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Robert Gibbs: Why Ethics? Signs of Responsibilities

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Why Questions?

A. THE RESPONSE IN RESPONSIBILITY

It is a commonplace that philosophy is defined by the questions it asks. Usually, the question is What: What is this? What is? What is the cause? What can we know? Often the question is How: How do we know? How do things occur? How does language refer? For others, the question is Who: Who acts? Who knows? Who has a place at the table? For us, the question is Why.

Questioning, like being questioned, occurs between people. If philosophy is a practice of questioning, then its social setting is not merely a backdrop for the thinking of thinking, but philosophy is a practice of responding to other people's questions, even if only answering a question with a question. Too often, philosophy has been conceived as the self-sufficiency of a solitary thinker. Too often, it has asserted its role as interrogator: the specialist in questions, challenging all others and answering to none. But what if a philosopher were first of all one who feels the weight of another person's question? What if a philosopher thinks not to be free of all others nor only to befuddle them, but thinks in order to respond to questions that others ask? To be master of the question is to be called to respond, to attend to others' questions. Then philosophy would begin in self-criticism, in fear before another, in hope to heed the question.

The question Why? opens up a realm of ethics: an ethics of responsibility, of an ability to respond arising in the exigency to attend to another's questioning. This book will offer an ethics of responsibility, arising out of the need not merely to speak and to act responsively, but more out of the need to think: to give an account to others of why we should respond for other people. Having found itself in question, philosophy requires an ethical justification, and we will seek such justification through an ethics—an extreme ethics for a thinking that has so much to answer for today.

This book offers an ethics whose center is responsibility and not principles of autonomy or rational deliberation or optimal benefits. I distinguish here between the ethical exigence of bearing a *responsibility* and the corresponding *responsive* performance in the following manner: I can be responsible for doing something, even when I fail to act responsively. Responsiveness is thus the fulfillment of a responsibility, but my bearing of that responsibility is independent of whether I act ethically or not. Hence

responsibilities can be necessary—binding me indissolubly to the ethical exigency—while the responsiveness is inherently contingent.

Responsibility in this ethics is asymmetric: I am responsible for others in a way that they are not responsible for me. Indeed, this ethics requires me to respond for actions of others, actions I could neither cause nor control. The origin of this claim arises in being questioned: I am responsible to respond independent of the responsiveness of the other person. I am responsible to my interlocutor, responsible for what she will make of what I say, responsible to keep answering as she keeps questioning, responsible because I cannot define the situation and cannot ethically close off the questioning. The primary responsibility is for a future I cannot control or even foresee: a responsibility that arises for me in attending to other people.

We also are responsible for each other in a mutual way when justice requires us to become present, one-to-another. But even in the present, where equality and fairness have their place, the instability of ethical responsibilities arises. For first we are bound asymmetrically to each other, and ethical mutuality is possible only because of that excess of responsibility. Indeed, the logic of relations of particulars to generals itself will appear as different modes of responding, of producing responsible individuals—individuals who can respond to others. But a community, despite its hope or pretension, is never alone. It stands over against other communities, and in judging the others is itself judged. This ethics will place extreme responsibility on each community for its others, discerning ways for the “we” to be responsible for its “you.”

Responsibility extends asymmetrically into the past, too. Here the gap between responsibility and blame accentuates the lack of control in responding. For some things we are to blame, but for much more we are responsible—called to respond for the sake of the future. For if we are responsible for the actions of others in the past, it means primarily that ours are the tasks of remembering and mending the damage wrought in the past. The responsibilities for the past I have collected around the responsibility for repenting. The tarrying with the past, the concern with its violence and its own failures in relation to earlier pasts, is a responsibility to reopen the past for the ones who will be able to redeem it. Just as I attend my interlocutor in the future, whose authority to question me I struggle to maintain, so the past is made into an interrogation of me, of us—an interrogation at the end of this bloody and terrifying century, to which we must respond. Responsibility claims us asymmetrically in various modes, calling for our response in extreme ways.

This ethics also requires a change in its organon, from consciousness and its thoughts to semiotics: to practices performed with signs. Indeed, I will argue for an interpretation of pragmatics as the key for semiotics. Pragmatics here will be the dimension of meaning that occurs in the relation between the sign-user and the signs. The traditional media of ethics are the will, conscious intentions, deliberate choices, or the perfection of an individ-

ual rational life. When ethics was construed around the self-consistency of a rational being or the self-rule of spontaneous wills, it struggled to reach a concept of who the ethical self was. Ethics became primarily the identification and perfection of that who. Only in the circumstances where that self was bound with others did the goodness of relations with others require discussion. A theory of deliberate action focuses on the way that means are fit to my end, making me sovereign over my action. Reason appears there to be a way of maintaining my self in my action, conserving or even expanding my being. Responsibility could never appear in its own light but was derivative from will or reason, from the activities that preserve a being in its being. Semiotics—the study of signs—replaces an ontology of presence and self-presence, where reason appears as self-rule and self-sufficiency.

This book is organized around sets of practices with signs: listening, speaking, writing, reading, commenting in the first part. Interpreting these practices, a position can be determined through the practice. Thus in addition to a speaker-position (“I, however . . .”), there will be a listener-position (a “me” in question), and others. The responsibility of the practice defines the position and is not the choice of a being who first has independent substantial existence. Each practice is called forth to respond to other people, and indeed, each position has the responsibility of heeding the authority of other people to interpret their own words and mine.

The practices that concern the responsibilities for justice and that require a presence are reasoning, mediating, judging, and making law. These practices are more recognizably philosophical, but in this book they will appear as social responsibilities and not in the first instance as cognitive functions. Justice requires us to reason and judge, to mediate individual and general terms—the need for justice produces a need for semantics and syntax. And indeed, we will give an argument based on pragmatics for these other aspects of semiotics.

The set of practices in responsibility for the past are repentance, confession, forgiveness, and remembrance. Each will appear here in terms of signs and not merely states of mind or will. The repair of the past occurs in using words and signs to repair the relations between signs in the past. Historiography appears here, then, as a way of responding for the past by interpreting texts, commodities, and even our own existence as signs of past suffering.

This book, moreover, presents an ethics of responsibility in a distinctive format: by way of commentary. The performance of the text is a juxtaposition of shorter passages from various authors with a commentary written by me. This has required unusual practices in the writing, in the composition by the printer, and in the reading. In several places within the book there are reflections on the responsibilities in reading and writing commentary. But at one level the point is quite simple: responsive writing bears responsibility for what others have written. I wrote this in response to the questions raised by other texts, striving to hold open the vulnerability of responsibility for the

readers to come. I am at the service of (responding for) both the authors I cite and comment upon and my readers—although these responsibilities are not identical. Page by page, this text will juxtapose texts from Levinas, Derrida, Rosenzweig, Habermas, Benjamin, the Bible, the Talmud, Maimonides, and others with my commentary. The reader then can see my practice of reading, and so will have the authority to read otherwise.

