

Responsible Subjects: On the Ability to Respond to Transcendence

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Abstract

This essay reflects on the constitution of subjectivity in relation to transcendence specifically through an analysis of responsibility. The openness to re-thinking transcendence in continental philosophy led to a corollary re-thinking of subjectivity as constituted in response to otherness or transcendence, in such a way, however, that emphasized the utter passivity of the subject. This essay attempts to forge a path forward for thinking about the constitution of responsible subjectivity, beyond the ruinous alternative of either the subjugating or subjugated self, to a subject able to respond to transcendence in such a way that does not threaten the inviolability of transcendence. Deliberating with, and beyond, Jean Wahl, Emmanuel Levinas, and Kelly Oliver, this essay argues that the various accounts of responsibility found in Jewish and Christian scriptures can provide an articulation of subjectivity as constituted by its relation to transcendence, in which transcendence is understood as both a movement and an end — a movement undertaken by a self towards that which remains ever other.

Keywords: Emmanuel Levinas, Jean Wahl, Kelly Oliver, transcendence, responsibility, subjectivity, witness, trauma, phenomenology, theology

Introductory problema

THIS ARGUMENT COMMENCES WITH THE statement that one of the primary contributions of continental philosophy in the past several decades has been a thinking of transcendence. However, it is also important to recognize that this opening to the transcendent, especially as it is accomplished in phenomenology, is performed immanently; that is to say, the question is asked only through the “lived experience” of the subject.¹ Thus the thinking

¹ See Joseph Rivera, *The Contemplative Self After Michel Henry: A Phenomenological Theology, Thresholds in Philosophy and Theology* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015): “If late modernity lives under the shadow of Descartes, and the late modern mood of the death of God continues to extend that shadow in radical and novel ways, then

of transcendence is ineluctably linked to a re-thinking of subjectivity. This is particularly the case with the so-called “new phenomenology” beginning with Levinas, but its source is earlier. Jean Wahl’s famous lecture on “Subjectivité et Transcendance” in 1937² begins with the statement that subjectivity is borne of the tension that arises when, through an interior movement, the “subject suddenly discovers the transcendent,” the “soul alone before God alone”. This moment does not result, however, in a Plotinian union or assimilation of one into the other. In agreement with Kierkegaard, Wahl rejects the notion of transcendence overflowing the soul: “Rather, there is the much more powerful force of negation, an all-the-more-irreducible opposition of individualities” (29). Subjectivity is borne out of this opposition of individualities—the self and that which is absolutely other to it, the transcendent.

In order to clear the path for thinking about subjectivity and transcendence, Wahl first has to distinguish his notion of transcendence from other “bad transcendencies” — whether that of the Romantic notion of *Jenseits* as “a horizon that recedes without ceasing,” or that of the Platonic-Christian notion denounced by Nietzsche as “a higher world conceived as justification for a morality of which one could trace a wholly immanent genealogy” (25). If the former focuses on the idea of transcendence as a movement (towards an ever-receding horizon), then the latter takes transcendence as an end (*terme*) in itself which necessarily negates the reality of this immanent world as illusory or inferior. The necessary challenge, however, according to Wahl, is to think these two aspects of transcendence—movement and end—together, such that transcendence “is at once a no and a yes. It is a yes that is posed to all of our affirmations; it is a no that is the affirmation of something beyond all our affirmations” (26). In order to accept Wahl’s insistence that we hold together both aspects of transcendence, I will argue it is necessary to consider a third concept—responsibility, which unites movement and end by ushering in a movement or activity of self-transcendence in response to transcendence as end.

In his genealogy of *The Origins of Responsibility*,³ François Raffoul identifies the primary contribution of continental philosophy, somewhat differently than I have just done, as orchestrating a shift in the understanding

phenomenology makes itself felt in this spiritual landscape as an intellectual tradition that reintroduces the question of the divine. *But it does so specifically in view of the lived experience of the subject*” (39 emphasis mine).

² Jean Wahl, “Subjectivité et transcendance,” *Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie* 37, no. 5 (1937); the subsequently expanded book, *Existence humaine et transcendance* (Neuchâtel: Éditions de la Baconnière, 1944) has been translated into English by William C. Hackett, *Human Existence and Transcendence*, *Thresholds in Philosophy and Theology* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016). The quotations are from the Hackett translation.

