The Central Problem of Fackenheim’s
*To Mend the World*

Michael L. Morgan
Indiana University

*To Mend the World* is a book with two introductions, and in both Emil Fackenheim informs its readers about the book’s central problem. When the book was originally published in 1982, in the first, introductory chapter, Fackenheim puts it this way:

when at last there remains no choice but an overt confrontation of thought with the Holocaust, ... thought must either flee from the event into inauthenticity or else suffer collapse ... Thus we come to a dead halt, and our prior achievements or conclusions all remain suspended unless and until it is possible, nevertheless, to move on—unless we can both confront the abyss and reach the other side. It is at this point that our going-to-school-with-life ... begins in earnest. Astoundingly, the world of the Holocaust, paralyzing our thought long after, did not succeed in wholly paralyzing ... some of those most exposed to it ... And only in [the] context [of this enormous fact] can the ‘central question’ of our whole inquiry be both asked and answered—how Jewish (and also Christian and philosophical) thought can both expose itself to the Holocaust and survive.1

When, in 1989, *To Mend the World* was reissued, Fackenheim added a new preface to the second edition. In that preface, he returns to this same ‘central question.’

The necessity to deny Hitler posthumous victories is moral and religious, but is it an ontological possibility? If the Holocaust is ‘not human nature’; if the ‘humanly impossible’ became real in the crimes of the criminals and the sufferings of the victims, how can the denial to Hitler of posthumous victories be a ‘possibility’ that lies within ‘human nature’? ... if the 614th commandment was to be preserved, deepened and followed through the length and breadth of its implications, the book had to focus all else on a single problem. The Holocaust must be viewed as no less than a rupture, and this not only of Jewish faith and life but of all things hitherto considered ‘human’: is it possible to view it as such and yet affirm a ‘mending of the world’? The reader who does not recognize this as the fundamental problem of *To Mend the World* may understand much in the book but not its central problem.2

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2 *To Mend the World,* second edition (New York: Schocken, 1989) xx-xxii. In 1994, the book was published in a third edition, with new introductory material. But this time the new introduction was the text of an address given by Fackenheim in Halle, Germany, and not an additional introduction to the content of the book.
In this paper I want to focus on this central problem; I shall try to situate it in Fackenheim’s thought, to clarify it, and to examine his solution to it. As a problem, it is fundamental to To Mend the World and, I believe, to all of Fackenheim’s thought since the late sixties. It is tied to his earlier work, to his study of Hegel, his reflections on Heidegger, and his thinking about the historicity and transcendence of philosophical and religious thought. For now, however, I shall restrict myself to its roots in his work of the late sixties and to its importance for his post-Holocaust Jewish thought.

For Fackenheim, human existence, our selfhood and agency as human beings, and our thinking, are both historically situated. We are born, grow, educated in, and act in situations that provide us with social, cultural, religious, and various other resources. Moreover, both we and our situations are historical, so that our interactions with our situations and resources are also interactions with various traditions. To articulate Jewish existence at any historical moment, for individuals and for communities, is to characterize its interpretive responses to the traditions which influence it, and to the historical realities that are given to it. Fackenheim’s thinking is all about how the Jewish thinker—and others—should and can respond to his or her historical situation.

That situation is characterized by many features, traditions that include texts, concepts, motifs, attitudes, events, political structures, and more. Primary among these given realities is the Holocaust; central to authentic Jewish existence today is a serious and honest encounter with that event. For the Jewish thinker, that encounter gives rise to two questions: what should the Jew do thereafter, and what can the Jew do? In a sense, all of Fackenheim’s Jewish thought after 1967 or so has been about these two questions.

Moreover, insofar as human existence and Jewish existence are historical and embedded in situations that are steeped in traditions of discourse, the questions about the necessity and possibility of authentic post-Holocaust Jewish thought and life are questions about continuity and discontinuity with the Jewish past. In language current today, they are questions about the viability of memory. Fackenheim uses the terms “abyss” and “rupture” in the above quotations; elsewhere he uses the expression “epoch-making event.” With this terminology, he is signalling the challenge forced by the Holocaust, insofar as it threatens to cut off totally the present from the past, to destroy our vocabulary, our frameworks, and our conceptual schemes. Viewed in these terms, the problem becomes one of both confronting the event seriously and yet finding some authentic, responsible way of going on, of honestly acknowledging the discontinuity with the past and yet finding resources for reestablishing continuity with that past.

3 That is, human existence is hermeneutical. See To Mend the World, 256–260.