or on-line 'Meet-up' groups. In the meantime, whole worlds become light as Ping-Pong balls. At lunch or over coffee we talk about good and evil, death and immortality. Over

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

132 "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).

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

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

135 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.

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

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 every 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 love or money or genuine humility, 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.

God and Connection

The truth of metaphor is a vérité à faire*, a truth that is accessible and within reach*

Hans Blumenberg[137]

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, 'does King Lear exist?'. (I mean the character in Shakespeare's play of the same name). Of course not. No-one in their right mind would try to prove or disprove Lear's 'existence'. To this extent, whether or not Lear *actually* existed as a real person has no relevance whatsoever to our ability to find meaning in the play. What is relevant in this context is that the figure of Lear is a *metaphor*. The word, metaphor, comes from the Greek, *metaphora*, meaning to 'transfer' or 'bridge across'. A metaphor transfers (or

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137 *Paradigms for a Metaphorology,* 20.

transports) from something we understand to something we don't understand, but also the other way: from incomprehension to comprehension.

As Jacob Bronowski explains, metaphors "link the different fields of our experience and seek out the likenesses between them".[138] So by using a metaphor, a person is "joining one area of experience to another, illuminating and enriching each with each".[139] 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. More than that, they show more generally how our minds work - in particular, the human faculty of *imagination*. For if the mind is, in the words of Leon Brunschvicg, "an indefinite power of intellectual creation",[140] then the metaphor is intrinsic to and the basis of intellectual activity of *every* kind.[141]

The work of metaphor is a work of sense-making, of rendering intelligible. With the 'transfer' effected by the metaphor, the "will to connection becomes form in the road, it transforms life into form; but it also turns into form the mere movement initially necessary to cover the distance".[142] To metaphorize, then, is to "measure a fragment of space, to illustrate it, and to set it up as a limit", giving "form to the uninterrupted unity of being" and thereby articulating it "according to a meaning, according to a value".[143]

The importance of the metaphor, then, is that it puts those truths which might otherwise be difficult to access "within reach". What makes this most notable of all Shakespeare's characters, King Lear, significant is that he enables us to connect to some truths about what it means to be human. Hence it is in the metaphorical being of Lear, in Lear *qua* metaphor, that the human condition becomes comprehensible. So what then of God? As with Lear, what if all these qustions about God's existence were likewise misdirected? Rather than searching for 'evidence' of God's existence,

138 *The Visionary Eye*, 15.
139 Ibid..
140 Quoted in Pietro Terzi, *Rediscovering Leon Brunschvicg's Critical Idealism. Philosophy, History and Science in the Third Republic*, 33.
141 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. On these terms, science and art are essentially alike in this respect, as Bronowski made clear: "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" (Bronowski , *The Visionary Eye*, 21).
142 Massimo Cacciari, *Architecture and Nihilism. On the Philosophy of Modern Architecture*, 81.
143 Ibid..

what if we were to see God as a *metaphor*?[144] The metaphor connects to a truth of some kind - that is, it makes a certain truth *accessible*. Yet this seems to raise more problems than it solves. For one thing, if one says God is a metaphor, it might well be asked: 'a metaphor of *what* exactly?'.

Let me make it clear, however, that in suggesting God is a metaphor, by this term I don't mean a device particular to certain kinds of literary language. Literary critics often talk about such-and-such a word in a certain writers' oeuvre as a metaphor of an idea. The prepositional 'of' here is decisive. It indicates thematization, and thus promises knowledge. Thematization of God is called theology. By thematizing God, he becomes an object of human knowledge. And from questions of *knowledge* - that is, *epistemological* questions - people quite naturally progress to *ontological* questions - that is, questions about the *existence* of something. So here one ends up, once more, with the dead-end of those existence questions.

The point is that God is precisely not a metaphor 'of' something; God is not thematizable. Rather, *God himself is metaphor*.[145] And if, as we've seen, the metaphor 'transfers', we might say that *God is that which effects transferal*. Or, putting it slightly differently, *God is the very event of transferring*.

To clarify this admittedly enigmatic statement, a short digression is warranted. In the long history of human civilization, there have been a plurality of gods. These gods do many things, and this many-faceted being of divinities is narrated in that body of literature known as *mythology*. In this context, also, arises the God of the Hebrews, who likewise appears as a divine being whose manifold existence is narrated in a particularly well-known collection of writings known as the Bible. This much I think should be uncontroversial. However, there is one aspect of the God of the Israelites which does not conform to the overall pattern of the mythological gods. And this is that the monotheist God is a God who *speaks*.

