Panentheism, History and the Problem of Evil

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Abstract

In this paper I consider the thought of two Jewish existentialists from the first half of the 20th century, showing how their critique of pantheistic and panentheistic thinking grounded novel ideas about politics, history and human thought. In place of a concept of history directed towards a teleological redemption of suffering in the future, Lev Shestov (1866–1938) and Benjamin Fondane (1898–1944) abandoned notions of philosophical rationality in order to avow a ‘reversal’ of history according to which historical suffering could be expiated through the unforeseeable powers of the divine. From here, I look at the work of a contemporaneous philosopher – Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) – for the way in which his own conception of history as ‘rescuing’ the past provides an alternative panentheism, one according to which political responsibility derives from a need to redeem God whose existence has been exiled throughout the mundane world.

Keywords


1 Introduction

Benjamin Fondane (1898–1944), in his essay, ‘Man Before History’, refers to the works of Spinoza and Plotinus thus:

"Homo liber de nula res minus quam de morte cogitate” [A free man thinks of death least of all things], wrote Spinoza, and Plotinus concentrates the substance of ancient thought in these few words: “To admit evil into the universe [and there is nothing more terrible than to think that the uni-
verse is unreasonable – BF] is to bring evil right into the intelligible ream itself” (Enneads, II.9.XIII). In other words, to admit evil is to posit it within reason, and if reason is God, to posit it in God.\(^1\) 2

Fondane goes on quote Plotinus’ explanation of the tensions that might arise between the ordering of the cosmos and the individual’s private happiness, writing:

> If a tortoise found itself caught in the middle of a chorus dancing in perfect order, it would be trampled underfoot because it would not know how to escape from the effects of the order that regulates the steps of the dancers. However, if it conformed to that order, it would not suffer any harm.

Enneads, II.9.VII\(^3\)

And he glosses Plotinus’ view thus:

> It is clear here that the intelligible world’s responsibility for suffering is masterfully let off the hook: The Laws cannot but dance perfectly and need not worry about the rest – the rest, that is to say history, the anonymous multitude of tortoises trampled under the dancers’ feet.\(^4\)

In the first half of the 20th century, the philosophers Benjamin Fondane and (the latter’s intellectual mentor) Lev Shestov, undertook a virulent critique of the very nature of philosophical reasoning, arguing that what has gone under the name of philosophy, in most cases, has been little more than the flattery of Necessity, and that for the human being to take hold of its basic (not to say divine) birthright means to oppose itself to the compulsion of Necessity – whether in the form of historical, logical or moral Necessity – in the name of one’s local desires and demands; that is, in the name of not knowing what we are compelled by Necessity (however this should be understood) to know.\(^5\)

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1 Research for this article was generously supported by a non-residential fellowship through the Panentheism and Religious Life project, funded by the Templeton Foundation. I wish to extend my special thanks to the project leaders, Yitzhak Melamed and Clare Carlisle, for their interest in this area of study.


This opposition to “Necessity” as it is understood in this context brings both Fondane and Shestov into direct conflict with some of the major figures of historical pantheism and panentheism – the former understood as the theological framework in which what exists simply is God; the latter understood as the view on which the divine has some important presence or intersection with the mundane world as we know it. These are figures like Spinoza, Hegel, and Plotinus, whose thought, often simply by virtue of their pan(en)theistic thinking, bears strong “Necessitarian” qualities. By this we mean that – on such accounts – the divinity attributed to the world as it exists requires our subjection to that world in its extant form.

Hegel’s “all that is real is rational” is [...] a free translation of Spinoza’s non ridere, non lugere, neque detestari, sed intelligere (“do not laugh, do not weep, do not curse, but understand”). [But] in contrast to Spinoza and those who before and after Spinoza sought “understanding” (intelligere) in philosophy and put human reason in a position to judge the Creator Himself, Job teaches us by his own example that in order to grasp the truth, one should not refuse or forbid oneself “lugere et detestari,” [to weep and to curse] but should proceed from them.

In other words, if the God of pan(en)theism permits understanding but denies indignation, the God of the Old Testament permits – even valorizes – indignation, but precisely at the expense of a rational comprehension of the world.

What is contained in these claims made against all variety of pan(en)theists for whom the highest – Reason, or Nature, or God, or Spirit, or The One – is to be...
found in every aspect of the universe? From where does the claim arise against these ways of thinking and what sort of a philosophy can give itself a ground against the conditions of knowledge and self-evidence? After all, if philosophy (in one form) seeks to arm the philosopher with sufficient resources to reconcile herself to an otherwise hostile world, what kind of value can be found in a philosophy that explicitly stakes its own existence against this kind of solace and against this kind of reconciliation?

In this paper I want to consider the objections posed by this group of little-known Jewish philosophers from the first half of the 20th century, each of whom formulated a powerful political critique of pan(en)theistic and historico-teleological thinking, proposing instead a metaphysical and irrationalist account of thought and of God as a resource for an indominable humanity. In doing so, we will see not only how these thinkers reconsidered the nature and purpose of philosophical reflection in general, but also how they reconsidered the nature of theology – away from a pan(en)theistic notion of God as generically and intrinsically a part of the world around us, and towards a notion of God as disruptive of the natural course of history: a God who permits the individual to retain an open and even incorrigible attitude of defiance to her historical circumstances. This latter conception, formulated in the language of philosophical theology but equally motivated by the turbulent political context of these authors’ lives, can help us to reconsider what it might mean to imagine a world “otherwise” than it exists and – moreover – what it might mean to reconsider the aims and ideals of political philosophy more generally.

