If philosophy is the pursuit of the deepest questions of existence in Western thought, we should expect that Western thinkers would address Antisemitism in some form, after Auschwitz. Yet, it is only after the Holocaust that we find any meaningful attempts to address this question: in 1946, Jean-Paul Sartre in his work *Anti-Semite and the Jew: An Exploration of an Etiology of Hate* and Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1951 that any meaningful engagement with Antisemitism emerges. Emil Fackenheim in his work *Encounters Between Judaism and Modern Philosophy: A Preface to Future Jewish Thought* is one of the few thinkers, Jewish or otherwise, whose work undertakes a thorough account of the history of modern and post-modern thought and its prejudiced and caricatured disposition towards Jewish thought and the Jews. I should also mention Prager and Telushkin’s *Why the Jews?* as another attempt to get at the source of Antisemitism.

These studies sought to elucidate the “why?” of Antisemitism, yet it is in David Patterson’s work *Antisemitism and Its Metaphysical Origins* that this phenomenon is finally addressed fundamentally. In this sense, the relevant scholarship lacks a fundamental explanation. As Patterson points out, most of the existing scholarship has lacked the understanding of that which is the object of the hate: Jewish thought and tradition itself. Here is the difference of this undertaking. Following the concept of the limiting principle that David Patterson points out in *Antisemitism and Its Metaphysical Origins* as “the elimination of all limit” my approach attempts to overcome the distortions, misreadings, and prejudices in Western tradition. To do so I turn to Jewish thought with its emphasis on categories of thought such as creation, revelation, and redemption to understand how the limiting principle means shows itself phenomenologically.
The history of the Jewish experience in Europe is well documented in its historical, social and cultural dimensions. We cannot say the same thing for post-modern thought. Hannah Arendt, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, attempts to explain Antisemitism in terms of politics. In doing so, Arendt falls back on the Thrasy-machean argument of power relations we read as early as Plato’s *The Republic*. While there are thinkers who happen to be Jewish in the Western tradition, very few, address this question on Jewish terms. One of these thinkers is Emmanuel Levinas, but few, with the exception of David Patterson, Richard Cohen, and Richard I. Sugarman, have approached Levinas as a Jewish thinker. Drawing upon Levinas’s analysis of what he regards as “totalizing” or totalitarian thought, this dissertation stakes out a new direction in arguing for the fundamental connection between Antisemitism and totalitarianism. Working through a phenomenological reading that is informed by Jewish thought, I argue that totalitarianism has its source in Antisemitism. To be sure, Sugarman has also approached Levinas as a Jewish thinker, and the phenomenological method. To date I know of no approach that addresses Antisemitism in its totalitarian form through a phenomenological lens rooted in Levinas’s Jewish thinking.

This approach takes a critical view of a power-based philosophy from the standpoint of what Levinas calls “ethics as first philosophy.” For this analysis I look to *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*; in the former Levinas diagnoses totalitarianism and its antidote conceptualized as infinity or infinite responsibility, and in the latter he introduces the notion of the substitution of the self for the other as a foundation for the ethics that he opposes to power. The totalitarianism that derives from Antisemitism rests upon power and must oppose the Jewish view of “ethics as first philosophy,” since such a view must limit power.

To demonstrate that totalitarianism has its source in Antisemitism, I begin with Levinas’s early work *Existence and Existent*. Through a phenomenological analysis of modes of being,
Levinas uncovers preliminary evidence that I use to argue that totalitarianism is necessarily Antisemitic. Levinas writes in *Existence and Existents*, “The preoccupation with this relationship between the self and its existence, existence appearing as *a burden to be taken up*, becomes particularly poignant in certain situations which philosophical analysis habitually leaves to psychology, but which we shall pay particular attention to: fatigue and indolence.” ¹ The burden of existence that breeds fatigue and indolence is the burden of an infinite ethical demand. Building on this insight, I argue that Antisemitism is tied to a resistance to taking up the ethical burden of existence. It is why I find that its symptom—totalitarianism—cannot, as Arendt argues, be a political category but an ethical one. This ethical analysis draws from Jewish tradition's understanding of creation, revelation, and redemption, not as abstractions, where the revealed purpose of creation is to seek redemption by answering, “Here I am,” to the ethical demand. In *The Star of Redemption*, Jewish thinker Franz Rosenzweig demonstrates that these categories are about a testimony to the human-to-human relation with all of its ethical demands, something that, as Levinas points out in *Difficult Freedom*, is prior to philosophy.