Here it might be worth anticipating a possible objection: 'but the mythological gods are not exactly dumb. Do they not also speak, communicating with mortals usually via intermediaries such as oracles, but also directly through visions?'. That is true. However, the difference in this case is that the speech of the Israelite God to

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144 Which is indeed what Franz Rosenzweig suggests: "What might be before the beginning, that vitality of God in itself . . . we could describe only by comparison, only as a metaphor" (*The Star of Redemption* [Galli trans.], 405).

145 A metaphoricality which is operative through the function of *naming*. For as Gerschom Scholem explains, "the Torah is a texture fashioned out of the names of God and, as the earliest Spanish Kabbalists already put it, out of the great, absolute name of God, which is the final signature of things. It constitutes a mysterious whole, whose primary purpose is not to transmit a specific sense, to 'mean' something, but rather to express the force of the divinity itself which is concentrated in this 'name'" " (*The Messianic Idea in Judaism. And Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*, 294).

his people is significant not merely as evidence of communication between divinities and mortals. Rather, the speech of the Israelite God *seeks out* the human being. This 'seeking' word turns out to be central.[146] For what is decisive in the fact that the God of the Hebrews speaks to man is not so much the content of what is said as that the divine 'saying' is a *word which is in search of the human*. Thereby it is a word *addressed to someone*,[147] to a personal being - a *self*. In short, when the monotheist God speaks, the divine word has in mind the possibility of an *encounter*.

Speech and Desire

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

Edmond Jabes

Returning, now, to the idea of metaphor as 'transfer', if God is *the event of transferring*, then central to this is a word which, in *moving between one being and another*, through this very movement and crossing a distance, marks out a space of *relation*, of *difference* and of *connection*. God's word thus *seeks out* the human, and in this seeking, expresses a *desire* for encounter, for relationship. But the really crucial thing here is that in the Bible, this desire for encounter occurs *in the space of language*. For, of course, there are many different ways in which, on a phenomenological level, an encounter can occur, whether it be physical or intangible, contact or proximity, such as the collision of two billiard balls or the intelligible relation between mental objects. And again, in the history of human civilizations, one finds all kinds of 'encounters' between divine beings and mortals,

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146 Thus in the Garden of Eden, when God calls out to Adam, "where are you?", a Midrashic commentary objects: 'why should God have to ask *where* Adam is? Surely God can see everything, invisible and visible?'. To which the commentator suggests: God asks after Adam not because He doesn't know where he is but rather to indicate that he senses that something has 'gone awry' in their relationship. In short, the 'where' of God's question is really a *metaphysical* 'where', an inquiry of the order of, 'where are you in relation to *the situation of creaturely being*, that is, the situation of living this god-given life on earth?'.

147 I say this because, to be sure, whilst human beings have often sought to 'hear' the voice of the mythological god, these divine voices are, more often than not, identified with the impersonal realm of nature. Thus the mystic will listen for the 'sound' of the god in the babbling of the brook, or the rustle of leaves in wind. As Alexander Doblin put it, "The trees keep on singing. It's one long chant" (*Berlin AlexanderPlatz*, 363). In this sense, for mythological religions, the divine word is indelibly associated with *magic*. Thus the magician will cast spell by chanting certain potent syllables. This, however, reveals the decisive difference between the revealed and the magical word. For the magician, all language is an incantation that aims to solicit the dull murmuring of essences from out of the heart of nature. And so, resonating in harmony with the great, wordless song of nature, the magic word personifies the impersonal and depersonalizes the personal.

between gods and men, some of them violent, some intimate, and some poetic and mysterious. Yet amongst all of these possibilities, the encounter which occurs between the monotheist God and man is remarkable for its elemental simplicity, in the sense that *everything here is staked on a word.*

I've said the metaphorical being of God does not just transfer 'something'; rather, God is the *very being* of transferal. This is implicit in the manner in which the very first verbal communication between God and man occurs (and here, it's worth remembering that in the account of Genesis, there's no speech whatsoever before the moment of the Fall, either between God and man or between Adam and Eve); what I mean is that its pretext is neither pragmatic nor admonitory. That is, God's first word to Adam and Eve is not a request for 'information', nor is it a rebuke for what they've just done (this will come later). Rather, it has the limpid clarity of an *enquiry*, a question ('where?'). In this sense, we might say it merely expresses a certain *desire* on God's part, his reaching out in search of man. Indeed, there's something almost wistful about the way God's calls out to Adam in the Garden after the first human couple have been seduced by the serpent. Again, this element of desire can be understood to mean that God stakes *everything*, his *entire being*, on this opening verbal encounter between himself and the human creature.