The itinerary of this paper comprises three movements: first, I present an account of some of those philosophers whose pan(en)theistic thought is directly targeted by Shestov and Fondane, showing how the former link notions of divine immanence (pan[en]theism), historical necessity and an ethics of resignation in their philosophies; then I elaborate an account of Shestov and Fondane’s critique of those accounts, especially emphasizing the way in which these philosophers’ rejection of rationality allowed them to reconceive the nature of politics; and, finally, I introduce a third thinker – Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) – whose own skepticism of historico-teleological thinking provides a possible resolution to this original conflict between pan(en)theism and political humanism – for whom the disruptive God of which Shestov and Fondane speak appears not outside of this world, but rather as a recalcitrant element within the world and in need of human rescue. In this way, we will see, it may become once again possible to square the theoretical radicality of pan(en)theistic thinking with the political radicality of thinkers like Shestov and Fondane: a materialist politics will mean a politics that finds possibility
sewn into the world around us, but in need of our own free action in order to “rescue” this possibility from its imminent foreclosure. This conception of history as the theater of a possible human redemption will fit with a Shestovian emphasis on the radical striving after possibility, while at the same time retaining the strongly immanentist elements of both pan(en)theism and historical materialism.

We begin with an account of those pan(en)theists to whom Shestov and Fondane react so forcefully.

2 The Theodicy of Pan(en)theism: Plotinus, Hegel, Spinoza

In the work of Benjamin Fondane and Lev Shestov, Spinoza, Plotinus and Hegel typically appear as representatives of a pan(en)theistic thinking that (more narrowly) reflects a particular commitment to the concept of necessity as an essential feature of the imputed divinity of mundane reality. Let us look at how each of these philosophers articulates this association between divine immanence and the inevitability of what happens as a lived experience of individuals.

2.1 Plotinus

The philosopher Plotinus (204/5–270 C.E.) espoused a Neoplatonic worldview according to which what exists emerges through a series of “emanations” from a first principle – known as “the One”: from “the One” emanates Intellect (Nous), from which emanates Soul, and so on down to matter itself. But this account

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8 Although not explicitly reflected upon in this paper, it should be noticed that each of the three philosophers discussed for their critique of progress – Benjamin, Shestov and Fondane – lived as Jews during the period of, and immediately preceding, the Shoah. One point mentioned in secondary literature on Benjamin, for example, has to do with Benjamin’s increased pessimism (that is, his anti-progressivism) as Fascism attained power during his lifetime. As we will witness below, Fondane and Benjamin shared similar convictions regarding the supposed “anomaly” of European Fascism (Walter Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History,’ in Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, eds, Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 4: 1938–1940 [Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2003], pp. 389–400 at p. 392; Fondane, ‘Man Before History,’ in Baugh, ed, Existential Monday, p. 58). It ought to be mentioned that both Fondane and Benjamin lost their lives to National Socialism – the former killed at Auschwitz in 1944; the latter taking his own life during an unsuccessful attempt at fleeing through Spain in 1940. On Benjamin’s theological turn as a dimension of his private life, see Yannick Thiem, ‘Benjamin’s Messianic Metaphysics of Transience,’ in Colby Dickinson and Stéphane Symons, eds, Walter Benjamin and Theology (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), pp. 21–55 at p. 51, fn. 50.

of emanation is also supplemented by an account according to which all that exists, strictly speaking, participates in a kind of orderliness even where this orderliness (not to say perfection) is humanly impossible to discern. Hence, in the Ennead entitled ‘Against the Gnostics’ (11.9) Plotinus argues theodically for the orderliness of things even where this order might be experienced as contrary to an individual’s private interests and concerns:

Those who are dear to god [...] bear the cosmos’ influence on their lives lightly, should the revolution of the universe impose any constraining force upon them. For one should not be focused on one’s heart’s desires but on the whole universe.\(^{10}\)

That is, one’s private desires may remain unsatisfied within the sweep of the universe, but this ought to be held as no imperfection in the universe itself. Similarly, Plotinus advises against the kind of individualistic dissatisfaction that comes from a misunderstanding of the nature of divine providence:

How reverent is the claim that providence does not extend to this region or not to every part of it? [...] But regardless of whether providence extends from above to you [Gnostics] or to whatever else you want to claim, at the very least the cosmos receives providential care from above, and neither was nor will be abandoned. For providence is much more concerned with wholes than with parts, and participation in god belongs much more to the soul of the universe [than to particular souls].\(^{11}\)

In this context, Plotinus argues that it is not the individual whose desires and demands are satisfied by the teleology of the universe, but rather the universe as a whole which expresses the orderly perfection of divinity, and therefore embodies providence in itself. And in opposing oneself to what is “necessitated” by the very orderliness of the universe (its basic subordination to emanation from the divine One), the individual participates in what is at once a

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\(^{10}\) Plotinus, *Enneads*, p. 222.