³ François Raffoul, *The Origins of Responsibility* (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 2010).

of responsibility from *accountability* to *addressability*. This shift, according to Raffoul, significantly provides a way of thinking about human selfhood distinct from a modern “ideology of subjectivity, free will, and power” (1), in which “one is accountable as a subject who is the cause of his or her actions through the freedom of the will” (5), to a decentered self found only in being addressed. Raffoul identifies Levinas as the one who accomplishes the great reversal from the traditional view of responsibility — “from intentionality to passivity, from the ego to the other, from freedom to subjection, from the spontaneous will to the accusation and persecution of the self” (31). Rather than talk about the free will, reason, and causal agency as the foundations of our responsibility, Levinas talks of the infinite obligation of “self”⁴ for other. Responsibility (and the subjectivity that is constituted through it) can no longer be associated with a self-initiated and spontaneous action of a previously existent self, but is derivative and secondary — a response to a previous call issued forth from what is variously figured as other, exterior, excessive, “inappropriable,” (Raffoul’s term) or, transcendent.

In his discussion of revelation, Levinas maintains that the possibility “to follow the Most High” exists only through a profound and primary responsibility for the other,⁵ which he connects to the idea of election. To be elected by God consists solely in being *assigned* toward the other, with an unavoidable assignation. For Levinas, the only response to this assignation can be “here I am” (*me voici* or *hinnênî*⁶) — the paradigmatic example of which is Abraham’s response to God in Genesis 22. The relation of responsibility is not an accident of the substantial self that issues in ethics. That responsibility simply *is* the self: “The word *I* means *here I am*, answering for everything and for everyone”.⁷ This is a response of total availability and absolute responsibility. Not only is responsibility neither chosen nor avoidable, it is also utterly non-reciprocal.⁸ Moreover, the unshakeable hold of Other upon the self is necessarily violating. Levinas uses metaphors of criminality and transgression to conjure this relation: the summons to obedience “slips into

⁴ A self that is insubstantial enough as to only come into being through that response to and for the other, hence a self to be marked with scare quotes.

⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, “Revelation in the Jewish Tradition,” trans. Sarah Richmond in *The Levinas Reader*, Seán Hand (ed), (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 202: “But to follow the Most High is to know, also, that nothing is of greater importance than the approach made towards one’s neighbor, the concern with the fate of the ‘widow and the orphan, the stranger and the poor man,’ and that no approach made with empty hands can count as an approach”.

⁶ It is significant here that the declarative self of the Hebraic “*hinnênî*” translates into a self in the accusative in French “*me voici*,” while English translations continue the nominative and declarative: “Here I am”.

⁷ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Duquesne University Press, 1998), 114.

⁸ See Levinas, “The Pact,” trans. Sarah Richmond in *The Levinas Reader*: “I always have, myself, one responsibility more than anyone else, since I am responsible, in addition for his responsibility. And if he is responsible for my responsibility I remain responsible for the responsibility he has for my responsibility” (226).

me 'like a thief' through the outstretched nets of consciousness,"⁹ resulting in "a traumatic hold of the other on the same".¹⁰

From a theological perspective one of the obvious benefits of his philosophical intervention is the way in which Levinas has made room to speak "philosophically" of transcendence, of a command or summons from a divine Other.¹¹ Nonetheless, this is accomplished in a way that raises a troubling binary when it comes to thinking about subjectivity and transcendence. Are the only possible alternatives for thinking about responsibility and subjectivity either a robustly sovereign, narcissistic, infinitely acquisitive, and dominating subject, on the one hand, or an insubstantial, passive, inept, guilty, and subjugated subject, on the other? Are the unilaterality of the command and the passivity of the response strictly necessary in order to guarantee the inviolability, or inappropriability, of the transcendent call from the other? Or, does the emphasis on the subject's absolute passivity, non-agency, and inefficacy not curtail the extent and power with which one can respond, or indeed, what one even means by response? In this essay, I explore what must be assumed of the subject to make him or her able to respond to transcendence and what kind of subjectivity is borne out of such a response.

Responsible subjectivity as witness

Kelly Oliver, an American philosopher influenced by Levinas, discusses the relationship between responsibility, transcendence, and the formation of human subjectivity in a way that addresses this dilemma directly.¹² For instance, suspicious of a simple replacement of the domination of the subject with that of the dictatorial reign of the other, Oliver offers a sustained reflection on how one might consider this constitutive responsibility in a less violent, and more reciprocal, manner. However, as I will argue, she does so in way that abandons a commitment to transcendence as *terme* (to recall Wahl's distinction); in Kelly's argument the response to transcendence is reduced to an immanent movement of change within an ever-shifting horizon of difference.

