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SIX VARIATIONS ON MICHAEL ROSEN'S

THE SHADOW OF GOD

ABSTRACT: *Michael Rosen's The Shadow of God illustrates a distinctive way of understanding the relationship of ideas to history, while posing several connected questions. Among these are how the human condition of alienation may be overcome in a way that is ethically and intellectually defensible; how the search for reconciliation may both generate, paradoxically, further alienation, and inspire terrible inhumanity; and whether a meaningful and good human life can be lived without the assurance of future justice—or, indeed, future existence. Rosen evokes the emotional pull of the quest for reconciliation, and reveals the argumentative richness it has generated; yet reflection on human evil and suffering should chasten our aspirations to attain historical reconciliation or rational understanding. We may have good reason to turn away from both the project of theodicy, and from the tendency to identify human value in something detached from living individuals, in favor of a reaffirmation of the value of the personal. Rosen's own work illustrates how a reaffirmation of the personal, and respect for the freedom of others, may be practiced in and through the history of ideas.*

Keywords: Theodor Adorno; Isaiah Berlin; Primo Levi; Michael Rosen; alienation; history of ideas; impersonality; theodicy.

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One of many things I have learned from Michael Rosen is that to call something *rich* is, in the precincts of British academic philosophy, not necessarily the compliment it appears. I intend unironic praise, however, in noting that *The Shadow of God: Kant, Hegel, and the Passage from Heaven to History* (Harvard, 2022) is remarkably rich. Beyond his contributions to the (re)interpretation of Kant, Hegel, and many of their contemporaries and successors (on which others are far better equipped to comment), Rosen's revisionary narrative defends and applies a distinctive way of studying the history of ideas as/and philosophy; and raises a number of profound questions. Among these is the question of how the human condition of alienation may be overcome, or at least lived with, in a way that is ethically and intellectually defensible. Significantly, this question arises directly out of the project of theodicy itself. It becomes particularly pointed in light of Rosen's depiction of how the search for reconciliation with human existence may lead thinkers to develop ideas—and forms of life into which these ideas are integrated—which may generate further, and possibly worse, forms of alienation; and inspire beliefs and conduct that inflict terrible suffering. Rosen's analysis of the problem of rational reconciliation, his claims about its implications, and his account of its far-reaching and often paradoxical (and sometimes pathological) consequences can, I will suggest, be extended by reflecting further on what he terms "the alienation of impersonality." I will further argue that awareness of, and vigilance against, the dangers of the alienation of impersonality provides an important link between—and rationale for—Rosen's way of engaging in philosophy and the history of ideas, as well as a more adequate response to the problem of finding meaning in the face of an existence which is hard to rationally vindicate as inherently, or inevitably, just.

In addition to raising these questions about the general project of rational reconciliation, Rosen's historical story advances the thesis—captured in the subtitle's invocation of "the

passage from heaven to history”—that a distinctively modern way of seeing human existence as ultimately meaningful and just is to see the future as a way of rationally consummating the past and present, and vindicating our sufferings and strivings. This is a fragile solution. It is far from clear that the future will render rational coherence to past existence, or affirm any values we might hold dear. Given the limits of our ability to know or control the future, investing our hopes in, and wagering the justification of our lives on, future outcomes leaves us in a condition of anxious uncertainty and dependence. Moreover, the very existence of a future (or a future that is compatible with a tolerable human existence) is itself open to question. Historical reconciliation poses some of the same problems and dangers as rational reconciliation generally, as well as some distinctive ones of its own. An overly confident faith, and overly ardent investment, in the future has, at times, fostered a dangerously repressive and ruthless politics; while loss of faith in the future threatens to plunge humanity into nihilism. Yet there may also be good reason to think that we cannot easily dispense with some dependence on the future for the survival of our sense of value in life.

Following Rosen’s lead, I will seek to shed light on these dark questions by confronting some of the depths of human evil and suffering. I will suggest that reflection on these dark times should both chasten our aspirations to attain reconciliation or rational understanding; and offer the possibility that the alienation of impersonality and loss of meaning may best be averted through cultivating an ethic of openness, decency, and willingness to acknowledge tragedy and uncertainty. I will begin by clarifying and querying certain aspects of Rosen’s account of the project of (rational) reconciliation, and further develop the connection he draws between a historicist theodicy, and political anti-liberalism. I will then confront the events—one hypothetical, the other all too real—that, Rosen suggests, throw the modern, this-worldly project

of historical theodicy into crisis: the prospect of human extinction, and the reality of radical evil as manifested in the Holocaust (and other, similar atrocities). These sections will gradually develop an argument about the dangers of depersonalization, and the need to retrieve recognition and respect for human personality—without the assurance of metaphysical or historical certainty. I will further develop these points, and tie them to Rosen’s practice and accomplishments as a philosophical historian of ideas, in a discussion of the method he advocates and employs in *The Shadow*, and a response to his concluding reflections on Theodor Adorno and Isaiah Berlin.

Theodicy as Reconciliation, Legitimation, and/or Consolation

The Shadow of God is premised on the view that philosophy represents an activity (per Goethe) of “coming to terms with the world” by “making sense of the world” (Rosen 2022, 239 and 289). More specifically, Rosen (ibid., 191) argues that much human and especially modern thought engages in a project of *theodicy*, understood broadly as the effort to “deal with the standing problem that we human beings, as finite, embodied creatures, all face: the existence of death and suffering” (and, one might add, injustice, ugliness, and evil). Rosen follows Nietzsche’s insight that, in Western thought at least, the “project of reconciliation” and the “project of justification” have been “intimately interwoven” (Rosen and Marshall 2022). *Reconciliation* involves “render[ing] life acceptable,” or making the individual feel at home in the world; *justification* involves demonstrating that one *should* accept the world, and one’s place and experience in it, as reflecting reason, justice, and/or value (Rosen 2022, 6, 37, and 239).