\(^{11}\) Plotinus, *Enneads*, p. 231.
(necessarily) losing struggle as well as reveals an inability to understand some basic truth regarding existence as such: among these, that the basic goodness of the universe appears as a function of its holistic nature. Certainly this goodness is recognizable locally to the extent that one can distance oneself from one’s own suffering by moving towards the intelligible world, but it is also a goodness which appears primarily in the whole to which the part is inevitably subordinate.12

There in Plotinus, then, we find an interdependence of three principle premises: first that the highest principle (the “One”) is panentheistically manifest in all of reality as the very principle of its existence; second, that this panentheistic divinity is reflected in the providential (essentially benign) ordering of this universe; and third, that dissatisfaction with the universe as it is experienced on an individual level – that is, dissatisfaction with one’s place in the universe and one’s lived experience of the universe – cannot fail to be an expression of ignorance, incorrigibility, or both, before this divine order. In broad conceptual terms, it is because the universe reflects the Necessity that is part of the divine essence – its basic orderliness and Goodness – that opposition to local states of affairs is avowed an individual fault, and not a fault belonging to any aspect of the universe.

2.2 Hegel
A comparably “theodical” account of panentheism is discoverable in G.W.F. Hegel’s work, where by that philosopher’s own admission, the intolerability of private suffering (what he refers to in the ‘Introduction’ to the Philosophy of History as “the slaughter-bench” of History13) finds its justification in the overall teleological directedness of History towards the realization of human freedom.14

Here Hegel’s association between God and History as a kind of teleological necessity is explicit:

The insight to which philosophy ought to lead [...] is that the real world is as it ought to be, that the truly good, the universal divine Reason is also the power capable of actualizing itself. This good, this Reason – in its most

12 On the Plotinian solution to the problem of evil – its reduction to a form of non-being proper to matter – see O’Brien, ‘Plotinus on matter and evil,’ and especially the last two sections on Gnosticism and the problem of evil, pp. 187–190.
14 Hegel, Introduction to the Philosophy of History, p. 22.
concrete representation – is God. God governs the world: the content of His governance, the fulfillment of His plan, is world history.\textsuperscript{15}

In other words, the way in which the world manifests God’s way of being is \textit{in} the teleological actualization of this divine essence historically. History is equally \textit{orderly, necessary} and \textit{good} to the extent that it points itself towards the eventual realization of Freedom, “to which all the sacrifices have been brought upon the broad altar of the earth in the long flow of time.”\textsuperscript{16} In this – perhaps the most brazen of the three accounts – the theological imputation which makes of history the gradual realization of God’s essence at the same time \textit{excuses} and \textit{instrumentalizes} the immediate suffering of individuals, since it is on account of that suffering alone that the rational course of History is possible.\textsuperscript{17}

\subsection*{2.3 Spinoza}

Spinoza’s account – at once the most “pantheistic” of the three – is at the same time the least theodical in the classical sense of the term, as well as the most “Necessitarian” in the sense that we have been using the term. As Stephen Nadler argues, in his ‘Spinoza in the Garden of Good and Evil’, Spinoza’s basic approach to the divine precludes any straightforwardly “theodical” interpretation on account of the fact that, for Spinoza, “there is no wise and providential God watching over the world” in accordance with whose will suffering might be justified.\textsuperscript{18} It is on account of the \textit{absence} of any teleological ordering of suffering towards the Good that Spinoza is obliged to introduce a decidedly Stoistic

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\textsuperscript{15} Hegel, \textit{Introduction to the Philosophy of History}, p. 39. \\
\textsuperscript{16} Hegel, \textit{Introduction to the Philosophy of History}, pp. 22–23. \\
\textsuperscript{17} Hegel, \textit{Introduction to the Philosophy of History}, pp. 24, 28, 40. On Hegel’s philosophy of history as a theodicy, see Pierre Chételat, ‘Hegel’s Philosophy of History as Theodicy’, in Will Dudley, ed, \textit{Hegel and History} (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), pp. 215–230 at pp. 218, 219, who – to my mind correctly – argues that even this account (on which suffering has a means-end relation with freedom) fails to accommodate forms of suffering contemporaneous with freedom (e.g., in parts of the world where Hegelian freedom hasn’t been realized) as well as forms of suffering that manifestly fail to contribute towards this goal (e.g., random murders of non-world-historical significance). \\
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element into his thought: namely, that things are so ordered that virtue by itself is a form of blessedness, so that the more an individual comes to understand God and remove herself from the local biases of perspective, the more that individual will become capable of acting in accordance with her own singular essence (i.e., will not be tormented by her own passive affections), and the more she will experience joy.  

In this way, Spinoza links an abstract understanding of one’s circumstance (a comprehension of the Necessary or “eternal” character of what happens) with an overcoming of one’s own suffering. The Necessity implied in the divine essence (“In nature there is nothing contingent, but all things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature and produce an effect in a certain way”) also makes possible a reconciliation with one’s local circumstances, so that to suffer one’s condition is effectively the same thing as to fail in one’s comprehension of Necessity.  

3 Shestov and Fondane Contra Pan(en)theism  

Having now shown some of what Shestov and Fondane had in mind in their attacks on these philosophers of Necessity, we can now turn to the details of their criticisms themselves. What did these early existentialists find so objectionable in the pan(en)theisms of Plotinus, Hegel and Spinoza?

