Failures of Thought in Holocaust Interpretation

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"... and now the only visions of the world that can be taken seriously are those that come through the irrevocably ash-darkened prisms of post-Holocaust sense and sensibility." Mistakenly seen as mere rhetoric by some readers, this closing statement of our book was in fact meant to be understood quite literally as the thematic conclusion following from analyses of the failures of law, religion, and science—the three pillars of Western civilization—to prevent the Holocaust. This chapter is an elaboration and extension of the theme in question, with the primary focus of inquiry being the impact of the Holocaust on meaning as such, especially in connection with the general failure of Holocaust scholarship to recognize this problem as the source of a painfully clearcut inability to offer meaningful interpretation. Despite its importance, and perhaps because of it, we use the phrase "meaningful interpretation" here, in a very general fashion, as being composed of two elements: explanation and exegesis; the former involving the familiar what-leads-to-what type of causal analysis, and the latter involving less familiar questions of "what has changed," and "how come?" It is especially on this point that Holocaust scholarship has been most inadequate.

This is not to say that all scholars are totally blind to the problem. Friedlander, for example, reviewing efforts to make teaching of the Holocaust an academic subject, suggested that any serious consideration of the Nazi mass murder, as well as other aspects of warfare and genocide in the twentieth century, forces re-examination of the Enlightenment idea of progress, and he argues further that historians and social scientists have only "made adjustments" while maintaining the ideal. 2 In another context, Feingold, after examining the question of responsibility of guilt for the Holocaust in admirable detail, concluded that the ultimate mistake of the Jews was their naive belief in the reality of "a spirit of civilization, a sense of humanitarian concern in the
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world, which could have been mobilized to save Jewish lives."

These remarks, like our own quoted above, point to a problem that has generally been ignored, avoided, or not perceived at all, namely that the Holocaust contradicts or calls into question all forms of knowledge suggesting that it could not occur. This we call "the problem of meaning"; its unacknowledged presence so distorts and contaminates prevailing interpretations of the Holocaust as to warrant the critical indictment "failure of thought."

THE MEANING PROBLEM

If the analysis to follow is approximately correct, then future scholars will probably say of the twentieth-century intellect that its continuing failure in the face of the Holocaust was the first unmistakable sign of its collapse. And they might further observe of that intellect or "mentality" (with appropriate footnoting of its early critics: Nietzsche, Kafka, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Burckhardt, Wittgenstein, and others), that having emerged during the preceding two-hundred-year rise of the mass industrial era, only to see that era ending in unprecedented mass destruction, the complex of moral and material values and logic systems defining the modern universe of rational thought, whereby intellect could interpret the human condition, was now either speechless or reduced to empty arguments over its own impotence.

The problem of meaning to be examined here constitutes an important basis for the foregoing judgment and may be perceived in the Holocaust literature in various forms, ranging from concrete symptoms of scholarly frustration and distress, to confusions rooted in uncritical acceptance of established epistemology. The concrete symptoms are quite blatant, but they have for the most part been carefully ignored, perhaps because they lead too quickly to a threatening recognition of what might be termed the paradox of Holocaust knowledge; namely, that the more one comes to know about "the facts," the less one seems able to conclude about their meaning. Virtually no important question that has been studied in factual detail had yielded answers on which there is a satisfactory consensus. Instead, just the opposite appears to be the case: After detailed study has been accomplished, the disagreements over interpretation become more, rather than less severe. This condition is ubiquitous in the literature, as a few salient examples should demonstrate.

Increasing knowledge about the Judenrat authorities and the Jewish police organizations associated with them has reduced rather than enhanced the possibility of reaching any general conclusion as to whether those involved should be condemned as collaborators or respected for their intention of trying to "save what could be saved." The recently published Warsaw Diary of Adam Czerniakow, for example, makes a strong case supporting many of his actions
as head of the ghetto community. From his standpoint, some of the most contemptible Jews were those leaders who used their connections to desert the community and escape to America.4

The role of anti-Semitism in the Holocaust grows ever-more debatable as knowledge accumulates. Helen Fein's recent quantitative analysis argues that the best predictor of Jewish destruction in the various Nazi-controlled territories was the degree of prewar anti-Semitism in those territories.9 But Poliakov suggests that such anti-Semitism is better understood to be merely symptomatic, not causal,6 and our own review of this matter, including Fein's data and methods, led us to maintain that indigenous government autonomy under the Nazis was the best predictor of Jewish survival.

The problem of Jewish resistance also remains ambivalent. Material emerging over the past decade has shown that violent resistance was far more prevalent than previously had been known. But all the new information about extraordinary efforts toward armed resistance has only succeeded in undercutting the prior consensus that violent resistance was virtually impossible. No amount of new information, however, can alter the still-unresolved moral dilemmas posed by violent resistance.

Another exemplary case involves the debates over presumed SS psychopathology. Our own interpretation, based partly on the excellent documentary studies of Boehnert and Segev7 as well as other sources, argues that the vast majority of SS, even those in the murder camps, were essentially normal and must be understood as such. This raises serious questions about the prevailing psychiatric conception of normalcy per se, however. Insofar as psychiatric inferences of psychopathology depend less upon actions than circumstances, even extreme violence may not be judged "abnormal."

There is an almost endless supply of examples like these showing that as further knowledge accumulates, the important substantive and moral issues not only slip further away from direct analysis and interpretation, but often become transformed in the process, sometimes to emerge, like born-again Christians, as neat, law-abiding vehicles for the display of methodological cliches. But concrete manifestations of the problem of meaning are not limited to instances in which additional evidence tends to obscure and deform the very questions it was supposed to resolve. In other cases, where the points in question are not open to empirical investigation, meaning can become lost in the labyrinths of scholarly discourse.