This book then advances the claims that ethics should be reoriented by the theme of responsibility; that the organon for ethics becomes pragmatics; and that the form of composition becomes commentary and depends on the pragmatics of paratactic composition. Such claims, precisely as advanced through commentary, are not my invention. My readings have assembled texts that have themselves already performed a sea change in ethical thinking. I have attempted to collect texts here that will facilitate further thinking in this new direction of ethics and responsibility. Such an undertaking is largely introductory, forsaking the more recognizable tasks (1) of providing basic readings of these major thinkers and their works, or (2) of exploring the most difficult and complex issues that specialists debate, or (3) of offering an extended comparison and debate between the various thinkers here examined. I believe that this book will be valuable for those specialists in part because of the intersections of diverse intellectual traditions here. My hope for those seeking an introduction to Levinas, or Habermas, or the Talmud is that if the book throws you into relatively deep water it also will indicate some basic strokes. But this book is primarily an introduction for those who are seeking a new orientation for ethics, those who seek help interpreting what it means to be responsible, indeed, who find themselves responsible as intellectuals for what others have thought and written. The assembling of texts and of why questions, of practices with signs, seeks to explore a way of writing an ethics that can hold open the responsibility and the vulnerability that calls us into question and so into action.

B. SIGNS

To give a response to a question is to give something to someone, to relate with other people. This ethics examines responsibility in the medium of signs because a sign is something that refers to something for someone. When we look to signs, we are already in the midst of relations *for* another (and not only *to* another). Responsibility appears as the key to an ethics of signs—because a sign requires other people and implicates me in response to them. Just as the meaning of a sign is a something usually outside the sign, so this ethics finds its center outside the self. The inability of a sign to measure itself for itself and in itself is the opening of the proper medium for the study of ethics: referring to another for another, a sign is a doubled relation to the world and to another person. But to understand signs in play, at work, is to complete a linguistic turn in philosophy. For as long as we see signs only

as a way of knowing, and so measure the frustrations in knowing that accompany the use of signs, we do not recognize the more profound contribution that the linguistic turn makes. That contribution to ethics is found in pragmatics, as the examination of the relations between signs and their users. I claim that pragmatics is originally ethical. It always addresses relations between people, indeed, relations of responsibility. The incapacities of language as a tool for knowing are to be grasped rather as its appropriateness for the activities of responding. Once we dare elevate the concerns of ethics, we can then accommodate the cognitive functions of signs as well—and indeed view them as more intrinsic to signification than the interactive and responsive functions of signs could be for epistemologists. Throughout this book, therefore, we retain a priority of ethics, and in a theory of signs, the priority of pragmatics.

The study of signs, semiotics, is a diffuse and complex set of disciplines. For the most part, it has been a descriptive discipline, exploring how signs signify and what they mean. The question Why? looks along a specific axis of view: looking at the range of activities that people perform with signs. I choose to term what I am doing here pragmatics, although the definition of pragmatics is almost unmanageable.¹ I will take recourse to definitions from Morris, where semiotics is divided into three aspects: the relations of signs with other signs (syntactics), the relations of signs with their referents (semantics), and the relations of signs and their users (pragmatics).² My claim, however, is that pragmatic meaning is the leading meaning of a sign. The claim of ethics always occurs in the dimension of ought that governs signifying practices, but ethics is not an account of the motives of the author or speaker. Indeed, to examine our motives in using signs would be to take recourse in the medium of consciousness. Why we should listen, for instance, is the reason within the practice and may often be ignored or transgressed in our intentions. Pragmatic meaning is not the intended meaning of the speaker, but the meaning that pervades the practice. Relations are struck in performances that exceed our intentions. Semantic meaning, at first glance, is the conventionally ascribed meaning: the meaning that stipulates a relation to a referent. Syntactical meaning is the interdependent meaning a sign has in relation to other signs. As we turn from a general theory of action to one of semiotic action, we can see the relations of signs meaning something for someone are different from a general account of enacting means toward an end, for instance.

This shift to semiotics will catch some scholars of semiotics and some philosophers of language unawares. In the process of the argument of this book I have dared to reconstitute semiotics, viewing even the relation of

¹ See Stephen C. Levinson, *Pragmatics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1–35; and Jacob L. Mey, *Pragmatics: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 35–52.

² Charles Morris, *Writings on the General Theory of Signs* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), 43ff.

signs to their referents through the relation of users and signs. Thus what I call semantics here (in Part II) will be about the social relations that require stable definitions and coordination of meanings between people—and will displace the ethical importance of what for others was a “self-evident” need to know and to name the world with signs. We do use words and other signs to know the world, but the reason why, I will argue, has to do with the social relations for the sake of justice and responsibility for each other. Operations like thinking, mediating, and judging will appear in relation to ethical responsibilities for justice. The reason why we use codes, stabilize definitions, and the like will occupy us.

In an even more dramatic shift, I will look at syntactics not in terms of ideal logical relations, but as forms of judgment of the relation of particulars to generals performed in social relations. That is, I am more interested in the sort of universality that is performed in a society as a relation of the responsibility of members for the general community than in the abstract relations of syllogisms and deductions. The concrete logic I explore is therefore referred again back to pragmatic relations, to relations between the particular as a sign and the community as a sign-user. The difference between judging an individual as representative of a community or as a cooperative participant with others produces different kinds of relations.

At the risk of confusing or frustrating those skilled in semiotics, I will try a simplified terminology of the sign. My focus is on the act of *signifying*. I will call the sign-bearer, the specific word on the page or articulated in utterance, the *sign*. The person who utters, inscribes, gesticulates, or otherwise addresses the sign I will call the speaker, the addressor, the utterer, or the writer. The person who receives a sign, who interprets it, will be variously the listener, the reader, the respondent. The central claim of the book is that the responsibilities in attending to a sign orient all of the pragmatic responsibilities, especially the utterer’s.

A sign, however, also relates to something, refers to either a perceptible object or a conceptual object. Signs refer to a world, investing it with meaning (as in Husserl’s semiotic), but the key activity is not the nomination of the sign, but the *donation* to another person. Our focus will not be, therefore, on the ontological status of the meaning of signs, but rather on the giving and receiving of meanings from and to other people. Similarly, the *indexical* function of a sign, to point to something, to refer in a direct perceptual way, will not be separated from the act of signifying. The core of indexicality will be reference to myself—will be the donation of myself to another person (“at your service”). Indeed, the most extreme claim that will guide the theory of ethics here is that the “I” who uses signs is assigned, made into a sign.