Let us now try to apply this to a human order of things. At the very beginning of this essay, I suggested the profound character of speech as the medium par-excellence of human-to-human relatedness. 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 interaction, both at its most superficial and most profound. Especially given that in so many situations, people are inclined to speak lightly and flippantly, we're liable to overlook that there's a certain gravity about words. Indeed, as Proverbs (18:12) reminds us, "Life and death are in the power of the tongue". Yet if it is the case that our deepest sense of who we are is bound up with language, this *gravitas* should not be surprising.[148] And so, a spoken word transports, transfers and carries not only a particular meaning or a signification but the *entire sense of our identity 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"[149]).

Actually, we can find still more in the word metaphor of relevance to this discussion. For aside from transfer, there's also the sense of *carrying a burden over and across* (for instance, a mountain range or an abyss). Yet what precisely is this burden, this heavy load? The burden *of meaning*. And when it comes to God, how

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148 Sigmund Freud was well aware of this and made it the basis of his 'science' of psychoanalysis.
149 Adriana Caverero, *For More than One Voice. Towards a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, 190.

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 after wrestling all-night with an Angel, this name 'Israel' being from this moment onwards the name of the Jewish People as a whole, a name which means in Hebrew "they who struggle with humanity and with God". And so, this arduous struggle, must indeed be carried a *very long way*, over all kinds of rocky and difficult terrain, if we are to become human.[150]

Metaphor and Infinity

The sense of what a metaphor is enables us to overcome the reductivism of the 'God-existence' question. We would not think to the question of King Lear's existence because what this figure represents to us is a compelling image of the human condition. God is not exactly an image of the human condition, yet the metaphoricity of God likewise serves to ward off trivializations (like the triviality inherent in the endeavor of those who insist on the asking the question of God's existence). There will still be questions that we want to ask of God. But the important thing is that the guidance offered by the metaphor now directs us towards a non-trivial questioning. To have the benefit of this guidance, however, we must stay close to the sense of what every metaphor is: firstly, a *linguistic* category; secondly, a form of language that is unique and particular to human beings. The second point is crucial. For 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 is that only humans think *imaginatively*, by using symbols to represent things and wordly situations (again, science and art are essentially alike in this respect, as Bronowski makes clear[151]). Even so, this capacity we have for metaphorical communication would not amount to very much unless there were something about a spoken word that means we cannot be human without it.[152] Yet why precisely is it impossible to be human without language? Aren't there, for instance, persons who lack the capacity for speech? Are they are less human for all that? Of course not. However,

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150 In this sense, we might say that the historical saga of the Jewish People is the *becoming human of humanity*.
151 "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).
152 On this point, see Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History*.

by this human necessity of language, I mean something that is not so much *empirical* (i.e., language as the verbal communication of a certain linguistic 'content') as *ontological*.

One of the fundamental characteristics of human speech on this ontological level is *spontaneity*; I can never predict exactly the words a person will say, partly since the possibilities of what they can say through a language are endless, perhaps infinite. This is not a 'calculative' infinity, however, as is the case with a logical system. Rather, the endlessness of human language, its *super-abundance*, is related to the fact that the words an individual speaks are the revelation and expression of a *personal existence*.[153] Earlier in this essay, I suggested that a person exists as an infinite depth, an *inner immensity*. Here is another reason why we are only human insofar as we exist as linguistic beings. For to be such an infinite being is to realize this infinity in the *endless possibilities of self-expression* which the infinity of language makes available to us. Might this be why people keep returning, again and again, over the centuries, to Shakespeare's play, *King Lear*? For if not only the character of Lear himself but the play as whole is a metaphor, insofar as the latter's power resides precisely in the fact that it contains an *infinite depth of significance*, then the metaphorical being of Lear represents an inexhaustibly rich exploration of what it means to be a human being.[154]

Of course, there will be those who just shrug and say, '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'. But the argument here is not about whether one can live without literary works. For if the latter are but a species of imaginative life, and if imagination is as basic to our existence as food, shelter, a sense of warmth, then those who believe they're able to get along without the imagination are fooling themselves. Perhaps their imaginative needs are met in other, sublimated ways, yet they have such needs no less, even if they're unable to acknowledge them.