⁹ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 148.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 141. See also, "...the one is exposed to the other as a skin is exposed to what wounds it, as a cheek is offered to the smiter... it is a denuding beyond the skin, to the wounds one dies from, denuding to death... being torn up from oneself...one-penetrated-by-the-other" (49).

¹¹ Given the way in which theology has an inherent drive to heteronomy and creatureliness, it tends to act as a strong riposte to the modern emphasis on autonomy and self-sufficiency. Therefore, it is not surprising that, when many phenomenologists turned to an emphasis on alterity and transcendence, they often found themselves sliding into theological territory so easily.

¹² The following discussion of Oliver is based solely on her work *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; 2001).

It does not matter, Oliver argues, whether one sees otherness as a threat to be assimilated or dominated, or as the origin of a call to which one must subjugate oneself: in both cases, one assumes a basic antinomy between self and other, which, therefore, results in a pathology of oppression and domination, in which violence and trauma are inscribed at the heart of what it means to be a human subject. Yet, when trauma inaugurates subjectivity, how can one distinguish between, identify, or judge the various types of unjust social practices that result in trauma? As Oliver writes, "If 'subordination,' 'pain,' 'trauma,' 'subjugation,' 'subjection,' 'vulnerability,' 'susceptibility,' 'violence,' and so forth are all part of the normal and normalizing process of becoming a subject, then how can we distinguish between becoming a subject and being oppressed, abused, or tortured?" (65). Oliver resists this understanding of the formation of subjectivity; far from being constitutive of subjectivity, trauma threatens it insofar as it threatens one's ability to respond, or to bear witness both to oneself and to others.¹³

Nonetheless, in explicit agreement with the phenomenological tradition,¹⁴ Oliver both insists on the necessity of transcendence and defines the roots of human subjectivity as "address-ability" and "response-ability". Both of these commitments are thought together in the process of *bearing witness* which Oliver equates with being a human subject.

Subjectivity is founded on the ability to respond to, and address, others – what I am calling witnessing. Insofar as subjectivity is made possible by the ability to respond, response-ability is its founding possibility. The responsibility inherent in subjectivity has the double sense of the condition of possibility of response, response-ability, on the one hand, and the ethical obligation to respond and to enable response-ability from others born out of that founding possibility, on the other (15).

Three main points in this statement can be highlighted. First, subjectivity is contingent upon certain conditions that enable one to respond. Oliver doesn't elaborate on what these conditions might be, but I will return to this idea later in the paper.

Secondly, to be responsible means not only to be able to respond (to an event, a person, or a transcendent call), but also to respond in such a way

¹³ On this point, see Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992) in which they discuss the totalizing strength of the Nazi attempt to exterminate all European Jewry: "This loss of the capacity to witness to oneself and thus to witness from the inside is perhaps the true meaning of annihilation, for when one's history is abolished, one's identity ceases to exist as well" (82).

¹⁴ In this work Oliver allies herself with the phenomenological tradition whom she uses as foils to her primary intellectual opponents: on the one hand, the liberalism (specifically, a politics of multiculturalism and recognition) of Charles Taylor and Axel Honneth, and on the other hand, the social constructivism of Judith Butler.

that opens up the possibility of another's response. Responsibility connotes responsiveness *and* ethical obligation.¹⁵ In this way Oliver reconceives subjectivity in ways that are radically relational and dialogical without being competitive. Simply put, we "are by virtue of others" who also are by virtue of us (18). Oliver strengthens her point through her use of psychological studies which observe infants innately responding to their environment, both social and natural, through the imitation of facial gestures and bodily movements prior to any "Lacanian mirror-stage recognition"; that is to say, response-ability precedes identity and recognition (13).¹⁶

Thirdly, the way in which one enacts their responsibility is through the process of witnessing, or bearing witness. Part of the value of talking about witnessing is that it is not only accomplished in speech, but in art and literature, bodily presence and movement, as well as political acts. Furthermore, its dual connotations—juridical and religious—are illuminating vis-à-vis the discussion of responsibility. The first describes the giving of testimony to something one witnessed "first-hand," while the second indicates a testimony about something unseen but believed in (in the sense of both having encountered only as an excessive event and "committing-oneself" to).¹⁷ It is this double meaning which renders the act of bearing witness a

¹⁵ As Oliver puts it, we have a "responsibility to response-ability, to the ability to respond. We have an obligation not only to respond but also to respond in a way that opens up rather than closes off the possibility of response by others" (18). Or again, "Subjectivity is responsibility: it is the ability to respond and to be responded to. Responsibility, then, has the double sense of opening up the ability to respond—response-ability—and ethically obligating subjects to respond by virtue of their very subjectivity itself" (91).

