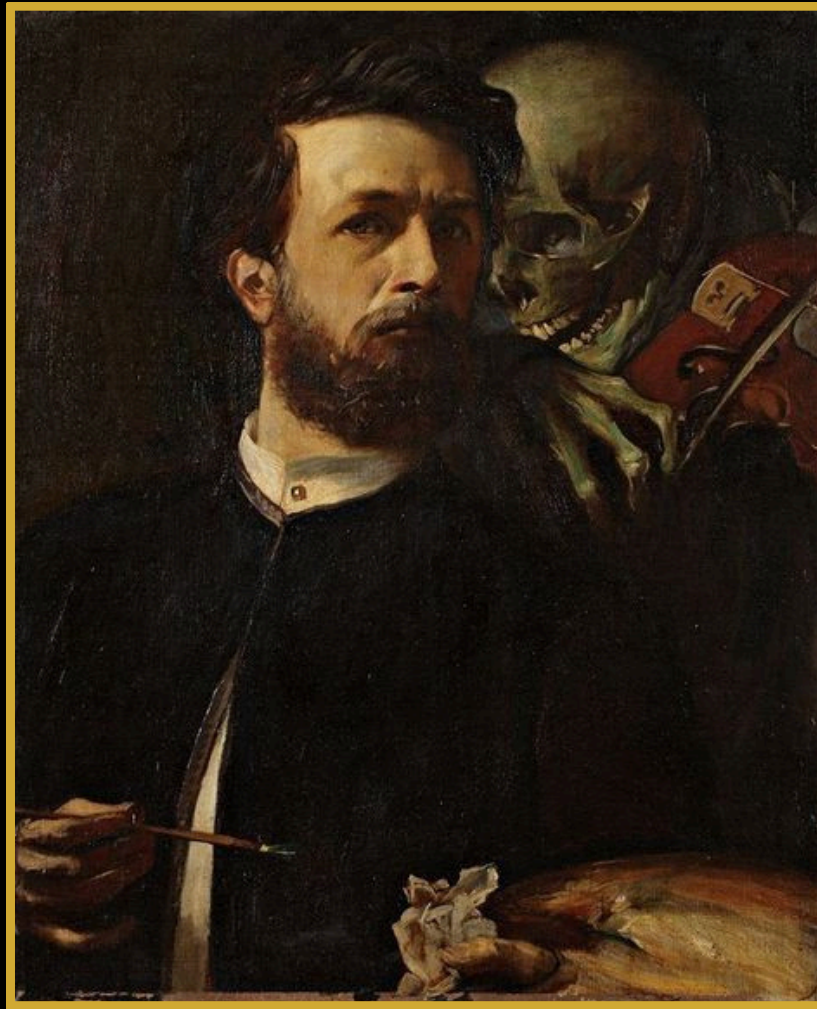


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NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

THIS SEVENTH EDITION OF THE JUDAIC STUDIES REVIEW IS CONCERNED WITH EXISTENTIALISM IN RELIGION. OUR CONTRIBUTORS HAVE FOCUSED ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF EXISTENTIAL SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT TO JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY. WE ARE FUNDAMENTALLY CONCERNED WITH THE QUESTION OF LIFE'S PURPOSE, FROM A VARIETY OF THEOLOGICAL TRADITIONS.

BEN FROGEL AND DANIEL KALISH'S PAPERS REVIEW ELI RUBIN'S RECENT WORK, "KABBALAH AND THE RUPTURE OF MODERNITY." FROGEL CRITICS THE PAPER ACCORDING TO THE CLAIM THAT A PHILOSOPHY WHICH IS TOO INSULAR TO ITS OWN TRADITION CANNOT PROVIDE THE NECESSARY FRAMEWORK OF BEING FOR MODERN MAN. KALISH ANALYZES THE WAY THAT RUBIN'S WORK CAN HELP TO UNDERSTAND THE CHABAD MOVEMENT'S THEOLOGY OF RUPTURE—AN ACT OF DIVINE CONCEALMENT WHICH LENDS ITSELF TO AN EXISTENTIAL EXPLANATION FOR GOD'S ABSENCES. GEORGE FRENCH'S ESSAY DESCRIBES THE EXISTENTIAL ROLE OF MYTH IN MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING. JACOB CONROD'S PAPER IS ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF PLACE IN UNDERSTANDING ONE'S OWN LIFE NARRATIVE. AYALA QIDRON'S WORK IS ABOUT THE OVERLAP IN ST. AUGUSTINE AND HANNA ARENDT'S THEOLOGY OF 'RADICAL GOOD.' TRAVIS SLOCUMB'S ESSAY ARGUES FOR THE NECESSITY OF SPIRITUAL COURAGE IN BECOMING A SELF FROM THE WORKS OF LEV SHESTOV AND NIKOLAI BERDYAEV.

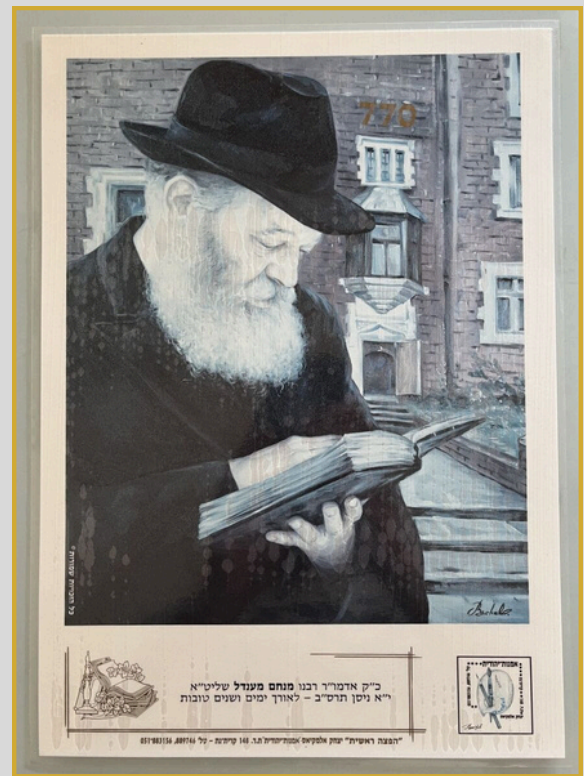
WE HOPE YOU ENJOY THIS MOST RECENT ISSUE OF THE JUDAIC STUDIES REVIEW, AND THANK YOU FOR READING.



DEDICATION TO DANIEL KALISH AND BEN FROGEL'S ESSAYS

BEN FROGEL & DANIEL KALISH

Like most Jewish college students on American campuses, we have interacted with the Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidic tradition at Shabbat dinners, tefillin booths, and via other facets of the impressive Jewish world that the movement has constructed. Between the two of us, we have prayed at the movement's headquarters at 770 Eastern Parkway, served for two years as president of a Chabad on Campus chapter, and broken bread with shluchim (emissaries) on three continents. Along the way, we have met countless Jews and non-Jews for whom the teachings and communities of Chabad have served as exposure to a traditionalist form of Jewish life and a source of meaning and inspiration. Yet to those who lack a background in Hasidic teachings and practices, Chabad can appear foreign. To a secular audience, and indeed to many young Jews, it may be challenging to understand the roots of a tradition that can seem detached from what we consider "modern" life.



Through a perspective that is both intellectually rigorous and central to the Chabad tradition, Eli Rubin's *Kabbalah and the Rupture of Modernity* (Stanford University Press, forthcoming in April 2025) calls into question just what it means to live a "modern" life. Rubin's work reflects his unique bona fides as both a Ph.D. from University College London and a contributing editor of Chabad.org. As such, we thought it fitting to approach *Kabbalah and the Rupture of Modernity* from two distinct perspectives.

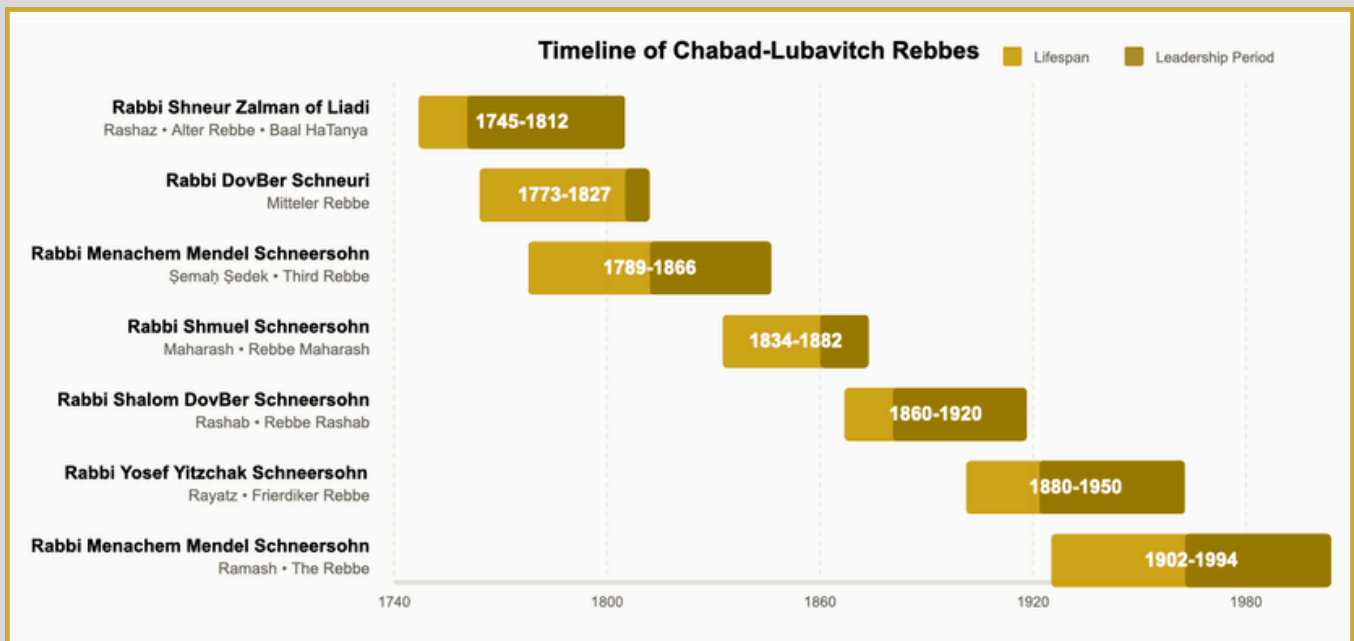


DEDICATION TO DANIEL KALISH AND BEN FROGEL'S ESSAYS

BEN FROGEL & DANIEL KALISH

Daniel Kalish will explore the ways in which this book is helpful to the informed layperson and critique the book where it fails to offer a wider picture of “modernity” to someone who is not immediately familiar with the Chabad movement. Ben Frogel will find Rubin’s methodology and intellectual history compelling while critically assessing his central contention, that the “general condition of modernity can be better understood through the particular prism of Chabad’s two-hundred-year confrontation with historical and kabbalistic rupture” (xix). We hope our reviews will spark more thoughtful engagement with Jewish life at the College of William & Mary and beyond.

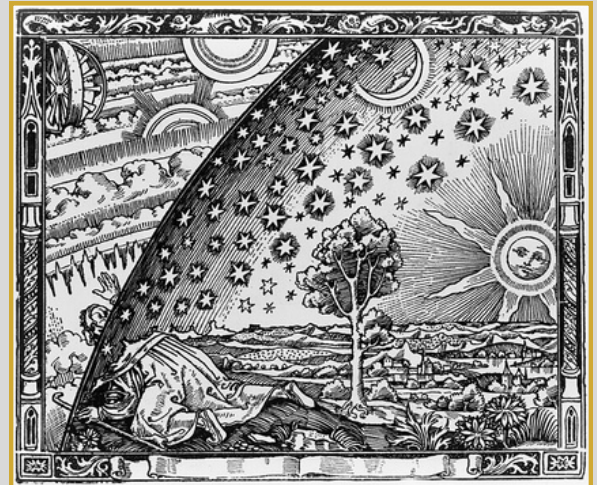
Dedicated to Rabbi Mendy and Esther Heber for the light they have brought to our corner of the world.