So the interiority which is the wellspring of this imaginative life is active and plays a part in the entire lived existence of every single human being, regardless of whether or not they might be aware of it. And for those who do possess an awareness of, and sensitivity, to their interiority, then exactly as they feel within themselves this infinite inner depth, they're also liable to feel an infinitude 'at work' in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. That is, thanks to the metaphor, they will recognize in

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153 Again, I cite those words of Adriana Cavavero, that human speech is "the self-revelation of speakers who express and communicate their uniqueness through speaking - no matter the specific content of what is said" (*For More than One Voice. Towards a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, 190).

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

Shakespeare's play - but really, it could be *any* work born of the spirit of imagination - a *semblance* of that infinite depth which is their own personal being.

Let us now briefly summarize. The infinity and abundance of language becomes the human infinity, the infinity of a personal being whose wealth of existential possibilities cannot be encompassed or exhausted by any knowledge or 'system' of being, is activated when we speak. In this sense, the infinite possibilities of language are a mirror of the infinity of a being who lives this infinity in the infinite depth of that interiority which they are. So if it's indeed the case that our interiority is constituted linguistically, it makes perfect sense that the metaphor - the human element of language par-excellence - 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, who are likewise made of the 'stuff' of that infinite being which is language, and also to God.

By joining, linking and drawing connections between unlike things, the metaphor sometimes leads us to surprising places: 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, if the human 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? Remember, also, that metaphor has the sense of something which *transfers*. In which case, God's infinity is *transferred* to the human in the form of language, which is "humankind's morning gift from the Creator".[155]

Interestingly, it's at this point that we discover the significance of the Biblical definition of the human being. In the Book of Genesis, it's said that man was "made in the image of God". The Biblical phraseology is telling, since the Hebrew word for image also means 'likeness'. But what exactly is the latter? A metaphor. So it appears we've come full circle: man is created as the *metaphorical image* of a God who, by the same token, *himself exists as metaphor*.

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155 Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption* [Galli Trans.], 200.

Bridging an Abyss

*To be is to question, to interrogate oneself in the
labyrinth of the question asked of someone else
and of God, and which has no answer*

Edmund Jabes

Consider, now, what all this adds up to: firstly, God is metaphor; then the latter is that which transfers, bridges between things, and also *carries across*; finally, a metaphor is an element of 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 God embodies something particular to words - what we might call their *transferential power*. The word is displacement, connection, separation, bringing together and holding apart, and all of this brought to pass in the space of human life. So the metaphor, this most human of all parts of speech, *makes* our experience of life human. But perhaps most importantly, the metaphor embodies, in the form of speech, a "crossing-over-towards-the-other",[156] a movement which can never be completed, a movement always and ever ongoing.

In short, the metaphor is a *messianic* word. At the same time, in this ongoing character, it is like anything that enables us to live, such as breathing, since if it were not to continue, we would be - well, what? Dead. If only we could recognize how central to this human living of ours is a spoken word, we might also see that God is *always already part of the actuality of our human experience*. But we can go even further. For insofar as the metaphor is transferal and 'bridging across', then if God in his non-identity with anything which exists cannot be approached - - and here I draw upon a Jewish understanding of things, as this is what is closest to me[157] - then this metaphoricity of God, which is perhaps the only way that we can arrive at some kind of statement about him, 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 works in this manner - that is, joins without linking, relates without itself entering into relation, so as to be the very medium and spirit of any kind of relational being? A spoken word. I've already pointed to this remarkable aspect of human speech: the fact it spans an unbridgeable divide, *connecting without connecting*. Could it be, then, that this "specifically human

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156 Hans Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, 158.
157 I.e., "to whom can you liken me, and to whom can I be compared!" (Isaiah 40:25). Hermann Cohen remarks that the fact Judaism does not allow "any connection between man and God" is something for which it has always been "reproached by Christianity" (*Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*, 105).

faculty of connectedness as lack"[158] is the vital clue as to God's significance for us as human beings?

Here I refer to the Jewish view, for which there can be no contact with God in the form of concepts or conceptual understanding.[159] If there is a relation or connection to God in the form of metaphor, of transfer, of a *non-connected kind of connection*, then another term for this is *correlation*. It's thanks to the correlation between God and man that "God and man have to remain separated, insofar as they are united".[160] With any kind of human knowing, the mind *enters into* things. However, if our concepts cannot ever approach God, let alone take up residence in him, there could be no knowing of God, and certainly no theology. In which case, what could be left? Not *knowing* but *experiencing*.