A relatively pure example of the latter may be seen in the controversy over whether or not the Holocaust should properly be defined as a genocide of the Jews, in which they became historical victims "like all the others": the Albigensians, the
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Armenians, the Japanese at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the American Indians, the Cambodians, and so on. The advantages of doing this always seem quite obvious in the context of positivist social science, since it opens the way for comparative studies which may then yield a general model of genocide that can be applied to all cases. Indeed, there is already at least one such study that has received high praise for introducing an ahistorical descriptive theory of genocide developed for the case of the Armenians.3

The disadvantage of portraying the Holocaust as genocide is that this conception robs the event of its uniqueness. As Bauer and others have argued, the policies leading to the destruction of the European Jews and the circumstances under which it was carried out are profoundly different from all other cases of genocide, and even in terms of numbers killed, the Holocaust is unique.9

The question, therefore, remains: Was the Holocaust unique, or rather (merely?), a genocide like all the others? It is a very significant question because depending upon how it is answered, the general orientation of interpretative analysis will obviously vary a great deal.

In a comprehensive review of relevant scholarly perspectives on this "enigma of uniqueness," the Eckardts can reach no important conclusions.10 Leaving no apparent intellectual stone unturned, however, they proceed to discuss the philosophical, theological, and political ramifications of the enigma in accord with eight different conceptual implications for its meaning, and they end by moving away from the original question, suggesting that what it really signifies is a problematic relationship between social ethics and sociology of knowledge. Whatever else is accomplished here, it seems clear that the meaning of the original, difficult question under consideration eventually gets lost in the abstract discourse it has provoked. Moreover, it is exemplary for our present purposes to emphasize that the Eckardts never consider that if the Holocaust is in fact a uniquely new development in the history of Western civilization, then its occurrence may (1) disconfirm the idea of social ethics as a useful category of thought, and (2) demonstrate the obsolescence of sociology of knowledge as a useful mode of social inquiry.

Up to now we have been concerned to point out some relatively concrete symptoms of the problem of meaning and have noted a few salient examples. These examples and others like them eventually create the necessity to look deeper. Given the manifest difficulties of interpretation cited, the focus of attention shifts quite naturally away from substantive questions and toward underlying conceptual structures by which they are formulated. The problem of meaning then imposes itself in terms of abstract theory and/or epistemology. Hence there emerges a
more basic, global question of meaning: Can it be that satisfactory interpretation of the Holocaust has been prevented not by confusion over subject matter (uncertain evidence, biased or ambivalent forms for its articulation) but by confusion about the conceptual tools applied to the subject matter? It is our contention that this is, in fact, the case, and that it ultimately arises from the inevitable failures of a post-Holocaust scholarship that has largely been conducted on the basis of a pre-Holocaust epistemology.

The limitations of this epistemology generate problems of meaning at all levels of Holocaust scholarship. For the moment, however, it is sufficient to identify the rudimentary source of the problem as lying in the prevalent tendency to treat normative assumptions of historical explanation as if they were absolute. The specific aspects of epistemology in question here are commonly accepted psychosocial-historical logic systems that are based upon established definitions of, and distinctions between, facts, theories, and value statements. Like all abstractions, these conceptual structures are essentially reifications, but as successful reifications supported by wide consensus, they remain above suspicion when phenomenal contradictions occur. Thus, to consider a simple illustration, it is possible to analyze the Holocaust by placing the facts of repression and then destruction of the Jews in a plausible historical sequence or chronology based on a theory of anti-Semitism. (That is, cause: Jews are perceived by their persecutors as evil deniers of Christ; effect: they deserve punishment.) Normative explanation of the Holocaust as the consequence of anti-Semitism is thereby attained, and interpretation—the meaning of the Holocaust—follows directly in terms of the issues associated with anti-Semitism; most generally, how to prevent it. Hence the explanation appears to be virtually equivalent to the meaning. What is missed here, and almost entirely ignored in the literature as well, is the question of how the world, including anti-Semitism, must be seen differently after the Holocaust.

In cases where this question of meaning is acknowledged, it is frequently by-passed via appeals to the limits of historiographic competency; as if by referring to imponderable issues of epistemology posed by encounters with mind boggling horrors, one might properly be excused for terminating the work of analysis where it ought to begin. This position has the apparent virtue of maintaining the appearances of scholarly modesty, yet insofar as it denies the imperative to seek expansion of existing boundaries of scholarly effort commensurate with the magnitude of the problematic subject matter, it must be rejected as a retrograde, defensive orientation. In our view, it is precisely when the existing historical and psychosocial imagination becomes most profoundly stymied that the demand for creative analysis and interpretation should be most keenly felt and acted upon.
It also bears emphasis that the meaning problem we are concerned with is not just a matter of philosophical speculation. Existing interpretations of the Holocaust—or explanations masquerading as interpretations—do not provide an adequate social, emotional, or historical ground on which ordinary people may come to grips with it as a human event defining our culture in the same way as nuclear energy plants and Beethoven symphonies define our culture. Nineteenth-century slavery, for example, was understood to be a part of the culture that supported it, and was conceptualized with enough clarity for ordinary persons to see its moral, political, and socioeconomic dimensions without much difficulty. It was not an intimidating horror to be avoided, but a concrete reality to be interrogated and resolved either in terms of the prevailing world view or via the construction of an alternative world view.

The foregoing viewpoints are articulated in the remaining sections of this chapter, which is devoted to: (1) Contemporary approaches to Holocaust interpretation, (2) Marxian and Freudian morality, (3) failures before the Holocaust, and (4) a summary and prospectus.

CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO INTERPRETATION

What looks...like an interest in the nature of the object being studied or the area being explored, may be primarily an effort by the organism to calm itself down and to lower the level of tension, vigilance, and apprehension. The unknown object is now primarily an anxiety producer, and the behavior of examination and probing is first and foremost a detoxification of the object, making it into something that need not be feared (Abraham Maslow).11

The literature of Holocaust interpretation may be ordered into four readily identifiable and clearly different (if occasionally overlapping) categories. Briefly, and by reference to the primary value orientations and assumptions each brings to the subject matter, these categories or approaches are: (1) the established liberal-eclectic, (2) the Freudian and neo-Freudian, (3) the Marxian and neo-Marxian, and (4) the metaphysical-religious.