“CHABAD AS A HERMENEUTICS OF SINGULARITY?”

BEN FROGEL

While most American Jews know the Chabad-Lubavitch movement for its **massive outreach efforts**, the past 20 years have seen a wave of academic literature attempting to examine the Hasidic dynasty’s relevance to our contemporary philosophical discussions. While both of these works attempt to present the teachings of Menachem Mendel Schneersohn (Ramash), Chabad’s seventh rebbe, in a systematic manner, Rubin’s new book, *Kabbalah and the Rupture of Modernity*, adds a helpful perspective in two ways. First, Rubin contextualizes Ramash as the culmination of Chabad’s 200-year intra-traditional negotiation of theology and praxis. Second, Rubin writes from within the Chabad tradition, both intellectually and communally. Rubin’s argument moves chronologically through the Chabad tradition through the lens of its struggle with cosmic rupture. Rubin divides the work into four parts, each with an introduction and epilogue. While the introduction and body of each part are primarily intellectual-historical, Rubin partially dedicates some chapters, especially epilogues, to the implications of Chabad thought to contemporary philosophy. As such, *Kabbalah and the Rupture of Modernity* presents a unique opportunity to engage with a case for Chabad thought that addresses itself to a modern audience while remaining faithful to the internal standards of the tradition. However, it is doubtful whether Rubin’s reconstruction of the Chabad tradition rises to the challenge of presenting a philosophically compelling account of modernity and postmodernity.



1 In particular, Elliot Wolfson’s *Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menachem Mendel Schneersohn* (Columbia University, 2012), Phillip Wexler, Eli Rubin and Michael Rubin’s *Social Vision: The Lubavitcher Rebbe’s Transformative Paradigm for the World* (2019) and Yosef Bronstein’s *Engaging the Essence: The Torah Philosophy of the Lubavitcher Rebbe* (Maggid, 2024) explicate the philosophy of Chabad’s seventh and yet-unreplaced rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneersohn (Ramash).

2 A rebbe is the leader of a Hasidic sect, who leads his community spiritually and in this-worldly affairs. Hasidic rebbes are thought by their “hasidim” (followers) to enjoy a greater perception of spiritual realms than the average person. While rebbe-ship is dynastic and akin to royal authority, Eli Rubin’s book argues that theological and philosophical issues play an equally important role in Chabad’s leadership controversies.

Rubin's central claim is that the **“general condition of modernity can be better understood through the particular prism of Chabad's two-hundred-year confrontation with historical and kabbalistic rupture” (xix)**. The kabbalistic rupture at the center of *Kabbalah and the Rupture of Modernity* is *tzimtzum*, the Lurianic doctrine of divine self-contraction as the ground of finite being.¹ The Hasidic movement spearheaded a nonliteral interpretation of *tzimtzum*, affirming the absolute immanence of God and situating this world as one in which God self-discloses divine immanence. In other words, **“to contemplate tzimtzum is to contemplate the foundational condition upon which any and all forms of being are predicated” (8)**. Thus, insofar as the Chabad-Lubavitch community situates itself within a cosmological drama where the appearance of rupture is the ground of finite being, to contemplate and thus overcome the illusion of *tzimtzum* is to recognize divine singularity and thus repair being itself. For Rubin, Chabad's project of dissolving the illusion of cosmic rupture to make way for a hermeneutics of divine singularity allows it to overcome historical ruptures such as succession controversies, the Holocaust, a transition from Eastern Europe to the United States, and within modern and postmodern philosophies.

Kabbalah and the Rupture of Modernity shines when it demonstrates how the Chabad community employs its unique formulation of *tzimtzum* to negotiate socio-mystical praxis through history. Like many of the figures he surveys, Rubin is an intertextual and tradition-situated thinker, making constructive points through analyses of earlier Chabad texts and rebbes. Writing consciously from the Chabad community, Rubin offers a necessary

¹ Isaac Luria (1534-1572) revolutionized Jewish mysticism with, among other things, the concept of *tzimtzum*, in which Primordial Adam's original sin severs a cosmic flow of divinity, thus rupturing God and making room for the created cosmos. Luria's accompanying philosophy of Jewish law holds that every commandment “repairs the world” via the reunification of the world with a contracted God.

corrective to scholarly literature that tends to reduce the tradition's actions in history to sociological factors.

Part I, "Being as Rupture", begins by explaining the stakes of the *tzimtzum* debate and ends by framing Shneur Zalman of Liadi's (Rashaz's) nonliteral interpretation of *tzimtzum* against the intellectual and political assault spearheaded by Elijah of Vilna (Gra),² as the key to the Hasidic movement generally and Chabad thought specifically. Rubin emphasizes the Lurianic conception of *tzimtzum* as a "herald of modernity"; Luria's argument that rupture is the ground of being which is a significant anticipation of modern thought where **"to be a modern thinker is to realize that knowledge can only be produced through acknowledgement of the rupture that undermines it" (15)** Just as Rene Descartes' break from medieval to modern philosophy depends upon the acknowledgement of rupture between the thinking self and the world, Luria's method depends upon the rupture between an infinite God and the diverse cosmos.

Rubin then emphasizes the existential dimension of Rashaz's interpretation, where *tzimtzum* does not impinge upon God's actual immanence. Rubin states that for Rashaz, **"the hidden presence of God within the rupture of being is actually the very ground of being. Rapturous reunion, accordingly, is always within reach" (27)**. For Rashaz, God's immanence allows one to come to true knowledge of God within this world. In contrast, Gra understands *tzimtzum* as an infinite gap between God and the created cosmos. Rashaz critiques Gra's literalism on pietistic grounds, arguing that Gra's infinite God-humanity gap eliminates the possibility of knowledge about God, thus rendering mystical texts like the Zohar as mere parables. The charge of a non-literal interpretation of the Zohar carried serious weight because both sides of the polemic claimed to

² Gra is known as the chief opponent, or *mitnaged*, of the Hasidic movement.

uphold it as divine revelation.³ For Rubin, the hiddenness of God ruptures being by obscuring God's omnipresence from finite being, yet finite being is only possible through the appearance of worldly diversity. Rubin, quoting a teacher, compares this picture of *tzimtzum* to a 2-liter bottle of Coca-Cola:

‘Look at this bottle. Do you see how it is wide, and then narrows to form a small opening at the top? That is *simsum*. Everything in this world has a measure, a limitation, a boundary, and that is what makes it usable and accessible. If the bottle didn't narrow like this it would spill over the table when I tried to pour some out. When I speak, I need to take all my thoughts and narrow them into words. The whole world is a product of *simsum*.’⁴

In other words, Rashaz characterizes the objects that constitute ordinary sense-experience as a contraction, or a concentration, of infinite divinity. Finite, limited being is not a given, but rather exists through a configuration of the Infinite. Rubin argues that, for Rashaz, finite being discovers its own finitude through the immanence of an infinite God: worldly diversity sets the stage for the loving self-disclosure of God-as-Infinite to a realm that, unlike one of static holiness, has the potential for radical revelation. The rest of the book proceeds according to the claim that, in line with nonliteral *tzimtzum*, **“Chabad Hasidism never attempted to ignore existential rupture, but always confronted it directly and strove toward its overcoming, or**

³ The Zohar is one of the canonical texts of Kabbalah. It was first publicized in the 14th century, but claims to be authored by Shimeon Bar Yochai, a second-century rabbi. The Zohar offers a rich description of the inner workings of divinity and was seen by Rashaz and Gra. Thus, Rashaz's suggestion that the Gra must take the Zohar as parable threatened the latter's standing within the Kabbalistic tradition..

⁴ Preamble, xv.

its reinterpretation” (15). The juxtaposition of worldly rupture with all-encompassing divinity is the grounds for what Rubin will later call a “hermeneutics of singularity.”

Part II, “Being as Nothing”, focuses on the implications of Rashaz’s nonliteral interpretation of *tzimtzum* for the ontic status of finite existence. Rubin argues, with Elliot Wolfson and against much of the academic intellectual history of the Chabad tradition, that Rashaz advocates for neither hard acosmism nor an ontological separation between God and nature. Rather, Rubin argues that **“The illusion is not that the world exists, but rather that the world stands in a relationship of otherness relative to a transcendent and distant God” (61).** He illustrates this distinction with the concepts of Lower and Upper Unities (*yihuda tata’ a* and *yihuda ila’ a*, respectively). While Lower Unity is a manifestation of God’s concealment via the illusion of transcendence, the Upper Unity absorbs existence in divine singularity. In other words, Rubin posits that, for Chabad thought, the existence of the finite world is made possible by an epistemic rupture, not an ontological one. Alongside brief discussions of DovBer Schneuri and Menachem Mendel Schneersohn (*Tzemach Tzedek*), Part II is also an introduction to the characteristic form of Chabad thought, the Hasidic sermon. The Hasidic sermon, delivered by a rebbe on theological matters over time, allows the community to bring the existential rapture implied by the drama of divine immanence and hiddenness to bear on its quotidian life.

Part III, “Being as Infinity,” intertwines Shmuel Schneersohn’s (Maharash’s) triumph in Chabad’s first succession crisis with his emphasis on the physical and historical realms through his interpretation of the Kabbalistic concepts of *hokhmah* (lit: wisdom) and *reshimah* (lit: residue). Maharash, who serialized his sermons on Shabbat, cast *hokhmah* as that which “reveals

the utter concealment of divine transcendence” (132). Rubin argues that Maharash’s definition of hokhmah recalibrates the concept as a phenomenal realization of the ungraspability of infinitude. Maharash’s characterization of reshimah as “**antecedent trace of infinity**” (156), or a finite shadow of divinity unscathed by *tzimtzum*, allows the tradition to assign the material realm chief importance in the drama of overcoming rupture.

Part IV, “Being as Innovation,” frames Shalom DovBer Schneersohn’s (Rashab’s) concept of *Or Hadash* (lit: “new light”) as a solution to a critical problem of modernity. The *Or Hadash* is “**the disclosure of the unconstructed, unarticulated, and unfathomable essence that is the very ground of all particular phenomena and of all particular constructs.**” (188) In other words, *Or Hadash* is the readily-available disclosure of the unthinkable divine essence. Given the contradiction of thinking the unthinkable, Rashab pivots to justifying *Or Hadash* in light of the mystic’s phenomenological experience of rapturous reunion with the divine essence. In an interesting epilogue, Rubin contrasts a Freudian view of modernity with that of Rashab. Rubin argues that for the former, autonomy is the grounds for the individual’s self-creation. In Rubin’s reconstruction of Rashab, modernity is teleologically oriented towards channeling autonomy into the re-creation of one’s origin. The origin, in this case, is divine singularity: the return to the origin via phenomenal contemplation of reshimah and the resulting enchantment of the finite world is a *sui generis* reconfiguration of being that would be impossible without the initial act of *tzimtzum*.

Part V, “Being as Humanity,” emphasizes the human and historical focus of Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn’s (Rayatz) and Menachem Mendel Schneersohn’s (Ramash’s) thought, in which the

messianic overcoming of tzimtzum **“meaningfully transforms materiality into an essential fulcrum of luminosity” (240)**. In particular, Rubin focuses on Chabad’s hermeneutics of singularity, in which belief in divine singularity manifests itself as confidence in the ability to overcome this-worldly rupture. In Rayatz’s order to direct the financial resources of Chabad’s American practitioners towards Eastern European Lubavitchers, Rubin finds the notion that **“[tzimtzum’s] teleological explanatory power allows for the spiritualization of material resources, such that the concealment of the world itself becomes a fitting receptacle for the immanent revelation of God” (227)**. For Rayatz, the this-worldly rupture between the American community, which possessed wealth and religious lacksadasicality, and an impoverished-yet-pious Eastern European community is a microcosm of the cosmic rupture at the heart of being. On Rubin’s account, Chabad’s approach to this-worldly rupture presupposes the cosmic singularity at the heart of Rashaz’s argument.