It sounds implausible. After all, if we cannot get close to God in order to know him, what chance could there be of experiencing him? That will depend on how we understand this word, experience. We're accustomed to thinking of experience as quite trivial. Certainly, people are inclined to set great store on their own experiences. Yet they're also aware probably no-one else would. And even they themselves would probably admit that, at the end of the day, knowing is more important than experiencing (in this respect, the doubt about experience only affirms one of the basic precepts of the classical philosophical tradition: that *theoria* is the highest vocation of the human being).

Yet perhaps experience only strikes people as trivial because the inheritance of modernity essentially consists of an utter and thoroughgoing "Destruction of Experience".[161] Here I'm not referring to those who bewail the apparent privileging of intellect over and above other forms of being in modern times; nor do I have in mind the notion that once there were 'better times' when experience, enshrined in fixed, stable forms, could supposedly teach human beings 'enduring lessons' about life. Such notions are only ever myths, and are thus as evanescent as the nostalgia which gave birth to them.

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158 Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History*, 7. This is how Agamben characterizes the linguistic of man, as the only living creature in the universe that is borth without the ability to speak, and yet must speak in order to be human.
159 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).
160 Cohen, *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*, 105. For Cohen's treatment of the concept of correlation, see ibid., 105ff. As Cohen puts it, "the correlation of God to man actualizes God's uniqueness by *averting any mediation*, which might creep into this correlation" (ibid., 104, italics in original).
161 On this theme, see Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History. Essays on the Destruction of Experience.*

We need to see past the false eternities which the destruction of experience itself creates; to see, in short, that there's really something to experience, something we've failed to recognize, mainly because it lies in a place that we'd never have expected. What I mean is that experience is important not insofar as it represents some kind of original substratum, an 'inner purity', font of original 'innocence', but because it's always *constructed* within and by knowledge. For this is precisely the nature of human intelligence, as a power of creation and a capacity of rectification, a "relentless activity of conceptual creation".[162]

Through the "inventiveness and inner transformative character"[163] of human intelligence, the "activity of the mind manifests itself" through the translation of experience in its entirety into "the laws and concepts of the intelligence".[164] Whereas what is most commonly taken to be experience - for instance, 'the inner life' - is in actuality a "perpetual transformation that one cannot know directly without interrupting it".[165] In which case, there is a radical distinction between "living spontaneously and knowing", such that "only what is known is real, is actual, has meaning".[166]

But didn't I say earlier in this essay that our *inner being* is what makes us human, and that this interiority has an infinite character? Certainly. But the important thing is that in such a state, interiority is "pure indetermination",[167] not only "obscure and tangled but also meaningless".[168] In fact, experience is less a 'ground of things', a datum or a substratum, and more *a series of perpetually redefined approximations to a unity which is always and ever unfathomable*. So whilst the inner life might be irreducible, an "essential activity",[169] it's not indubitable, at least in a psychological sense.

There is a place, then, for experience in the life of a reasoning being, however it's precisely *not* where most people would expect to find it - that is, in a pure intuition. And the reason is that it's "impossible to seize our inner life directly, to place ourselves at the centre of our inner duration".[170] The fact is there's "no direct access to the inner self; the only way to study a mind is through its intelligence at work, by analyzing its products, *from the outside*".[171] And yet, exactly in the form of this

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162 Pietro Terzi, *Rediscovering Leon Brunschvicg's Critical Idealism*, 32
163 Ibid., 35.,
164 Ibid., 32.
165 Ibid., 40
166 Ibid..
167 Ibid., 36.
168 Ibid., 41.
169 Leon Brunschvicg, quoted in Ibid., 36.
170 Ibid., 41.
171 Ibid. (italics in original).

exteriority, the credibility of interiority is not ruined but actually secured, as something *limited* and *relative* rather than absolute. Otherwise one oscillates between those two anti-thetical poles between which modern people do indeed perpetually swing: on the one hand, experience is 'everything'; on the other, experience is worthless, a mere trifle, 'nothing'. Strangely, however, it's precisely the first which begets the second. For when experience is all, then we have too much of it. And when there is a glut of something, what then happens? It becomes worthless. And so, the nihilistic 'as nothing' of experience actually stems from the immoderate desire which wants experience to encompass all things.

The result when people insist on interiority as a pure and undiluted form of being, thereby making it an absolute which must encompass all, is that experience is in danger of being lost completely.[172] Above all, if there's something about experience which makes it more than merely that self-satisfied modality of being embodied in such pursuits as knowledge and wisdom, it will surely need to be capable of moving us out of self-precoccupation, of jolting us into an awareness that there's something truly external and exterior, something which cannot be controlled and mastered, and for all that doesn't exactly deprive us of our freedom.