In my introduction, I outline the parameters for the question of Antisemitism after the Holocaust. As Levinas writes in Ethics and Infinity, after the Holocaust the question becomes: “Do I live by Murder?” This question makes Antisemitism a problem that concerns every human being, and not just the Jews. If the question after 1945 is about ethics, what does it mean for an understanding of Antisemitism? I argue it is the question of the limiting principle revealed in the prohibition against murder. In the ten utterances, also known as the Ten Commandments, the Zohar tells us that the first utterance of “I am God” already implicates us with regard to the

commandment, “Thou Shall Not Murder.” Revelation understood phenomenologically means that the Antisemitic impulse rejects this revelation of the limiting principle for a totality steeped in violence.

In Chapter One I seek to strengthen this claim through an examination of *The Writing of the Disaster* by Maurice Blanchot, who suggests that Auschwitz is the crisis in thought that originates from the turn to a pursuit of power. Auschwitz then is the unsurpassable aporia after this turn. Blanchot finds this etymologically in the word disaster: the prefix dis- is a privative, a doing-away with and aster from Latin astrum/astro, or star, a derivative from the Greek word ἀστήρ. Blanchot ties the significance of Jewish tradition to the ethical orientation of the West, and demonstrates that the Shoah marks the loss of such an orientation for the West. This loss shows itself in the totalitarian attempt to annihilate the Jew and Jewish tradition; it exposes Antisemitism as an attempt to escape the ethical claim that calls the human being to a responsibility.

In Chapter Two I expand on this disaster to demonstrate a rejection of an ethical existence grounded in responsibility for that of power. Consequently, in rejecting the ethical summons the Antisemitic impulse rejects the responsibility for the other, a burden that only increases, for as Levinas recalls from Dostoevsky in *Is It Righteous To Be?* “Each of us is guilty before everyone.” Antisemitism, then, is a nihilistic movement seeking to negate this summons that resolves itself in murder. I connect this greatest of burdens to Antisemitism and its consequence as the loss of orientation, direction, and meaning to the totalitarian turn. The Holocaust demonstrates an utter rejection of what Levinas claims in *Otherwise than Being* is being responsible for the very responsibility of the other!
Chapter Three examines Levinas’s *Nine Talmudic Readings*. This takes us to Heidegger, and the rethinking of the human being in continental thought after 1945. At issue is who is the human being and the ground for determining the value of the other human being. For Heidegger, this question revolves around the retrieval of the Greek understanding of the human primarily in his “Letter on Humanism” which is a decisive work post-1945. I also look to Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* to contrast this ontological view with that of the ethics in Jewish tradition. I contrast the King Midas tale with the conception of *tzimtzum* that stems from the understanding of *creation* in Jewish tradition. The concept of *Tzimtzum* illustrates a crucial distinction I seek to make between the Greek and Jewish account of existence, namely, whether existence is better than non-existence that is the at the origin of the Antisemitism.

*Nine Talmudic Readings* and *Difficult Freedom* are Levinas’s most explicit work on Jewish thought. I argue that after 1945 Levinas turns to Jewish tradition and follows the hermeneutical form in Talmudic discourse, which is crucial to distinguish the human being’s task as ethical following the crisis of meaning. In *Difficult Freedom*, this turn undertakes to understand Jewish thought as an integral understanding of existence and not simply rules and regulations. In *Nine Talmudic Readings* Levinas demonstrates this through his reading of the giving of the Torah that he titles “The Temptation of Temptation” where he argues that the Jews accepted the burden of existence. Thus, the moment of *revelation* becomes a knowing prior to intellectualizing, but not a naivete to the burden of existence. Levinas finds this in the phrase: *naase ve nishma*, “we will do and we will hear.”

In Chapter Four I analyze in *Totality and Infinity* the section titled “Freedom Called into Question,” in order to open the horizon which we will use to demonstrate that Antisemitism ultimately illustrates that the primacy of freedom concludes in totalitarianism, making existence
a question of Justice. Antisemitism is totalitarian because it seeks to remove all limits from its freedom. Thus, contrary to the Sartrean assertion that the human is condemned to be free, Levinas understands that the human is summoned and set apart for a task. Here I argue is the irritation to the Antisemite. For in this exposition the arbitrariness of freedom that is called into question the irritation of the Antisemite shows itself as the realization of, (1) the limitation towards the exercise of this freedom; and (2) that it is limited by the alterity of something other than what it can appropriate.