¹⁶ Oliver distinguishes between one's "subject-position" and "subjectivity". The former is determined by history and circumstance (Heideggerian "facticity"), whereas subjectivity is "the sense of agency and response-ability that are constituted in the infinite encounter with otherness" (17). These two are profoundly inter-connected, though Oliver will agree with Levinas that subjectivity is "logically prior to any possible subject position" (17). Witnessing holds both of these together, testifying to what you have seen and recognized with your own eyes according to your own subject-position, and bearing witness to what you cannot see, yet still encounter, and in response to which your subjectivity is constituted.

¹⁷ Much more could be said about these dual connotations of witnessing as the juridical and religious often appear to conflict one another—the one promising an "objective" and public account, the other relegated to the private and speculative, the first is dispassionate, the latter, passionate, etc. Thus, the former is usually granted more authority than the latter as a proof, or demonstrative evidence, that something happened. Theorists working in trauma studies have called into question such oppositions between the two senses of bearing witness, both complicating the strict divide and indicating the places of overlap. On this question, see especially Cathy Caruth (ed.), *Trauma Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), and Laub and Felman, *Testimony* op. cit. By maintaining a link between both connotations, Oliver implies a quality of bearing witness that is both religious (or excessive) and has the public authority of a juridical statement. While Oliver does not address them, this is precisely the way witnessing functions in Truth and Reconciliation Commissions; see Tamsin Jones, "Bearing Witness: Hope for the Unseen," *Political Theology* 17, no. 2 (April 2016): 137-150.

“powerful alternative to recognition” because the act can go beyond the familiar, to the excessive and unforeseen (16), and yet remains, in all cases, a public and observable act.

Again in agreement with the phenomenological tradition, Oliver argues that there needs to be a transcendent element in the process of the formation of subjectivity, something which escapes the strict confines of one’s own judgment: “Without the space for excess... there is no space for transformation or revolution. Rather, there is merely repeated revision or oscillations within the same economy of domination and subordination” (66). If we cannot get beyond the self, if nothing escapes our own systems of meaning and interpretation, if nothing surprises or interrupts, then we are back in the narcissistic, “ego-logical,” world Levinas criticized.¹⁸ Nonetheless, despite her explicit desire to think a non-antagonistic relation to transcendence, Oliver finds herself backing the non-antagonism of the relationship at the cost of the transcendence. This can be seen especially at the end the book with her treatment of vision.

Oliver wants to reconfigure vision in a way that avoids the metaphor of subjective dominance by which one “fixes an object” in their gaze. Instead, she suggests we talk of the space between the subject and what the subject sees, not as an empty void that must be bridged, but as filled with the connective tissue of “air, light, and the circulation of various forms of electrical, thermal, mechanical and chemical energies that sustain and connect us to each other”. Thus, she wants to think of vision as a “proximal sense like touch” (12), connecting, rather than alienating, us.

One of the key implications of this view is that, if our relations to other people are likewise “constituted by the circulation and exchange of energy” – social and affective energy, as much as photic and mechanical – then we can attune our receptivity to such energies more intentionally. Just as an art critic is trained to distinguish between subtle changes in photic energy and nuances of light, and the musician attunes herself to distinguish between subtle changes in sound waves, so too, “some people...are ‘trained’ to be more attuned to changes in affective energy and mood” (14). Moreover, if we are fundamentally connected to our environment, social and natural, then it follows that we are motivated, on utilitarian grounds if nothing else, to respond in a way that ensures the continual exchange of energies (15).