Experience, Event and Encounter (Speech and Human Singularity)

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*, an *encounter*. An encounter is an experience which cannot be possessed, and the reason is that it is an *event* (like speech itself). This is why the event of 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 they're in the midst of experiencing are likely to miss out on it, precisely because they're too busy trying to master the happening of what happens with their knowledge, their *theoria*.[173] Thus by the time they've gotten a handle on the event, it has already passed them by.

So the human experience of God concerns "meetings between God and man".[174] 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

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172 In this sense, "*psychological* or metaphysical interiority is a just a mirage" (Pietro Terzi, *Rediscovering Leon Brunschvicg's Critical Idealism*, 40).
173 Just as 'Cognition of the All' has been the overriding preoccupation of all philosophy, from Thales to Wittgenstein.
174 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.

God.[175] Now, what is important about an encounter is that it is transient and momentary. That is why we might say that meeting is the epitome of an event. Because an event *happens*, it is evanescent, something we cannot take possession of or control. The same applies to the human parties to the event. Just as those who are present in the situation of meeting cannot take possession of the encounter itself, so too, each one cannot take possession of the other.

Essential, then, to the event of meeting is that the beings who encounter each other in this event-space remain *separate* and do not merge. Otherwise this would be not so much meeting as *fusion*. In the words of Emmanuel Levinas, encounter always "comes to pass between strangers, otherwise the encounter would be kinship".[176] Any encounter, therefore, preserves the terms "that are in relation from what would alter them in it, a relation that excludes, therefore, ecstatic confusion, mystical participation, but also appropriation, every form of conquest, and even when all is taken into account, the seizing that comprehension always is".[177]

As an *advent*, encounter occurs between beings who are "non-additive",[178] whose separateness and integrity is maintained and preserved through the encounter. Even so, would it make sense to say that God is present at an encounter or a metting? That is, does he *participate*? But if God is beyond all being and all knowing, how could one speak of something like participation? After all, this is not a colloquium or a counselling session. Likewise, in this meeting of God and man, God is not *what* or *who* we meet. On the other hand, if the human-divine meeting is an 'event', maybe *God himself is this event*?

But perhaps the most which can be said is that God is somehow involved, but without us being able to say *how* exactly he is involved, that with the exigency of meeting, words are spoken and heard. With meeting or encounter, there is the experience and happening of a 'between'. And where there is a 'between', things are *related* in some way. But how should this relation come to pass without it becoming something substantial - that is, without it turning into a relation of knowledge and hence of power and mastery? When it comes to words spoken and exchanged, I enter into relation with another, but this is a "strange relation that consists in there being no relation".[179] Could this apply also to God?

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175 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.
176 *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 211,
177 Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 51.
178 Emmanuel Levinas, *In the Time of the Nations*, 158.
179 Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 51.

Once again I refer to the Judaic conception, for which the relation to God is never some kind of mystical merging; 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.[180] Thus the format of the link between the person and God is essentially the same as that between one person and another: a spoken word.[181] Moreover, the fact that the human-God encounter, as for the inter-human itself, involves language indicates that we're dealing with *communication*. But the latter, again, is not merely about imparting information. Rather, such human-divine 'meetings' and 'encounters' draw attention to those features of human language which make it distinct from any system of signs.

The first of these features is immediacy and *directness*. Whenever there is an encounter or a meeting, something is *present* to me, in the sense that any encounter is both *of* and *in* the moment.[182] 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".[183] 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".[184]

By contrast, the past and the future are not places of human life, modalities of actual existence. Those who want to live in the past are lost in their memories; those who live futurally are continually unnerved by something which might never

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180 As the *Talmud* puts it, God speaks "in human language"; likewise for the Jew, God's word is "the only possible link with Him" (Edmond Jabes, *From the Desert to the Book. Conversations with Marcel Cohen*, 73).

181 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; the Biblical saga of ethical monotheism is older than or *prior* to the adventure of ontology, the Greek aspiration which seeks the intelligibility of the intelligible. It is, rather, about an idea of how humans beings might live in the world as personal beings who bear an unevadable responsibility for each other.

182 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).