I suggest two amendments to this framework. First, we may distinguish between justification, reconciliation, *and* understanding—the effort to render existence comprehensible. Socratic religion, as Rosen (ibid., 292) defines it, offers a combination of faith, explanation, and

justification. In doing so, it reconciles us to our fate by rendering it both intelligible or understandable (explanation) and recognizable as *good* (justification). Secularized (or semi-secularized) forms of “Socratism” similarly seek to effect reconciliation by offering rational explanation and justification. But explanation may easily be decoupled from justification—and, in the process, from reconciliation. That something is comprehensible does not make it just; that something is unjust does not make it incomprehensible. And a pluralistic intuition suggests that coming to better understand the world (or ourselves) might leave us *less* reconciled (cf. Berlin 2013). We may also distinguish between reconciliation and *consolation*. Reconciliation, as I understand it (and as I think Rosen understands it) resolves or rectifies the sense of alienation by rendering the conditions that cause us suffering such that we can accept, even approve, them. Consolation, on the other hand, may leave us with a sense that suffering remains nonsensical or unjust, while furnishing us with some compensation or amelioration, helping us to live with what we cannot rationally accept. This consolation would enable us to find some comforting affirmation of our value or moral identity, of the possibility of life to at least sometimes be good. Is such consolation possible even in the face of an existence to which we cannot be reconciled, or come to accept as justified?

Rosen enriches and complicates our understanding of the project of theodicy through a probing exploration of reconciliation’s opposite, alienation. This hinges on a distinction between two types of alienation. The “alienation of arbitrariness” is the sense of being subjected to a capricious, incomprehensible, unresponsive power; the “alienation of impersonality” is the sense of being subject to a rational, comprehensible power that lacks such personal traits as warmth, care, and love. On Rosen’s telling, Kant’s attempt to resolve the first kind of alienation produced alienation of the second kind: Kant’s rigorous resistance to the alienation of arbitrariness led him

to develop an account of freedom, and a conception of God's nature, which left humanity existentially lonely in the absence of a personal, warmly loving God (Rosen 2022, 200-203, 216-17). While Rosen emphasizes the theological roots of this "alienation dilemma," he also explores its psychological, moral, and socio-political facets, culminating in the suggestion that we *may* now face the worst of *both* worlds: a Marxian-Kafkaesque nightmare in which we are subjected to an impersonal, unaccountable bureaucracy, *and* enmeshed in an opaque, uncontrollable, seemingly arbitrary global market. This fruitful observation might be pressed beyond the story of theodicies of historical immorality on which Rosen is focused. Different individuals and groups may long to overcome one alienation rather more acutely than the other: liberal or progressive reformers, seeking to eradicate arbitrariness from social life, are often confounded and indignant in finding that people might prefer, not reform, but generosity, warmth, sentiment—even if they find it in corrupt political machines, "utopian" counter-cultural movements, or retrograde nationalism or populism.¹

Thus, one avenue for further research, inspired by Rosen's account, would be to delve more deeply into the experience of the depersonalization of the self itself. Kant presents us with an *ethical* conception of the rational self rigorously "separated from its own empirical nature" (Rosen 2022, 214)—that is, from the things that make me (at least in part), not a mere rational agent, but *me*.² This alienation from our very selves—or this devaluing of vital aspects of our own selves and experiences in our own eyes—may have far-reaching consequences, to which I will return.

Yet alienation may not be completely negative; it may have positive effects, such as in its relationship to understanding. Many thinkers of the Enlightenment pursued a strategy of distancing or estrangement—a kind of alienation—from existing prejudices and experiences. The

aim was not necessarily to attain a “view from nowhere,” but to critically examine their inherited positions and to inhabit the experience of others at least temporarily, to gain some sympathy as well as insight. Smith’s theorization of sympathy and the impartial spectator, and the use by Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Diderot of fictional non-Western characters to critique European conventions, all served to alienate readers from their given, parochial identities. Thus, the strategy of alienation played a powerful role in progressive arguments (Sharpe 2023).

Impersonality, the Theodicy of Historical Immortality, and Anti-Liberalism

The Kantian response to the theodicy problem involves not just an account of “freedom without arbitrariness,” but the ideal of a “*corpus mysticum*” of free, rational beings, which Rosen (2022, 9-10, 152-3) links to the German Idealists’ notion of a “Church Invisible” sustained across historical time. This involves another form of “depersonalization” which has particularly fearful moral and political consequences. These consequences particularly troubled Isaiah Berlin (to whom I return below). Berlin stressed the tendency for the individual to become subjected to or dissolved within the “church.” This may take psychological, political, or moral forms—by the last of which, I mean that the individual’s *moral worth* may come to be seen as subordinate to, derivative of that of the whole of which she is part. Berlin traced this story with a focus on the idea of freedom. Beyond the conceptual claims (or contortions) of “Two Concepts of Liberty” lies an attack on the way that the individual’s “true” freedom comes to be identified with anything but the freedom-from-interference by others (and corresponding ability to make choices for themselves) of actual, empirical individuals. Instead, freedom is identified with the determination of the individual in accord with some “higher” self—the perfectly rational (and thus, “depersonalized”) self, or the collective self of General Will, nation, race, or class.³

