THOUGHT GOING TO SCHOOL WITH LIFE?  
FACKENHEIM’S LAST PHILOSOPHICAL TESTAMENT

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Nietzsche’s madman is mad, then, because he comes both too late and too soon: too late to have a god for company; too soon to be able to bear the new solitude.\(^2\)

Emil Fackenheim’s philosophical response to the Holocaust is permeated by the worry that Auschwitz marks a rupture so severe that it compels any attempt to philosophize in its wake either to ignore the magnitude of this rupture, or to lose itself in a radical nihilism. “Perhaps no thought can exist in the same space as the Holocaust,” Fackenheim writes in To Mend the World. “Perhaps all thought, to assure its own survival, must be elsewhere.”\(^3\)

In the writings which culminate in To Mend the World, a single realization may be said to save Fackenheim from post-Holocaust philosophical and spiritual despair. Contemporary thought would indeed remain incapacitated by the Holocaust, the “sphere of thought would stay paralyzed,” Fackenheim tells us, “were it not for the astounding fact that the very sphere of life that does the paralyzing also gives the basis for a mending. For if the wonder in which philosophy originates is turned into paralyzing horror by the ‘humanly impossible’ crime of the criminals, its paralysis is mended by the wonder at the victims who resisted a crime to which resistance itself was ‘humanly impossible.’”\(^4\)

The possibility of an authentic response to the Holocaust in post-Holocaust thinking thus depends, in Fackenheim’s account, on the actual response of those victims living through the Holocaust itself.\(^5\)

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\(^{2}\) GPH 51.

\(^{3}\) MW 191.


\(^{5}\) Cf., M. Morgan, “Fackenheim and the Holocaust,” Yad Vashem Studies 32 (2004): 16: “Fackenheim came to this answer to his central question: it is possible for us to resist Nazi purposes now, because resistance was actual then in a way that it understood itself as the victim of radical evil and yet as acts of resistance against it.”
If contemporary thought is to survive the radical rupture of the Holocaust, Fackenheim concludes, “then it is clearly necessary for thought...to go to school with life.” Philosophy after the Holocaust must bear witness to the resisting life it discovers in the midst of that rupture; and it must learn from that resisting life how to think resistance, how to resist the Nazi logic of destruction in thought. Without the resisting victims of the Holocaust as our teachers and guides, we would remain ever frozen in our “metaphysical paralysis” before Auschwitz. This is why, Fackenheim declares, for philosophy after the Holocaust “the going-to-school of thought with this life is not a temporary necessity but permanent.”

“Thought going to school with life” thus comes to name, in the form of a slogan, the most “permanent” of Fackenheim’s methodological commitments, for it is Fackenheim’s explicit conviction that such schooling alone makes possible a thinking and a living, fragmentary as they may be, in this our post-Holocaust moment in history.

But there is now reason to suspect that Fackenheim changed his mind decisively, in the last years of his life, regarding this most basic tenet of his philosophical response to the Holocaust, and thereby regarding the path he thought philosophy and religious thought must take in order to come to grips with the Holocaust in its truth.

This reason comes in the form of a note Fackenheim left for us to ponder in his own personal copy of To Mend the World. I discovered this note on the day of Fackenheim’s funeral, on September 21, 2003, during a visit to Fackenheim’s Jerusalem apartment after his burial. Fackenheim’s personal copies of his own books had been set out on a coffee table in the middle of the apartment, and in the course of that afternoon I picked up Fackenheim’s copy of To Mend the World (second edition, 1989) and began thumbing through it. My attention was caught

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6 MW 15.
7 MW 28.
8 Noting how the motto of “thought going to school with life” links To Mend the World with some of Fackenheim’s earliest writings on the Holocaust, Michael Morgan has pointed out that the specific form of “life” that teaches thought is reconceived over time. “In the works of the late sixties,” Morgan notes, “the ‘life’ that educates thought is the commitment to Jewish survival of post-Holocaust Jews, and what it teaches is the existence and content of an imperative to go on, to oppose Nazi purposes. In To Mend the World...the ‘life’ is that of the resisting victims, and what it teaches is that there is an imperative or duty and that the imperative can be heeded, that Jewish life after Auschwitz is not only necessary, it is also possible,” “The Central Problem of Fackenheim’s To Mend the World,” The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy 5 (1996): 300.