PART TWO

THE PHILOSOPHICAL DIMENSION
OF FACKENHEIM'S THOUGHT
In what follows, I look at the strictly philosophical component in Emil Fackenheim’s Jewish thought. I ask: What does Fackenheim say we need to know—or can in principle come to know—about God and the world and human beings by our own unaided efforts, as distinct from what we are told or seem to be told about these things by the Torah or by Jewish tradition? In other words, what are his strictly philosophical views, as opposed to his Jewishly derived or Jewishly inspired views?

A simpler way of asking this question might be to ask, using an old-fashioned term: What is Fackenheim’s natural theology? But this way of asking is too simple, since Fackenheim stands in a philosophical tradition that denies the instructiveness of the term nature in connection with theology. It is the tradition of post-Kantian German philosophy, including such thinkers as Hegel, Schelling, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Heidegger (as well as Buber and Rosenzweig), to whom Fackenheim typically turns to clarify philosophical difficulties. What then is it, according to that tradition and to Fackenheim himself, which prevents or pre-empts the philosophical appeal to nature as found in the theological arguments of, say, Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas and especially Maimonides? The quick answer is history. But, again, this answer is too quick, since what is meant by it is this: Philosophical insights—including above all those

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1 I find it hard, though sometimes necessary, to be in occasional disagreement with my teachers, especially a saintly if rigorous teacher like Emil Fackenheim. As a way of corroborating this necessity, I cite a Hasidic tale told to me impromptu and freely adapted to my circumstance by Professor Fackenheim—as I then knew him, though as an even younger person I knew him as Rabbi Fackenheim: “A great Zaddik was asked why he did not follow the example of his teacher in his own way of life. The Zaddik replied: ‘On the contrary, I do follow his example. For just as he left his teacher, so I leave mine.’” See QPF 187, with Gershom G. Scholem, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism (New York: Schocken Books, 1946), 348.