3.1 Shestov and the Reversal of Besinnung  

To begin with the thought of Lev Shestov, we can observe a distinction that Shestov adopts from the Stoic philosopher Seneca, who wrote (following Shestov’s paraphrase): “Ipse omnium conditor et rector ... semper paret, semel iussit [The creator and ruler of all himself ... always obeys, once commanded].” Here what Shestov wants to highlight in Seneca’s passage is the distinction between parere (to obey) and jubere (to command). On Shestov’s reading, Seneca here avows that even God (especially in relation to “fate” [fata]) obeys the course of history, and does not dictate the course of that history. Shestov takes up this

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19 Spinoza, Ethics, pp. 249, 264.  
20 Spinoza, Ethics, p. 104.  
21 Seneca, De Providentia, in John W. Basore, trans, Moral Essays (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1928), pp. 2–47 at p. 38, qtd. in Shestov, Athens and Jerusalem, p. 79. The full quote reads: “Ille ipse omnium conditor et rector scripsit quidem fata, sed sequitur; semper paret, semel iussit [Although the great creator and ruler of the universe himself wrote the decrees of Fate, yet he follows them. He obeys forever, he decreed but once]."
distinction between *jubere* and *parere* in a direction that is at once philosophical and metaphysical: in its exercise of thought, humanity has inclined towards *obedience* rather than towards command or creation; humanity has understood the verb “to think” in terms of the subjection of thought to what is outside of itself – obedience to reason, self-evidence, or logical necessity – so that much of the history of philosophy has been an encomium to what *constrains* human beings’ natural and individual impulses. Shestov elaborates this idea by appeal to the philosophical notion of *Besinnung* (“reflection”), which he understands in terms of a directional etymology: “looking backwards.”

Philosophy – we have seen – was, is, and wishes to be, a looking backward. [But] have we not the right, are we not obliged, even if it be only once in our life and only for a moment, to doubt [...] that our thought, which we have become accustomed to consider as the only possible thought, leads us precisely to the sources of the final truths? Should we not tell ourselves that to think means not to look backward, as we habitually believe, but to look forward?

Here we see something of the generalized critique which Shestov wishes to lay at the feet of conventional philosophical thinking: namely, that it has misplaced its confidence in an anxious *subjection* to truth – a “looking backwards” which, as Shestov puts it, “paralyzes man” – at the expense of taking up a more noble prerogative of thought to *command* or *create* truth in its exercise; a creation which Shestov suggests can be accomplished through a unself-conscious, “forward-directed” movement, rather than through a hesitant looking-backward.

In making this claim, Shestov draws a distinction between Greek (“Athens”) and Abrahamic (“Jerusalem”) thought, looking in particular at the implied lesson of Adam’s eating fruit from the tree “of knowledge of good and evil,” which – according to Shestov – is “in complete disagreement with our conception of knowledge as well as our conception of good and evil.” Contrary to the diverse ways in which this famous event from the Pentateuch has been understood,

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24 Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, p. 82.
25 Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, p. 330: “He alone is capable of fighting against the Medusa and her serpents (the *anankê* [Necessity] of Aristotle [...] who has enough daring to march forward without turning around.”
according to Shestov its meaning “is perfectly clear and admits of no tortured interpretation. [...] God clearly said to man that he must not put his trust in the fruits of the tree of knowledge, for they carry with them the most terrible dangers.” In other words, it is knowledge and our knowing subjection to moral good and evil which is the evil that man brings upon himself by eating from the tree of knowledge. On this very simple interpretation, our rejection of self-evidence and our refusal to be anything other than morally free comprises the true birthright of human beings.

Hence the primary distinction Shestov wants to make ties together the moral Stoicism of philosophers like Plotinus, Spinoza and Hegel, and their strong rationalism, especially where this rationalism reflects something like the presence of God in the material world: for these philosophers, to think means primarily to recognize what is and what is necessary, and implies a striving to subject oneself more forcefully to the demands of Reason. But by Shestov’s account, what humanity has abdicated in this is its own divine right to creation, activity, and commandment, by which humanity places itself not only beyond the laws of Necessity (according to which everything that happens happens inevitably, which it is useless to resist), but equally beyond the laws of moral obligation. “The serpent said to the first man: ‘You shall be like God, knowing good and evil.’ But God does not know good and evil. God does not know anything. God creates everything. And Adam, before his fall, participated in the divine omnipotence.”

3.2 Political Irrationalism
It is the affinity that Shestov identifies between the valorization of reason and existential obedience that Shestov and his sometime disciple Benjamin Fondane both take in a decidedly political direction. As we will see, Fondane identifies a strong compatibility between rationalism with its emphasis upon dispassionate obedience and authoritarianism, and Fondane and Shestov both argue that the compatibility between rationalism and theodical thinking forecloses the possibility of justified resistance to one’s historical state of affairs. In other words, for Shestov and Fondane, the close association between rationalistic and theodical accounts of history makes the suffering of concrete existent individuals inavowable on account of its fundamentally irrational and particularistic nature.