In Rubin’s account of Ramash, the hermeneutics of singularity is a hermeneutics of synthesis, where **“true synthesis exhibits the singular essence of being; the innermost point of existence that is simultaneously the essence of God and the essence of all things” (253)**. For Ramash, divine singularity must be realized via the synthesis of historical ruptures. Divine immanence, for Ramash, necessitates approaching historical ruptures with syntheses that point towards the essential singularity of divine being. Rubin’s analysis presents Ramash’s hermeneutics of messianic singularity at work, most prominently in his simultaneous acceptance of conflicting truth claims. However, Rubin’s analyses betrays several obstacles to the success of Chabad hermeneutics to understand the modern condition.

While Rubin introduces Ramash as having internalized the quantum uncertainty of Ernst Schrodinger, what he actually presents is a fideistic “hierarchy of truths” (265) that situates Chabad dogma as existing on higher planes of reality than opposing views. For instance, Rubin summarizes that **“the students of Rashaz, Ramash argued, were cognitively capable of understanding his nonliteral interpretation of [tzimtzum]. In subsequent generations, by contrast, people have difficulty understanding how the divine King can possibly be present in a filthy place, and so Rashaz’s doctrine must now be accepted on faith”** (264). For Ramash, the conclusions drawn by human reason are not to be ignored, but rather to be understood as a limited refraction of dogmas that one must accept on faith. Rubin’s analyses argue that Ramash’s belief that different claims may be true in different metaphysical realms, yet his examples present a dogmatist who presents a hierarchy such that **“even if reason undermines the conclusive dogma that ‘all’ of the Torah is eternal, the ‘higher’ truth of that dogma must remain unquestioned”** (268). While Rubin claims that Ramash incorporates metaphysical uncertainty into a hermeneutics of singularity, Chabad discourse fails to allow uncertainty to interrogate central dogmas.

At the culmination of Rubin’s narrative, divine singularity is accepted on faith, yet employed as a presupposition required for the remediation of any and all rupture, historical, epistemic, or cosmological. Yet, if “rupture” is any human shortcoming, Chabad’s assertion of a divine singularity that *a priori* renders any perceived rupture illusory fails to confront the possibility of rupture. Moreover, in Ramash’s command to place traditional dogma above all possible rupture, we see a rejection of the possibility that rupture could impact the leading figures of one’s tradition. Thus, one must question the extent to which Chabad’s hermeneutics of singularity is a

metaphysically-saturated “God of the Gaps” argument, or an employment of *a priori* theological dogma to explain this-worldly human shortcomings. If contention with modernity requires acknowledging rupture, to begin inquiry from the presupposition that any and all rupture is a mere illusion in light of higher metaphysical truth is to reject the possibility of engagement with modernity.

Moreover, Ramash’s appeal to faith makes clear that much of the Chabad tradition is predicated upon authoritarian claims upon socio-mystical practice. While Rubin rightfully critiques historical scholarship for negating the theological dimensions of Chabad’s praxis-negotiation, his own argument risks papering over the top-down nature of a rebbe’s authority, which is often predicated upon the leader’s perceived supernatural abilities and perceptions of a spiritual realm to which the ordinary believer lacks epistemic access. As such, while Rubin convincingly argues that Chabad’s ongoing interpretation of *tzimtzum-qua-existential-rupture* is sufficient for Chabad’s perseverance in the absence of a physically-present rebbe, an existential account of Chabad risks undermining the starting point of existentialism: the individual’s encounter with her own finitude. If the individual’s existential consciousness can be dictated to her by a divinely-inspired authority figure, then, once again, the *a posteriori* rupture at the heart of Rubin’s argument is resolved as a matter of an *a priori* doctrine that rejects the possibility of an individual’s confrontation with her own finitude.

However, these avenues for critique are only apparent in light of Rubin’s dedication to interweaving the theological and existential commitments of his tradition through a narrative of its historical struggle with rupture. Rubin displays erudition and philosophical

sophistication throughout the work. In both form and content, *Kabbalah and the Rupture of Modernity* stands alone in its portrayal and endorsement of the Chabad tradition's socio-mystical hermeneutics. It will surely inspire interesting conversations in years to come.

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"FROM NIKOLAEV TO BROOKLYN: CHABAD HASIDISM AS AN EXISTENTIAL THEOLOGY OF MODERNITY"

DANIEL KALISH

1. Nikolaev

My grandmother was born 101 years ago in Nikolaev (now Mykolaiv, Ukraine), an industrious Soviet port city on the Black Sea. I do not know whether she dreamed of leaving her birthplace, but the tide of 20th-century history left her little choice. During the Second World War, her family, like thousands of others, evacuated to Kazakhstan. The arduous trek saved them from the city's Nazi occupation; Nikolaev's remaining Jewish community, already scarred by pogroms in earlier decades, was nearly annihilated by the occupying German forces. After the war, she would settle in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg, Russia) and work as a lawyer. Despite living a secular life, the insidious specter of anti-Semitism never vanished. She ultimately left the USSR in 1989 with her husband and son, hoping to secure a safer, freer future in the United States. When she passed away in 2019, she left behind a life shaped by war, migration, and perseverance.



In that same city, Nikolaev, twenty-two years before my grandmother was born, a boy destined to become one of the most consequential religious leaders in modern Jewish history was also born: Menachem Mendel Schneerson, known by his followers as “the Rebbe.” Like my grandmother, he and his family left Nikolaev before fleeing Russia altogether, eventually leaving Europe on the eve of the Holocaust and settling in Brooklyn. There, he became the leader of Chabad-Lubavitch, a Hasidic movement that reoriented Jewish mystical teaching and communal outreach worldwide.

Remarkably, my grandmother's and Schneerson's paths briefly crossed. In the early 1990s, she attended the Rebbe's famous "Sunday Dollars" event, where the Rebbe would hand out dollar bills designated for charity to hours-long lines of visitors. When my grandmother reached the front of the line and told him she, too, was from Nikolaev, the Rebbe handed her a second dollar. It was an unassuming gesture, but one infused with symbolism. Two trajectories of emigration and upheaval, both rooted in the same Black Sea port, crossing again in Brooklyn. On one side, a secular Jewish mother who had survived World War II and Soviet anti-Semitic discrimination; on the other, the spiritual heir of a Hasidic dynasty, leading a global community in pursuit of divine illumination. Nikolaev, overshadowed by devastation, yet also a cradle of rebirth, bound their stories together.

This personal anecdote crystallizes a central motif that Eli Rubin explores in his new work, *Kabbalah and the Rupture of Modernity: The Existential History of Chabad Hasidism*. At the heart of Rubin's study is the concept of *simsum* (also spelled *tsimsum*), a mystical idea derived from Lurianic Kabbalah, positing that God "withdrew" or "concealed" divine infinite light to allow the physical world to exist. Rather than regard *simsum* as a dry theological abstraction, Rubin frames it as the key to understanding Chabad's profoundly modern engagement with rupture. It is precisely this notion of existential gap or "rupture" that sets modern consciousness apart, Rubin suggests, and it is *simsum* that allows Chabad to face that gap and speak to its implications.

I. Chabad in a World of Rupture

The Chabad-Lubavitch movement, which Schneerson led from 1951 to his passing in 1994, might appear at first glance a bulwark of Orthodoxy seemingly untouched by modernity. After all, Chabad emissaries (*schluchim*) are instantly recognizable by their traditional attire and fierce commitment to *halakhah* (Jewish law). Yet, as Rubin argues, Chabad’s trajectory is far more innovative—it is rooted in an ongoing negotiation with rupture, and by extension modernity, itself.

Rubin’s central claim is that Chabad’s core mystical teaching, heavily informed by the Lurianic Kabbalistic concept of *simsum*, addresses one of modernity’s defining themes: an experience of ongoing break or discontinuity, be it historical, social, or existential. “[I]f there is one thing that unites modernity, in all its variations, it is a confrontation with rupture,” Rubin writes. “Some embrace rupture, others seek to overcome it, or repair it. None can ignore it.” (xix) *Simsum* posits that God “withdrew” or concealed divine light to create a world that appears separate, yet remains spiritually interconnected. Chabad Hasidism, with its emphasis on divine immanence, elevates this paradox of concealment and revelation into the animating heartbeat of its theology: if the world seems profane and God distant, that very hiddenness is itself part of a divine drama in which human awareness can unveil the ever-present infinite light (*eyn sof*).

Rubin traces this theme through two and a half centuries of Chabad texts, personalities, and upheavals. Founded in the late 18th century by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi (known to followers as “the Alter Rebbe”), the Chabad movement offers a distinctive approach to Hasidic spirituality. While Hasidism generally emphasizes personal devotion, prayer, and attachment to a holy leader or *tzaddik*, Chabad layers on a philosophical-psychological framework that trains

practitioners in meditative reflection on God’s immanence. The word “Chabad” itself is an acronym for three intellectual faculties in Hebrew—*Chochmah* (wisdom), *Binah* (understanding), and *Daat* (knowledge)—signaling that the movement values rational cognition as a path to deepen religious experience.

Yet, as Rubin shows, Chabad is no mere school of mystical speculation. It was born at a time of enormous turmoil in Eastern Europe, and its leaders grappled with waves of oppression: czarist decrees, the rise of socialism, Soviet-era persecutions, the Holocaust, and, finally, the forced and voluntary migrations of the mid-20th century. These upheavals shaped Chabad’s mission: if Jewish communities were to remain spiritually alive through chaos, they needed a theology that not only explained divine unity but did so in a manner urgent enough to address such crises.

Rubin persuasively contends that *simsun* is central to this project. Originating in 16th-century Lurianic Kabbalah, *simsun* imagines God contracting or concealing the infinite divine light to “make room” for creation. But Chabad’s interpretation, advanced by Rabbi Shneur Zalman and later rebbes, goes even further: not only is *simsun* a cosmic event, but it also reflects a psychological and existential state wherein God’s presence appears obscured. Put differently, the same dynamic that shapes cosmic creation—the partial withdrawal of infinite revelation—also structures human experience in a modern world rife with chaos and discontinuity.

II. From Nikolaev to Brooklyn

Although Rubin’s book focuses on the genealogies of Chabad thought, my own familial link to Nikolaev makes his study feel especially personal. In Nikolaev, on the eve of the Russian Revolution, Jewish life was teeming with radical change: secularization, Zionist movements, Bundist socialism, and the overshadowing threat of pogroms. Meanwhile, in the same city, the

future Lubavitcher Rebbe was born into a religious lineage that would soon cross the Atlantic, reestablishing itself in Crown Heights, Brooklyn.

Schneerson's ascension in 1951, after the death of his father-in-law, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, marks a pivotal turning point in Chabad's unfolding story. By that time, the Holocaust had decimated entire Hasidic communities in Europe. Many survivors arrived in the United States or Israel, haunted by the question: *How could divine providence allow such horrors?* Indeed, the catastrophic events of the Holocaust—arguably the nadir of modern rupture—would loom over all postwar Jewish theology. Rubin's analysis shows how Schneerson took this moment of worldwide rupture and recast it through *simsun*: the Holocaust stood as a terrifying concealment of divine light, but even that concealment might be transformed into impetus for renewal. In Chabad's case, the renewal is channeled by Jews performing mitzvahs to hasten the coming of the messiah: ergo the tefillin booths and mitzvah tanks that the movement is identified with today.

This renewal demanded activism on an unparalleled scale. Chabad's emissaries established outposts across the globe, from Bangkok to Berkeley. They host Shabbat dinners, teach Torah classes, and display a tireless optimism that could seem almost otherworldly. It may seem like the world appears distant from God, but no place is truly devoid of the divine, they would argue. For the Rebbe and his emissaries, *simsun* does not mark a permanent expulsion of holiness, but rather a strategic concealment inviting its very unveiling in the remotest places.