With this attention to the training or attunement of one’s reception to various energies, as well as her discussion of an infant’s responses to its environment, Oliver gestures to a theory of human development which takes the discussion of responsibility and its constitution of the subject out of the solely pre-ontological moment in which Levinas keeps it.¹⁹ The

¹⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

¹⁹ In *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas uses both the phrase “pre-originary” and “an-archic” to clarify that the responsible ego is “not just a being endowed with certain qualities called

inherent relationship between subjectivity and responsibility (as the ability to respond, to address and be addressed) implies that as our subjectivity develops, so too does our ability to respond, and conversely, the more fully we are able to respond, the more robust is our sense of self. I would argue that this is an important distinction to make more explicit—between a notion of a pre-ontological or originary response to transcendence that issues in one’s subjectivity, and the ongoing transformative responses to transcendent calls or events in one’s life that transforms one’s subjectivity.

Nonetheless, as helpful as Oliver’s argument is in these respects, there are a couple of problems: first, it relies upon an unrealistically optimistic view of humans, and secondly, it seems to eradicate the possibility of encountering something truly new or transcendent without experiencing trauma. On the second point—the first being somewhat obvious²⁰—Oliver’s conceptualization of vision, which draws on insights from new materialism²¹, underscores her sense of connection and her ultimate loyalty to a Deleuzian

moral which it would bear as a substance bears attributes, or which it would take on as accidents in its becoming” (117), but rather precedes essence and being (104-5).

²⁰ One of the strengths of Oliver’s argument is her refusal to remain merely theoretical, and her willingness to test her theory of witnessing with actual specific cases. Nonetheless, her concreteness also lays bare her overly irenic view of the nature of human relations. For instance, in debates about affirmative action Oliver argues that the problems which arise are merely structural; they arise with an assumption that differences between people need automatically result in an antagonistic relation between them (115). This view of Oliver’s would seem to ignore that, in this case, one is specifically talking about competitions for jobs or coveted positions, and thus, is inherently competitive, if not antagonistic. She makes this explicit in a footnote that challenges the racist notion that affirmative action entails “undeserving people of color” taking jobs away from “deserving white people”. To counter this claim, (which I agree must be countered powerfully—now more than ever!) she complains that the “rhetoric also presumes an economy of scarcity...[when] in reality, there is plenty to go around” (227, Note 1). I am not sure that in our current world with its looming ecological and energy crises already impacting the poorest of the global population, and its unprecedented numbers of refugees, we can be as hopeful and confident any longer. In an almost throw-away line, Oliver admits that domination and subordination still exist: “Subjectivity as fundamentally response-ability does not require domination and subordination, *although they may be facts of life*” (223 emphasis mine). Yet, an agreement with Oliver’s insight that domination and subordination “work to erode the very possibility of conditions of subjectivity” is insufficient in itself to eradicate them. We are living in a world of dwindling resources where our inter-connectedness and our awareness of inter-dependency will not be sufficient reason to stop war and violence, or growing nativism and bigotry.

²¹ Without ever explicitly aligning herself with “new materialism”, Oliver draws on many of the insights found therein. For instance, Oliver states that all of our perceptions rely on and incorporate our basic sense of gravity—a sense that involves our interaction with sound waves, photic and mechanical energy, etc. As a result, if “energy... is the medium through which we perceive the world,” then space is not an abyss to be traversed, but a connective tissue, “full of the energy of life that connects us to the environment sustaining us” (193). For an introduction to the somewhat amorphous movement of new materialism see Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (eds.), *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

immanentism rather than remaining open to an absolute transcendence. By emphasizing the dynamic exchange of energies connecting subjects, she seems to eradicate any absolute distinction between self and other.²² By the end of the book, Oliver makes this explicit:

The other is not an object or determined by the subject's gaze. The other is no longer *the* other. There is no the other, but a multitude of differences and other people on whom my sense of self as a subject and an agent depends... There is no other except as a result of a process of domination through which subjects are turned into objects, othered subjectivities (223).

It would seem that absolute otherness is gone, in exchange for the more domesticated difference or variations on the same; indeed otherness is consequent to a process of domination rather than challenging it. To put this in the terms that Wahl laid out, do we not have here, another case of transcendence as movement without *terme*?