The Shadow provides ample illustrations of how post-Kantian philosophers, in moving “from heaven to history”—from the hope for personal immortality after death to *impersonal* immortality through participation in the march through time of the “Church Invisible”—end up subordinating the value of the individual’s life to collective projects. Perhaps the most striking is Rosen’s reconstruction of the place of war in Hegel’s philosophy, which adds nuance to and qualifies—and, as I see it, ultimately affirms—Walter Benjamin’s description of Hegel as a “man of violence” (Rosen 2022, 144-5), as well as Isaiah Berlin’s identification of Hegel as being “on the side of the big battalions” (Berlin 2014a, 106). Hegel’s embrace of war is a consistent application of his doctrine that freedom lies in “the essence of self-consciousness,” which is “externally realized as a self-subsistent power [*Gewalt*] in which single individuals are only moments” (Rosen 2022, 182 and 225, quoting Hegel). This recognition leads, in turn, to the realization that “submission of one’s own personality inherent in military discipline and the sacrifice of life in an impersonal conflict are, in fact, ‘the existence of freedom’” (Hegel quoted in *ibid.*, 185). Hegel indeed praises that very mechanical quality of the modern state against which Herder protested, managing to find “the maximum self-subsistence of individuality” in the individual’s existence as “a cog playing its part in the mechanism of an external organization; absolute obedience, renunciation of personal opinions and reasonings, in fact the complete absence of one’s own *Geist*” (Hegel quoted in *ibid.*, 186).

This subordination of the parts to the process of the whole may extend to discounting not only individuals, but entire peoples—a position Hegel espoused (Rosen 2022, 185). In a characteristic gesture of iconoclastic even-handedness, and having drawn a central insight of his account from Nietzsche, Rosen uses Nietzsche as the example of this tendency. The passage that Rosen quotes at length is clearly, though not explicitly, a rhetorical onslaught against the Jews:

“men, who as it were through birth are placed outside the national- and state-instincts . . . truly international homeless money-hermits . . . a selfish stateless money-aristocracy” (ibid., 304-6, quoting Nietzsche). It is also an anathema against *liberalism* (the Jews are blamed for “the enormous dissemination of liberal optimism”), understood as the view that individuals should be “able to pursue *their own* purposes without restriction” and that the state exists to serve individuals, rather than individuals being rightly seen as “only means for the fulfilment of the state-purpose” (ibid., 305-6, quoting Nietzsche). While Rosen does not note this, there are echoes of Hegel on war: part of the Judeo-liberal way of life is an effort to replace “those awfully incalculable war-convulsions” that put the individual in his rightful place as a subordinate instrument of the state with a policy that is rational, calculable, secure, and profitable (ibid., 305, quoting Nietzsche).

Hegel’s glorification of military discipline and impersonal self-sacrifice, and Nietzsche’s onslaught on the liberal bacillus and its “foreign” carriers, point to how the “Church Invisible” may become the “Church Militant,” engaged not merely in a peregrination toward redemption, but a war against evil. There is a further line of development of the “Church militant” discussed by Rosen: the revolutionary brotherhood, universalist in aspiration but narrow in actual membership. One of the most powerful examples is that of Leninism. In Rosen’s eyes, Marxism’s tremendous appeal, and particularly its ability to inspire self-sacrifice, lies in its being defined by “the *doxa* of historical immortality, self-transcendence through *immersion* in a collective struggle for human emancipation” (Rosen 2022, 245, *emph added*). To this, Marxism adds an analysis of capitalist society as a “deceptive system,” which only the Bolshevik vanguard-party, uniquely vouchsafed a vision of the truth beyond appearances, can overcome (ibid., 300-302; cf. Rosen 1996).

This incisive account illustrates the virtues of Rosen’s attention both to the *doxa* of historical immortality, and to *doxa* in general (a point to which I return below). However, to grasp the power and plausibility of Leninism, and other anti-liberal politics, we should attend not only to *doxai*, but to *mythoi* and *exempla*: to narratives and exemplary figures whose power goes beyond argument, even if this power derives in part from the way that narrative and exemplar converge with belief.⁴ Here the crucial mythic or exemplary figure is the revolutionary martyr or saint. Rosen invokes several examples to illustrate the connection between this figure, and the *doxa* of historical immortality: Robespierre, Saint-Just, Castro, Trotsky, the Russian nihilist S. G. Nechayev, and Eugen Leviné, the minister in the short-lived Communist government of the Bavarian Soviet Republic. Leviné is most famous for the declaration that “we revolutionaries are all dead men on leave,” which Rosen (2022, 266) cites as evidence of the consoling role the *doxa* of historical immortality played in the revolutionary mindset. The same speech reveals related features of the revolutionary mindset: the subordination of the individual to both the historical process, and the historical agent of the Party. Leviné (1919) affirms the Communist doctrine that “to achieve victory the entire proletariat must act as a body. . . . When the proletariat is united in its will and purpose, it is invincible.” The individual’s actions gain meaning from their contribution, as an interchangeable cog in the revolutionary machine, to the march of history: “the disappearance of one or other of the leaders will under no circumstances hold up the movement” (ibid.).

There is an irony in such self-abnegation: the words gain much of their power from the exemplary figure of the revolutionary-martyr, who, like the saint, practices self-abnegation yet also asserts his personal conviction and virtuosity in sacrifice. The personal sacrifice vindicates the impersonal, “scientific” doctrine; but the fact that this doctrine is sanctified, even incarnated,

by individuals also seems to subvert it. The dynamic of depersonalization differentiates the revolutionary martyr from his religious precursor. Yet the power of such figures suggests that more of an element of personal mystique persists than the impersonal, scientific *doxa* would suggest. The *combination* of depersonalized, “scientific” doctrine that admits no doubt with the inspiration of personal example could yield a particularly potent inspiration to ruthlessness.⁵

There is another way in which the “form of life” of the revolutionary reflects the limitations of depersonalization. The lives of these revolutionaries were lonely—often in prison or exile, cut off from human company. Posterity is not a good companion. Revolutionaries relied not just on the idea of the Church Invisible across time, but the fellowship of the Church Militant in their own time: the revolutionary brotherhood provided a sense of personal union, connection, and consolation that the science of historical materialism could not. Yet this comfort carried pain with it. While Leviné professes not to care whether his fellow Party members regard him as a traitor or not, his desperation to vindicate himself in their eyes, by proving his fidelity to the Party, is palpable. Many revolutionaries, growing aware of the horrors they were wreaking, felt unable to abandon their path because doing so would mean betraying their comrades—and losing their comrades’ respect. And then the revolutionary cause demanded the betrayal of comrades, in purge after purge. Leviné, Lukács, Bukharin were never really cogs in a machine; their individuality was never, as Arthur Koestler (1940), put it, a “grammatical fiction”: their relationships and personal experiences mattered. And this made their destruction—and, in many cases, their forced self-betrayal, their alienation from their own convictions, pasts, and comrades—all the crueler.