In Chapter Five I explore Levinas’s most challenging work, Otherwise than Being to sound the depths of this ethical summons that calls freedom into question and that therefore rearticulates subjectivity. Here I argue that Levinas derives his notion of subjectivity from the Jewish of bitul hayesh, or self-nullification. Self-nullification opposes the self-expansion of totalitarianism, so that totalitarianism must oppose such Jewish thinking, hence the antisemitic nature of totalitarianism. With Levinas this self-nullification goes to the point of the substitution oneself for the other by taking on an infinite responsibility to and for the other. This rethinking of human subjectivity comes as a response to what Heidegger calls the sway of being over the human. According to Heidegger the question is no longer about action, as he will state in the “Letter on Humanism,” rather, it is about the truth of being where being’s sway is understood as a letting be or Gelassenheit. However, this releasement, another way Gelassenheit is often translated, begs the question: A releasement towards what? I seek to draw out the ways in which Levinas rethinks subjectivity despite Heidegger’s assault on the concept. I argue that this rethinking on subjectivity leaves itself vulnerable to totalitarianism unencumbered by responsibility for the other.
Subjectivity as understood in *Otherwise than Being* means substitution. That is against self-possession, justification, and sovereignty of the ontological or autonomous ego. For if the human being is summoned, as Levinas argues, then responsibility is for the sake of the other, rather than simply for the liberation of the subject, who then can then decide for or against its task. This means freedom is defined as responsibility and responsibility means substitution. Thus Levinas challenges the power-based philosophy of post-modernity that places primacy on freedom, a tendency towards a domain of unfettered volition with no limitation on the human, what I am calling totalitarianism. I argue that this substitution points to the finite freedom as subjectivity that post-modernity rejects. That is, substitution is anathema to a freedom that denies the subject its “liberation.” It is the allergen of the Antisemitic impulse. After all, to suppose this liberation would mean to retrieve an origin prior to it. Finitude testifies against this premise. This allergy shows itself as totalitarianism.

The Conclusion takes me to Levinas’s essay “Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism,” where he argues that far from an aberration, Hitlerism was symptomatic of a fundamental outlook towards existence, what I am calling both totalitarian and Antisemitic in essence. Such categories are problematic for post-1945 thought precisely because they require grappling with the question of Evil, yet such a category is unintelligible after 1945. I argue that Levinas demonstrates that an election prior to this exercise of freedom is this disposition towards existence that is the revelation of a responsibility one cannot reject. When we attempt to do so, murder becomes justified.

Since beginning my training in the Humanities, I have focused on the intellectual history of early modern Europe. My Bachelor’s degree in Historical Studies explored of the Renaissance and Reformation, Enlightenment and Romanticism, French Revolution, and the Jewish Question.
Having grounded my early training in history, I ventured into the master's program with the intent to understand modern thought. Taking a course on Antisemitism with David Patterson helped prepare this topic. My doctoral degree has focused on close reading of continental thinkers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger, Greek tragedy and post-modern thought, Levinas and Jewish tradition.

My research is guided by the great professors in the School of Arts and Humanities and their respective fields that have guided my understanding of this topic. My chair, Dr. David Patterson, is the Hillel A. Feinberg Distinguished Chair in Holocaust Studies, and an authority on the Holocaust, Antisemitism and Levinas continues to guide the bulk of the understanding on this topic. Dr. Charles Bambach, an authority on Nietzsche and Heidegger, specializes in hermeneutics, contemporary continental philosophy, nineteenth and twentieth-century European intellectual history and philosophy. Dr. Bambach’s insight is particularly indispensable in the way I understand the question of ethics for the continental tradition after 1945. Dr. Charles Hatfield has assisted immensely in given me a peripheral view of the influence of continental thought on Latin American thinking. Tracing the intellectual genealogy in Latin American thought, has brought to the fore the need to raise anew the ethical question.
Primary Texts


Secondary Texts


Stoetzel, Marcel. The State, the Nation, & the Jews: Liberalism and the Antisemitism Dispute in Bismarck's Germany. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008.


**Completion Milestones**

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