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

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

happen. The past is life as *regret*; the future is life as *anxiety*. In both cases, a person who lives this way misses out on that which is of fundamental importance for human existence. I don't mean enjoying 'hear-and-now' material pleasure. I mean encountering real, living human beings. For one cannot be human without such encounters. And there is no way to experience encounter except by living in the present - that is, by being *personally* present to whatever is happening right in the midst of life's unfolding.[185]

The second dimension of language relates to what might be called personal singularity. It is the latter that a spoken word upholds, preserves and protects. In this sense, we only exist as personal, individual human beings when and insofar as we speak. 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".[186] In short the meaning which is of issue for human-to-human or human-divine communication is not much *psychological* as *spiritually personal*.[187] 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".[188]

So the sense in which there is a human "meaning in a sign" depends upon "engaged commitment". By the latter, Nemo has in mind a commitment to be *responsible for the other*, and in particular, 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, I can. For a word spoken to another is able to do two things: it can *negate* or *affirm* them. So I have a choice. With a word, I can either *give life* or I can *kill* (again, as the Book of Proverbs suggests[189]).

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185 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*.

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

187 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.

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

189 I.e., "Life and death are in the power of the tongue"; 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

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, a 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".[190] To this extent, if we want to remain not only within the sphere of words but also in a human domain, 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 spoken word in effect says to them: "I *believe* in your existence *as such*'.[191]

The word is hospitality, primordial greeting. To speak to another, regardless of the *content* of what 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', 'it is good that you exist'.[192]

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 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).

190 *Essays in Understanding*, 376.

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

192 Thus Levinas asks, "Is not the first word, 'good day'. . . 'good day' as benediction and as any being available for the other man? It doesn't mean: what a beautiful day. Rather: I wish you peace, I wish you a good day, expression of one who worries for the other. It underlies all the rest of communication, underlies all discourse" (Emmanuel Levinas in Jill Robbins [ed.], *Is it Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, 47). And so, "the essence of language is friendship and hospitality" (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 305). Likewise, 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 phenomological locus of potential meetings (for the latter is, again, what revelation is). In this

The same applies when it comes to God: to encounter God or meet God is *to affirm God's existence*. But even more important, this affirmation is *a need of God himself*. 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 an entire philosophical tradition of Western culture, which, after the Greeks, found a way to 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".[193]

Despite what Pascal thought, there is really no difference between the "philosopher's God" and the God of theology. It is thanks to them that both theistic and atheistic dead-ends become inescapable. So perhaps the challenge for us today is to approach this problem *otherwise* than either philosophy or 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".[194] 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".[195]

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".[196] Likewise, Stephane 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".[197]

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sense, we might say that the world was created proleptically, for the sake of revelation, so that redemption could happen within it.

193 Spinoza*, Ethics*, part 5, prop. 19, quoted in Franz Rosenzweig, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 60-61, n. 31.
194 Quoted in ibid., 23, n. 24
195 Nemo, *Job and the Excess of Evil*, 135.
196 Ibid., 123; italics in original.
197 *System and Revelation.The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig*, 102, 108.

Stay On Earth

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 remain incipiently egoistic). Rather, as I've already suggested above, affirming the other means assuming *personal responsibility* for them.

There is here, then, a non-sentimental stringency which, far from precluding intimacy, is its precondition. 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.[198] The affirmation of the other which is at the same time the onerousness of an infinite responsibility for my neighbour becomes, through the sense of this obligation, a responsibility one-for-the-other, "each one answering for and answerable to the lives of all the others".[199] And so, we are brought into the domain of the supra-human, but without for all that leaving behind the here-and-now condition of finite existence.

Most religions and forms of spirituality tend to denigrate the finite, earthly situation of human life. Thus, for example, Plato recommends that human beings "ought to try to escape from the earth to the dwelling of the gods as quickly as we can, 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".[200] But as Michael Wyschogrod notes, the problem with this tendency of the spirit to flee earthly, finite existence in search of a more ethereal environment is that "the higher it wishes to rise, the more ballast it must shed in its ascent".

As a consequence, he writes, a great many religions have "little regard for the everyday world in which men are entrapped. This is true of much oriental religion but also 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

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198 The exigency by which this comes about is *suffering*: "Suffering exists in and of itself, whether I feel it or not. I can always feel it, always it is right next to me, even when for a moment I don't feel it and don't have to bear its entire weight myself. But I at least have to see it, hear it, feel it, even smell it, for it continues to spread its thick mist" (H. G. Adler, *The Journey*, 59).

199 Levinas, *In the Time of the Nations*, 171; "'But there is suffering that you don't experience. A stranger's suffering is not your suffering'; 'Any suffering is my suffering'" (H. G. Adler, *The Journey*, 59).

200 Plato, *Theaetetus*, 176a.

therefore shuns the darkness, from which it attempts to escape into the light of redemption and sinlessness".[201]

Judaism, however, "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".[202] In this respect, Judaic tradition, in its commitment to infinite responsiblity, offers what is perhaps the only distinct alternative to the Greek *logos*, in which, as an understanding of being, philosophy surpasses religion yet remains mythological.