In this book, I use personal pronouns extensively. In the first instance, there is an I that is the writer’s voice, conducting the text on its way. But

there also is a concept of the “I,” an indexical position transformed into a theme. In addition, there is also an I, or often a me, who is the locus of responsibility. These different uses overlap, too. And for this book the question of the “me” is even more important, as responsibility begins not in a subject making its own choices, but with a me who is called to answer. Last, I have disrupted the exclusive masculine usage of most of my authors for describing the third person. Thus often I will write that “she is responsible,” even though my authors tended to limit their discourse only to males. Rather than neuter all third persons or use the clumsy “she or he,” I have opted for interweaving the masculine and feminine pronouns, and I hope that it helps disturb our readings of the pretexts.

The choice of semiotics, moreover, involves not just a theory of language but one of signs and signifying. While much of the philosophical interest in meaning and language has confined itself to our audible languages, the pragmatics of using language rests in large measure on modes of signifying that move beyond language. Late in the book I will argue that goods (commodities) can also serve as signs. They serve in a system of signification (an economy) but they bear the marks of things that do not belong to the system: the labor of the people who made the stuff. Our belongings (and our trash) are signs of a suffering that we cannot represent adequately.

But it is not only what was made that signifies, for the critical point in each part of this book is when the performance of signifying revolves and we discover that the performer has become a sign. I hesitate to do so, but I will call this form of signification *existential signifying* when the pragmatic relation does not so much collapse as become raised to a second power. I am not merely the one who has to respond to the sign, I have to respond for the sign that I am become. Such assignment of me, the one who has to respond, is not a reflexive action. I do not choose to become a sign and then choose to respond for myself. Rather, another assigns me, or rather still more passively I am assigned, and respond for that assignment. We will see this in Chapter 2, when in my skin I am assigned for the other person, again in Chapter 8, when we are judged in the form of general judgment that defines the particular social logics, and in Chapter 17, when memory and repentance single us out as a surviving remnant, responding for the suffering of those who are dead. The pragmatics of existential signs depends on insight into gesture and motion, liturgy and perception, and at many points breaks beyond the semiosis possible with language alone. The inversion of autonomy as the norm for ethics could not be more radical, because here the responsibility for myself is precisely for myself as assigned by others, responsible to others and not to myself. As a sign, my being is not separable from the complex relations of signs and users. The social dimension of signification pervades this responsibility for myself, this need to account for my existence, and is far and away opposed to any model of authenticity and self-

legislation. I am given to signify and now must respond for the sign I am become. Hence the fulcrum of the pragmatics of this ethics is in Chapter 12, *Why Me?*, because the existential signifying of the addressee position is the key asymmetry of responsibility. Because we can be signs, can be for others, language can be used responsively. But ethics, then, is possible here only in these relations of signification. There are no responsibilities of beings per se, but only of signs and their users.

C. COMMENTARIES

The body of the book is close readings of extended passages by various authors. I write responsively, citing a text by one of the authors on the left side of the page and letting my commentary flow around it. Each page presents at least two voices: or rather two bodies of text. I call the cited texts *PRETEXTS*. They are usually a paragraph or two long, and I have parceled them out into chunks of one or more sentences, numbering the passages consecutively in a chapter, and labeling the chunks with letters (1a, 1b, 1c, 2a, 2b, etc.). My commentary, on the other hand, is relatively continuous, leading from one topic to the next and coordinating the various pretexts while producing a close-reading of the given pretext.

I proceeded in my writing by first forming a general interpretation of each author's work. I then chose passages for the sake of the argument in my commentary, but I found myself interrupted, challenged, and educated by the discipline the pretexts exerted. My authors just wouldn't say what I knew they should, leading me to revise the argument, from slight matters of terminology, to larger matters of the general structures of a chapter's argument, even to restructuring a whole part. The tension between my own thought and the others' texts is performed on every page. As I learned from and reread these authors, my own structuring of the sequence of texts changed.

My commentaries are postmodern. A premodern commentary would follow a whole text, line by line, presenting a new reading while serving the integrity of the text. A modern writer would choose to stand independent of previous texts, assembling a system or an essay in his own voice, asserting in composition the principle of autonomy. This text, however, performs the switch to responsibility that characterizes the ethical concepts it claims. But unlike a medieval commentary, this commentary reconstructs arguments from the various authors. Its juxtaposition of various authors (from diverse traditions) and its manner of citation (paragraphs, not chapters or whole books) force texts to meet each other. It is not so much a collision or a battle that is staged, but a peaceable conversation. The commentary 'unifies' the disparate texts, depending on the texts, and responding both to them and for them. Ultimately, the commentary is a way of eliciting from the texts a

set of teachings about responsibility. The page is a way of watching my practices of reading, allowing the reader to distance herself from the commentary, and in that repetition of pretext and commentary, even from the thematic itself.

The text composition, however, is yet more complicated often by a third and sometimes fourth text block. At the bottom of the page are parallel passages usually from the author of the pretext but often from other authors, too. These texts continue the argument of the chapter, sometimes deepening the resources in a given author, other times showing the affinities with the other authors. They usually originated as texts I had chosen to write commentaries upon, but which I relegated to the bottom of the page because of redundancies they would have brought into my commentary. Again, the commentary governs the page. Nonetheless, the parallel passages do provide a third text body that offers corroboration and occasional correction to the pretexts and commentaries. It is not hard to imagine generating a parallel commentary by replacing the pretexts with these parallel texts. This hypertext compensates in a vital way to the selectivity that I was bound to in choosing my 140+ pretexts. Thus the parallel passages represent another order of disruption of my text, but not an absolute or rigorously exhaustive realm of possibility. My concern was to make available to the reader such relevant texts that would lead to a reasonable range of parallel readings.

The fourth body of texts, moreover, are texts cited and commented upon by the pretexts. These commented-upon texts are on the right side of the page, with the cited words underlined. There are chapters with almost none of this intertextual element, and others where the chapter is devoted to this examination of how a text comments upon another text, for instance, Chapter 4 devoted to the question Why Read? Like a play within a play, the commented-upon text serves as a challenge to the pretext, illuminating the practices of the pretext. Thus, even the responsibility I perform in commenting is itself a commentary on the performances found already within the pretexts. And at times, the commented-upon texts themselves will open up to still earlier strata of texts. I thus perform a kind of stratification of interpretations, composing the page to allow both myself and my reader to discover both the reopening of the earlier texts and the recovery of openings that later interpretations have covered over.