III. Commentary

Rubin's scholarship is especially strong when examining Chabad's ongoing engagement with broader philosophical and scientific developments. In a few surprising but compelling sections, he draws parallels and comparisons between Chabad's understanding of divine concealment and Freud's insights on the unconscious, or between *simsun* and the indeterminacy in quantum physics (Schneerson, in a delectable historical coincidence, took physics classes taught by Erwin Schrodinger as a student at the University of Berlin). This interplay deepens his argument that Chabad, far from burying its head in tradition, drew creatively from modern thought. Rubin's exploration of Schneerson's fascination with ideas like Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle is, in this regard, especially enlightening: it testifies to a worldview that sees the cracks, or ruptures, in scientific determinism as potential windows into the divine.

Still, certain readers might wish Rubin expanded his investigation to include a more sustained comparison with other currents in modern Jewish philosophy, or with broader post-Enlightenment discourses in Europe and North America. One also wonders how *simsun* might resonate or clash with Jewish existentialists or even postmodern thinkers. While Rubin briefly signals these larger philosophical contexts, one senses untapped potential for deeper cross-pollination.

Rubin self-consciously writes as both a scholar and a follower of the Chabad movement. He views this as a strength, arguing that his skill in using the tools of the academy help him to "better understand, and participate in, the intellectual and cultural tradition within which [he is] embedded," and conversely his being embedded in the tradition "enables [him] to apply the tools of the academy with a greater degree of cultural nuances, and to attain a greater degree of

exposure to the subjectivity integral to Chabad thought and literature.” (xxv). However, one may question whether such an approach risks downplaying tensions which his argument faces.

Indeed, he emphasizes the movement’s leadership succession process, yet it has been Rebbe-less for thirty years now without any clear successor in sight. The question of what this rupture means is not posed.

In this way, *Kabbalah and the Rupture of Modernity* is most valuable when read alongside a range of Jewish intellectual histories. While Rubin’s work is indispensable for those seeking an internal, text-based understanding of Chabad, a more panoramic view emerges by juxtaposing it with studies of Reform, Conservative, and Modern Orthodox thought in the same era. One can see how *simum* provides a metaphysical key for Chabad which equipped it to face modern disruptions just as other movements developed their own strategies, like leaning into rationalism or redefining Jewish identity.

Ultimately, *Kabbalah and the Rupture of Modernity* is a rich resource, pairing philosophical and theological exegesis with a lively historical narrative. For readers of Judaic Studies who want an introduction to Chabad’s intellectual underpinnings, Rubin’s work is essential. It admirably situates Chabad as a creative outgrowth of Lurianic Kabbalah and a direct participant in modernity’s defining theme: rupture. The story of my grandmother from Nikolaev, echoing Schneerson’s own journey, illustrates the ambiguities of that theme; migration can destroy, but it can also forge new possibilities. Chabad’s reading of *simum* teaches that every break, whether it be personal, historical, or cosmic, is fraught with potential discovery.

Rubin's book, like the two lives that crossed paths at Sunday Dollars, is a reminder that our biographies and the spiritual frameworks we adopt are intricately linked to broader forces of history. It is precisely by grappling with rupture, rather than ignoring or tidying it away, that the Chabad movement, and indeed modern Judaism as a whole, can continue to chart new ways forward.

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“RELIGIOUS MYTHOPOEIA AND EXISTENTIALISM”

GEORGE FRENCH

I. Man as Mythopoeist

Human beings are myth-makers. It may be one of our oldest activities. Archaeologists continue to unearth evidence that our ancient ancestors, as far back as the time of the Neanderthal, buried their dead with small tools and other trinkets, possible evidence of a belief in an afterlife. The archaeological record suggests that some of humanity’s earliest mythmaking behavior emerged out of an awareness of death. This should give us pause. Why would our ancestors spend time telling myths when the burden of daily survival gave them enough to think about? Perhaps it was because they, like us, were curious about the world and had a deep concern with how to live, not merely with how to survive. Our ancestors did not tell myths to amuse themselves or to ease the fear of death (at least not primarily). They told myths in order to orient themselves in the unsearchable mystery of human existence, with all of its wonders and sorrows. They wanted to chart a trustworthy course through its defining features – life, love, suffering, and death.



Allow me to roughly outline what I mean by “myth”. I do not use this word in the modern sense. Today, a myth is little more than a tall tale or an unsubstantiated claim. However, I hold that a myth is a creative effort intended to make sense of life and to narrate and disclose what is essential and universal about the human experience. Myths are often told through stories, but it can also be communicated in paintings, dances, songs, and other media. They may be true even if they are not scientifically or historically true. A myth is true to the degree that it makes sense of reality and human experience. For example, Homer’s *Odyssey* is a true myth regardless of whether or not it accurately describes historical events. It is more than a tale about a man trying to sail home. It is the story of

¹ Armstrong, “What is a Myth?”.

every homesick traveller, every pair of separated lovers, every band of friends pitted against the forces of nature, every wandering beggar, and everyone who has ever felt himself pitted against the gods and nature. We are each Odysseus in some aspect, and Odysseus is all of us. This is what makes for a true myth. The *Odyssey* may even be more helpful than historical accounts of Odysseus' life insofar as it grapples with core elements of the human experience.

Given their nature, we should not be surprised that the same archetypal themes reemerge time and again in mythologies across the globe. Common tropes include a lost ancestral paradise, treacherous serpents, great floods, warring twins, lands of giants, the overthrowing of a tyrannical father figure, great heroes with a tragic flaw, journeys to the underworld, and a postmortem judgment. The commonalities are staggering, and I think their abundance merits further reflection. How can Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Babylonian, Amerindian, Caribbean, Greek, Norse, Hindu, Jewish, West African, and Aboriginal mythologies be so similar when they developed in such vastly different geographical, historical, and cultural environments? The most plausible answer is that they are drawn from the same imaginative wellspring: the human psyche. The world has radically changed over the years, but humans fundamentally have not. We are still mythmakers, and we make myths (whether we know it or not) for the same reasons.

There is clear evidence of this in everyday speech in the way we often try to narrativize our lives. Motivational speakers tell us to “write your own story”. Pivotal life events are referred to as “the end of an era” or the marking of “a new chapter”. We describe people as having “main character energy”. Online quizzes tell us what Harry Potter house, Avatar tribe, or Middle Earth race we belong to. We fit ourselves to personal aesthetics like “dark academia” or “cottagecore”. The list goes on. Thousands of years after our ancestor's told the first fireside tales, we still find

ourselves trying to understand our lives using narrative. The mythopoeic spirit lives on in us. With this in mind, we turn now to a modern myth: the intellectual movement known as existentialism.

II. The Birth of a Myth

For many reasons, the twentieth century stands out in human history as uniquely tumultuous. The world population grew like never before. Standards of living rose across the globe. Entire infectious diseases were eradicated. Technology like automobiles, typewriters, home appliances, and mass media irrevocably altered daily living. Physicists began probing the weirdness of the quantum world while a patent clerk proved Newton wrong. The world went to war – twice. Atomic weapons were designed, built, tested, and *used*. A man set foot on the moon. The Human Genome Project began. The Internet was introduced. And that's to say nothing about decolonization, globalization, environmentalism, the Civil Rights movement, women's suffrage, and the Cold War. No other century compares to the staggering degree of suffering and triumph that humanity endured during this one.

It is no wonder that the generations born into this time struggled to find their voices. Living in the 21st century, we cannot fathom how radically different the world once was. Our lives are intertwined with instant communication and global culture. But if we could imagine for just a moment what it would be like to live without these things, and then to have them thrust upon us all at once, we would begin to understand the literary, artistic, philosophical, and religious movements that emerged from the 20th century. One can see how totalitarian suppressions of individuality led to brutalist architecture, how dramatic social upheaval precipitated the

expressionist movement in the arts, or how the undetermined place of women in society encouraged the *femme fatale* trope of noir cinema.

Existentialism is one of these movements. It emerged as a violent reaction to essentialism, a view that held sway for millennia. The essentialist holds that man is born with an essence, what we call *human nature*. He does not need to question who he is or what he is for, he can simply consider the fact that he is a human person. For example, Aristotle thought that there was an essential activity that human beings could participate in that no other animal could – rational thought.¹ Human flourishing, then, consisted in living rationally. However, the World Wars' wanton waste and destruction of human life and culture makes the essentialist view much harder to swallow. Are we not, after all, like every other living creature, ripping and tearing at each other to get what we want? Is it really virtue that drives men to noble deeds, or is it just blind, animal panic in the face of death? Do we really have immortal souls attuned to goodness, truth, and beauty, or are we, as a fellow student of mine once put it, “just bags of meat” at the end of the day? These questions tempt us to nihilism, the view that there is no meaning in life whatsoever. Existentialism arose as a response to this.

The existentialist myth runs something like this. We are thrown into the world suddenly and without our consent. Soon after, we are confronted with questions about life, death, love, meaning, and existence. These questions reveal to us that, unlike the rest of the animal kingdom which is guided entirely by instinct, we are both blessed and cursed with *freedom*. We can, if we choose, override our animal instincts. It is up to us to decide how we are going to live. The recognition of our freedom is often frightening and leaves us in a state of *anxiety*, what Kierkegaard calls “angst” and Satre “nausea”. Of course, the world around us offers many

¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097a15-1098a20.

ready-made answers to life's greatest questions, but accepting them comes with a cost: we will have to sacrifice our *authenticity*. Religious doctrines, political ideologies, fashion trends, mainstream entertainment, social conventions, economic systems, and the like constantly encourage us to fit in with the crowd. But if we want to live truly authentic lives, we cannot accept the easy answers given to us by those who claim to have them. We must engage with the absurdities of the world and to strike out on the path of self-discovery and self-interpretation. Ultimately, the only answers to the biggest questions of life that we should accept are those which we discover and create for ourselves. No one can do it for us.²

These three key concepts in existentialism – freedom, anxiety, and authenticity – are very familiar to the modern generation. In our digital age, we are constantly bombarded with news of tragedies from around the world, news about starving refugees, marginalized identities, social injustices, and a dying planet. Many young men and women feel pessimistic about the future yet completely paralyzed by the thought of trying to help. I have felt this way myself. Existentialism offers a way of living in a world we do not understand. It tells us that the world is in shambles because the powers-at-be are sustained by our conformity to the status quo. Our greatest act of rebellion is to live authentic lives, to define ourselves against the expectations being thrust upon us, and to chart our own course. Many young people subscribe to this philosophy unconsciously. It lies at the center of our culture of self-invention and self-identification.

However, the fruit of the existentialist myth should give us pause. It seems like every year we hear of more hatred on the Internet, more division in politics, more young people committing violent crimes, more pessimism about the future, and more cases of depression and social

² Aho, "Existentialism".

isolation. Of course, there are many factors that contribute to these statistics, but we ought to ask ourselves whether living the existentialist myth, consciously or not, encourages these trends.

Up to this point, I have given existentialism the status of a myth, but in many regards it is more like an *anti-myth*. Historically, myths would put the listeners in touch with transcendent reality. Existentialism aims for a different kind of transcendence, one of self-determination and self-expression. These two forms of transcendence could not be more different. Once, the tribal hunter felt himself participating in the Great Hunt in the Sky as he pulled back his bow, animated by the strength of Orion himself. Now, the existentialist stares into the cold expanse of outer space, declaring to the void that he is unique, the pattern of no higher image than himself.

III. And the Myth Became Flesh

I was once taken with the existentialist myth. The fascination began around my freshman year of college when I lived alone in a small dorm. The global pandemic ensured that I lived in near-constant isolation, connecting with others mostly online. I made efforts to meet people and to build good habits, but it was difficult. I had plenty of time to think, and I began to think deeply about the Christian faith that I had inherited. I was soon engaging with atheist thought online. And it was not long before I discovered Nietzsche.