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27 Shestov, Athens and Jerusalem, p. 198.
28 Shestov, Athens and Jerusalem, p. 198.
29 To the question of whether these philosophers concede too much to their philosophical foils by terming their own approach “irrationalistic,” two points should be noted: on the
In drawing a connection between theodical rationality and authoritarianism, Fondane rejects popular a view of Fascism that links the latter to a kind of resurgent “barbarism” or “irrationalism” in an otherwise rational era. He writes: “Are we really so certain that what confronts us [as Fascism] is just an enormous Irrationality and not, more simply, the same reason as ours – but more conscious of itself, more consistent?” To cite as evidence of the implicit rationalism of Fascism, Fondane highlights the manner in which – consistent with the behavior of Stoics and philosophers of all stripes – those at the service of a political ideal can appeal to some standard by which to justify their own subordination and at the same time justify their own heroism. “How did [the Fascist martyr Otto] Planetta die?” Fondane asks, referring to National Socialist propaganda of the time. “Shouting: Heil Hitler and long live Germany! How did Christ die? On the cross, sniveling.” Here it is the irrationality and the disapprobation of Christ at the moment of his death that distinguishes the Fascist existential ideal from that of the religious type. The Fascist is capable of drawing upon a Stoic impassivity in the face of their historical mission that Christ – here identified, on Fondane’s account, as a figure of refusal, humility and suffering (even cowardice!) – is unable to call upon. Hence the Christ who announces, Stoically, that “everything is accomplished” is less the proper figure of Christian refusal than the Christ of Matthew and Mark who cries out “My God, my God! Why hast thou forsaken me!”

Against Fascism, therefore, Fondane will invoke precisely the irrationality and even pettiness of the individual’s personal desire as the proper meaning of humanism:

What is not built into the human frame is true humility; not the kind that consists of training the will and self-mastery but the kind that consists in recognizing that one has no power, that one does not amount to much, that one amounts to so little that one can, without shame, be afraid, and tremble, and cry out, and call for help. There is more true humility in praying to God for one’s own flesh, in asking him, for example, for deliverance from a terrible toothache [...] than to ask him to reveal his intelligible essence or confuse his will with ours in the delights of [mystical] union.33

In other words, a true acknowledgment of the nature of the human being ought to accept suffering as irreducible. Suffering should not be understood as directed in a way that it can be overcome – that is, transformed or bracketed so as to “redeem” it in the manner of a theodicy. Rather, it ought to be treated as a demand that must be addressed univocally in the manner in which it is posed. The “terrible toothache” that Fondane describes does not wish to be reconciled through a greater appreciation for the value that follows from that toothache, but rather to be rectified here and now, as a toothache, and despite the unreasonableness and incorrigibility of that demand.

It is this emphasis on the irreducibility of human suffering that links Fondane’s criticisms of Fascist “heroism” to a more general critique of theodical thinking, where suffering is taken as inavowable in its immediate and individualistic form. To return to the passage on Plotinus quoted at the beginning of this essay, Fondane emphasizes the incompatibility between the history of human suffering in its existential reality, and the picture of suffering presented through a pan(en)theistic conception of Necessity as the governing force of what exists.

It is clear here that the intelligible world’s responsibility for suffering is masterfully let off the hook: The Laws [of Nature] cannot but dance perfectly and need not worry about the rest – the rest, that is to say history, the anonymous multitude of tortoises trampled under the dancers’ feet. [...] Yet how many stupid, ugly, clumsy, ignorant tortoises there are – millions! – born without the least rhythmic instinct, who will be mercilessly crushed without ever knowing why.34

In Shestov’s collection of essays, Athens and Jerusalem, he echoes this sentiment by reference to the sorrowing affect of the Psalmist, who refuses to efface

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suffering as it was lived. “In certain cases and even very often, almost always, [...] injustice will cry and protest only to end up by becoming silent; men forget both their sorrows and their cruel losses. But there are injustices that one cannot forget. ‘If I forget thee, O Jerusalem ... let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth.’”35 And in Kierkegaard and the Existential Philosophy, Shestov quotes the Russian thinker Vissarion Belinsky who argues against Hegel:

If I should succeed in ascending to the highest rung of the ladder of development, even there I would ask you to render an account of all the victims of circumstance in life and history, of all the victims of chance, of superstition, of the Inquisition of Philip II, etc., etc.: otherwise I would fling myself headfirst from the highest rung. I do not wish happiness even as a gift, if my mind is not at rest regarding each one of my blood brothers.36

In other words, for both Shestov and Fondane an important element of existential philosophy is its refusal to bargain with the concrete suffering of existents – an unwillingness to treat suffering as repayable in terms of some good other than the expiation of that suffering itself. Hence it is precisely the inavowable singular individual who falls beneath the level of rational accounting (the particular always escaping the organization of rational thought) that is overlooked in theodical, pan(en)theistic and rationalistic accounts of history. These cannot help but accommodate suffering through some form of sublation or – at best – offer a Stoical mechanism for “disavowing” one’s private suffering by turning towards an impassible eternity (as in Spinoza). The pan(en)theistic accounts of figures like Plotinus, Hegel and Spinoza leave little recourse to the suffering individual qua suffering individual, and much to those who would gladly submit themselves to the exigencies – however politically reactionary – of their historical moment in time.