The Comet, the Camps, and the Crisis of Human Value

Rosen's narrative depicts a terrible irony: the quest to exorcize fears that humanity might be rendered worthless (Rosen 2022, 136-8) generates *doxai* that lead their adherents to treat individual men and women as worthless, dwarfed to insignificance and dispensability in relation to some larger principle or historical mission. The many horrors of the twentieth century (and beyond) challenge us to vindicate human worth; yet the existence of these horrors may, as Adorno suggested, fatally undermine the faith in progress on which many had pinned the affirmation of human worth. In response to, and in order to resist, Adorno's despair, we may distinguish between *faith* in *assured* progress (which seems negated by Auschwitz), and the more modest, defiant *hope* that we are not doomed to perdition and horror—that it is always open to us to affirm human worth through the act of defending it.⁶ Still, Rosen's account points to two challenges that seem to threaten any worldly theodicy—that is, any way of investing our existence with moral worth which does not rely on some notion of justification, redemption, or justice beyond life in this world. Call these the challenges of the comet and the camps. Both are better seen not as crises for the idea of *progress*, but threats to the *preservation* of value.

“The comet” refers to the exchange, recounted by Rosen (2022, 261-67), between Diderot and his friend the sculptor Falconet about the implications of knowing that humanity would, in the remote future, be wiped out by a falling comet. Would this denude human life of meaning and value? Falconet said no; Diderot yes. This exchange anticipates a later conversation between another *bon vivant* philosopher and a creative artist—with, however, the roles reversed. In his diaries Stephen Spender recounts a meeting with his life-long friend Isaiah Berlin (who was familiar with the human-extinction-via-rogue-meteor hypothetical, having encountered it deployed by Alexander Herzen in his own critique of theodicies of historical immortality [Berlin 2008, 105, 222-3]). Berlin, Spender reports, declared that “[i]f there were a choice between

human beings surviving in conditions of utter poverty and misery, and the extinction of the human race, he would prefer extinction.” Spender demurred, because he cared about the preservation of “the civilization the world produced;” he was haunted by the thought of “Renaissance achievements” falling to waste (Spender 1986).

Spender returned to the theme of historical immortality in his poetic contribution to a *festschrift* for Berlin. Reading Pepys’ *Journal* awakens in Spender intimations of historical immortality, conveyed through the written word. Thanks to the preservation of his diaries, Pepys and his friends

*Burn from their days and through my veins—
Their acts and passions one with those
Moving through mine! As though
to live meant to be tenant of
This temporary flesh through which
Continually the one life flows
Out of the past—through us, and to
Those generations yet unborn.*

This consolation is not without its shadow. Such immortality depends on leaving a record, and its reception by others; to wager on historical immortality is to give hostages to fortune. Spender is accordingly haunted by the vision of a future earth as a barren, burnt-out rock. The only *sound* consolation may be an affirmation of the individual and of the present: “Well, there’s the being conscious. *Now!*—/Each separate life, an ‘I’ (a world,/To his own self) within which meet/All

that's outside" (Spender 1991). And if the temporary reality of our existence proves insufficient, it is not clear that historical immortality will be adequate consolation in the face of personal oblivion. Some of us are inclined to agree with Woody Allen's remark that he didn't want to achieve immortality through his work—he wanted to achieve it through not dying.

Even if historical immortality, understood as the mere survival of humanity, is not sufficient for reconciliation or consolation, Rosen still suggests that it may be necessary.⁷ This reflects a view, which Rosen (2022, 286) attributes to most contemporary "moral realists" (and appears to endorse) that values are (or may be) objective, "not because of their existence in a non-human realm, but because they are part of human communities." If this is so, then "the extinction of humanity would remove the conditions for the existence of morality itself" (ibid.).

Against this view, the philosopher Fabian Freyenhagen has drawn on Bernard Williams—and, strikingly, the experience of the Holocaust—to offer a vindication of morality even in the absence not only of faith in progress, but of any *hope* for the future. Freyenhagen's proposal is that we see moral action as "merely expressive" of our character or moral identity. He illustrates this with the example of Jean Améry, in whom "the principle of hope" was destroyed by Gestapo torture and internment in several death camps, including Auschwitz III/Monowitz. Améry was keenly aware of the need to preserve his dignity by asserting, in order to "objectify it in the world." The goal was not to change either his tormentor's *view* or the future, but to *express* his moral identity and agency (Freyenhagen 2022).

Yet what would be the purpose of moral expression, if there was no one to express it *to*? In the absence of any audience to register it, what is the difference between an action expressing dignity, and a "merely individual subjective claim" to dignity regardless of external circumstances (Freyenhagen 2022, quoting Améry)? This seems indicated by other examples

from the *Shoah*: the way in which many victims of the Nazis became stubbornly committed to preserving some record of their existence against the Nazi effort to obliterate it.⁸ This raises a set of troubling thoughts, which I can perhaps best bring out through the example of another survivor of Auschwitz III.