To recap what we have thus far seen, in the first section there was a championing of transcendence at the cost of a robust sense of the subject. Yet, in the second section, it is clear that Oliver's theory, while tremendously helpful in providing a model of the constitution of responsible subjectivity which is intentional and reciprocal, ultimately does so at the cost of an encounter with true otherness or the transcendent. Is it simply impossible to talk about a subjectivity responsive to transcendence, or more precisely, a subject who is constituted and transformed through responding to a transcendent call—assuming therein an ability to respond? Must one assume that any relation with transcendence will be antagonistic? In the final section of the paper I turn to biblical accounts of responsibility which suggest otherwise.²³

Responsibility in Jewish and Christian Scriptures

In continental philosophy and phenomenology the primary biblical site of inspiration for thinking about responsibility is Abraham's response of *hinnênî* ("Here I am") to God in Genesis 22—the traumatic narrative of the "binding of Isaac". In the Protestant tradition from Kierkegaard onwards, Genesis 22 is viewed as a test and testimony of Abraham's great

²² See Oliver: "If the dynamic energy that surrounds us touches, permeates, affects, and nourishes us, then we are neither self-contained nor separated. Rather, we are profoundly dependent on our environment and other people for the energy that sustains us" (198).

²³ This move to explore the ways in which scripture discusses responsibility does not grant any unique authority, for the purposes of the argument here being made, to the biblical accounts. Rather the move is warranted and guided by the frequent reference to, and discussion of, certain scriptural passages within continental philosophy and phenomenology as serious sources of reflection and inspiration.

faith, which lies in his ability to believe, “by virtue of the absurd,” that his beloved son would be returned to him.²⁴ Jon Levenson has a slightly different take, one which heightens the tension and trauma of the narrative and, actually, echoes more precisely the continental tradition of responsibility: Abraham’s *hinnênî* is not a statement of trust and faith in God, it is an expression of “readiness” to do God’s will, to act in absolute obedience.²⁵ To be sure, Abraham’s response aligns with the unilateral responsibility of the subjugated subject before the transcendent other emphasized in new phenomenology. However, this is not the only place in scripture that we see the use of *hinnênî*, nor the only instance of transformative responsibility that scripture gives.

Compare this to the call of Moses (Exodus 3:1-4:17). Like all prophetic calls in the Hebrew Scriptures, the call of Moses is depicted as a radical break with the past; Moses wakes up one morning to start herding his animals, and goes to bed, God’s messenger and the deliverer of God’s people.²⁶ Further, this is a call that is initiated directly from God and is surprising and unbidden; Moses had not been brooding for days about what he could do about the political situation in Egypt. In this passage, when God summons Moses, Moses responds, like Abraham, with *hinnênî*, “Here I am” (3:4). The parallels end there, however. When God then calls him to a specific task—to liberate the Israelites from Egypt—Moses’ response is less willing. Instead he offers five different rationales or excuses for why God might want to ask someone else, five times in which he resists. Moses goes through a number of responses, beyond *hinnênî*, to God’s call—from a humble denial of his ability to do that which he called to do (3:11), to a request for further details

²⁴ See Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay (Penguin Classics, 1986).

²⁵ Jon Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 125. For this reason, Levenson writes that the English translation for *hinnênî* as “Here I am” misses some of the existential urgency of the response; he prefers the translation by E. A. Speiser, “Ready” (126). In fact, Levenson argues that to say “Abraham is prepared to [sacrifice his son] because through faith he expects to receive Isaac anew (as indeed happens) is to minimize the frightfulness of what Abraham is commanded to do” (126)—namely to kill his son, his favored son, the son that he loves, Isaac (Gen. 22:2). Abraham is ready to do God’s bidding, Levenson argues, with his knife in the air above his beloved son, bound by his own paternal hand. This is a story about an absolute command and an absolute obedience (130). Beyond that, the narrator of the story gives us no details about what is going on in Abraham’s mind, a “narrative austerity” that keeps its reader “in the dark on the issue of Abraham’s subjectivity” (131).

²⁶ See Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1974): “What began as just another day doing the same old thing, turned out to be an absolutely new experience for Moses. The old life of shepherding was ended; the new life of deliverer was beginning. The transformation is recorded in the interaction of God with Moses... The ordinary experiences emerge as extraordinary” (72). I am grateful to my colleague at Trinity College, Gabriel Hornung, for this reference.

about his interlocutor's identity (3:13), to doubts about the people to whom he has been sent (4:1), to even contradicting God (4:10), before finally just pleading for a break so that God might send someone else (4:13). Each act of resistance "is handled by God with utmost seriousness".²⁷ Even when God finally loses patience with Moses at the end of a debate in which emotions are portrayed on both sides, nevertheless, "a concession is made".²⁸ while Moses is not relieved of his responsibility in its entirety, one aspect is taken from him when Aaron is appointed his spokesperson. In other words, there is a discussion and a debate; it may be an unequal debate with a predictable ending, to be sure, but there is still a clear depiction of Moses' subjective desires and fears, and ultimately, choice to accept the call. Therefore, what makes this so different from the example of Abraham, as Brevard Childs observes, is that "the point of the call description lies in showing that there remains a human initiative and will which, far from being crushed, remains a constitutive element of the one who has been sent".²⁹