Any religious person who has ever seriously read Nietzsche knows how dangerous he can be. I can still remember, clear as day, when I finished reading *Beyond Good and Evil* in the public library. I was disturbed by his refutation of objective truth. It was not his arguments that enticed me, but his passion. Here was a man who meant every word that he wrote. Unfortunately, I absorbed the worst of what Nietzsche had to say, missing nearly all the wisdom. The same became true for Dostoevsky, Camus, Kierkegaard, and other existentialist writers.

Though I still sincerely believed myself to be a Christian, my life was slowly becoming animated by a new myth, the existentialist myth. I felt small in the face of the “gentle indifference of the world.”³ But I loved the drama of that feeling. There I was, one of billions of inhabitants of one of the billions of planets in the universe, and I was going to make something of myself. And if I fail...well, *c’est la vie*.

I was Odysseus, shipwrecked on foreign soil, trapped there in the clutches of an unwanted lover. Deep down, I longed for the warmth and homeliness of my lost faith. It would be many months of soul-searching before I arrived back on familiar shores. The odyssey of my deeper conversion taught me that Christianity (the Christ-myth) is meant to be *lived*, not merely *subscribed* to. It was something that could only be understood from the inside, by plunging into the mystery. This gave me a richer understanding of religion, and I am now convinced that religious myths are uniquely powerful.

A myth serves to pull back the curtain and remind us of the true nature of reality. In other words, it reminds us of what is *real*. However, religious myths stand apart in that they make us a promise – that we can be reunited to this ultimate reality, to God. The very etymology of religion from the Latin *religio*, which means “linking back”, suggests this. Joseph Campbell describes how this occurs.⁴ One can engage with myths on different levels. The basest is sensual, where myths are just fun stories to stir up an emotional response in the listener. Religious stories often prompt too many questions to succeed at this. Then there is the level of willpower where myths serve as aids in overcoming the obstacles of life. Again, religious myths hardly stand out here. The highest level of engagement is “the level of the heart”. At this level, myths open us up to

³ Camus, *The Stranger*, 122.

⁴ Campbell. *The Power of Myth*, 267-8.

transcendent values. In order to reach this level, one must undergo an “opening of the heart.” The heart is that innermost chamber of the human person. To open one’s heart means to go outside of oneself, to be willing to give oneself over to the myth. Although Campbell does not make this distinction, I think this is where religious myths shine. By *living* religious myths and not merely *subscribing* to them, we allow ourselves to be transformed. Practically, this looks like praying, spiritual reading, attending liturgy, following our conscience, and abstaining from whatever draws our hearts away from God. In doing so, we begin to understand myths in an *experiential way*.

A personal example of this relates to the problem of evil which has plagued Christians for centuries. Is the amount and severity of suffering that we see in our world what we would expect from an all-powerful, all-loving Creator? Two millennia of Christian theology produced many responses to this question, yet it persists because people often mean the question in a far more personal way. They are not asking, “Why, logically speaking, does evil exist?”, but rather, “Why is God letting me (or someone I love) suffer?” Clever arguments fail here because this is a question not of the mind, but of the heart. To this question, Christianity has only one answer: the Cross. The significance of the Cross is that God freely chooses to enter into humanity’s pain and to suffer alongside us. He does not patronize us, nor does He punish us for our weakness. Instead, He takes on human flesh and *shows us how to suffer*. In this way, our suffering, which would otherwise be senseless and cruel, becomes redemptive. I realized this when I decided to practice uniting my sufferings to Christ’s own. I began to accept my pain, not with stoic indifference, but with the humble resignation to suffer like Christ did. I resolved to learn from Him how to face Calvary. Everything changed. I began to understand how suffering served God’s loving plan, but in a radically new way. The difference was like the difference between

reading about an apple and tasting one. This is the uniqueness of religious myths. They have the power to transform us, but only if we totally surrender to them. There are no half-saints. This requires boldness, a willingness to step into the unknown. This is what Kierkegaard meant by his “leap of faith” and Pascal by his infamous wager.

The great virtue of the existentialist myth is that it discourages its practitioners from disconnecting from the world. The existentialist is meant to live life for himself, not mediated through others or institutions. However, without any values higher than himself, he is a traveller without a compass. Religious myths offer him this and more, but only if he is first willing to open his heart, to see himself as a reflection of the one true Self.

I choose to remain a Christian because the Christ-myth surpasses all others. The Christian tradition understands all myths (religious or otherwise) as mere shadows of this one. Christ is the fulfillment of Odin hanging from Yggdrasil, Orpheus descending into Hades, and King Arthur preparing to return; and they each reflect Him, even if only dimly. He is the place where the narrative touched history and “myth became fact.”⁵ Humans have and will always seek for truth by narrativizing their lives, and Christ is God’s story breaking into human history. When one understands his past, present, and future – even the most painful moments – through the life of Christ, he satisfies his need for mythology by understanding his place in the cosmic theodrama. Finally, the love of God poured out on the Cross is the fulfillment of existentialism, because it gives humanity a redemption story which can be entered into and experienced.

⁵Lewis, “Myth Became Fact.”

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"TAKEN UP BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH: SUBJECTIVE INDIVIDUALITY IN FAULKNER'S SOUTH"

JACOB CONROD

Ludwig Wittgenstein once remarked that Søren Kierkegaard was the greatest mind of the 19th century. The melancholic Danish philosopher is perhaps most famous for his idea of the "Leap of Faith," but too often that important facet of his thought is taken in isolation from the entirety of his project, which was concerned primarily with the individual. For Kierkegaard, the individual does not exist autonomously, independent of a wider network of relationality. Rather, the individual is a *subject*, the result of interplay among various social relations—the most important being, as emphasized by the Leap of Faith, a relationship between the individual and God. For Kierkegaard, God is *absolute*, that by which all else exists only in relation. Kierkegaard's insistence on a radical subjectivity of the individual before the face of



God provides one point of entry for a discussion of a broader, but related concept of subjective individuality. That social realities are prior to the individual is in some ways an ancient concept. Something very similar is implied in Aristotle's definition of man as a political animal—such that outside of the *polis*, a man cannot be said to be a man in the fullest sense, but rather a beast (and thus below a man) or a god (and thus above). Kierkegaard himself acknowledges that the subjectivity of the individual, though primarily existent in reference to God, applies to a host of social relations, writing in *Either/Or*: "Every individual, however original he may be, is still a child of God, of his age, of his nation, of his family or friends. Only thus is he truly himself. If in all this relativity he tries to be the absolute, then he becomes ridiculous." For Kierkegaard, sometimes cited as the first existentialist thinker, the main existential problem is the nature of individuality. His solution is to propose a radical subjectivity by which the absurdity of existence is confronted and overcome in relation to God.

1 Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: a Fragment of Life* (New York, New York, United States of America: Penguin, 2004).

So far, this essay has mentioned Kierkegaard, Aristotle, and Wittgenstein—in reverse order, a German, a Greek, and a Dane. That subjective understandings of individuality should have a long pedigree in Europe, with its comparatively communitarian social structures, is hardly surprising. The challenge is to find an equivalent approach to the individual in an American context—an understanding of the individual grounded not in the objectivity of the autonomous person, but in a radical declaration of subjectivity to relationship. That such an understanding should not only exist, but flourish in a more aggressively individualistic American context may be surprising. Historically, American expressions of subjective individuality have found explicit commendation in the philosophical and literary traditions associated with the cultural subregion of the American South. Prior to the last half-century, with the rise of figures like Wendell Berry standing as the heirs of the Southern Agrarians, many Southern expressions of something like subjective individuality are difficult to disentangle from contextual defenses of Southern racial politics, including slavery. This problem is particularly pointed in the works of the Southern Agrarians, including their manifesto *I'll Take My Stand*; fortunately, the ethos of a particularly Southern individuality is expressed largely without baggage in the works of the South's great artist, the 20th-century novelist William Faulkner.

The mustachioed figure of Faulkner towers above all other Southern literature, and most wider American literature as well. His classic novels, including *As I Lay Dying*, *Light in August*, *The Sound and the Fury*, and *Absalom, Absalom!* are very intently about one thing: Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi. Through stories about this very specific corner of the earth, based upon the Mississippi of his own upbringing, Faulkner was launched to international fame, disseminated by writers as far abroad as Camus and Sartre, culminating in his reception of the Nobel Prize for

Literature. Faulkner's insistence on writing primarily about this fictional county provides the groundwork for a theme of subjective individuality that runs throughout his entire corpus. There is little mention of God in Faulkner's work, but, like Kierkegaard, he embraces a subjective individuality that is predicated upon both lateral and vertical relations—the lateral being relations between persons and families throughout time; the vertical being the deeply intimate relationship between people and the land, or place, in which they live. As Robert Cantwell wrote in his introduction to Faulkner's *Sartoris*,

“It is commonly asserted that the strength of Faulkner's novels comes from the depth of his absorption with the life of his own region... Faulkner has consequently always been a central figure to the regionalists. He has been their proof of the advantage to the author of remaining in his own hometown, close to his origins, among people he knows, with traditions he understands, and away from the vast anonymous crowds of the cities, with whom he can have at best only a formal kinship... Faulkner's achievement was not that he chose to live in a provincial community, but that he selected this particular one. The life of northern Mississippi, on which he focused his imagination, needed an interpreter in the way that desert regions need irrigation.”¹

Cantwell's emphasis is twofold: first, that Faulkner can be said to represent the ideals of the regionalists, embodying the special relationship between person and place that animates his work; and second, that Faulkner's particularity is even more specific than any broad affirmation of generic regionality, no—such would be a betrayal of particularity—rather, Faulkner's particularity is confined to Northern Mississippi. There is no Faulkner otherwise. His very identity as an artist exists only relative to that place.

¹ William Faulkner, *Sartoris*, ed. Robert Cantwell (Signet Classics, 1964), xvii-xviii.

A compelling demonstration of the principle could be taken from any of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha novels. In all of them the characters are shaped by the land to such a degree that their very identities are derivative of their home, by way of a negative example, one could consider Thomas Sutpen of *Absalom, Absalom!* or Joe Christmas of *Light in August*; both of whom, foreign to Yoknapatawpha County, and thus existing in a certain degree of alienation from place unique to other characters, oscillate between beasts and gods. However, the most useful and interesting example of the principle—subjective individuality as relation to, among other things, place—may be found in a character study of Quentin Compson, who figures prominently in both *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*

Quentin Compson is the oldest of the Compson boys, a family that features in most of Faulkner's novels. Quentin, unlike his brothers Jason and Benjy, is an introspective and intelligent young man who is sent north by his family to study at Harvard University. As narrated in *The Sound and the Fury*, he struggles internally with angst over his relationship to his sister, Caddy, and with the legacy of the South that he left behind. Ultimately, this internal struggle culminates in his suicide. Quentin's story is told across the events of *Absalom, Absalom!*, in which he serves as an unreliable narrator for the tragedy of Thomas Sutpen, and *The Sound and the Fury*, which chronicles the days leading up to his death. A character study of Quentin Compson, taking place as it will across the events of two very different novels, will necessarily focus on what may be the animating force of his internal life, and a common theme of both Quentins: his own tortured relationship to the South, and his alienation from the South that occurs in Massachusetts. To quote from the opening pages of *Absalom, Absalom!*

“Her voice would not cease, it would just vanish... Then hearing would reconcile and he would seem to listen to two separate Quentins now—the Quentin Compson preparing for Harvard in the South, the deep South dead since 1865 and peopled with garrulous outraged baffled ghosts, listening, having to listen, to one of the ghosts which had refused to lie still even longer than most had, telling him about old ghost-times; and the Quentin Compson who was still too young to deserve to yet be a ghost but nevertheless having to be one for all that, since he was born and bred in the deep South the same as she was...”²

As soon as the reader meets Quentin in *Absalom, Absalom!*, he or she is made aware of his painfully conscious dependency upon place—the South, Mississippi, and Yoknapatawpha County—for the constitution of his very person. As Faulkner describes, Quentin’s “very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous, defeated names; he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth. He was a barracks filled with stubborn back-looking ghosts...”³ The plot of *Absalom, Absalom!*, from which this description is drawn, follows Quentin as he gradually unravels the tragic tale of Thomas Sutpen, who had come from a far-away land and died in Yoknapatawpha County shortly after the Civil War. The story of Sutpen’s rise and fall which makes up the central narrative of the book becomes an obsession for Quentin. The novel begins with his hearing rumors of Sutpen’s demise in Mississippi, and ends with him breathlessly recounting the series of events to his roommate at Harvard. *Absalom, Absalom!* thus begins with Quentin in Mississippi, weighed down by the legacy of the South, and ends with Quentin in Massachusetts, haunted by it. At all points, Faulkner is keen to emphasize that Quentin’s very

² William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (Modern Library, 1993), 2-3.