The result is a page that translates Talmudic form into philosophical ethics. The Talmudic page, particularly in the printed format such as the edition of Vilna, is composed of a text and its commentary (Mishnah and Gemara) surrounded by commentaries, including some supercommentaries on earlier commentaries. Moreover, there is a compendium of citations to parallel passages in the Talmud. Earlier manuscript versions do not show this format, and many Christian texts were also typeset in this fashion. But

beyond the recognizably Talmudic composition, there is a further mark of translation. The Talmud cites texts with a certain apparent disregard for their contexts. When the question is an argument of the Talmudic sages themselves, it is often oblivious to the context. When the pretexts are Biblical or Mishnaic, the context has been suspended; although even a cursory re-reading of the context shows that its problem has been brought to the Talmudic text through the citation of the abbreviated text. Indeed, much of the Talmud is concerned with retroactively justifying the Mishnah's readings of Biblical texts (and the Mishnah's lack of textual relation to the Bible). I am not claiming to make a Talmud out of texts by a group of contemporary philosophers, but the relations of citation and of commentary, of juxtaposition and of representation of the intertextual relations within a wide-ranging discussion—all these are translated into a philosophical idiom: with a risk of losing what is particular to the form, and with the hope of disrupting the philosophical page.

This book requires a double-reading, and sometimes a triple. The pretext is relatively intact, but detached from its economy within its own book. The commentary both serves and organizes the texts. This form of writing is exacting and slow-paced, as I provide exercise in reading some very hard texts. My hope is that my commentaries will make those hard texts more accessible, at least for those who are willing to read them through my questions about using signs. But that exercise is also about the responsibilities in reading and writing, in judging and remembering. The texts are not just dumped together, and the thematics of the book are not merely expounded but in large measure performed.

The path through this book was set by the agenda of responsibilities and semiotic performances. I have tried to write with a certain responsibility to the texts of these authors, but I have tried to stick to most familiar texts, and so have not been attempting to master current scholarship. Rather, the goal has been to make almost obvious points about the various texts, but through recontextualization and juxtaposition to raise significant questions. I was unable to give a thorough interpretation of even one work by one author, much less of all of any author's published work. The parallel passages only accentuate the emphasis and limitations of my readings: they cannot stand for a full commentary on a given writer. You will not find here an authoritative interpretation of Benjamin or Habermas, or even Rosenzweig or Levinas. As limited as my readings of each philosopher are, all the more so limited are my readings within traditional Jewish texts. I could not, at the same time, engage the secondary scholarship with great rigor and extensive treatment. This will not be a book that instructs specialists in their own authors—but it will place their favorites into a context with often unusual others. Not a text of intellectual history, this one is historically informed but governed by the ethical responsibilities that set its task. I have provided a set of suggested readings, located at the end of each chapter. These citations are

keyed to the pretext numbers and direct my readers to several of the best readings of the pretexts I comment upon. In general, my task with these suggestions is to introduce the readers unfamiliar with a given author to helpful companions for the work in this book.

The compiling of pretexts and parallel passages excluded several authors that could well have occupied me in this book. I think immediately of Maurice Blanchot, Ernst Troeltsch, Max Weber, Talcott Parsons, John Dewey, Theodor Adorno, Paul Ricoeur, Karl Barth, Jean-François Lyotard, Martin Buber, Judith Plaskow, and others. These authors would have bloated this text still further, but I find the impossibility of citing and exploring their relation to this work frustrating. More noticeable is the limited amount of dialogue I have allowed my authors. There are many important conversations to be had from pairs like Habermas and Derrida, or James and Royce, or Rosenzweig and Benjamin, or Rosenzweig and Peirce, or Levinas and Benjamin, and so on. With notable exceptions, I have been unable to explore the sometimes generous and sometimes polemical interactions of these thinkers. Instead, I have opted for an irenic mode of discourse, where the faults of each are overlooked and others are brought in to remedy the flow of the argument.

D. A MAP

The paths through the Talmud are intricate and confusing. This text is written not for Talmudists but for philosophers, for students of ethics, literature, social theory, history, and religion. Its paths wind not in a forest, but among texts—the products of human art, commodities that explicitly signify. Even if you read this alone, you are not a solitary, but are already in relation not just with some authorial voice (me?) but with a set of voices—or perhaps better, a set of texts. This is a thinking with, or better, a walking with/walking in responsibility for others.

I offer now a map of some paths—paths that will not be as linear as they may look on this map. The map is not the land, or in this case, not the library—the place where the texts meet each other. But a map should offer the reader some sense of what to expect and where to look for specific issues or authors.

Part I: Attending the Future

The book is written in four parts, each part divided into chapters, each chapter itself written in sections. The table of contents displays this structure. The first part concerns attending, the very beginning of pragmatics. The actions I examine will include listening, speaking, writing, reading, and commenting. In each of these actions the actor must pay attention to other people; indeed, we will see that the other person has the authority to interpret the words I use. My responsibility is my ability to respond to the other person,

and to respond for the other's words. Attending opens the future meaning of signs, opens it for the other person to interpret, in a future that I cannot control.

Chapter 1, Why Listen? This ethics begins in a conversational situation where we ask why I should listen to another person. I explore listening by reading a set of texts from Levinas' *Totality and Infinity*. When I listen to another person, I listen to words. But I also listen to the other person. The other person's speech reveals an authority to speak, to interpret words, to question me (A = Section A). My being questioned is the call to respond, the beginning of responsibility. The other who has this authority in speaking is my teacher who appears to me as beyond my attempt to know her, as transcendent. My exigency to respond here becomes infinite. But my listening is not responsible on condition that the other listen to me. On the contrary, ethics depends on an irreversibility of the positions (B). Listening is not at first reciprocal. My teacher speaks about the world and signifies both the world and the speaker—my teacher—in different ways (C). For Levinas the key question is how I am conscious of the infinity of this transcendence of the other person. He coins his most important term, THE FACE, to name the way the other person expresses herself by disrupting any image I have of her (D). This produces a spiraling of consciousness as my self-consciousness is called into question and becomes a moral conscience. Listening does not annihilate me, but preserves me as separate from the other person who summons me, and I am called to respond, to answer for myself (E). My words are a kind of apology, attempting to justify myself—and so I continue listening to the other even while speaking.

Chapter 2, Why Speak? Responsive speaking is more concerned to offer oneself to the other than to articulate something for the other to understand. We shift to Levinas' second major work, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974). The key distinction, between *the saying* and *the said*, emphasizes the pragmatic relation at the expense of the semantics (the said). The exposure of the speaker in the saying contrasts with the model of speaking as transferring information (A). I become a sign for the other person, by drawing near to another person bodily (B). The vulnerability in approaching signifies my availability for her, even to the point of suffering for her. Here is a substitution for another's sake, a kind of assignment as existential sign for the other. If then I speak to announce to another person that I am at her service, available for her, I can say the saying of nearness (C). To say "I" does not secure me as a subject who will choose responsibilities for itself, but allows me to say my saying, to expose my exposure to the other. As a result, dialogue has now been radically altered, as I no longer am present as a coordinate subject, but have become the position of being-assigned—and responsibility is announcing this being made into a sign for the other. Finally,

I can witness the infinite responsibility for the other as a witness to God (D). God is neither a presence nor an interlocutor, nor is my responsibility dependent on evidence, but the theme of my responsibility arises for the first time in my witness, announcing not my choice, but my responsibility. I speak to witness that I am responsible for others.