Likewise, the depiction of the Annunciation in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 1:26-38)—in which Mary learns of her call to conceive, gestate, birth, and mother, the son of God—narrates a dialogue and an acquiescence to the call that implies a choice, the ability to refuse.³⁰ Mary's initial response, upon the appearance of Gabriel hailing her as "κεχαριτωμένη," is to be confused and troubled (1:29); no doubt, "highly favored one" was a fairly unexpected way of addressing a poor young girl. When Gabriel instructs her not to fear and explains what is to come—that she will conceive and bear a son who will be called "Son of the Most High" (1:31-32)—Mary, like Zacharias before her, questions how this is possible "since she has known no man" (1:34). Gabriel offers an explanation, of sorts,³¹ and more importantly, a sign: Mary's relative, Elizabeth, who conceived unexpectedly (or, miraculously) despite her old age and prior barrenness (1:36). Only then does Mary declare herself vis-à-vis the Lord: 'Ιδου ἡ δούλη κυρίου (which the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible translates as "Here I am, the servant of the Lord") and consent with the words "let it be with me

²⁷ Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 73.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

³⁰ See Richard Kearney's discussion on Mary's response to the Gabriel's announcement in *Anatheism: Returning to God After God* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010), especially, pp. 23-26 and 189-90n5. Much more could be said about the maternal body as a site of transcendence-in-immanence, giving an account that might complement, while critically nudging, the recent accounts of paternity as withdrawal (Jean-Luc Marion, *Negative Certainties*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis, [University of Chicago Press, 2015]) and as source and example par excellence of the *basileia* (Kevin Hart, *Kingdoms of God* [Indiana University Press, 2014]). However, this would be something of a lengthy tangent, which is not a necessary element of the argument being made here.

³¹ "The Holy Spirit will come upon you [ἔπελεύσεται] and the power of the Most High will overshadow you [ἐπισκιάσει σοι]; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God" (1:35)

according to your Word" (1:38). While this is a statement of acquiescence, Mary's declaration is neither unconsidered nor coerced.

Two other examples of biblical characters responding to a transcendent call indicate the way in which the call may require preparatory time and activity as well as pedagogical interpretation from another in order to be both received and responded to properly: the call of Samuel (1 Samuel 3) and the "conversion" of Saul (Acts 9). In the former, Samuel, a disciple of Eli, is called by the Lord three separate times and each time responds "*Hinnênî*" to the wrong person, assuming that the voice calling him belongs to his teacher Eli (1 Sam 3:2-9). It is not until he is instructed by Eli on how to receive the call and how to respond—"Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening'" (1 Sam 3:9)—that Samuel understands and does as he is called to do. This call still comes directly from the transcendent Lord to Samuel but it is misunderstood until interpreted by his teacher, Eli (ironically, as it turns out, for the call speaks of the destruction of Eli's house). Likewise, despite the fact that Saul's conversion, and subsequent transformation of his identity from Saul to Paul, is usually depicted as happening "suddenly" (Acts 9:3) with a flash of light and a voice from the heavens on the road to Damascus, the biblical account slows down the transformative event. Saul's sole verbal response to the light and voice, which only he hears, is to inquire who is speaking—"Who are you, Lord?" (Acts 9:5). Jesus identifies himself to Saul and instructs him to enter the city and await further direction. Saul, blinded by the encounter goes to the city without another word, and fasts there for three days. In other words, prior to committing or declaring himself in any way, Saul prepares himself to receive further clarity regarding the significance of the encounter. This clarity is delivered by another disciple—again the intervention of a third to help deliver the summons—Ananias, who, incidentally is the one to actually respond "Here I am, Lord" (Ἰδοὺ ἐγώ, κύριε) when addressed by the Lord and instructed to lay his hands on Saul so that he might see again (Acts 9:10-13). It is Ananias' actions by which the "scales fell from [Saul's] eyes" after which he is immediately baptized³² and begins preaching that Jesus is the Son of God (Acts 9:18, 20). In the case of both Paul and Samuel we see a transcendent call—a summons from the Lord—that requires preparation (temporary blindness, fasting) and intervention (instruction through words or actions of another) in order to both receive and respond to the call appropriately.³³

³² Presumably this is the moment Saul changes his name to Paul to indicate his transformed identity but the book of the Acts of the Apostles does not mention the change of name for another four chapters.