³ *Ibid.*, 6.

sense of self is inseparable from his home. This becomes more apparent as the novel reaches its conclusion. In one of the more explicit passages to this effect in the book, Quentin's roommate from New England, Shreve, tells him:

“Maybe I wouldn't come from the South, anyway, even if I could stay there. Wait. Listen. I'm not trying to be funny, smart. I just want to understand it if I can and I don't know how to say it better. Because it's something my people haven't got. Or if we have got it, it all happened long ago across the water and so now there ain't anything to look at everyday to remind us of it. We don't live among defeated grandfathers and freed slaves... and bullets in the dining room table and such, to be always reminding us to never forget. What is it? Something you live and breathe in like air? A kind of vacuum filled with wraithlike and indomitable anger and pride and glory at and in happenings that occurred and ceased fifty years ago? A kind of entailed birthright father and son and father and son of never forgiving General Sherman, so that forever more as long as your children's children produce children you won't be anything but a descendant of a long line of colonels killed in Pickett's Charge at Manassas?”⁴

The line of questioning from his roommate gets at the core of Quentin's personal crisis detailed in Faulkner's novels. Quentin Compson is a Southerner. The centrality of place to his identity is so essential that Shreve correctly asserts that the same will be true of his progeny to the end of time. Like begets like. So far, this theme is fairly explicit throughout the excerpts provided. A secondary and derivative theme, however, becomes apparent at the very end of *Absalom*, *Absalom!*, and carries Quentin to the great tragedy of *The Sound and the Fury*. Just as place

⁴ Ibid., 377.

constitutes an essential and core part of Quentin's individuality, so too alienation from place serves as a key agent of his destruction.

In the final pages of *Absalom, Absalom!*, cracks begin to form in Quentin's identity as his physical absence from the South carries over to a psychological alienation from his Southernness. As he recounts the end of the Sutpen saga to Shreve, "he could taste the dust. Even now, with the chill pure weight of the snow-breathed New England air on his face, he could taste and feel the dust of the breathless (rather, furnace-breathed) Mississippi September night."⁵ Transported back to his native Mississippi in spirit and mind, even as he remains physically in Massachusetts, Quentin describes the final end of the Sutpen family to Shreve. At the conclusion of his tale, Shreve asks Quentin why he, apparently, hates the South. Quentin's response is despairing. "‘I don't hate it,’ Quentin said, quickly, at once, immediately; ‘I don't hate it,’ he said. *I don't hate it* he thought, panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark: *I don't. I don't! I don't hate it! I don't hate it!*”⁶ These words mark the end of *Absalom, Absalom!* Quentin, whose Southernness is central to his identity, faces the accusation that he hates the South. It is as if he has discovered that he hates himself. Faulkner makes sure to emphasize that this realization takes place in the foreign setting of New England, described almost like a prison. Quentin's physical alienation from the South has become a psychological alienation from his Southernness, effectively an alienation from his own self.

Students of Søren Kierkegaard, with whom this essay began, will recognize in Quentin Compson's conditions parallels with Kierkegaardian despair—Quentin's horror at the end of

⁵ Ibid., 378.

⁶ Ibid., 395.

Absalom, Absalom! is the realization that he is alienated from himself, that his individuality constituted by its relationship to place has been torn asunder by his physical alienation that is itself inseparable from psychological alienation. The alienation that has begun by the end of *Absalom, Absalom!* reaches its tragic conclusion in *The Sound and the Fury*. The narrative style of *The Sound and the Fury* is famously convoluted, but much of part II, concerning Quentin Compson, deals with the days leading up to his suicide. The themes of Southernness and personal alienation are not as immediately evident as they are in *Absalom, Absalom!*; instead, Faulkner focuses on Quentin's broken relationship with his sister, Caddy, a relationship made all the worse by Quentin's obsession with Southern chivalric ideals. In a way, Quentin's discord within his own family is a reflection of the discord recorded in *Absalom, Absalom!*—an alienation from family, itself influenced by and inseparable from physical alienation, all wrapped in memories and imagery of the South (one of the last vignettes before Quentin's suicide shows his grandfather in full Confederate regalia), and culminating in Quentin's drowning himself.⁷ Quentin Compson's alienation from his own family is a function of his alienation from place, and thus the self.

William Faulkner's rise to international prominence was in part due to the appreciation of his work shown by French existentialists, including Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, who read his works during the Second World War and popularized them in postwar Europe.⁸ Upon familiarity with his corpus, this fact becomes hardly surprising—Faulkner was, above all, an author uniquely tuned to man's existential struggle. The subjective individuality that forms an essential part of early existentialists such as Kierkegaard is given magnificent expression in the

⁷ "The Sound and the Fury : William Faulkner : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive," Internet Archive, 1928, https://archive.org/details/soundfury0000will_o3e5/page/n3/mode/2up.

⁸ Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, viii.

works of the Mississippian. One need look no further than his most famous novels for proof. The individuals of Faulknerian canon do not exist apart from place. They are subjects, the result of relational interplay between family, time, and most importantly for Faulkner, place. Quentin Compson does not exist except as the result of a dance in which the South takes the lead. In alienation from his subjectivity, he becomes ridiculous, and in the face of absurdity, he chooses suicide. Quentin Compson is an icon of man's existential task. None were more painfully aware of this than William Faulkner himself, who exists not as a great artist in general, but as the great artist of the South.

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“SPIRITUAL COURAGE: IN THE WORKS OF SHESTOV AND BERDYAEV”

TRAVIS SLOCUMB

Existentialism concerns the principles of being. What does it mean to be? How are we to be? There are different states of being that define the human. Do we exist in joy, fear, melancholy, etc.? Emotional realities are not merely passing states of being, but the structures which come to define our everyday life. I will argue that courage is the most necessary mode of being for developing a self. Faith is required for any real knowledge of being, and to approach God’s throne with faith requires courage.

Lev Shestov (1866–1938), a Russian Jewish philosopher known for his critique of rationalism, argues that faith is opposed to knowledge. Nikolai Berdyaev (1874–1948), a Russian theologian who focused on the intersection of freedom and creativity within Christianity, says that faith creates authentic personality. Human authenticity is founded upon the virtue of spiritual courage, which overcomes all of material reality. This courage drags the individual beyond good and evil to a realm where only God’s voice has significance, and enables them to find purpose in the recognition of their lack of knowledge.



In *Great Expectations*, Charles Dickens’ protagonist describes Miss Havisham: "The admission of the fact that she had been in the same state of mind for many years had a strange effect on me. She looked at me with an expression of such melancholy and despair that I was almost afraid to speak to her." Emotional states are not merely flashes of feeling that are contained to one’s soul. Over time, they create the person, and define them ontologically. Every human is created by the sum of their experiences, and the way they react to these experiences through their responding emotional reality. As far as philosophy goes, it is the human’s job to try and regulate their spiritual state in the face of every life experience for the sake of becoming a self. I will argue that God is the great definer of personality, and to find one’s self has more to do with a blind faith than any psychological hierarchies that are observable in nature. Following faith comes

courage—to approach God’s throne and walk away marks an individual with the observable characteristic of courage, as you cannot be exalted to Heaven without being humbled by Hell.

Let us first understand the necessity of faith within the metaphysical hierarchy of needs. There are two roads to walk according to Shestov, that of freedom and necessity. With God you are free, as God is free; and with the world you are enslaved. In *Notes From the Underground*, Dostoevsky’s ‘Underground Man’ reflects on the difference between freedom and necessity: “But, good Lord, what do I care about the laws of nature and arithmetic if I have my reasons for disliking them, including the one about two and two making four! Of course, I won’t be able to breach this wall with my head if I’m not strong enough. But I don’t have to accept a stone wall just because it’s there and I don’t have the strength to breach it. As if such a wall could really leave me resigned and bring me peace of mind because it’s the same as twice two makes four! How stupid can one get? Isn’t it much better to recognize the stone walls and the impossibilities for what they are and refuse to accept them if surrendering makes one too sick?”¹ This quote summarizes the central theme of Shestov’s thought. In the laws of nature and science there is only necessity, and it is preposterous to conclude that we are supposed to remain satisfied with these laws. The explosive personalities of Dostoevsky’s characters serve as a helpful poster board to the battle that takes place in every man’s soul—if they allow it. The majority of people accept necessity with resignation, and it is Shestov’s fight to prove through Biblical witness that it is not the correct existential alignment for human beings.

¹ Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Notes from Underground*. Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993, 28.

Berdyayev was another philosopher who attempted to define the self apart from necessity; however, his thought focused more on the role of the individual and his creative freedom. “But personality is not a part of the universe, the universe is a part of personality, it is its quality. Such is the paradox of personalism... Personality is recognized only as a subject, in infinite subjectivity, in which is hidden the secret of existence.”² Berdyayev hopes to make man the center of the world, because inside of man, he argues, is God’s imprint; and thus the pursuit of personality is most necessary in one’s search for God Himself. Berdyayev makes faith concrete in the way he seeks to reconcile eternity with human existence through personality. If the world imposes slavery upon man through the necessary conditions of science and natural philosophy (which are one and the same), the self is the way that one breaks free—through creative activity. Creativity forces man to determine his own course in the world and thus grow closer to a free God. I will use Berdyayev’s philosophy to build upon the core difference between freedom and necessity as outlined in Shestov, however, I think that Berdyayev ultimately focuses too much on personality instead of God, thus making an idol out of the self. Berdyayev’s philosophy will be an afterthought to the central statement of this essay, that a faith grounded in God’s freedom is necessary for personality, and that this resolves itself into an act of courage.

“The substance of this faith, emphatically denied by both science and philosophy, is the daring and unsupportive but paradoxically true conviction that all things are possible.”³ The underground man’s convictions are not important because he is crazed and wishing to be free—they have value in their ability to inform us of humanity’s inmost desire. "There is no great

² Berdyayev, Nikolai. *The Destiny of Man*. Translated by Nina Kasdon. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960, 22.

³ Shestov, Lev. *Athens and Jerusalem*. Translated by Bernard Martin. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1966, 16.

genius without a tincture of madness."⁴ Do we want to accept that twice two equals four? Or is this fact forced upon us to appear sane, because it seems obvious from the standpoint of basic human rationality? The underground man's desire to break through the wall is the same as not accepting twice two equals four. A wall exists objectively, and if one is imprisoned by it, all they can desire is for its objective existence to be broken through by their own world of subjective desire—for the wall to cease existing. If a man was imprisoned unfairly and his conscience was clear, would it be unreasonable for him to wish above all reason that his walls would be broken down? One might say that the walls of logic are placed around man fairly, unlike our prisoner. But is this so? Death, disease, and hierarchical domination all appear to be a part of the natural created order; and would it be fair to ask man to accept his fate amongst these woes without going mad? True neuroses exists in places where man convinces himself that he must tolerate the negative for the sake of the positive, rather than obliterating the negative to fully embrace the positive—wherein people are usually called 'mad.'