3.3 Shestov, Fondane and the Reversal of History

It is on the basis of this rejection of rationalist approaches to suffering that Shestov and Fondane introduce one of the more provocative elements of their philosophies – namely their insistence upon a paradoxical expiation of historical suffering facilitated by a miraculous reversal of the self-evident course of history. As Bernard Martin notes in his ‘Introduction’ to Athens and Jerus-

35 Shestov, Athens and Jerusalem, p. 73, quoting Ps. 137:5–6.
36 Belinsky, Letter to Botkin, March 1, 1841. Qtd. in Shestov, Kierkegaard, pp. 7–8.
In the specifically religious thought of his mature and final period, Shestov seems to have been motivated basically by an unremitting awareness of what Mircea Eliade has appropriately called “the terror of history.” He was obsessed by the fact that Socrates, the best and wisest of men, was poisoned by the Athenians and that, in the understanding of the historicist and rationalist philosophies, this fact is on the same level as the poisoning of a mad dog.\footnote{Bernard Martin, ‘Introduction’ to Athens and Jerusalem (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016), pp. 25–45 at p. 43.}

This concern with the injustices of history and the demand that they should be addressed according to their own nature is shared by Fondane, who writes:

> Just like you, I dream of useful reforms, of great measures to be put into effect. But the atrocious clamor of the world and my own anxiety demand not only a better future but also a past that has been put right; not just sufferings justified but also wiped clean, erased; not just healed, but as if they had not been.\footnote{Fondane, ‘Man Before History’, in Baugh, ed, Existential Monday, p. 61, italics added.}

This refusal which both philosophers espouse in relation to historical fact underscores the significance of their rejection of intellectual obedience to the laws of Reason, since – as Shestov highlights – the \textit{a priori} impossibility of undoing what has been done historically is something which no more fundamental a thinker than Aristotle avows.

> Nothing that is past is an object of choice, [...] for no one deliberates about the past, but about what is future and capable of being otherwise, while \textit{what is past is not capable of not having taken place}; hence Agathon is right in saying: “For this alone is lacking even to god, / To make undone things that have once been done.”\footnote{Aristotle, The Nicomachean Ethics (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 104 (1139 b5–11), italics added. Qtd. in Shestov, Athens and Jerusalem, p. 106. Agathon (c. 448–c. 400 BC) was an Athenian tragic poet.}
Hence, to insist that past injustice not simply be “rectified” but moreover that it be expiated entirely and according to its own nature demands a manifest rejection of the “Necessity” implied in one’s obedience to self-evidence. To insist – as both Shestov and Fondane do – on the omnipotence of human thought, and on the human capacity to demand even those things which exceed the limits of Reason, entails that even impossibilities such as these should be possible. “The ‘fact,’ the ‘given,’ the ‘real,’ do not dominate us; they do not determine our fate, either in the present, in the future or in the past. What has been becomes what has not been.”\textsuperscript{40} Thus the emphasis upon existential suffering in Shestov and Fondane turns to a concrete if nonetheless paradoxical political program: that injustice should not be rectified indirectly in terms of a political eschatology – the idea of some future utopia through which past suffering is “justified” – but rather should be rectified directly, through its (im)possible expiation there where it is in the historical past. For Shestov and Fondane the past itself will become an object of normative political concern, and it is only for a humanity and a God “for whom all things are possible” that such a platform can be realized.\textsuperscript{41}

4 Benjamin Shestov and Fondane’s opposition to historical injustice and their insistence upon the possibility of an “erasure” of the past for the sake of individual suffering points quite interestingly towards the thought of another theologically-minded philosopher from roughly the same time period: the German critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), who, across several of his most important works, especially from the period of Fascism towards the end of this life, emphasizes precisely a “reversal” of history for the sake of human

\textsuperscript{40} Shustov, Athens and Jerusalem, p. 66, italics added.

\textsuperscript{41} On the theme of the reversal of history in Shestov and Fondane, see also Fondane, Le Conscience Malheureuse, pp. 26–27, and Lev Shustov, In Job’s Balances (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1975), p. 377. A full elaboration of the political consequences of this view are beyond the scope of this paper; nevertheless, it is worth highlighting the iconoclasm of such a position with respect to conventional future-oriented notions of political justice, which tend stake their claim precisely on the idea that the future, in contrast to the past, remains “open” to possibility. What we gain, to my mind, in the accounts presented in Shustov, Fondane (and in Benjamin, as I argue below) is the notion that political possibility need not be tethered to the concept of futurity, and therefore that notions of justice, retribution, utopia, etc., might have a much more ambiguous historico-temporal structure than has been typically taken for granted.
suffering. This emphasis on the past (as opposed to a utopian future) in Benjamin is linked to the latter’s rejection of the concept of progress in history. Here Benjamin’s reflections on Fascism as coherent with an Enlightenment notion of progress are remarkably similar to those cited above from Fondane:

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that accords with this insight. [...] Fascism’s chance consists not the least in the fact that its opponents oppose it in the name of progress as a historical norm.