I've suggested that speech is hospitality; the word is human when it greets the other, welcoming them into the space of finite, mortal existence. So 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'. 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"[203] - does God appear. 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, a responsibility which is infinite. It is this "infinite debt" which arises in the engagement of one with another, and occurring through a spoken word, "effectively rules out speaking man ever becoming a man of power".[204]

Metaphor, contact across an infinite space, a connection that respects the integrity and separateness of the other, that seeks neither to control nor to dominate, a relation, therefore, which is essentially pacific - all of this is particular to a human, spoken word. But as the framework in which human-divine encounter occurs, the character of language, as both organon par-excellence of human finitude and the link between

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201 *The Body of Faith. Judaism as Corporeal Election*, 9.
202 Ibid..
203 This ephiphany of the Divine in the face of the other stands for a universal exigency which ultimately is foreign neither to philosophical thinking per se nor 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).
204 Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 9.

creature and Creator, will only be recognized to the extent that we allow words to take their place in the life which becomes human insomuch as it is *the life of words spoken and listened to*.[205] 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. Hence the phenomenological method, which is 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.

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 Dostoyevsky[206]

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 at the same time, pledges responsibility to 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".[207] To this extent, there can be no relation to God outside of society with the other. So whilst one cannot approach God with any concept, nonetheless it is God who approaches *in the face of the other person*, God being precisely a "relay to the neighbour".[208]

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205 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).
206 *Crime and Punishment*, 629.
207 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.
208 Levinas, *In the Time of the Nations*, 171.

The point of ths essay is that all questions of spirituality are ultimately questions of living - that is, *human* questions.[209] 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 called 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. In this sense, we might say that all communication is "an adventure of a subjectivity"[210] quite different to that striving of an ego which feels a need and concern "to recover itself", to return to itself; different, also, from that "coinciding in consciousness"[211] typical of all knowing, which seeks to reduce the encounter with what is other 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 characterizes this dialectic of closeness and distance, proximity and separation, as a modality of "being-together-in-the-distance", a caesura which is, however, "acted upon, crossed through, suffered, never simply measured or contemplated".[212] It is, thereby, an experience which culminates in that "pure exteriority"[213] by which the subject finds themselves "cast into language without the vehicle of a voice",[214] into the "void" of an "*aphonia*",[215] an 'outside of self' which is precisely the peculiar *transcendence* brought by a spoken word, a transcendence whose absoluteness is neither static nor rigid but alive. In which case, speech 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".

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209 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).
210 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*, 120.
211 Ibid..
212 *Europe and Empire*, 66.
213 Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History*, 6. Yet maybe God, too, insofar as he can neither be mastered nor known, is this "unpresupposable non-latency"?
214 Ibid., 9.
215 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.

Rather, it points us towards that "unpresupposable non-latency in which men have always dwelt, and in speaking, they move and breathe".[216]

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".[217] 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".[218] 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 the "only possible answer" to this question is "human life as . . . ethical way".[219]

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",[220] who've managed to maintain a hold on being in a "void" that is neither the "absence of a voice nor a *gramma*"?[221] 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 that presuppositionless non-latency to which Agamben refers.

Yet why should this double condition - freedom from presupposition and non-latency- be 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, otherwise latency would leave it open to being appropriated and thus incorporated as an element in a calculable totality - ontological, political or societal.

But whether as potentially knowable or assimilable to the All, language is in danger of losing that which makes it human, thereby lapsing into the condition of language typical of *ideology*, whose deforming power creates a speech which, as Franz Kafka so aptly put it, is "blurred".[222] And so, there are many people who "prowl around Mount Sinai", who are "garrulous or they shout, or they are taciturn".

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216 Ibid., 9.
217 Ibid..
218 Ibid..
219 Ibid., 9-10.
220 Ibid., 10,
221 Ibid..
222 'Mount Sinai', in Kafka, *Parables and Paradoxes*, 45.

Yet none "comes straight down a broad, newly made, smooth road that does its own part in making one's strides long and swifter"[223] - this smooth, broad road being the way of ethical monotheism. With the latter, the transcendence of words is 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. It is the road, in short, to a humanity which is original on the basis of its presence to God, a God who concerns me "by the word which is expressed in the form of the face of the other person".[224] In this sense, we might say that it is the Jews who've showed humanity how to be human.

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223 Ibid..
224 Emmanual Levinas, in Robbins [ed.], *Is it Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, 219.