Primo Levi's *If This is a Man* asks: "how much of our ordinary moral world could survive on this side of the barbed wire[?]" (Levi 1996, 86). Stripped naked, standing last in a queue of human skeletons, Levi reports: "I have stopped trying to understand for a long time now. As far as I am concerned, I am by now so tired of standing on my wounded foot, still untended, so hungry and frozen, that nothing can interest me anymore" (ibid., 48). The capacity to understand, even the desire to understand, have been undermined by sheer physical brutalization. Later, Levi meets with Dr. Pannwitz, to have his usefulness as a trained chemist evaluated: "The brain which governed those blue eyes and those manicured hands said: 'This something in front of me belongs to a species which it is obviously opportune to suppress. In this particular case, one has to first make sure that it does not contain some utilizable element.'" So far, we have a report of the horror of dehumanization. But the horror goes further, as Levi recounts his side of the exchange "And in my head, like seeds in an empty pumpkin: 'Blue eyes and fair hair are essentially wicked. No communication possible. I am a specialist in mine chemistry. I am a specialist in organic synthesis. I am a specialist . . . '" (ibid., 106). Levi, too, has come to see the other as less than human. This is not the alienation of arbitrariness and impersonality alone, but both together, combined with the alienation of hostility. But he has also come to see himself not in terms of his moral personality or his sensuous individuality, but of his use-value to those who abuse him. This exemplifies Adorno's claim that the camps eliminated not just individuals, but individuality (Rosen 2022, 303)—a process painstakingly and

penetratingly charted by Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt 1973, 437-79). The victims were subjected to a different pair of alienations: an alienation from a common world in which moral ideals and personality cannot be expressed, because there is no-one to express them *to*; and alienation of the individual from her own moral personhood by a depersonalization in which individuality is vacated, not for the sake of purifying Kantian personhood of empirical corruptions, but to reduce individuals to mere units to be processed.

The revelations of Levi's account are not over. Levi is collected by the guard, Alex. On their way back, Alex gets black axel grease on his hand. "Without hatred and without sneering, Alex wipes his hand on my shoulder, both the palm and the back of the hand, to clean it; he would be amazed, the poor brute Alex, if someone told him that today, on the basis of this action, I judge him and Pannwitz and the innumerable others like him, big and small, in Auschwitz and everywhere" (Levi 1996, 107-8). At this moment of degradation, Levi asserts—without false heroism or redemption—his moral personality: his ability to judge, to recognize and hold himself and his tormentors to some moral standard. It is not just, as Pascal wrote, that man, the thinking reed, can know that the universe crushes him, while the universe is oblivious.⁹ It is that the victim, in the abjection of torment and in the scarred memory of it later, can still dig through the muck of learned helplessness and hatred, and exercise that last right and dignity of moral judgment: the affirmation that, yes, this is a man who suffers—a particular, unique man, weak and corruptible, resistant and righteous—and this is a man who inflicts suffering. Both can be judged in how they bear themselves and how they treat the other; and she who recognizes her own humanity and that of others, and who recognizes and judges the trespass against that humanity, has risen above her torment and her tormenters.

So far, this is close to Freyenhagen's view. But what if Levi had not survived to tell his story, to look back and pass judgment? What if the production of a new order of humanity in the camps had become the new moral reality for a society, or for humanity as a whole? And what of that day to come when there will be no one to read Levi's words, or to remember Levi, or Alex, or Pannwitz, or Auschwitz?

It is for this reason, more than Spender's pain at the thought of Renaissance art sitting unseen, and certainly more than the disappointment of our expectation of some culminating human triumph, that loss of the possibility of a future (decent) human existence strikes me as so damaging to our sense of moral worth. This invests the effort of preserving a decent human existence with an urgency that is independent of any project of reconciliation or longing for final redemption, of recompense for past sufferings, or of rendering a retrospective harmony to human existence in some reverberating final chord. These aspirations can be noble in themselves, and generate great human achievements. They can also, however, inspire or justify terrible error and evil, and alienate us from the only consolations we can honestly hope for: the comfort of a sympathetically understanding gaze, a friendly hand, a word of kindness or help, an expression of our own experiences in the voice of another, a comprehending ear to hear our story.

Rosen's History of Ideas as Method, and Method as Ethics

I have, building off of Rosen's historical reconstruction and examples, suggested a case for eschewing the depersonalizing moves of identifying human value in a purely rational self, and the meaning and justice of human existence in historical fate, in favor of a reaffirmation of the personal. Rosen does not exactly make this case, though much of what he says suggests that he is sympathetic to it. This sympathy for—and, indeed, contribution to—an approach that affirms

human personality (in a non-Kantian sense) can be found not only, or even so much, in any explicit ethical arguments offered by Rosen, but in the approach to the history of ideas that he both articulates as a method, and practices.

Rosen's approach provides a way of engaging with the history of ideas that avoids some common worries about it: that it will either anachronistically assimilate the problems that preoccupied past thinkers, and the responses they made, to our own categories and sensibilities; or so anchor these thinkers in historically specific contexts as to render their thought antiquated. The latter sort of approach may be presented as liberation: dethroning authorities, discarding the "steel-like casing" of past conceptual schemes in which we are encumbered, allowing us to "do our own thinking for ourselves" (Skinner 1969, 52).¹⁰ But it is not clear how useful such ground-clearing is today, when forgetting, critiquing, or rejecting the past (as irrelevant, wicked, or both) seems more common than credulous reverence. And once the ground has been cleared, it is not obvious that we should care so much about the correct classification of the cleared-away rubble. If the point is that Hobbes, Locke, Kant, or Marx cannot help us think through *our* problems, why should those concerned with such problems—philosophers, political theorists, citizens—devote serious time and thought to working out what their answers *really were*?