³³ Though it would take us too far afield at this juncture to discuss the Christian mystical traditions, one can, at the very least, note in passing the ways in which these traditions utilize practices that shape and facilitate one's reception of excessive experiences and one's response to it. Such practices would include things like a structured reading of, and meditation on, scripture, communal recitation of the psalms and hymns within a liturgical rhythm, ascetical

A final biblical example of someone responding “*hinnênî*” — “Here I am” or “Ready” — will suffice to give us a more complicated picture of biblical responsibility. It is found in Isaiah 52:6, but it is not a prophet or patriarch who says those words in answer to a summons from God. Rather, God speaks them: “Therefore my people shall know my name; therefore, in that day they shall know that it is I who speak; ‘Here am I’”. Remarkably little commentary is given to this passage, or at least to God’s use of *hinnênî* in it. However, what is important about this passage, for the purposes of my argument, is that God (as transcendent Other) does not simply command, call for, or summon a response, but also is presented as “Ready” in response. Significantly, in this case, God’s response of “*hinnênî*” comes as a response to the human call of anger and of despair from his chosen people languishing in Babylon; it indicates, at a bare minimum, the reciprocity of responsibility.

Thus, the biblical accounts seem to show more diversity than the phenomenological account of responsibility; they do not present us with the stark alternative of either passive submission to, or willful appropriation of, transcendence. These passages assume the otherness or transcendence of the call that comes upon a person. The encounter with Moses, Samuel, Mary, and Saul, no less than with Abraham, are sudden, surprising, transformative stories; something extraordinary coming into the ordinary lives of ordinary people. Yet, concurring with Oliver’s argument, these passages are structured as a dialogue, indicating the intentionality of the person responding. At the same time, however, these scriptural narratives give accounts of the resistance of the transcendent to correct or supplement initial impressions. This resistance of that which transcends the subject’s appropriation need not be antagonistic; many joyful events might stubbornly resist the meaning I would give them, exceed my expectations, and correct my remembrance, without being traumatic or violent.³⁴ *Noli me tangere*. Instead, wonder, enjoy.

Responsibility — the ability to respond — it would seem requires addressability *and* accountability. The latter does not necessitate a return to the subject as autonomous, causal agent who can account for, or explain, his actions, but rather the engagement of subjective intentionality and will

disciplines, as well as communal patterns and rules of life (including the cultivation of hospitality and an attitude of wonder and attentiveness). Such practices might enable a greater receptivity to a call, but do not, however, circumscribe or control the excessive experience. In this regard I am thinking, in particular, of the recent work of Amy Hollywood, *Acute Melancholia and other Essays: Mysticism, History, and the Study of Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016). Hollywood discusses the back and forth between corporate prayer, recitation of psalms, etc., and “wordless exaltation” in which a transcendent encounter (Hollywood speaks of joy in particular) “is both engendered through practice and given by divine grace; it is simultaneously recognizable and ineffable” (60).

³⁴ Of course, there are cases where this resistance of the original event to disrupt the interpretation and response of the subject who experienced it *is* violent, or traumatic. My claim here is not that transcendence is never violating or destructive, but rather that it *need* not be logically.

in response, as well as the basis for the ethical obligation of his response. Likewise, the return to intentionality, as a corrective to abject passivity, need not entail an appropriation of the transcendent, which continues to resist any such attempt.

One of Wahl's great insights regarding transcendence was the need to hold the sense of movement and end together. Transcendence merely as end diminishes this life and struggle in the sight of an idealized distant; it loses the truth that we only think transcendence immanently—the “yes that is posed to all our affirmations”. On the other hand, transcendence as movement alone implodes upon itself without the “no that is the affirmation of something beyond all our affirmations”.³⁵ Transcendence as infinite end resists subjective incorporation, while transcendence as movement entails the activity of that which is moved—as response implies the ability to respond. A concept of responsibility holds both poles of transcendence together: there needs to be the subject that self-transcends as movement *in response to* that which resists and refuses assimilation infinitely, that which remains always and, in the end, transcendent.

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³⁵ Wahl, *Human Existence and Transcendence*, 29.

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