Chapter 3, Why Write? Like saying, writing is a withdrawal as the author leaves signs for unknown readers to interpret. Derrida offers most help to the argument of this book in the shift to the practices of writing and reading. My interpretations will focus on how Derrida reads Levinas. A text from *Of Grammatology* argues that written signs hold open the vulnerability of signifying with a particular clarity (A). Two other texts from the 1960s explore Derrida's claim that his own writing practices are ways of announcing to the reader that the reader has the authority to interpret the text. Can Levinas, too, be read as making writing a way of responding and holding open my exposure for the other (B)? Derrida's reading in "Violence and Metaphysics" is explored here as a reconstruction of Levinas' often polemical treatment of writing, showing a way to find even Levinas treating writing as a way of ethical responsiveness to the other's actions. Levinas' account of the trace in *Otherwise Than Being* offers a way for Derrida to interpret Levinas' writing as a series of crossing-outs, or traces (C). The TRACE is the way that the other person withdraws and does not crystalize into a presence, a subject, when addressing me. Just as I became less a present subject in speaking, so the other person who teaches me in our initial dialogue model is attenuated in a textual model. Derrida discusses how Levinas makes the withdrawal of the author appear as withdrawal by repeating the gesture in a series. Levinas assumes the role of author without authority, responding for the reader not by promoting a theory of responding for the reader, but by serially withdrawing as author.

Chapter 4, Why Read? How do I read responsively, if the author is withdrawn from the text? How do we now attend not to the other person (who has withdrawn), but to the text, to the responsibility that comes through reading itself? Derrida offers the greatest assistance here, again from his earlier writings. He explains how a text is not a source of information but a solicitation to read and reread, a reading that occurs across generations (A). Moreover, Derrida explores why we have to reread the philosophical tradition, either to disrupt it or to interrupt it with another tradition (in much of his work that has been literature, in Levinas' work—Jewish sources) (B). Levinas then provides a deconstruction of the philosophical tradition from *Otherwise Than Being*—arguing that philosophy cannot overcome the disruptions and interruptions from others, even when it overwhelms them in coherent discourse. He instructs us to read for the traces or breaks and also alerts us to the pragmatics of writing for others to read that pervades even

the most systematic philosophical texts. This leads to the climax of Part I, Derrida's remarkable reading of Levinas in "At this moment itself . . ." How does repetition disrupt the drive toward having something to say, a drive that thwarts responsibility (C)? I comment on a text by Levinas that discusses how books themselves are not only the summation and reduction of the responsibility to attend, but are also pragmatically situated for others, indeed, calling for other books. Derrida then cites a line of this text twice in the midst of discussing repetition, allowing my commentary to develop the pragmatics at the levels of (1) reading texts to find the interruption, (2) reading Levinas' repetition as producing interruption, and (3) reading Derrida's re-citation of Levinas as producing another sort of interruption. Commentary itself, then, emerges as a way not to tell the reader what the previous author had wanted to say, but to redevelop the responsibility of opening the text for the next reader, to attend to the text and its breaks so as to await a reader.

Chapter 5, Why Comment? The ethics we are presenting in the philosophical texts correlates with an ethics that arises in Jewish revealed texts, as we shift to Levinas' writing on Jewish texts. Revelation of this ethics of responsibility happens through written texts (A). Those texts gain meaning through the separation in time (B). The text means more than the author wants it to mean, and the fecundity of the text depends on historical distance and renewal. Levinas cites a pair of famous stories from the Talmud—a text from the fifth to seventh centuries that is itself a commentary on a third-century text (the Mishnah)—that claim only a limited role for Divine authority in determining the meaning of Scripture, and instead point to the vital role of human interpretation in determining the meaning of the text.

The Jewish texts and the realia of practical life mutually interpret each other (C). And those texts then continue to reveal through the orality of teaching and studying. The rabbinic texts do not sum up oral discourse, but interrupt it in order to instigate new conversations in new contexts. They bear the practices of responding for others and attending to others forward to new others, acting like a script requiring new performances of responsiveness in a ongoing cycling of writing and speaking, of reading and listening.

Part II: Present Judgments

Using language produces not only responsibilities for the future but also responsibilities in the present. The responsibilities here will be mutual, where we share authority with others, and equality and justice become possible. Such responsibilities occur in social contexts, where we are present with others—or, as we will see, where there is an ethical exigency to become present. We will consider reasoning, mediating, and judging as practices performed for others with signs. Knowledge will be interpreted as a response

to the demands for justice—and not as self-justifying. Thus the theory of knowledge offered here is both fully social and fully ethical.

Chapter 6, Why Reason? Our plural infinite responsibilities for each other produce the ethical need to measure and coordinate. Levinas interprets justice as arising from our multiple responsibilities for many others, represented by the entry of the third person (A). Within the context of responsibility for justice, we begin to recover the function of signs in knowing. For a fuller account of how authority to interpret should be shared equally in the process of moral argumentation, we turn to Habermas (B). Responsibility for justice arises in a communicative situation, where we are each present to the others. But the relation between the asymmetry of attending the other and the mutuality of a community engaging in a present discussion about its norms produces a tension (C). Habermas' suspicion of asymmetry in ethics is complicated by his own account of how each person must take on the roles of the other in a communicative situation, becoming substitute for the other's claims. Levinas insists that justice must not abandon the asymmetric responsibility and vulnerability to the other person—even as that responsibility to attend the other also requires the mutual responsibilities for justice.

Chapter 7, Why Mediate? Responsibilities extend to those who are not present, and indeed even for the social systems that exceed our presence. The question of how to respond for not just one other or other others with whom we can talk, but for social institutions calls for us to mediate. We move from Habermas' theory of action to Rosenzweig's theory of blind acts of love to Luhmann's theory of communication, steadily losing the presence of the people who have mutual responsibilities (A). Luhmann distinguishes social relations and face-to-face interactions. Indeed, much as the textual model replaced the conversational one in Part I, so too in Part II mediated relations accentuate the possibilities for responsibility with attenuated personal presence.