In other words, to the extent that historical order exists, it exists in such a way that is overwhelmingly compatible with the experiences of suffering and oppression which its advocates reject. But this notion of progress is itself deeply morally suspect. In Benjamin’s unfinished *magnum opus, The Arcades Project*, he cites philosopher Hermann Lotze (1817–1881), where the latter argues against the theodical morality of progress narratives:

> It is not ... clear how we are to imagine one course of education as applying to successive generations of men, allowing the later of these to partake of the fruits produced by the unrewarded efforts and often by the misery of those who went before. To hold that the claims of particular times and individual men may be scorned and all their misfortunes disregarded if only mankind would improve overall is, though suggested by noble feelings, merely enthusiastic thoughtlessness ... Nothing is progress which

42 On Shestov’s relationship to Benjamin, who may have visited Shestov sometime in 1936, see Michael Weingrad, ‘New Encounters with Shestov’, *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy*, 11:1 (2002), 49–62 and Matthew Beaumont, *Shestov: Philosopher of the Sleepless Night* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020). Both Weingrad (61) and Beaumont (p. 71) note a difference in the emphasis on politics in Benjamin; but this, to my mind, is precisely what Benjamin can offer for a novel reading of Shestovian philosophy.

43 Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History’, in Eiland and Jennings, eds, *Selected Writings*, p. 392, translation substantially modified. It seems that the translator of this passage in the *Selected Writing* has confused a reference, so that the latter phrase – “ihm im Namen des Fortschritts als einer historischen Norm begegnen” – is read as treating fascism as a historical norm, which makes the passage nearly indecipherable (since no one reasonably treats Fascism as a historical norm). The point, to my mind, is instead that fascism is treated as an exception to “progress as a historical norm,” as indicated in the translation as modified. For Fondane, see Fondane, ‘Man Before History’, in Baugh, ed, *Existential Monday*, pp. 57–58.
does not mean an increase of happiness and perfection for those very souls which had suffered in a previous imperfect state.  

Here we see Benjamin excerpting (in fact, the technique of “montage” – “showing” without “saying” – constitutes part and parcel of Benjamin’s historico-political approach in the *Arcades Project*) Lotze in a way that very closely follows the concerns of both Shestov and Fondane: namely, that notions of history which exchange historical suffering for “compensatory” historical aims effectively insult the nature of suffering itself. For this reason it should not be surprising to find, as central to the very politics of Benjamin’s historiographical approach, a concern to *redeem* that past in its threatened political status.

The notion of historiography as a kind of redemption of the past is perhaps most explicitly pronounced in Benjamin’s ‘Theses on History’, where he describes the task of the historian as “fighting for the oppressed past” through a practice of “recognition” that is specific to the historical moment of the reflecting subject. For Benjamin, it is this historically-situated subject who is capable of recognizing and thereby rescuing the past from its status as an endangered object.

Historical materialism wishes to hold fast that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject in a moment of danger [*im Augenblick der Gefahr*]. [...] Every age must strive anew to wrest inheritance away from the conformism that is working to overpower it. [...] The only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious.

In other words, the past for Benjamin appears as a threatened object which is capable of being rescued through the efforts of the present historian. But this means precisely that the historian has a task of *rectification* with respect to this object which can – in the event of their failure – fall back into the hands of

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(Benjamin minces no words here) “the Antichrist.” In the *Arcades Project* this view of things is explicit:

> [H]istory is not simply a science but also and not least a form of remembrance. What science has “determined,” remembrance can modify. Such mindfulness can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete. [...] In remembrance we have an experience that forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological, little as it may be granted us to try to write it with immediately theological concepts.

Benjamin is explicit in this passage that the task of the historian is not only to affect the status of the past *in its state as past*, but moreover that this normative responsibility reflects a *theological* endowment belonging to individuals in relation to the past. This theological endowment is what Benjamin famously refers to as the historian’s “weak messianic power”: their capacity to rescue the past from its jeopardized status just at the particular moment at which it is recognized. This and the preceding quotation find a striking parallel in a remark found in Shestov’s *In Job’s Balances*:

> It is possible that the dead are not so helpless, so bereft of all power, so “dead” as we think. In any case philosophy, which, as we have been taught, should not admit any statement without proof, cannot guarantee to historians *in saecula saeculorum* [indefinitely] the same security from the dead, in which the dead leave them today. In an anatomical theatre one can dissect corpses at leisure. But history is not an anatomical theatre, and it is conceivable that the historians may one day have to render account to the dead.

Here the common sentiment between Shestov and Benjamin is of a past which is not unalterable (we cannot “make undone things that have once been done,” says Agathon) but rather a site of contestation, in need of intervention in order to relieve this past of the suffering with which it has been bound.

49 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, p. 471 [N8,1]. The quotation is taken from Horkheimer.
In this way, Benjamin’s own historiographical approach is deeply political – not (or at least not primarily) on account of the usefulness of historical interpretation for some futural notion of utopia. Rather, the messianically-endowed historian is tasked with the moral and political responsibility of expiating the past of its injustices, wherein we find a striking parallel – perhaps a more explicitly political one – to the concerns of Shestov and Fondane, for whom philosophy ought to rescue the past from its threatened “eternalization” at the hands of rationalistic thought.