Rosen (2022, 3) suggests that turning to the history of philosophy and philosophical history may be "the most fruitful way of understanding some of the deepest and most perplexing issues that face us." This rests on an *idealist* conception of history, according to which human life is shaped by what Rosen (ibid., 17-18) calls *doxai*: more-or-less coherent and stable combinations of (empirically or rationally corrigible) beliefs, and "attitudes, practices, and evaluative commitments," "convictions about value, ways of seeing the world and practices that are not matter of empirical fact." The prevalence of such *doxai* can profoundly shape human

action, deciding whether a critical mass of individuals persist in upholding existing institutions and practices as legitimate, virtuous, or inevitable—or, to the contrary, furiously reject them, toppling the old order and demanding a new one.

Since problems and *doxai* develop historically and continue to reflect their earlier roots and intervening vicissitudes, tracing their historical trajectory is a necessary part of coming to self-understanding. As Rosen (e.g., 2022, 244) shows, historical development is not linear or smoothly progressive, nor completely discontinuous; and no society is marked by coherent unity or homogeneity of *doxai*. Therefore, drawing our own *doxai* to the surface requires both synchronic and diachronic inquiry: showing how the formulation of questions or problems has changed, how different responses appeared to work (to some), how these responses lost their capacity to carry conviction, or how they have maintained a grip on some while failing to appeal to others.

Those committed to materialist explanations of social phenomena on the one hand, and those who seek rational coherence in the pattern of history on the other, will find this unsatisfactory. I share Rosen's skepticism of both of those camps (Rosen 2022, 238), and sympathize with his effort to make room for the non-rational without abandoning aspirations toward rational explanation and justification. But it would be worthwhile to raise several questions about some methodological aspects of his account.

First, there may be a necessary vagueness or blurriness in the conceptual boundaries of what counts as a *doxa*, but what are the boundaries—or dynamic relationships—between beliefs, habits, dispositions, sentiments, and experiences within and around *doxai*?

Second, how should we think of the relative roles played by the factors that are internal and external to the logic of the ideas that contributed to secularization? On the one hand, *The*

Shadow of God presents an internal or endogenous account of secularization (i.e., internal to the ideas themselves). It argues that the project of rational theology—the project of justifying *God*—undermined itself through the internal development of certain lines of thought, leading to the disappearance of God, at least explicitly. Yet Rosen also describes how certain external or exogeneous (i.e., non-ideational) factors were crucial in the project of trying to reconcile ourselves to God and/or to a social world filled with suffering. Thus, for example, in the eighteenth century, when Kant was writing, the devastating earthquake in Lisbon was emblematic of a challenge to *God's* justice, while, in the twentieth century, the horrors at Auschwitz posed a challenge to the notion that the direction of *history* gives us a sense of justice. Lisbon and Auschwitz were external shocks—of, respectively, natural disaster and human action—that appear to have driven ideational reflection and change. To what extent is history—including that of ideas—driven by (in Harold Macmillan's words) “events, dear boy, events”? And, if events do, in fact, shape the content, and determine the viability, of ideas, how far is this impact a matter of undermining the theoretical viability of those ideas, as opposed to affecting emotional attitudes to them? That is, were “Lisbon” and “Auschwitz” so influential in the history of ideas because they were incompatible with beliefs about the goodness of nature or progressiveness of history, or might such horrors have made a *mood* of optimism or complacency in the direction of history seem morally and emotionally insupportable?

These questions are linked to a more normative one about the power and place of reason. At times Rosen (2022, 44-47, 292) expresses doubts about the “Socratic” project of achieving reconciliation by rationally demonstrating that the world may be understood as just and/or good. (This is the acknowledged conception of the task of philosophy for two thinkers who loom over Rosen's account—Hegel and Rawls.) Yet there are moments when Rosen still seems committed

to a *political* Socratism, whereby political order and laws are legitimated rationally by reference to justice. Thus, responding to Burke, Rosen (ibid., 272) writes that “rationally justified laws are supported by the claims of justice—what better support could laws have?” Rosen’s view is obviously rather far from the one held by political romantics and conservatives, on the one hand, and by skeptics, on the others. The former have suggested that there *are* better supports for law than rationally vindicated principles of justice, while the latter have questioned just how, or whether, we can truly vindicate the justice of any set of laws by appeal to impartial reason. Thus, a third question to ask about Rosen’s account is whether—and if not, why—some of the worries about *religious* Socratism also apply to a *political* Socratism (i.e., to conceptions of politics that see rational justification as necessary and sufficient for political legitimation).

Getting clarification on these methodological issues is likely to help us better understand Rosen’s broad conception of, and approach to, the interpretation of historical ideas: he sympathetically reconstructs some very alien and difficult ideas without falling into what philosophers tend to think of as “interpretive generosity”—attributing to past thinkers the views that *we* find most plausible—and without confusing interpretation with advocacy (ibid., 175). This seems to me praiseworthy for both intellectual and ethical reasons. Intellectually, Rosen’s approach offers greater intellectual fidelity to the historical material, and allows us to learn more—not merely to project our own views outward, but to encounter genuinely foreign ways of thinking that can (and perhaps should) provoke deeper reconsideration of our own ideas. In this way, restoring the strangeness of past ideas advances the intellectual goals conventionally associated both with history (gaining a fuller, more accurate, more explanatorily adequate conception of the past) and philosophy (gaining a deeper, more critical, more considered perspective on the questions we ask and the answers we give to these questions).