With the absence of interlocutors, we require media to respond for society (B). For Luhmann, media include spoken language, print and mass media, and also media of values (truth, love, money, power, etc.). Just as we need to reason for justice, so we also need to use a semantic system to share our mutual responsibilities. The semantic dimension of signs is here reconstructed in its role of mediating. Even the formation of a consensus can be achieved through semantic mediation, as in Rosenzweig's account of communities (C). His account of how doctrine formation allows the Christian community to expand and coordinate the responsibilities of the members resembles Habermas' account of consensual communication. Moreover, the need for a medium, for a semantically stable meaning for terms, guides Rosenzweig's interpretation of cooperative responsibility.

Chapter 8, Why Judge? Responsibility must come back to present individuals, indeed, the ethical exigency to judge individuals and to be judged produces them. The process of attribution of responsibility—the responsible member is one by attribution—addresses the attenuation of physical presence in mediated societies. Responsibility is assigned, not chosen, but the ways that attribution singles an individual out are various. In tabular form, this chapter offers four types of judgment, each reflecting both different social relations and different logical relations between the individual and the general term. Luhmann explains why in order to develop itself as a communicative system a community needs to attribute its communications not to the system in general but to individuals (A). Following Luhmann’s basic definition of system—the opposition of system and its environment constituting the communications within the system—we will explore the deconstruction of that opposition (B). Rosenzweig interprets the relations of a “we” and a “ye” as a judgment that rests first on another community but then deconstructs our own community as well. In different ways both Judaism and Christianity contest this fundamental opposition as each claims universality (C). Here social responsibility regains its infinite dimension. Judaism achieves this by contraction, by drawing every opposition within itself; Christianity, by expansion through cooperation, inviting everyone to join and coordinate with the others.

Judgment is needed for these universal, infinite responsibilities (D). Luhmann explores how Christianity needs a Last Judgment at the end of history to allow the inclusion of sinners within the community now. The goal of universality for cooperation is deferred to the end of history. In contrast, Judaism then brings the day of judgment into its yearly calendar, when on Yom Kippur the Jew prays as responsible for the whole world, according to Rosenzweig’s interpretation of some of the most important prayers of Judaism. The Christian relation, for Rosenzweig, is responsive through cooperation; the Jewish, through representation.

In contrast, two other types of communal judgments finitize responsibilities, reducing social responsibilities and avoiding the self-critical judgment (E). Rosenzweig distinguishes between two forms of reductive social responsibilities: idealism and paganism, as totalizing and as subordinating the community over the individual. Briefly I will turn to Aristotle’s description of ostracism as a social practice of pagan judgment, and to Hegel’s discussion of the immanent judgment by history (“Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht”) as a totalizing judgment. The chapter then concludes with a table displaying the four different kinds of social logic—offering a rather different kind of reflection on syntax of signs by focusing on social responsibilities.

Chapter 9, Why Law? Law can be a medium for the study of the mutual responsibilities of justice. Rosenzweig interprets how Jews understand the cultivation of the law as a way of justifying this world, indeed that the law

redeems the world through its judgment upon the world (A). Law, moreover, engenders and preserves conflict within a community (B). Luhmann claims that law increases conflict for the sake of communication. The need for contradictory positions within the text then appears in a familiar Talmudic text. A more detailed commentary of a Talmudic text we cited in Chapter 5 will conclude Part II, providing an account of how taking advantage of another person with words becomes an image of the limits of Talmudic argument, precisely in a process from which God has withdrawn.

Part III: Pragmatism, Pragmatics, and Method

Part III is a reflection on the method of this book, particularly exploring the responsibility to think about ethics in terms of pragmatics. This part has some of the most far-reaching links between thinkers, as I bring the Jewish philosophers into contact with American pragmatism. While the Jewish thinkers develop the key concepts of responsibility for others, the pragmatists provide the semiotic methods for the interpretation of signs. The work of Peter Ochs has pointed Jewish thought to explore resonances and confluences with Peirce's theories of signs and has refashioned American pragmatism in the study of rabbinic hermeneutics in Talmud and Midrash.³ My task is not to offer an account of American philosophy, or even of influences, but rather to explore the need for a pragmatics and pragmaticist method for this ethics.

Chapter 10, Why Verify? I begin with an accessible model of my method, claiming that a theory will require verification. Rosenzweig's own reflections on his method claim that responsive thinking arises in taking time seriously in relation to others, and that future is the time for a theory to be made true or verified(A). I then pair Rosenzweig with James, as each claims to frame an empiricism that can verify relations, particularly relations between people and between people and God (B). But we must move from James' definition of pragmatism focusing on verification of truth to Peirce's redefinition of pragmatism as pragmaticism where the verification is no longer simply producing a sensible experience, but is an interplay between theoretical activity and habits (C). Thus the future making true of a theory will depend on social behavior, it will depend on others' interpretations.

Chapter 11, Why Thirds? Any theory about responsibility involves an inherent betrayal of the asymmetry of responsibility, but there is a justification

³ Peter Ochs, *Peirce, Pragmatism and the Logic of Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). See also Peter Ochs, ed., *Understanding the Rabbinic Mind: Essays on the Hermeneutic of Max Kadushin* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), especially his own essay, "Max Kadushin as Rabbinic Pragmatist," 165–96. See also his essay, "Charles Sanders Peirce," in *Founders of Constructive Postmodern Philosophy*, ed. David Ray Griffin et al. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 43–88.

for just that betrayal and the risk of losing sight of the asymmetry. Levinas claims that language must invoke the third person and not just the private romance of me and the other (A). He is joined by Gabriel Marcel, who explores how the direct responsibility of I for you is compromised by speaking about it. But from Marcel we go back to Royce, who saw how interpretation is a three-term relation, an interpretation *to* someone (B). Royce, however, was adapting Peirce's account of thirdness and the way that signifying always involves a relation to a third, which he calls the *interpretant*. The tension between the specificity of the index and the generality of the symbol arises from the task of signifying. The task of theory is to frame a theory for others, a theory that must be, as theory, general.

Chapter 12, Why Me? In parallel with Chapter 8 (Why Judge?), we require an attribution of responsibility, in this case the responsibility not only for others but also for theory. We redevelop the need for theory as my own responsibility for a theory about my responsibilities—and so move back to the indexicality of writing about responsibility. The argument mirrors Chapter 11, this time moving from America back to France, from Peirce to Levinas. In Peirce's account of vagueness, the utterer reserves the authority to interpret her signs (A). Royce then socializes vagueness by discussing how the other interprets her own signs to me—much like Levinas' face of the teacher in Chapter 1. It is Mead, however, who explores how “me” develops through learning how to respond for others (B). Social intercourse, precisely in its asymmetries, produces the self who can respond. We return to Levinas for an account of the thematic “me” and its relation to me (the person who is examining the responsibilities of the “me”) (C). The indexicality of responsibility disrupts and orients the generality of the theory.