“And if the task of philosophy had reduced to the mere demonstration of the possibility of a miracle, her business would have been splendidly accomplished long ago.”⁵ Shestov believes that miracles are available for witness on the daily—the very creation of the world or the birth of a human. But the problem is that miracles are not enough for people, as nobody wants to believe in them. We could live in an even more miraculous world, and people would still *choose* to close their eyes to it. Widespread doubt comes from cowardice. Man wants control more than he wants God, and to admit that God exists and everything is possible for Him requires courage for man to step into the unknown, beyond the precipice of his own will and understanding. Despair is the

⁴ Seneca. *On Anger*. Translated by John W. Basore. Loeb Classical Library 34. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932, 239.

⁵ All things are possible, 190.

common sickness of non-selfhood, as Søren Kierkegaard argued in *The Sickness Unto Death*.⁶ And despair runs rampant in a world where we are bound to the ceiling of necessity because we are too cowardly to approach a throne beyond our control. If God moved a very mountain before our eyes, we would find a way to explain it without God—thus securing ourselves into a reality where there is no silver lining of eternity behind the clouds of the very things which make man sick to begin with—death, and therefore necessity. The largest necessity is death; but by ignoring death we can dig ourselves further into the hole of ‘security,’ which is another word for despair. When Christ calls His followers to a faith in God which defies the reality of death—by His resurrection—He calls the individual to rest his identity outside of himself in a God who cannot be controlled.

What does this faith have to do with selfhood? It is the individual’s personal choice to believe in God. “Man desires to be strong and rich and free, the wretched, insignificant creature of dust, whom the first chance shock crushes like a worm before one's eyes, and if he speaks of ideas it is only because he despairs of success in his proper search. He feels that he is a worm, he fears that he must again return to the dust which he is, and he lies, pretending that his misery is not terrible to him, if only he knew the truth.”⁷ We are conditioned as ‘creatures of dust’ to submit to twice two equals four—the walls of death and suffering placed all around us. It lies only in a courageous faith to see the wall and believe that it could no longer be. The question is not one of theodicy. People avoid faith by saying that evil exist for everyone else around them, and thus it is their job to suffer as well. This is a quiet and deadly spring of cowardice that comes from the simple desire to avoid the question of God. If God exists for the individual, the walls may fall

⁶ Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Sickness Unto Death*. Translated by Walter Lowrie. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941.

⁷ All things are possible, 196.

away, but only if he is willing to believe. This requires the individual to focus all of their strength on God, on the unknown. If one truly faces the unknown, they look back upon their life through a mirror of transcendence, where the question of universal evil falls away, because it is apparent that God Himself is too great a mystery to know why it would exist in the first place. The answer that the man of faith receives is that of Job: “I am who I am.”⁸ There are no more walls in the great *I am*—they disappear through the lens of God’s omnipotence. “Freedom consists in the force and power not to admit evil into the world.”⁹ Is it insane to deny the existence of evil? Well, most would say it is insane to deny that twice two equals four. The freedom of God requires much, and the reward of eternity is far better than a neat equation.

While I don’t believe in all of the ends of Berdyaev’s personalist thought, some of it serves as helpful practical implications for what faith means for man. “There is a psychological force of the individual person, and there is a psychological force of the community, of society.

Crystallized, hardened public opinion becomes violence upon man. Man can be a slave to public opinion, a slave to custom, to morals, to judgments and opinions which are imposed by society.”¹⁰ The majority of society lives by forces of science and ‘knowledge,’ which, qua Shestov, limit their ability to grow in faith and therefore in true knowledge—it is necessary to cut oneself off from the mob in order to grow alongside God. This is a common belief shared throughout the Bible, first where God selects Israel from amongst the other nations, and then when Jesus calls his followers to take the ‘narrow road.’¹¹

⁸ Exodus 3.14, Job 38-41.

⁹ Shestov, Lev. *Athens and Jerusalem*. Translated by Bernard Martin. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1966, 256.

¹⁰ Berdyaev, Nikolai. *Freedom and Slavery*. Translated by Ralph H. Metcalfe. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1953, 65.

¹¹ Matt 7.13-14.

People do not want to break from the boundaries of the norm, because they are afraid. Life itself is full of fear, because of death. And it is easier to face death when you know that others share the same fate, because the scariest part of dying is being alone. Humans were created to rely on each other, and this reliance comes out most poignantly when they are faced with death. It is necessary to not only overcome the fear of death, but to overcome the fear of dying alone. This is impossible. A human will always reach out for something beyond itself to assuage the crushing weight of loneliness. The solution of our philosophy is not to overcome the fear of loneliness, but to replace it with faith that God is always near. One may reach out their hand to the abyss, if they are crushed and perish alone; but they know, through faith, that God reaches down to grab them first. “Fear is overcome by an integrated centralized personality, by an intensive experience of the dignity of personality.”¹² This ‘dignity of personality’ comes from the experience of God inside of one’s soul.¹³

“We cannot, however, create God: we can only be united to Him, serve Him with our creative activity, answer His call. Knowledge requires great daring. It means victory over ancient, primeval terror.”¹⁴ Berdyaev’s ethics rely on the individual seeing their moral life as an extension of their creative activity. Eternity itself, for him, is ‘creative and dynamic,’ because it is echoed through the subjective movements of finite man. We do not know eternity in and of itself, and we will not until the next life—it is foolish to try and mirror its actions through a reality which is not our own. There are two aspects of man that are in tension: the “primeval, utterly undetermined potential freedom springing from the abyss of non-being, and the element

¹² Berdyaev, Nikolai. *The Destiny of Man*. Translated by Nina Kasdon. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960, 134.

¹³ God Himself has all of the dignity, because He created and sustains the world. He is the ruler of the world and not the God of deism who keeps His creation at a distance. When one sees this God inside of their self, they see themselves as a piece of His artwork, and can therefore understand themselves as having infinite worth.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 14.

determined by the fact that man is the image and likeness of God, a Divine idea which his freedom may realize or destroy.”¹⁵ Man must tap into his inherent divinity within the confines of his finitude. And finitude is not to be underestimated through language—it is the reality of death, despair, and an ever so present terror in the face of utter loneliness. God does not bring one out of these conditions for them to look back down at the rest of humanity with an air of superiority. God rescues a soul only when it is in need of being rescued; and when there is real need, the resulting reality of grace, peace, and eternity that follows can only fester in a cushion of humility and love for other people, because nobody who truly acknowledges their finitude feels like they deserve to be exalted afterward.

Shestov and Berdyaev share the common approach that faith goes beyond the limits of reason and is necessary for a life of authenticity that exceeds the natural capacities of man. My own deduction from their thought is that courage is necessary in a life of faith, because God is a fearful force outside of one’s understanding of good and evil. Shestov in particular quoted Nietzsche often in his understanding that God exceeds the bounds of human moral understanding—not because he is an evil God, but because we are limited creatures. If one can approach the almighty in authenticity, as an omnipotent and omniscient entity that dwells entirely outside of our understanding, then they have enough spiritual courage to face anything that might oppose them in the physical world—and they will always win, if they have this faith, because God is on their side.

Shestov’s conception of the self is focused on rebellion against conceptions of being that are enslaving to the individual, and Berdyaev focuses on how the self is a means towards creative

¹⁵ Ibid, 53.

fulfillment. Shestov's faith finds its truth beyond good and evil, whereas Berdyaev has more reliance in the goodness inherent to creation, as Christ was incarnate. Berdyaev says that there is more virtue in someone who would work towards an evil end through means of goodness. I disagree and would side with Shestov's Nietzschean tendencies, because humans can easily deceive themselves about good and evil. The end towards which they work is more significant, because virtue is only attainable through an almost blind faith in the mystery of a sovereign God.

Faith is necessary in the development of personality, because truth lies outside of our world order. One cannot find themselves in twice two equals four, because this is one aspect of finitude. Natural philosophy is not useless entirely; but it cannot be applied to find one's self, because personality is supposed to reflect the image of God within man, and in order to do so one must come into contact with God Himself. God exists outside of the boundaries of the created order. To step out of these boundaries requires courage, because it is unknown and it is a lonely task—as most people choose to spend their entire lives within the confines of finitude. Therefore, faith requires courage; and it is a courage that creates the most beautiful possible reality—a personality that reflects God.

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IS AUGUSTINE'S 'LOVE OF NEIGHBOR' THE ORIGIN OF ARENDT'S 'RADICAL GOOD'?"

AYALA GIDRON

Abstract

This article presents the possible influence of Augustine's concept of 'love of neighbor' on Hannah Arendt's notion of 'radical good.' By examining Arendt's intellectual engagement with Augustine in her 1929 doctoral dissertation[1], this article proposes that her understanding of 'love of neighbor' serves as the foundation for her later reflections on radical good. Exploring Arendt's philosophical evolution in relation to crisis, memory, and the public sphere, the discussion sheds light on how these elements converge in her interpretation of 'love of neighbor' and its ethical implications for times of crisis.

Introduction

This study is part of a broader inquiry on 'radical good'—a Jewish moral philosophy developed as a response to the Great Crisis, referring to the devastation of World War II and the Holocaust. The objective of this article is to argue that Hannah Arendt's early intellectual engagement with Augustine, particularly her analysis of the concept of *caritas* as love of neighbor in her 1929 doctoral dissertation, is the origin of her understanding of good as radical.



In her book *What Ought I to Do?* Catherine Chalier wrote:

What value does a philosophy have if it vanishes when it is put to the test? What value do ideas about ethics have if human beings do not place the fear of transgressing them above their articulation?[2]

[1] Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London (1996)

[2] Catherine Chalier, *What Ought I to Do?*, Cornell University, US (2002), p13

Chalier ties philosophical theory to the philosopher's position in the world. It is clear that, in her view, philosophy loses its value when this connection is severed. While this perspective is shared by many thinkers, it is not self-evident, nor is it the only prevailing viewpoint. Philosophy can, and perhaps must, remain a theoretical and abstract discussion, as Aristotle defined the contemplative life and theoretical insight. The detachment from reality and the capacity to discuss ideas and epistemological concepts that shape reality are, in fact, the source of its power.

The discourse on the role of philosophy and the position of the philosopher has been ongoing since the inception of philosophy itself. However, this discourse gained renewed urgency in the period between the two World Wars and particularly following the rise of the Nazis to power.

My interest in the notion of the radical good is inseparable from my interest in how philosophical work responds to crises in reality. When I first sat down to write my research proposal, I was curious to explore the changes the Great Crisis brought to this discussion and to the perception of identity and thought among Jewish intellectuals in particular. I did not imagine that I would write the research itself while experiencing such a profound crisis myself. More than once in recent months, I have paused to ask myself whether this is the right time for academic research, for philosophical discourse. Is this what we should focus on during these days of war? I sincerely hope that this research will serve as an expression of direct resistance and a living creation of an alternative in these times, overflowing as they are with so much evil— for the collective whole.

Radical Good

The term radical good first came to my attention in Michal Ben-Naftali's afterword to Julia Kristeva's *Tales of Love*:

The gap between the forms [...], between love that is given freely and love as recompense, between giving for its own sake and the economy of Kaddish, is what allows for innovation and rebellion. That is, it introduces into the discussion, as an heretic gesture toward Hannah Arendt, the radical good (and by extension, forgiveness and the promise) that was inherent in the contemplative life, during the later, reflective, and exalting phase of her thought.¹

Ben-Naftali draws our attention to the space between things, to what can be found "in between." In this space, Ben-Naftali adds, lies radical good—the driving force behind new action, rebellion against the status quo, the capacity to forgive, and the choice of responsibility. Moreover, Ben-Naftali links radical good to a certain form of "love" and "giving." What lies between love and giving that are not for the sake of reward and are not contingent upon outcomes, and love and giving that are accompanied by self-interest and an expectation of return? Ben-Naftali's words offer a direction for what radical good could be, yet they do not explicitly define it.