This intellectual approach has *ethical* value. It prioritizes such virtues as honesty, intellectual integrity, and the advancement of truth or knowledge. It is also ethical in its relationship to an ideal of individual freedom. There is something coercive—not in the sense of using fraud or fear or force of arms, but in the sense of seeking to *compel* the reader to do what the author wishes her to do—in the way some scholars go about presenting their interpretations. In such cases, the goal seems to be to reconstruct the figure under discussion (or, in cases of philosophical argument as opposed to interpretation, to present the writer’s own views) in a way that the reader *cannot* reject—or, at least, can only reject on pain of being made to feel unreasonable. In contrast, while Rosen seeks to persuade readers of certain interpretations, he does so without making those seem like the only possible ones; nor, when he critiques those past thinkers, does he make their arguments seem *completely* implausible or irretrievable. Instead, he assists his readers in recognizing Kant’s distance from many of us (i.e., from liberal, humanist Anglophone philosophers) while showing that Kant’s views compellingly respond to problems we do (or can) share. Neither the defender nor the doubter of theodicy, or moral realism, or voluntarism, or idealism, feels compelled to simply shut up. By asking his readers to “note” a distinction, claim, or textual detail, Rosen aims to direct his readers’ attention, rather than force their agreement.¹¹ What we are to make of what we notice is largely left up to us.

Both in its revisionary interpretations of individual thinkers, and the larger historical narrative it unfolds, *The Shadow* exemplifies a way of practicing the history of ideas that renders past thinkers both urgently relevant and, at the same time, deeply *strange* to us (see, e.g., Rosen 2022, 186, 252). It also attests to its author’s own, very personal sense of what is important and valuable. As one of Michael’s grateful students and someone who shares many of his scholarly and moral inclinations, it is particularly inspiring, and fittingly consoling. There is no alienation

of impersonality here; to read the book is to be both reminded of a dear friend, and illuminated anew. I will therefore end with a very personal set of reflections—which will also, I hope, further suggest the affinities of Rosen’s historical focus, methodological approach, and ethical concerns and commitments.

Coda: Berlin and Adorno

In an “Afterword,” Rosen (2022, 311) addresses the legacy of his teachers’ teacher, Isaiah Berlin, and reports a conversation with one of his own students concerning Berlin and Adorno. I was that student. I remember remarking that what Rosen gets from Adorno is the same as what I get from Berlin, but I’m not sure that I remember—or any longer understand—what I meant. Here I will try to re-think my remark in order to bring out the affinities between Rosen and Berlin—his “intellectual grandfather.”

Rosen’s account of German Idealism represents important improvements over Berlin’s writings on the subject; it also displays affinities with Berlin’s outlook. Berlin was familiar with, and warmly endorsed, Herzen (and Herder’s) condemnation of the use of past and current generations for the sake of the future (Rosen 2022, 154, quoting Berlin 2008, 105). As is clear in his conversation with Spender, discussed above, he too invoked the philosophical challenge posed by the prospective destruction of human life by a comet, and traced the crooked path from Kant to anti-liberal ideologies by way of the depersonalization of freedom and historicization of reason. At the same time, Berlin’s outlook bore traces of Kantian influence, similar to some of those discernible in Rosen’s approach. These include a broadly neo-Kantian historicist position—the idea that our perceptions of the world are shaped by concepts and categories with which we cannot help but work, but which are more historically contingent and shifting than Kant allowed. Berlin was also deeply attached to what he identified as a Kantian protest against

paternalism and manipulation, which lies, in part, in the affirmation of the centrality of the capacity for choice (though, crucially, Berlin jettisons the distinction between *Wille* and *Willkür*).¹² In this, he echoed Kant's identification of human worth with an assertion of one's claim to be treated as an *adult* (Rosen 2022, 203).¹³

The Shadow suggests a further way in which Berlin both echoes and departs from Kant: in his conception of the nature of values. Kant distinguishes between *price* and *dignity*: what has a price “can be replaced by something else as its *equivalent*”; what on the other hand is raised above all price and therefore admits of no equivalent has a dignity” (Rosen 2022, 130, quoting Kant). For Kant, only *one* thing possesses “the distinctive kind of value” that is dignity as opposed to price (ibid). But for Berlin, this feature—*non-fungibility*, or inability to be replaced by something else as its equivalent (Rosen 2022, 132)—is true of *multiple* values. This is why Berlin's conception of pluralism involves an element of tragic loss: when one value conflicts with and must give way to another, the loss of that value is not cancelled or compensated by the gain in terms of another. Berlin did not typically invoke the idea of conflicting *obligations*, which Rosen attributes to Adorno and suggests is needed to save Berlin's pluralism from “banality” (ibid., 313), but this sense of genuine values as “ultimate” and “absolute” (Berlin 2002, 213-14), as non-instrumental and non-fungible, does seem to go some way to bringing the two thinkers' views closer together—and, I hope, rendering Berlin less banal.¹⁴

More broadly, Berlin and Adorno can both be seen as taking the project of theodicy seriously as a human aspiration, and rejecting it. One of the things that I get from, and value in, Berlin (and which I *think* draws Rosen to Adorno) is an antipathy to all theodicies, all false comforters of humanity in its affliction.¹⁵ Berlin insisted on the need, out of both intellectual honesty and respect for humanity, to acknowledge the tragic dimension of human existence.

Promises of salvation, he believed, were not only dangerous or dishonest, but diminished the full horror and seriousness of the victims' suffering. To discount the reality of irredeemable and inconsolable loss, through the compensatory vision of a final harmony—which reduced “the miseries and evils of the world” to a mere “passing phase, evil dreams that will fade before the real dawn”—trivialized and “[took] all dignity from human experience and human ideals” (Berlin 2014b, 172-3). Horror at the infliction of human suffering, and the sense of its absurdity and ultimate emptiness, drove Berlin's “anti-ideological” skepticism. For him, actual human beings were “the sole source of all morality, the beings for whose sakes alone whatever is worth doing is worth doing;” it was from their value to and for actual human beings that all ideals and goods ultimately derived their worth (Berlin 2014b, 259). Hence, the extinction of human beings *would* mean the extinction of value. At the same time, to preserve human beings in a condition in which none of their positive values could be attained would also be counter to the realization of any moral value. To sacrifice the real value of actual individuals for the fictive value of abstractions or the hypothetical value of the future was perverse.¹⁶

This respect for human beings in all their difficulty and diversity connects to a final quality that Rosen closes by honoring and endorsing: Berlin's tolerance, his virtuosity in practicing philosophy as dialogue, his welcoming of disagreement among his students (here, somewhat ironically, my teacher Rosen and I fully agree!) Berlin objected to accounts of the history of ideas that harmonized points of disagreement between thinkers, or sought to depict them as contributing progressively to the realization of truth¹⁷ and, like Rosen, he wanted to insist on past thinkers' individuality and idiosyncrasy. For this reason, I suspect that, whether he agreed with it or not, Berlin would have both admired, and relished, *The Shadow*.