Chapter 13, Why Translate? This book is located in a “here,” for it works by presenting Jewish thinkers in an American context. It translates books from there to here: from Jewish sources to contemporary philosophy, from Europe to North America, from phenomenology to semiotics, from ethics to pragmatics. The alternatives are that one should leave sources in their proper tradition, or that one should sublimate them into a pure philosophical discourse—with no “here.” Jewish philosophers have justified such translation, in a line from Hermann Cohen, to Rosenzweig, and then to Levinas.

Cohen claims that while Jewish sources lack the scientific qualities of Greek philosophical sources, they have their own intrinsic share of reason and so have something to contribute to the exploration of an ethical rational religion (A). Rosenzweig claims there is need for a translation from theology to philosophy (B). Even as his *Star* is a philosophical book it also is a Jewish one because it is expressed in the living language of Jewish texts and prayers. Rosenzweig, in his later works of translation, explained why he had a responsibility to translate from Hebrew into German (C). His major claim is

that all communication is translation and that translation cultivates new possibilities in the target language. Thus for the sake of enriching the “here” we must bring texts from “there.”

Translation, however, runs the risk of betraying what was “there,” failing to bring across just what was most important. A text by Levinas comments on a Talmudic discussion of the limitations of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (D). Levinas echoes the original problem by his own efforts to translate the argument of the Talmud into a contemporary intellectual context. Moreover, he finds in the earlier text the exigency to translate—even as it requires us to run the risk of misinterpretation. This book, moreover, runs that risk in various modes: juxtaposing translations from various languages with a commentary that also tries to translate the discourse into a more familiar American idiom of thought.

Part IV: Repenting History

Part IV examines the responsibilities we have in relation to the past, responsibilities for repenting and so changing the past. Through an interpretation of Jewish sources on repentance as returning, we will explore a series of practices (repentance, confessing, forgiving, and remembering) that use signs to respond for the past, repairing the relations of signs in the past. These responsibilities require a remembering, indeed, the writing of history, as well as an interpretation of ourselves as survivors. This part, in contrast to the first three parts, begins with Jewish sources, producing a kind of stratified history of reinterpretations of texts and practices.

Chapter 14, Why Repent? Hosea’s call to the people to return to God is the primary text on repentance (A). The sages argued with prophetic texts by reinterpretation, struggling to accentuate the power of returning as capable of forcing God’s hand in redeeming the world in an extended Talmudic essay on repentance, “Great is repentance” (B). But repentance in the relation between people and God differs from that between people (C). The Mishnah separates out sins between people and those before God by interpreting a Biblical text, and Levinas then comments on both sins. The possibility for a translation of the theological relation of repentance and forgiveness into a social-ethical one is questioned here, as the need to return in relations with others appears as a responsibility.

Chapter 15, Why Confess? In confessing, I attribute responsibility for the past to myself. Confession, moreover, produces the “I” as “confessing one.” The chapter begins with the requirement that confession be made orally, as interpreted by Maimonides (A). He interprets Biblical texts, including the text from Hosea, in order to explain how repentance is not complete without an audible confession. Cohen claims that the specific individual who confesses is herself a task (and not a given) produced through the perfor-

mance of confession (B). Soloveitchik claims that the specific preamble to confession achieves a radical transformation of the speaker. Rosenzweig then argues that the pragmatics of confession transform the self in relation to its own past, resulting in a confession of faith, that the soul knows itself forgiven (C).

Chapter 16, Why Forgive? Not only is the the repenter changed in repentance, but that return alters the past as well. We do not merely attribute responsibility for a past that is gone, but through return and forgiveness we can change the past. The Talmudic text of Chapter 14 claimed that repentance can change intentional sins into either inadvertent ones or merits. Soloveitchik explores these two texts and their author (Resh Lakish) and distinguishes between erasing the sin (forgetting) and elevating it through repentance (forgiving) (A). But can an historian take a similar view in regard to past events? Horkheimer resists this possibility in a letter criticizing Benjamin, but Benjamin cites and then responds in his notebooks to that letter (B). Benjamin not only stands close to Resh Lakish, but he also articulates the need to think theologically as historian. But we can change the perspective again, looking at my dependence on the other person to change the past. A text from Levinas argues that time arises through the forgiveness of the other person, which changes my past (C). The shift from my repentance changing my past, to the other person's forgiveness changing my past also marks the limits of my capacity to remember the past, as the relation to the other is not initiated in rememberable time.

Chapter 17, Why Remember? It is social practices of remembrance that make possible the mending of the past, precisely when the individual recognizes the inability to remember alone. We start with calendars as a social construction of time that marshals communal remembrance. The first texts are from the Mishnah and the Bible, showing how the timing of these holidays has been left to people to determine (A). Rosenzweig offers a sociological interpretation of the Sabbath and the holidays as ways of making eternity enter time. But Benjamin reinterprets Rosenzweig's claims and raises the challenging question: Do modern consumerist societies live by such calendars?

The responsibility to remember without the social prop of the calendar produces an historiography that contests the past (B). In a series of texts Benjamin criticizes historicism and proposes a juxtaposition of a past image with a present one in order to question the path of history and the current situation. We interpret this historiography as a kind of repentance for the past that can change the past. Benjamin also offers, in a commentary on a text by Marx, a way of reading commodities as signs of labor that itself has no historical presence. The realm of signs expands beyond language, as stuff also requires a response from us, a responsibility for the past.

What lies beyond memory can incite us to remember while holding open our responsibility for the past (C). Benjamin discusses the place of ruins on the baroque stage, as constructed gestures of decay and of human failure. But Rosenzweig then interprets Jewish existence as itself a sign, the Jews interpreting themselves as remnants and so as signs of those who have suffered and died. The existential sign is a self-critical one, for we are not the miserable victims, for they perished, but are rather the survivors who must take responsibility for the past and hold open the future of those we do not control. We signify ourselves as survivors to mark the loss and our responsible relation to it.

Epilogue

The relation of postmodern Jewish thought to modern philosophy is itself not a refusal or an obliteration, but a kind of repentance. The responsive relation to the past is not to negate it in order to forget it, but to respond for it. To reread, in this sense, is not to repeat but to recover possibilities otherwise lost. Perhaps the greatest failing in modern projects was the obliteration of their own past, their impossible claim to stand free from and no longer responsible for their ancestors. Postmodern thought must not repeat that failing (lest it be just another modern project). The responsive relation lies precisely in the rereading of the modern project as signs for a future that others will interpret.