When I began investigating whether this is a term Arendt herself used, and if so, when, I discovered a correspondence between Gershom Scholem and Arendt

¹ Michal Ben-Naftali, "An Endless Encounter: Afterword to Tales of Love, in Julia Kristeva," *Tales of Love*, Kibbutz Hameuchad, Tel Aviv (2006), p. 401.

following the publication of her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*.² In his letter to Arendt, Scholem wrote:

[...] After reading your book, I am not in the least convinced by the notion of the 'banality of evil.' If the book's subtitle can be believed, you strove to develop the theme. This banality seems rather more of a slogan than the result of the kind of in-depth analysis you presented far more convincingly under very different circumstances in your book on totalitarianism. Apparently, back then you had not yet discovered that evil is banal. The radical evil which your previous analysis testified to so elegantly and knowledgeably has disappeared without a trace into a slogan. If this is to be more than a slogan, it must be taken to a deeper plane of political morality and moral philosophy. I regret that, given my sincere and friendly feelings toward you, I have nothing positive to say about your theses in this work. I expected something else, especially after your first book.

All the best to you, from your old friend Gerhard.³

Arendt responded to Scholem as follows:

You are completely right that I have changed my mind and now no longer speak of radical evil. We haven't seen each other for a long time; otherwise, we would perhaps have gotten around to discussing this. It's unclear to me why you characterize the

² Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Penguin Books, New York (2006).

³ *Letter 132, June 23, 1963 - The correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Gershom Scholem*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago (2017), pp204-205.

phrase 'banality of evil' as a slogan. So far as I know, no one has ever used it before. But this isn't important. The fact is that today I think that evil in every instance is only extreme, never radical: it has no depth, and therefore has nothing demonic about it. Evil can lay to waste the entire world, like a fungus growing rampant on the surface. Only the good is always deep and radical.⁴

Arendt explains that evil, contrary to her earlier assumptions, is superficial, shallow, and devoid of the mysterious or supernatural qualities sometimes found in profound and enigmatic phenomena. This, she argues, is also why it can spread so quickly, "like mushrooms after the rain." Arendt goes on to emphasize that only good has depth and that only good is radical.

From Arendt's perspective, we can infer that radical good is rooted, profound, and possesses a mysterious or even supernatural "demonic" quality. It cannot be easily uprooted, yet it seemingly also lacks the capacity for rapid dissemination.

Here too, as with Ben-Naphtali's observations, we are offered a direction for what radical good might be, but not a clear definition. The above textual references to the radical good provide substantial evidence for its place in Arendt's work. Nonetheless, the full contours of the concept are not yet clear. For this inquiry, I propose three defining characteristics of radical good:

- A. It is connected to love.
- B. It is hidden (mysterious/demonic) or rooted (deep).
- C. It exists "in between"

⁴ Letter 133, July 20, 1963, p.209.

The second part of this article explores how these characteristics manifest in Arendt's dissertation and provide a foundation for a more developed account of the radical good as it appears throughout her work. This analysis is based on the assumption that the dissertation contains the seeds of Arendt's philosophical thought—elements that persisted throughout her work and are interwoven into her writings, even if not coherently or explicitly articulated.

Back to Augustine

At the age of 23, Arendt sat down to write her doctoral dissertation on love and St. Augustine. Also it is an interesting question of why a Jewish student chose to study a Christian saint, we have to remember that this was not an uncommon path for scholars of her time. Babette Babich points out that this decision had significant implications for Arendt's philosophical life "*Under Jaspers' direction, Arendt would write a thesis written on, seemingly as if to illuminate the point of transfer (from Heidegger).*"⁵ In the dissertation itself, Arendt stated that her choice to study Augustine was an effort to develop and cultivate her critical thinking through a study that was internal to the Western philosophical tradition yet also external to it.⁶ Scott and Stark, editors and translators of Arendt's doctoral dissertation into English, added that this was a first step in shaping the independent thinking for which she would become so well known. They also argue that this work serves as a "bridge" connecting 1929 to her later writings in America, a bridge that reflects Arendt's ongoing search for the "relevance of the other."⁷

⁵ Babette Babich, "Arendt's Radical Good and the Banality of Evil: Echoes of Scholem and Jaspers in Margarethe von Trotta's Hannah Arendt," *Existenz* 9/2 (2014), p. 21.

⁶ *Love and Saint Augustine*, p. xvii.

⁷ *Love and Saint Augustine*, p.116.

Love of Neighbor

Arendt's attempt to understand the meaning of the term love of neighbor in Augustine's thought serves as the backbone of her doctoral dissertation. Through the discussion of this concept, Arendt weaves together the individual's journey of self-discovery that leads to the divine with the obligation toward others in the human community. The desire for a happy life, tied to a sense of dissatisfaction or lack of fulfillment with what the world offers, drives the individual—and in this case, Augustine—on a quest for happiness.

A. Two Forms of Love

Arendt begins her work by distinguishing between two forms of love that express this desire: *cupiditas* and *caritas*. The former is love for the world—an incorrect form of love—while the latter is love for God, the correct form of love. Both loves reflect the longing and will to live a happy life. However, only one of them truly guides the individual in this direction, while the other leads in the opposite direction. When a person is driven by love in the form of *cupiditas*, they seek happiness in the world, in tangible, material objects and mortal, transient beings. This quest often leads to deep frustration and a sense of helplessness. The constant fear of death confines existence to a linear perception of time and influences the individual's relationship with their existence, fostering anxiety, greed, pride, and more. When a person is driven by love in the form of *caritas*, their world "expands," and the sense of lack that drives them is eased. The ephemeral nature of the earthly world is replaced by the eternal essence of God, which awakens an internal experience of the self. God within the human heart, reflecting the eternal essence of humanity, is the 'highest good'.⁸

⁸ See all chapter 1 part 2. And specifically p.35.

It appears that love in the form of *caritas* aligns with radical good and exemplifies its first characteristic: the connection between radical good and love. *Caritas* is a love tied to the good, guiding the individual toward the 'highest good'. It is neither the 'highest good' itself nor a love in the form of *cupiditas*, which is tied to the material, earthly world and creates an illusion of good that is only temporary. *Caritas* is a love that takes place within the heart, spirit, and soul of the individual but is connected to God. Its orientation is toward the Creator, not toward the created. In *caritas*, the divine command is received as divine grace, penetrating the earthly world and evoking a sense of closeness to God. It is a love that looks "outside the world"⁹ yet exists within the world.

B. Hidden (Demonic) / Rooted (Deep)

Human existence is simultaneously hidden and revealed. This duality constitutes the second characteristic of **radical good**.

According to Arendt's reading of Augustine, the universe, as God's creation, can only be understood as encompassing all things simultaneously, just as all things that grow into a tree are invisibly present within the seed itself.¹⁰ The human being is part of the universe, part of the whole, yet it cannot see the whole. In the whole, there is no place for evil. In the whole, there are only 'good' elements, arranged in their proper order, which may appear as evil from the transient perspective of the individual. The quality of goodness does not stem from the things themselves but is attributed to them by their being part of the whole.¹¹

⁹ P.37.

¹⁰ P.58.

¹¹ P.60.

The 'highest good' provides an objective measure, and everything in the earthly world measured against it receives the degree of love it deserves. Thus, a person who "returns" to the earthly world with the reference point of the 'highest good' understands that their existence is but one 'thing' among the many that exist temporarily in the world. It holds no inherent importance except in relation to the whole. As Arendt explains, the whole is "indifferent to its parts."¹² Human life is stripped of its uniqueness and singularity; it has no significance on its own.

To love God, one must empty oneself. Love in the form of *caritas* is self-love through self-denial.¹³ Consequently, in **love of neighbor**, as part of love in the form of *caritas*, one loves the neighbor as God loves them. That is, the neighbor is stripped of all specific identity and loses their concrete significance. In this form of love, we do not love the neighbor's tangible and earthly qualities but rather what is eternal—the reflection of God through them.¹⁴ The neighbor becomes another way to love God. In other words, this is not love of neighbor per se but love of God through the neighbor.

C. In Between

In the first two chapters of her dissertation, Arendt explores human existence in relation to the existence of God and to others. She demonstrates that preceding the desire and aspiration for a happy life, which drives the individual toward self-discovery, is a prior force—the power of memory.¹⁵ Without the memory of a happy life, how could one aspire to it? Arendt explains that the knowledge of what happiness is predates experience (innate knowledge) and is stored in memory. Memory directs the individual toward a transcendent past, beyond the material world,

¹² P.60.

¹³ P.30.

¹⁴ Pp. 90-97.

¹⁵ P.47.

and points them toward the source of their being "The Creator is in man only by virtue of man's memory, which inspires him to desire happiness and with it an existence that would last forever."¹⁶

Human existence in the world is defined in relation to God's existence. The existence of the created being depends on the One who created it.¹⁷ However, Arendt does not wish to leave the discussion solely in the domain of God. She continues to search for an additional source of **love of neighbor** in Augustine's thought, one that addresses the fact that humans exist not only in relation to God but also in relation to the human community in which they live.

In the third and final chapter, Arendt identifies this additional source in the redemptive death of Christ, which symbolizes the Redeemer of the world (not just the individual), a world created by Humans:

Each individual already belongs to Adam (that is, to the human race) by generation, not by imitation. The possibility of imitation, and thereby of freely choosing the grace of God, did not exist until Christ revealed this grace to all people through his historic sojourn on earth."¹⁸

The world created by Humans—the 'earthly city'—reflects the second source of human existence (the first source being is the Creator God). This is the 'First Man', a historical origin that unites all people through a generational connection shared by all humanity to Adam. The closeness among human beings is not a matter of similarity but is rooted in history. This closeness establishes equality that is not based on traits

¹⁶ P.49.

¹⁷ P.49.

¹⁸ P.102.

or talents but on a shared condition—all share the same fate. The individual is not alone in the world; they have companions in their destiny.¹⁹

However, as a result of the redemption of human beings through Christ, equality acquires a new meaning: **love of neighbor**. This new meaning reflects the transformation created by the awareness of a common origin in shared existence in God. It shifts from an understanding of shared existence as inevitable interdependence under Adam to an awareness of shared existence as an act of freedom and full commitment—as a "community of believers" under God.²⁰

Divine grace gives new meaning to human belonging in the 'earthly city' and establishes a "new city—the City of God."²¹ In this city, existence is with and for others, coexisting alongside the existence of the old city (the earthly city). Social life in the City of God is based on the Messiah and defined by mutual love, which replaces mutual dependency.²²

By connecting the different aspects of the term **love of neighbor** in Augustine's thought and concluding that it stems from the dual origin of the human being (God and the First Man), Arendt reaches an understanding of the relevance of the other. This insight underpins Arendt's thinking about the social origin and moral foundation of action in the public sphere.²³ These themes would continue to preoccupy her throughout her life in various forms (such as the public realm, political space, plurality and more).

Between absolute existence and nonexistence, between memory and desire, between worldly existence and eternal existence, between man and God, between man

¹⁹ P.100.

²⁰ P.112.

²¹ P.108.

²² P.111.

²³ P.116.

and others, and between the 'earthly city' and 'the City of God', it is evident that being 'in-between' describes an existential condition.

Conclusion

This study began with the question of whether Augustine's Love of Neighbor is the Origin of Arendt's Concept of Radical Good. I present a possible affirmative answer to this question and demonstrated how the characteristics of radical good are integrated into or emerge from the discussion of love in the form of *caritas* and, specifically, love of neighbor.

Additionally, the discussion in its first part addressed the philosopher's position and their stance in times of crisis. This is evident in Augustine's attempt to address the crisis between the Graeco-Roman tradition and Christianity, and in Arendt's response in 1929 to the ethical crisis posed by Heidegger, and later in her work during the 1960s following the Eichmann Trial. The love of neighbor reflects the philosopher's position, enabling action guided by radical good in times of crisis.

Like Augustine, Arendt struggled to hold onto tradition with one hand while creating innovation with the other. Her account of Augustine's notion of the love of neighbor constitutes her first attempt to develop an ethics of a radical good that would develop throughout the remainder of her later work and would be central to her method of addressing philosophical challenges.

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