Given this affirmation of disagreement—and Rosen’s own wonderful precision in tracing out the transformations, ruptures, and differences of ideas, in the movement from heaven to history—one should not press the affinities between Adorno, Berlin, and Rosen (and the present author) too far. Still, I think that, beyond any particular arguments or propositional commitments, Rosen values Adorno, as I value Berlin, as representing a response to the world which maintains that, in politics and the larger conduct of life, morality (or ethics) is terribly important, but also terribly difficult. Moral predicaments, ideals, and obligations matter, but are not clear-cut; nor do they admit of correct solutions. It is also a view keenly aware of the way in which both a cynical or despairing abandonment of moral seriousness, and an overly simplistic, doctrinaire, and self-satisfied assertion of clear-cut and severe moral rectitude, can excuse or inspire terrible cruelty. It is a tragic view, but also an idealistic one. It affirms the worth of human beings by insisting on the seriousness of the problems with which we grapple, the worth of the scruples and aspirations that we feel, and the importance and dignity of continuing to try to work out how to make sense of our lives, and live together. *The Shadow of God* proudly stands in, and contributes to, this tradition of intellectual struggle and moral decency.

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NOTES

¹ For an illustration—and acute observation—on this point see Addams 1965.

² While Kant is as far removed as one could imagine from B. F. Skinner, reading Rosen’s reconstruction of Kant, I was reminded of Sidney Morgenbesser’s incredulous reaction to Skinner: “So, you’re telling me it’s wrong to anthropomorphise *humans*?”

³ See Berlin 2002, Berlin 2014b. For a more detailed reconstruction see Cherniss 2013, chs. 6 and 8.

⁴ Several of Rosen’s students have worked on these dimensions of political thinking. See e. g. Keum 2020; Alfaro Altamirano 2021; Cherniss 2021 (the last of which also examines the ethos of the revolutionary ascetic).

⁵ The Soviet dissident Lev Kopelev (1980, 235) recalled that his youthful Communist “fanaticism” was “nourished not only by speculative newspaper and literary sources. More convincing than these were people who in my eyes embodied, personified our truth and our justice, people who confirmed with their lives that it was necessary to clench your teeth, clench your heart and carry out everything the party and the Soviet power ordered.”.

⁶ For a much fuller, and somewhat different, development of the idea of political hope, see Goldman 2022.

⁷ Rosen evidently agrees with Diderot: “Even if I didn’t believe in progress I would still feel very distressed by the thought of human extinction . . . knowledge of the extinction of humanity in a thousand years’ time would be an utter catastrophe and would destroy my sense of the world and my place in it” (in Rosen and Marshall 2022).

⁸ The inmates of the Kovno Ghetto, knowing that they would be exterminated, resolved to preserve as extensive a record of their lives—photographs, writing, artworks—buried in the ground. After liberation the few remaining inmates recovered the buried records. We now know more about life in Kovno than the other ghettos which suffered the same fate.

⁹ “Man is only a reed, the weakest in nature, but he is a thinking reed. There is no need for the whole universe to take up arms to crush him: a vapour, a drop of water is enough to kill him. but even if the universe were to crush him, man would still be nobler than his slayer, because he knows that he is dying and the advantage the universe has over him. The universe knows none of this. All our dignity consists then in thought. It is on thought that we must depend for our recovery, not on space and time, which we could never fill. Let us then strive to think well; that is the basic principle of morality” (Pascal 2003, 66; all but the last two sentences of this passage are quoted in Rosen 2012, 18).

¹⁰ One oddity of the influence of “Cambridge School” contextualism within political theory is the frequency with which scholars feel compelled to assert the need to do our own thinking for ourselves . . . by quoting Skinner’s authoritative words. For a more substantive critique of Skinner’s methodological views see Rosen 2011.

¹¹ E.g. Rosen 2022, 30, 51, 57, 62, 73, 74, 75, 79, 95, 152, 193, 206, 216.

¹² See Cherniss 2013, 8-9, 38, 101, 109, 120-21, 190-94, 208-9; on Berlin as “Kantian” see also Kocis 2022; Lyons 2020.

¹³ “I object to being treated like a child. I think I object to not being reasoned with. I object to paternalism . . . being treated like a schoolboy, being told for my own good that there are certain things to do, or being driven in a perfectly beneficent direction by a perfectly disinterested, pure-hearted body of—anyone you like, governments or manufacturers—it doesn’t matter which—even if you assume that they are pure-hearted men not seeking profit at all” (Berlin 1964).

¹⁴ For exploration of Berlin’s obscure characterization of values as “absolute” see Cherniss and Hardy 2022, note 16.

¹⁵ There is also an important difference here. Adorno continued to insist on the validity of the standpoint of, redemption (Adorno 1978, aphorism 153). Berlin (according to his friend the pianist Alfred Brendel) once commented, during the interval of a performance of *Parsifal*, “the concept of redemption I do *not* understand.”

¹⁶ See, e.g., Berlin 2008, 99-103, 107, 220-21, 224-5, 236.

¹⁷ See Berlin 1953; see also Lifschitz 2016.