Although these approaches obviously reflect opposing world views based upon very different theoretical-philosophical convictions, it is noteworthy that insofar as substantive Holocaust scholarship is concerned, there is no major disagreement between them over the large-scale historical evidence; they generally accept the same thematic formulation of the problem-to-be-solved (How could it happen? What does it mean that it did?); and they similarly tend to submerge the problem of meaning in the problem of explanation. But the latter point will become clearer as we examine each approach in turn.
1. The Established Liberal-Eclectic Approach

It is difficult to specify the established orientation to Holocaust scholarship and interpretation without falling into tautological semantics. That which is the established, dominant way of doing things is, manifestly, "establishment" or "mainstream." And the character of such scholarly work in Western European and American society is typically liberal and eclectic. Among historians and philosophers of science, T. S. Kuhn's description of "normal science" has become the accepted technical label for the liberal-eclectic and usually positivist-empiricist theories and methods of contemporary science. In Holocaust scholarship, the equivalent of the normal science paradigm is made up of narrative histories and empirical analyses grounded on the same underlying liberal eclectic and positivist rationality underpinning the hard sciences.12

These works generally interpret the Holocaust as an aberration, a terribly dark, bizarre event growing out of the irrational Nazi racial ideology. In order to establish meaning, therefore, the task of analysis then becomes one of reconstruction: determining the sociohistorical sequence of what led to what and explaining the peculiar circumstances of Hitler's rise to power as well as the more specific details of the persecution of the Jews, beginning with conventional anti-Semitism and ending in their physical destruction.

This general approach presents the Holocaust as a kind of historical morality play justifying the ideals of Western liberal democracy by showing what can happen when madmen gain power and racism is allowed to prevail. Finer grain historical work is devoted to explaining specific aspects of how the madmen came to power and how they were able to impose their will (via the SS, for example) once they had it. This explanatory effort has been supported and enhanced by the qualitative case-history and theoretical studies of psychiatrists and psychologists concerned with the special psychodynamics of the Nazi leaders, their appeal to the masses, and the makeup of their more devoted followers. At a more general group level, quantitative empirical research by sociologists and social psychologists has provided abstract principles for the explanation of aberrant, destructive behavior. Some of the better known examples here include studies of authoritarianism that have been applied to German national character; studies of conformity and obedience to authority indicating mechanisms whereby ordinary people might behave atrociously; and more recently, Helen Fein's multiple regression model of the Holocaust, wherein the numbers of Jews killed in various parts of Europe serve as the statistical criterion for evaluating the weights assigned to such predictor variables as levels of prewar anti-Semitism and degrees of Nazi control.13

All of the foregoing historical and psychological categories of
work demonstrate the established, conventional orientation towards the problem of interpretation, namely, that the meaning of the Holocaust must be sought via explanations of how it came to pass. And this tendency to equate meaning with explanation is frequently confirmed by statements to the effect that by developing detailed explanations, we will have the means of avoiding such terrible horrors in the future. Implied, if not stated, is the idea of the Holocaust as an aberration that can be prevented from ever happening again if enough knowledge can be gained to explain how it happened in the first place. The major thrust of this interpretation is to minimize the significance of the Holocaust. In contemporary textbooks, for example, it does not receive close attention but is subsumed under the rubric of German mistreatment of conquered populations. There is little room here, quite obviously, for considering what it may mean to us now as a factual event in the history of our civilization. Above all, there is no hint of any reason why we should now feel secure with explanatory interpretations of the Holocaust provided in accord with the same intellectual paradigms which, earlier on, failed to perceive its onset.

2. The Freudian and neo-Freudian Approach

The essential basis for Freudian and other psychiatric interpretations of the Holocaust is its blatant irrationality and unspeakable cruelty. It is virtually a truism that wherever gratuitously intense, "irrational" human destructive force has appeared in the modern world since Freud, his theory has invariable served as the main point of departure, if not the entire structure, for rational psychosocial interpretation. Freud himself set the pattern for this in his famous essays "Why War?" and "Reflections on War and Death."

The Freudian formula, which may be applied to irrational violence across the board from individuals to groups, masses and nations, holds that the more senseless the violence, the more obviously it must be rooted in some form of instinct repression of which the person, mass, or state is not consciously aware. Such repression creates a burden of tension (anxiety, hostility), which eventually must be released (catharsis) either by turning it inward (self-destruction, psychoses and neuroses) or outward via creative redirection (sublimation), or destructive attack upon a convenient target (scapegoat).

At both the individual and sociocultural levels, the specific dynamics of experience (personal, historical) leading to the conditions for violence will vary a great deal and be concealed by all sorts of socially approved and/or institutionalized defense mechanisms. Interpretation of violence, therefore, requires the informed, discerning eye of a theorist who can penetrate to its hidden sources.

Where sociocultural and historical trends underlying the Holocaust
are concerned, such writers as Erich Fromm and Wilhelm Reich have maintained that its sources lie, respectively, in the disruptions of communal life produced by the industrial revolution and the suppression of sexuality. Other analysts, such as Bruno Bettelheim and Elie Cohen, who observed extraordinary behaviors among prisoners and guards in the concentration and death camps, have suggested that patterns of apparent violence and passivity may be traced to the breakdown of inhibiting superego- and ego-protective psychosocial mechanisms. And the Nazi leadership, mainly Hitler, but a number of high and medium rank leaders as well, has been studied intensively via the method of psychobiography. Here too, one may choose from among different interpretations, but the general trend fits the basic model noted earlier, insofar as personal repression and politicized forms of catharsis emerge as primary sources of seemingly inexplicable motives.

The many significant insights provided by Freudian and neo-Freudian works on Holocaust problems are well known enough to be stipulated without elaboration. It is not so obvious, however, that this approach is perfectly complementary to the established historical and social science aberration interpretation. In this connection, it is clear that an implicit, mutually supportive division of labor prevails among conventional, established forms of Holocaust scholarship. Historians and others explain the aberrant circumstances opening the way for Nazi power, while psychiatrists and psychoanalysts explain the aberrant motives among the Nazis.

Taken together, and viewed in a larger perspective, these two approaches have obviously dominated Holocaust research, and their explanatory theories have generally been accepted as the only sensible interpretation.

3. The Marxian Approach

There are so many different forms and facets to Marx's own writings, let alone those of his followers, imitators, and interpreters, that no brief summary can claim to present a comprehensive review of how Marxists (what kind? where? when?) approach any important event.