The book as a whole thus reorients ethics by focusing on responsibility, the responsibility for what others do. The parts move in a sequence from future to present to past, with an interruption to consider the method for framing this theory of ethics. At another level, the parts stretch from literary theory, to social theory, to theory of knowledge, to historiography. And at the most concrete level we move from the asymmetry of interaction to the mutuality of relations in communities to the relations of remembrance and return. In each part there is a parallel motion from a more accessible everyday context, where the other person and I appear together, through an attenuation of that presence, until we discern the assignment of responsibility as singling me out again—despite the absence of a present subject. Indeed, the two central points of the ethics are the need first to listen (Chapter 1) and then the inescapability of my responsibility that singles me out (Chapter 12). But the task of writing this book and examining others' texts assigns the responsibility to return and repair the past, for philosophy, and also for modernity. An ethics of infinite responsibilities must not conclude, but hold itself open for further tasks.

E. THE AUTHORS AND TEXTS

I offer here only a brief introduction to the authors and the texts from which my pretexts are cited. The composition of this book precludes a more tradi-

tional treatment of the various texts, and so for those reading these thinkers for the first time, my brief introduction will have to stand in for the tasks of giving a reading, or exploring the intellectual contexts, or developing an intellectual biography of the author. The authors are profiled in the sequence in which they appear.

Emmanuel Levinas (1905–95) was born in Lithuania and raised in both Russia and Lithuania in a modern Jewish family. He studied and then lived in France, where he was one of the first expositors of Husserl and Heidegger. Levinas was a leader in the Jewish intellectual community in Paris (a community including many Mediterranean Jews), and only later emerged as an important figure in the general philosophical world.

In *Totality and Infinity* (1961) Levinas presents a phenomenology of the ways I relate to the world and to other people. The main themes of that book are that justice requires a face-to-face responsibility for another person, for whom I am infinitely responsible, and that responsibility occurs in discourse, in my being questioned by the other. Levinas' phenomenology strains with the task of describing that infinite responsibility, but the work explores a broad range of social relations, including domesticity, erotics, and paternity with a phenomenological method.

Levinas' second major work is *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974). It is a redevelopment of many of the themes from *Totality and Infinity*, but works within a narrower focus—offering a profound interpretation of how I am assigned for the other person, made responsible, in a moment that cannot be represented or experienced as a phenomenon. The argument is a reduction that determines discourse as an obsession with the other person. The book concludes with an account of the relation of philosophical discourse and prophetic glorification of the Infinite—engaging a more complex account of the limits of discourse in closer relation to a theological dimension.

Levinas wrote occasional pieces for the Jewish community and also offered yearly readings of Talmudic passages. These various texts were collected and segregated from his philosophical works. *Beyond the Verse* (1982) is the fourth volume in French of these writings and comprises a set of Talmudic readings and essays, including several on the question of interpretation of Scripture. The text offers an emphatically positive interpretation of reading, and indeed offers us an account of responsibility in attending others in the practices of commenting.

Jacques Derrida (b. 1930) was born in the Jewish community of Algiers. He proposes a theory of writing (*Of Grammatology*) (1967) as a reinterpretation of the phenomenological tradition. Derrida offers most help to the argument of this book in the shift to the practices of writing and reading—although he has also had much to say about ethics. The focus of my comments will be two essays by Derrida on Levinas. In “Violence and Meta-

physics” (1967), he both offers a strong reading of *Totality and Infinity* and contests it by rereading Husserl and Heidegger against Levinas. He suggests that Levinas is too entangled in the philosophical tradition to achieve the radical reorientation he desires. For Levinas’ festschrift, Derrida explored his later work, too, and wrote a very dense essay, “At this moment itself in this work Here I am” (1980), where he tried to give a gift, exploring the complexity of asymmetry and the way that Levinas’ texts work.

Jürgen Habermas (b. 1929) is a German philosopher and descendant of the Frankfurt School. His major work, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), offers a grand argument based on the history of social theory. He claims that communicative action is capable of arriving at rational norms for society, focusing on the mutuality practiced in rational argumentation. The very abilities to talk and reason with others themselves produce principles of justice. In the following years, Habermas redeveloped many of the themes from this work, naming his work *Discourse Ethics*, and so making the very practices of discourse into the medium for framing an ethics.

Niklas Luhmann (1927–98) was a German sociologist and a longtime dialogue partner with Habermas. His major work, *Social Systems* (1984), presents an interpretation of the self-defining nature of social systems. Indeed, his account of society is a more radical semiotics, focusing on the ways communications happen and not building society out of speaking individuals. As a social theorist he only described ethical norms and practices, and so is a less likely participant for this book. Yet his descriptions are relevant, because he, too, interprets society in terms of communication.

Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929) was raised in a liberal Jewish home, but returned to a more traditional Judaism. He struggled with philosophy and theology, and composed the masterpiece of modern Jewish thought, *The Star of Redemption* (1921), in a virtual idiolect shared with his circle of relatives and friends. The work is dense and complex, and argues for a transformation of thought in the new organon of speech and gestural performance. After the *Star*, Rosenzweig founded a Jewish community education program in Frankfurt, but was stricken with ALS. Bedridden and incapable of speech, he managed to complete a translation and commentaries on medieval Jewish poetry and translate the first part of the Hebrew Bible into German with Martin Buber. Rosenzweig’s loyalty to the world produced a challenging social theory in the *Star*, focusing particularly on the way that societies can be redeemed by responsive practices.

Hermann Cohen (1842–1918) was the founder of the Marburg Neo-Kantian School, a leader of Liberal Judaism, a commentator on Kant’s works, and the author of his own system of philosophy that bore a distinct imprint of Jewish thought. His last works were explorations of Jewish sources as resources for a theory of rational religion, arguing that Judaism and ancient Greece each had a share in reason. His analyses of monotheism,

repentance, love of the neighbor, and messianism in *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism* (1919) have dominated Jewish thought in this century.

Moses Maimonides (1135–1204) was the Jewish philosopher par excellence. He was a community leader for Mediterranean Jews. He wrote the defining book of Jewish philosophy, *Guide for the Perplexed*, and redacted one of the great codes of Jewish law, *Mishneh Torah* (1177).

Joseph Soloveitchik (1903–93) came from a distinguished family of Lithuanian rabbis. He was a leader of the Orthodox Jewish community in America, whose yearly lectures on repentance were edited by his student, Pinchas Peli. Soloveitchik studied Cohen's work and often commented directly on Maimonides' texts, and fashioned a radical intellectualist view of Judaism.

Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) was raised in a bourgeois Jewish Berlin family and maintained an unresolved relation with Judaism. He committed suicide, fleeing the Nazis in 1940. His work arose in the context of Gershom Scholem, Theodor Adorno, Ernst Bloch, and Bertolt Brecht. His works include several completed writings and a huge unmanageable project on the early shopping malls of the nineteenth century (*Die Passagenwerk*). We will cite not only his thesis *On the Origin of the German Trauerspiel* (1928), but also pieces from the later project, and an exchange of letters with Horkheimer. Benjamin's work struggles to frame a theory and a practice of historiography that will disrupt the presumption of survivors to justify their own presence.