4.1 Benjamin, Kabbalah, Panentheism

The “messianic” conception of history that Benjamin gives us finally offers us a clue as to how one might attempt a reconciliation of the politics of revolt involved in Shestov and Fondane’s conception of history and the immanentistic aspects of pan(en)theism which we might want to rescue from the latter. This potential compatibility between a materialistic panentheism and a distinctive politics of resistance will be evident from reflection on some of the implicit but deeply-rooted pan(en)theistic elements involved in Benjamin’s philosophy.52

Benjamin, as a friend and interlocutor of the Kabbalah scholar Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), was in fact well-acquainted with the tenets of Kabbalistic thought.53 According to an influential conception of the latter, God’s presence in the profane world occurs as the consequence of a cosmic catastrophe: the creation of the world by the divine essence (the Ein Sof) involves a “contraction” (tzimtzum) in which this essence is invested in several divine emanations (known as the sefirot) serving as “vessels” (kelim) for this essence. During the process of contraction and investment, the Ein Sof, in its superabundance, shatters its containing vessels (the shevirat ha-kelim or “breaking of the vessels”)

52 On Benjamin’s relation to theology more generally, see Buck-Morss, Dialectics of Seeing, pp. 228–252. The topic is well-represented as a subject of dispute in Benjamin scholarship, not least owing to a conflict among figures like Scholem and Adorno over the proper way in which to interpret Benjamin’s eclectic use of both theological and Marxist ideas. Thiem, ‘Benjamin’s Messianic Metaphysics of Transience’, in Dickinson and Symons, eds, Walter Benjamin and Theology, p. 21, fn. 1, provides very helpful references for the range of positions interpreters have taken on this subject.

resulting in the exile of the divine essence in the profane world below.\textsuperscript{54} This account – according to which the divine essence is immanent throughout the material world in the form of exiled “sparks” – provides the cosmological background for one Kabbalistic conception of human moral and religious responsibility: it is given to human beings to \textit{heal} the world (what is known as \textit{tikkun olam}) through acts of \textit{mitzvot} (“good deeds”) so that the aspects of the divine essence embedded in the profane world may be redeemed and returned to the unity from which they came.\textsuperscript{55} 

According to this important account, it is – distinctively – \textit{we} human beings who bear a messianic responsibility, carrying the burden of healing the world in order to return the divine essence to its proper place. But in order for this to take place – Buck-Morss points out – we cannot regard ourselves as mere “unwilling tools in realizing God’s plan,” but must rather see ourselves as “historical agents whose knowledge and understanding of what is at stake is indispensable.”\textsuperscript{56} In other words we should understand ourselves as uniquely capable of fulfilling our responsibility to heal the suffering of the world, \textit{because} we are capable of either failing or succeeding in that task. The fate of human history is here not necessitated in the manner of rationalistic panentheism, but rather radically contingent, even where this means that human beings must perform effectively miraculous acts upon earth. It is, effectively, given to humanity to serve a messianic function with respect to God Himself. As Buck-Morss argues, this view makes human sin less a matter of moral failure (an unwillingness to live up to some set of abstract moral rules) and more a matter of \textit{resignation}: “The meaning of sin is to accept the given state of things, surrendering to it as fate.”\textsuperscript{57} In other words, it is obedience to \textit{necessity} – to the self-evidence of things “just the way they are” – that constitutes humanity’s moral catastrophe.

On this account, the Benjaminian conception of political responsibility – to intervene with respect to a threatened past whose rescue is “in the next moment [...] already irretrievably lost” – fits with a notion of the profane world as panentheistically imbued with a threatened divine essence.\textsuperscript{58} For Benjamin, if there is a paradoxical power afforded to human beings to “undo” what has been done and to expiate the suffering of the past, this is possible less by appeal

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{54} Dan, \textit{Kabbalah}, pp. 73–75; Buck-Morss, \textit{Dialectics of Seeing}, p. 235.
\bibitem{56} Buck-Morss, \textit{Dialectics of Seeing}, p. 235.
\bibitem{57} Buck-Morss, \textit{Dialectics of Seeing}, p. 240; Buck-Morss cites Benjamin, \textit{Arcades Project}, pp. 882–883 [g,1].
\bibitem{58} Benjamin, \textit{Arcades Project}, p. 473 [N9,7].
\end{thebibliography}
to the omnipotence of some transcendent divine entity, and more on account of divine prerogative of humanity itself, to aid in the rescue of this world from its state of suffering. Such a panentheism reflects not only the sacredness of the fallen, suffering world around us, but moreover the “weak” divinity of each human being to act so as to overcome the catastrophic norm of human history in the direction of political justice.

5 Conclusion

From what we have seen, the critique of pan(en)theism in the work of figures like Shestov and Fondane points us towards several important philosophical and ethical principles that have been left woefully inadequate in conventional notions of historical progress. As these philosophers powerfully observe, a conception of history as fundamentally rationalistic and endowed with a teleological directedness towards eventual redemption makes nonsense of the claim to redeem the suffering of historical subjects, and moreover leaves individuals no recourse by means of which to critique their given historical circumstances. Against this view, they advocated for a conception of history and of human thought which made possible a reversal of history at the limits of rational thought.

Beyond this, in Benjamin, we find the tools for a compatibility between such a radical conception of human history and the immanence of pan(en)theism, where the capacity of human beings to intervene with respect to their historical past reflects an investment of the profane world with theological significance.

In these accounts, we find profound challenges to conventional ideas about politics, rationality and human history, and an invitation to reconsider the relationship between the divine and the mundane in ways that can open new paths for political justice.

Statements and Declarations

Research for this article has been supported by a Non-Residential Research Fellowship through the Panentheism and Religious Life Project, under the direction of Profs. Clare Carlisle (King’s College London) and Yitzhak Melamed (Johns Hopkins University).
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