Concerning the Holocaust, however, the main themes of virtually all seriously committed Marxian discussions are not so difficult to identify because: (1) The destruction of the Jews per se has not been seen as a very important topic for analysis; it is usually subsumed and treated as part of all the other ruthless destruction caused by the Nazis. (2) The Holocaust is typically portrayed as the final outcome of European anti-Semitism for which a sound, well-established, socioeconomic explanation was produced by Marx himself. And (3) Marxist scholars have avoided direct engagement with the Holocaust not only because anti-Semitism can be a "sensitive" political issue in the Soviet Union.
and many Third World nations, but also because it is difficult to find explanations for extraordinary irrational violence in a very rational, economically-based social philosophy. Consequently, although the following discussion is relatively brief, it includes most if not all of the main themes of Marxian Holocaust interpretation.

In Marx's own theory of anti-Semitism, the Jews were seen as being both the historical progenitors of capitalism and also among the chief victims of the industrial class society it produced. More specifically and apart from its origins in the early history of Christianity, Marx saw anti-Semitism nurtured and encouraged by the ruling class, especially during times of crises, because it served as a means of diverting the attention of the masses away from recognition of their true condition, and/or, away from awareness of the fact that the policies of the ruling class were responsible for the crisis. In this sense, anti-Semitism is a preeminent form of false consciousness. In the modern era, moreover, anti-Semitism has a clear economic function: By providing the Jews as a ready-made target for popular discontent, it enhances the ability of the ruling class (monopoly capitalism) to exploit its workers. The theory of anti-Semitism, therefore, is directly linked to the general economic theory of capitalism.

Applied to the Holocaust, such Marxian theory offers useful guidelines for analysis of how the Nazis were able to exploit anti-Semitism during their drive for power in the Weimar Republic. Once their control was established, however, and the Jews were reduced to second class legal status via the Nuremburg laws (1935) and the confiscatory forced emigration program, it would appear that Marx's theory of anti-Semitism was more or less fulfilled, although it is arguable that subsequent utilization of Jews for slave labor is also relevant.

Why then kill Jews in wholesale lots when they could otherwise have been exploited economically, if only by working them to death? Marxian theory has no real answer to this question because it does not conceptualize situations in which a genetically based ideology of human destruction can take prolonged, systematic priority over the achievement of economic benefits.

Some Marxian theorists maintain that economic motives may be found for the mass killings insofar as they involved not only slave labor but also the collection from dead victims of their hair, clothing, gold tooth fillings, and other valuables. Yet such views do not stand up to close scrutiny; even the SS economics bureau objected to the mass killings as being inefficient and disruptive of important war production activities.

Other Marxian writers have argued that the socioeconomic benefits of Nazi anti-Semitism initially set the stage for the Holocaust,
but then become secondary to the political significance of Hitler's obsessive desire to eliminate the Jews. Thus, apart from his personal hatreds, another reason for the Holocaust was his realization that by killing so many people "for nothing," the remaining subject peoples including the Germans, would be so intimidated as to become willing servants to his policies. This ignores the fact that the subject peoples were already intimidated by methods other than the "final solution." Moreover, like so many other Marxian arguments—that the German capitalist ruling class wanted the Jews got out of the way, or that this same class had to allow Hitler to kill the Jews as a reward for his anti-communist services in their behalf—this is quite strained and lacks even surface plausibility as well as any substantive support.

It is noteworthy, finally, that an important critique of Marxian efforts to apply the economic theory of anti-Semitism to the Holocaust has been developed by Konrad Kwiet. After reviewing the work of East German (DDR) scholars, he observed that of all the Nazi leadership, it was Hjalmar Schacht who best represented the interests of German capitalism, yet it was Schacht who resigned as finance minister in 1937 in protest against the excesses of pre-Holocaust Nazi anti-Semitism.

4. The Metaphysical-Religious Approach

The range of perspectives here is represented in exemplary fashion by the salient works of Emil Fackenheim, Elie Wiesel, and Richard Rubenstein. These authors have all engaged the problems of explanation and meaning in explicit metaphysical terms, inclusive of, but extending well beyond the relatively commonplace issues of politico-religious theology. The latter have received attention from ecumenical Christian philosophers such as Franklin Littel but since their discussions have generally involved Christian responsibility for anti-Semitism, and whether or not Jews should still be held responsible for the death of Jesus and so forth, we will not be concerned with them here.

The basic premise of Fackenheim's extensive work is his assertion that the Holocaust is a form of Jewish "sacred history"; an epoch-making event comparable with the destruction of the Temple by the Romans or the emancipation of Europe's Jews in the eighteenth century. He explains the Holocaust as a culmination of centuries of anti-Semitism, a more or less inevitable catastrophe of Christian, not Jewish, civilization. In this connection, he differs sharply from some traditional Jewish theologians who see the mass destruction plainly as a punishment from God visited on the Jews for their disobedience; their assimilationist tendencies under the Enlightenment, and/or their subsequent Zionist politics. Fackenheim argues that the destruction was too indiscriminate and cataclysmic to fit the theology of punitive judgment.
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By the same token, he also rejects secularist views of the Holocaust as an aberration or accident of history, since the God of history would not permit such errors. Virtually by a process of elimination, then, Fackenheim comes to interpret Auschwitz as a manifestation of the will of God, a commandment, in fact, for Jews to hold fast to Judaism even in the face of the most terrible forces seeking to crush it.

Contradictory as it may seem to secular reason, and here Fackenheim appeals to Hegelian dialectics for help against lesser logic systems, the Holocaust commandment is put forward as a revelation insisting upon Jewish survival and rebirth, not death. The birth and persistence of the State of Israel is at least in part taken to be a realization of this commandment. But he further insists that all Jews who retain their Jewish identity after the Holocaust when every claim to rationality would seem to demand its denial, whether or not they live in Israel or practice their religion, are in this way bearing witness against Hitler and thus against the corruption of Western civilization that allowed him to flourish.

The general explanation and meaning of the Holocaust, therefore, comes down to a form of dialogue between the disaster wrought by secular Christianity and the manifest mission of the Jews to testify against it by virtue of their continued existence. For Fackenheim, Auschwitz represents an epochal breakpoint in Jewish history yet remains metaphysically coterminous with the core theological history of the Jews.

Richard Rubenstein takes a completely opposite position. Far from being conceivable as a new, tragically heroic episode in the on-going covenant between God and his chosen people, Rubenstein sees the Holocaust as the end of the covenant. The historical Jewish God finished as another victim of Auschwitz. Having been nearly obliterated by unrestrained secular power operating in the service of traditional anti-Semitism allied with scientificaly rationalized racism, Jews now have no other choice except to abandon their God-Ideal and to seek to realize their values as unaided humans through construction of their own community. And this cannot be accomplished if they continue in their traditional Diasporic indifferences to secular power.

Theologically and symbolically, therefore, the meaning of the Holocaust is the death of God. It is especially noteworthy, however, that Rubenstein argues this position not from the outside, as a rationalist skeptic, but from the inside, working within the fundamental assumptions of traditional Jewish faith. Thus, if the historical Jewish God is so cruel as to ordain a Holocaust or so impotent as to be unable to prevent it, that God must in either case be rejected; the contract must be abrogated.
Being neither a philosopher nor a theologian per se, the authority of Elie Wiesel's writings on the metaphysical significance of the Holocaust derives from the dedication of his art to his life experience, first as prisoner and later as survivor of Auschwitz. Unlike most survivors who have understandably made strenuous efforts to distance themselves from the Holocaust, Wiesel had devoted himself to staying in close touch with it and has made it the central focus of a remarkable body of literature.

Apart from its literary value, however, this work demands consideration in the present context because it epitomizes the endless dialogue over meaning between the living and dead victims, as well as their living or dead ideas of God. In many respects that can hardly be enumerated, Wiesel's work has been to dramatize the experiential implications of the conflict between those who, in one way or another, either take the position of Fackenheim or of Rubenstein or else waver between them. The extraordinary tension of his work, therefore, follows from Wiesel's struggle with the irresolvable paradox: One cannot, after Auschwitz, accept that there is any immanent basis for morality either in God or humanity; yet there is no way to bear life without the presence of something in which to believe.

Caught in this paradox, the protagonists of Wiesel's fiction may be seen as enacting a pilgrim's progress through all the familiar scenarios of desperation—withdrawn apathy, warfare, murder, suicide, madness—only to find them ultimately false and useless.

In the end, the prototypical survivor makes a conditional peace with himself through realization that the paradox of morality is not a problem to be solved but to be lived with as a condition of human life. Confronted with this condition, it is the task of each individual to work out a pathway from despair to affirmation. Wiesel thus moves toward an existential posture wherein doubts and dialogues concerning the Holocaust remain painfully vivid, yet become livable when both the severe limits and redeeming possibilities of human thought and action are finally grasped.

The similarities and conflicts between the three positions outlined above should be readily apparent. In all of them, of course, arguments with and about God outweigh every other consideration. This hermeneutical orientation is very significant from our point of view, because unlike the other approaches described, here one may see an immediate, almost axiomatic rejection of pre-Holocaust civilization so far as important values and beliefs are concerned. Consequently, distinctions between explanation and meaning are all but wiped out, and the salient issue becomes salvation; either for Jews-in-general or for their archetype in the person of the survivor.
The four general approaches to Holocaust interpretation provide in many ways a brief tour of the salient forms of culture analysis presently practiced in Western civilization. That is, regardless of whether the subject matter were something other than the Holocaust, such as art, science, or male-female relationships, one would still find that the general routes toward interpretation, the approaches or forms of social thought we have called liberal-eclectic, Freudian, Marxian, and metaphysical, remain quite the same because they are really all there is. Moreover, although the difficulties and limitations noted within each of these approaches when they are applied to the Holocaust might easily show up in connection with other subject matter, the unequivocal intensity of what is at stake here cuts to the bone of every form of interpretation.

When the majority of established scholars, for example, speak of the Holocaust as an extraordinary aberration, and provide detailed accounts of how this aberration occurred, to the astonishment of all concerned except for the handful of its central planners, does this not mean, in effect, that even "advanced" human societies can be so wildly unreliable that none of their pretensions to "civilized" values can be taken for granted? And since the very forms of thought and analysis employed to construct the aberration interpretation are themselves intimately rooted in and reflective of the civilized values and beliefs of the Enlightenment now revealed to be untrustworthy (actually falsified by evidence that they fail to prevent unspeakable destruction), does this not discredit the basis for the interpretation? In other words, if one takes the aberration theme seriously enough to pursue its implications, it ultimately turns back upon itself, calling into question the rationality it is based upon.

At the metaphysical-religious end of the interpretation spectrum, a similar type of paradox also exists and causes very serious problems, but of a different sort from those we have identified for conventional scholars. Those who believe in a divine power called "god" face a dilemma. If an event of such terrible magnitude as the Holocaust could occur by chance, as an aberration, then can there be any divine power worthy of the name? And if it was not a random event but actually ordained by a divine will or power, then how can one accept such a power to be an object of belief or worship?

Unresolvable, this dilemma imposes itself as a huge, intimidating burden upon all Jewish theology and metaphysics. Like Sisyphus with his heavy stone, Jewish moral philosophers seem condemned to be forever pushing this intolerable weight up the infinite mountainside of existential meaning. Worse yet, those few who honorably and knowingly acknowledge this burden (there are many who do not) and struggle to grapple it forward, are further condemned to struggle with each other as well. Does the Holocaust
affirm the presence and will of God for Jews to reestablish their religion in its traditional homeland (Fackenheim)? Or does it terminate the historical Jewish God ideal (Rubenstein), leaving Jews only with the desperate necessity to maintain themselves in a garrison state? Or does it, finally, only convey massively irrefutable evidence of the existential emptiness within which Jews either may or may not choose, by their own act of will, to affirm a God ideal (Wiesel)?

Compared with the consensus prevailing among most established secular scholars, who seem comfortably at ease with the aberration interpretation, the disputes and contradictions among the metaphysical writers appear passionately arbitrary and perhaps childishly irrational. But if our analysis to this point is correct, then the bitter epistemological struggles characteristic of the metaphysical approach may ultimately be judged as the more appropriate line of interpretation because it at least keeps alive the fires of critical controversy and painful confrontation. The liberal secular approach, by contrast, goes on with explanatory business-as-usual, almost as if nothing had happened.

The two remaining approaches to Holocaust interpretation, via Freudian and Marxian theory, have each, to a certain extent, been assimilated to the established aberration theme of secular scholarship. As we have seen, Freudian works explain the unusual motives of the Nazi leadership in terms of psychopathology (individual aberration), whereas Marxian analyses of Nazi policies offer explanations in terms of the economic benefits of anti-Semitism (a collective false consciousness). Liberal eclectic scholarship has no special difficulty joining these ideas together and adding various empirical findings to demonstrate how they combined in Germany to yield the preconditions for an aberration as large as the Holocaust.

Freudian and Marxian thought can only be pasted together in this fashion, however, so long as the profound antagonisms between them are put aside in favor of their technical explanatory points of convergence. Thus, for example, Marx's structural-economic theory of anti-Semitism appears to blend easily into Freud's relevant psychodynamic formulations of projection and scapegoating. Yet the two systems are not simply theories of social behavior susceptible to reconciliation at the hands of clever scholars; they are moral world views based on radically opposed fundamental assumptions. The antithesis here is so intense that each conceives the other to be symptomatic of the illnesses it aims to correct! (To the Marxist, Freudian theory and practice is a bourgeois self-indulgence diverting attention away from the real material sources of human suffering; to the Freudian, Marxist theory and practice is a complex defensive rationalization and compensation for failures of psychosexual development.)

Furthermore, it remains an unresolved Marxian mystery how the
conventional historical-economic forces behind anti-Semitism could have gone amok to produce the Holocaust; and it remains similarly a Freudian mystery how persons so dominated by pathological symptoms as Hitler and the other leading Nazis could have come to control and preside over the reorganization of a complex nation state. But there are problems with both systems of thought that must be addressed in depth because they suggest that the Marxian and Freudian failures vis-à-vis the Holocaust are rooted in their conceptualizations of morality.

MARXIAN AND FREUDIAN MORALITY

In both Marxian and Freudian thought, morality as such is generally treated as an epiphenomenon; an artifact of the sociocultural framework rather than a defining quality of the human condition. There is no golden rule nor any other absolute standard prohibiting any of the various forms of human destructiveness to be found in either the Marxian or Freudian canons. Instead, both relegate traditional ideas of right and wrong to the status of either primitive, religious Superstition, and/or evolving social norms serving to maintain existing power structures: of the ruling class (for Marx), or the patriarchal father (for Freud). The general thrust of both systems, therefore, is to eliminate or trivialize all conventional notions of moral responsibility by revealing their sources in the oppressive economic and psychosocial structures of society.

This is not to say that the Marxian and Freudian systems have no moral dimension. But their moral dimension is indirect; derivative from their fundamental commitments to human liberation from economic and psychosocial forms of oppression. The basic analysis of morality presented in both systems emphasized that unless special circumstances intervene, the ideas of right and wrong prevailing in society and within individuals will remain beyond the reach of deliberate, self-conscious control. Groups and individuals will remain dominated by the morality associated with their economic and psychosocial situation, unless they can reach a new level of self-awareness via revolutionary activity or psychoanalysis. Yet even in these exceptional situations, the liberty that may be experienced contains no special ethic except group- and self-realization. To be liberated in these (Marxian or Freudian) terms, therefore, is to be freed from any absolute standards of right and wrong.

Such freedom can also carry with it an imperative to violate the prior socially inculcated moral restraints against destructive aggression, especially insofar as those restraints may now be perceived as instrumental to the prior state of oppression. According to the Marxian system, destructive violence may in fact be required in aid of the revolution; and according to some branches of Freudian theory, personal violence (acting out) may be construed as therapeutic catharsis in aid of ego development. In both systems, it appears that normative morality is a
disguised instrument of oppression that may be transcended; but once a liberating transcendence is attained, morality becomes quite problematic, something to be decided upon depending on circumstances. It is precisely at this point, however, that the locus of moral thought becomes external to the group or the individual, since determinations of right or wrong can only be made according to objective interpretations of circumstances.

These interpretations, of course, are attained by following the guidelines of theory; either Marxian or Freudian as the case may be. This is a major epistemological move away from the traditions of religious metaphysics and liberal pragmatics. The end result, manifestly, is that right and wrong are no longer matters of internal conviction or reflexivity, but are, instead, remote constructions of circumstances mediated by theory. Once this epistemological quality of Marxian and Freudian thought is understood, it becomes painfully apparent that, at the level of daily moral praxis, they cannot provide any formal stipulations defining right and wrong behavior.

The many formal similarities between Marxian and Freudian conceptions of morality may seem to contradict the prior critique of eclectic scholarship by ignoring the antithesis between them. Yet this antithesis can only be fully appreciated once the points of formal similarity have been acknowledged, for it is in their mechanisms and procedures of moral interpretation—their "rules of the game"—that Marxian and Freudian thought stand in total opposition to one another. In a brief, necessarily oversimplified way, it may be said that the moral touchstone of Marxism is economics; other things being equal, any activity enhancing the extent to which workers can own and control their own productive labor, thereby avoiding alienation, will be liberating and thus morally good. The touchstone of Freudian morality is effective psychosexual development; other things being equal, activities enhancing the individual's achievement of the psychosexual stage of genitality will be liberating and thus morally good.

The antithesis here hardly requires elaboration, except to specify that when they are applied at the level of common praxis, the chief point of conflict between the two systems lies in their radically different assumptions about the sources of human motivation. Is it reducible to a matter of economics or psychosexual needs and instincts? Should external material circumstances be seen as the generative source of inner psychosexual development or vice versa? There is no adequate answer to such questions, although compromise solutions have been attempted by stepping outside of both systems. This was tried by critical theorists Adorno, Marcuse, and others, but it leads inevitably to another dilemma: If liberal thought is rejected as being false in accord with Marxian and Freudian analyses, and if the global exclusivity claimed by the Marxian and Freudian systems are both rejected in order to argue that both may be
correct when they are considered within some higher level system that neither one will accept, then what sort of thought system has one arrived at? What are the "rules of the game" in this supra-Marxist-Freudian system that purports to embrace both of them? The critical theorists could not answer this question, except by attempting to convert the general strategy of relentless Marxian-Freudian criticism into a philosophical system. This was Adorno's aim in his final and most obscure work, *Negative Dialectics*. By all accounts, including those of the most devoted admirers of critical theory, it does not succeed in constituting a new system.

**FAILURES BEFORE THE HOLOCAUST**

It is not clear whether the palpable failures of Marxian and Freudian thought in the face of the Holocaust should be conceived as demonstrating that the two systems are altogether false in their claims toward general interpretations of society or that they are simply much more limited in their applicability to human affairs than their progenitors could possibly imagine. After all, neither Marx nor Freud nor any of their chief exponents could think that anything like the Holocaust might ever occur at the center of European civilization. It is clear, however, that neither Marxian nor Freudian views of human motivation are adequate to interpret the behavior of the victims and perpetrators of the Holocaust.

More specifically, when examining such "perpetrator" issues as the evolution of the final-solution policy, the functioning of the SS organization which carried it out, or the behavior of individual SS commanders of death camps, there do not appear to be any important problems that can be resolved in accord with economic motives. If anything, the theory of motivation based on dialectical materialism suggests that a policy of the magnitude, ferocity, and counterproductivity of the final solution would never be adopted by rational men and could never be implemented effectively by irrational men.

On the other hand, although Freudian psychosexual theory suggests that atrocious horrors may be committed by certain individuals (working out bizarre psychodynamics via ego defensive acts of aggression) and sometimes groups; namely, the Jim Jones cult murders and mass suicides, it also suggests that such horrors will be limited and relatively rare insofar as they depart from normative social values. If anything, psychosexual analyses of individual and group behavior processes implies that the conduct of mass killing, torture, and brutalization of defenseless men, women, and children as a matter of daily routine should be a social-emotional impossibility. There were in fact some cases of SS men, and many more among their victims, who did commit suicide or allow themselves to die quickly rather than go on with life under such circumstances; had more of them done so,
Freudian theory would have a stronger claim to fit the events.

In general, it may be acknowledged that such concepts as Marx's notion of alienation and Freud's notion of compartmentalization, projection, and other defense mechanisms can be usefully employed to help explain how ordinary men may adapt themselves to extraordinary atrocities, but even in the hands of the most adept scholars, these concepts merely offer tentative grounds for speculative discussions beyond the scope of their parent theories.

It is noteworthy, in this context, that Freudian theorists, some of whom were themselves prisoners in death camps and concentration camps, have done much more work on Holocaust problems than Marxian theorists. Almost without exception, these writers (for example, Bettelheim, Cohen, Fromm, Frankel, Lifton, E. A. Rappaport) try to show how the Holocaust experience requires basic modifications of important Freudian assumptions, as well as different forms of process interpretation. So far as SS behavior is concerned, one of the major points of contention has been the question of moral values: Were the SS men with criminal superegos as some theorists claimed? Were they banal, self-seeking mediocrities? Or were they instead, so very high in the qualities called authoritarianism that their morality was superceded and subordinated to their need for obedience to a charismatic leader? Other questions concerning the behavior of both victims and survivors of the camps have generated still more controversy, particularly when they involve matters of apparent victim passivity and reasons why some prisoners seemed better able to survive than others. The fact that vast uncertainty and conflict remains about such matters, even among the most credible and articulate of Freudians who have had nearly forty years to sort out the evidence, is in itself very clear evidence that the theory is inadequate to interpret the events.

This conclusion is also supported by A. E. Rappaport's little known but very significant professional analysis of how Freudian theory fails before the traumatic experiences of Holocaust survivors. As both a survivor and a psychoanalyst consulted by other survivors, Rappaport brought unique credentials to his scrutiny of theory. His conclusions that (a) it was wrong to apply the concept "traumatic neurosis" to the behavior problems of survivors, and (b) that a traumatized ego—contrary to the teaching of Freudian theory—could result from atrocious experiences in the absence of any predisposing childhood conflict or trauma, are developed in a way that gives a very practical and moving sense of the difficulties created by the fact that Freudian theory does not fit Holocaust trauma and, consequently, cannot offer much help to its survivor clients.

SUMMARY AND PROSPECTUS

Our main arguments have been that: (1) The various modes of
thought applied to the task of Holocaust interpretation have all been inadequate because they do not acknowledge the extent to which their epistemological assumptions, theoretical structures, and methodologies have been compromised or falsified by the fact that the Holocaust happened. (2) The internal contradictions and confusion between explanation and meaning characterizing the eclectic empiricist and metaphysical approaches are evident. (3) The Marxian and Freudian approaches to the Holocaust fail for two reasons that have not been appreciated. As moral worldviews, the two systems share with liberal empiricism the idea that morality may be conceptualized objectively and thus enable rational evaluations to be made of right and wrong. By shifting the locus of morality to material and psychosexual circumstances, however, the end result is only a new form of complex subjectivity offering no assurances against tendencies toward mass destruction. Furthermore, insofar as the two systems provide theories of motivation, they both turn out to be largely irrelevant to the problematic behaviors of Holocaust victims, perpetrators, and survivors. In none of these groups, does one find significant evidence suggesting that either material gain/loss or psychosexual gratification/frustration was anything more than a fringe motive for the majority.

Based on the foregoing considerations, our general thesis is that all or most of the important failures of thought before the Holocaust follow from a more basic and pervasive failure to recognize that the Holocaust has altered the boundaries of human possibilities: Because of the Holocaust, we must recognize that reality has been changed. It now includes as actual happenings and plausible likelihoods, events that were heretofore simply not thought of, or else thought of but dismissed as bizarre fantasy. By relying upon philosophical assumptions, values, theories, and methods rooted in pre-Holocaust visions of reality and possibility, scholars have consistently and systematically either missed or misconstrued important problematic aspects of the Holocaust.

What occurs at the level of psychosocial theory seems directly expressive of Feyerabend’s formal critique of science in general, namely, that insofar as new evidence is obtained, it will be assimilated into the preexisting expert consensus even if this requires a radical deformation of the evidence in order to maintain the credibility of the consensus. Feyerabend argues further that whatever evidence cannot be fit into the preexisting consensus will be ignored or devalued as subjectively biased, mystical, or otherwise flawed.16

It is noteworthy, moreover, that within their own specific histories both Marxian and Freudian thought contain very dramatic instances of alternative viewpoints and critiques that were directed at the same general points of theoretical significance that we have identified in connection with the Holocaust. Within
the Marxian tradition, the views of theorists such as Sorel, who emphasized the influence of myth over human behavior, and of Bakunin, who argued for the reflexive independence of small groups as against the intrinsically oppressive hierarchical organization of masses, both exemplify a concern with themes that were anathema to Marx but now appear very cogent in relation to the Holocaust and subsequent events of this century. (Revival of interest in anarchist theory among contemporary intellectuals is no accident.)

In the Freudian tradition, the major internal critiques came from Jung and Reich. Jung's ideas about racial archetypes, especially his Nietzschean ambivalence about the Germanic "blonde beast" were dismissed by Freud as evidence of his latent anti-Semitism; and Reich's work on the psychosexual basis of Nazism as a mass movement was also rejected. Both of these renegade Freuds were able to perceive some of the darker aspects of European culture in ways that Freud's commitment to an outmoded scientific rationality apparently prevented.

Mainly judged to be failures in their own time, these revisionist currents within the Marxian and Freudian traditions have in one form or another made steady gains ever since the Holocaust. When taken together with other dissident currents of modern thought, such as the critical theory of Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse, and the existentialism of Sartre and Heidegger, there begins to be visible among the many overlaps and common predispositions between them a loosely linked body of thought—full of contradictions, obscurities, and apparent dead ends, to be sure, that is strikingly relevant to the Holocaust experience. It is in these philosophical, psychosocial, and historical domains of the cranky, quirky critics of all that is held dear by the modern democratic or authoritarian industrial state, that the latent forms for an adequate post-Holocaust social epistemology may be perceived.

Without claiming any special priority or making any pretense toward a fulfilled, programmatic vision, it is possible to suggest at least three key premises for such an epistemology. If, as we have tried to show, the facticity of the Holocaust defies interpretation via the main streams of pre-Holocaust social thought, it is because the events of the Holocaust reveal their central conceptual structures to be either false or inadequate. First among these conceptual structures is the Enlightenment ideal of material and moral progress via science and technology. It is now clear, however, that these enterprises are ruthlessly amoral and that their potential for human progress, (liberation from fear, want, and so forth) is matched or exceeded by their potential for human destruction—whether in the form of weapons, death camps, or disease-causing chemicals in the natural environment. Consequently, science and technology are not to be trusted; not to be taken at their face value, for they lead as
easily to Auschwitz as to Disney World.

Furthermore, science and technology are not neutral instrumentalities of human will, as is so often claimed by those with the highest stakes in maintaining their present-day hegemony. On the contrary, the record of the twentieth century in general and the Holocaust in particular shows that the Promethean qualities of instrumental power conferred by science/technology have functioned in fact as irresistible seducers toward fundamentally antihuman thought and antihuman social policies. It is a familiar and credible argument, in this connection, that every advance of science/technology has been accompanied by a further decline in the ontological status of human beings from subjects to objects.

A second and closely related conceptual structure supporting pre-Holocaust epistemology is the Cartesian splitting of the psyche leading to the normative view of rationality. The Cartesian split is more and more generally recognized to be the origin of the modern domination of abstract, analytical thought over reflexive human feelings. A post-Holocaust epistemology cannot accept such a split. In fact, from the standpoint of the Holocaust, it seems obvious that we must stand Descartes on his head and declare: I am, therefore I think, feel, and so on.

The thrust of this proposition is not to eliminate any or all forms of rationality, but to restore the balance between abstraction and reflexivity. This requires alteration of the subject-object relationship, both in terms of the presumed differences between subjectivity and objectivity, on the one hand, and on the other, of the now-conventional thought models allowing subjects to be converted into objects.

Finally, a third and crucially important general premise of post-Holocaust epistemology must be recognition that the chief social instrument of human suffering in the twentieth century—epitomized in the Holocaust—has been the modern state. Whatever else it may be or might have been, the bureaucratic, hierarchical, rationalized structure of the modern industrial state is a social invention that has evolved in this century into an historically unparalleled engine of efficient human destruction. It is the primary empirical means and constitutes the technical-methodological framework whereby the sundry forces within society can be coordinated to function against the immanent interests of sensate humanity. As Jules Henry suggested in the title of his psycho-social analysis of American society, we may see "Culture Against Man" revealed not only in warfare, but also in the daily, prosaic activities of the state. Furthermore, as we have argued elsewhere in detail, the failures of law, religion, and science revealed in the Holocaust are intimately associated with the fact that these three pillars of Western civilization have all come under
control of the modern state, beyond which there is no higher authority today anymore than in Europe circa 1939-45.

It should be emphasized again, by way of conclusion, that once interpretations of the Holocaust as a species of insane anti-Semitism and/or historical aberration are rejected for the reasons we have discussed, then it can only be perceived as an acute manifestation of the modern transformation of European civilization. Embodying many of the antihuman trends already glimpsed and occasionally prophesized by some pre-Holocaust thinkers who tried to warn against the terrible ontological consequences they saw latent in the growing dominance, above all, of science/technology, rationality, and the structure of the modern state, the Holocaust forces deep critical reconsideration of the epistemological underpinnings of the European Enlightenment. In our view, the Holocaust is nothing less than a horrible monument to the confusion and failure of the modes of thought that have dominated twentieth-century Western civilization. Nazism jioned together the mythic, aggressively destructive elements of human culture with those of nationality, technology, and bureaucratic social control. We see this symbolized today when terrible new weapons systems are named after Greek or Hindu Gods. Unself-conscious efforts to interpret the Holocaust in accord with such modes of thought cannot succeed; if post-Holocaust epistemology does not yet exist, then it is necessary for us to begin to invent it. From this standpoint, Holocaust interpretation can only be accepted as valid insofar as it becomes the means of revealing the deep structural thought systems that made it possible and then exploring routes toward their alteration, guided by emerging new visions of the ideal of a unitary and indivisible humanity.
NOTES


2 Henry Friedlander, "Toward a Methodology of Teaching about the Holocaust," Teachers College Record 80, no. 3 (1979), pp. 519-42.


7 Gunnar Boehnert studied the personnel records of the SS officer corps; Tom Segev studied former concentration camp commanders. Both projects (unpublished) are mentioned in detail in G. Kren and L. Rappoport, The Holocaust and the Crisis chapter 4, "The Unique Institution."


