

Nazi. To this end they would do well to remember the Holocaust for the Jewish and human disaster it was, and to recognize that its roots lay in demonizing the hated “other.”

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***Philosophical Witnessing: The Holocaust as Presence*, Berel Lang (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England for Brandeis University Press, 2009), 260 pp., cloth \$50.00.**

This important book, which consists of twelve essays—five are revised versions of previously published pieces—has two main aims: to explore neglected aspects of the “presence” of the Holocaust (by which Lang means its “continuing place . . . in the contemporary world” [p. xi]), and to inquire into, and show by way of example, what might be distinctive about a specifically philosophical manner of “witnessing” this presence.

Lang’s book is organized into three parts. The first and most tightly focused of these, “The Holocaust at Philosophy’s Address,” includes chapters on philosophical witnessing, the implications of the Holocaust for understanding the nature of truth, philosophical and theological responses to the problem of evil in the context of Jewish history and meta-history, and a discussion of Karl Jaspers’ 1946 exploration of German guilt, *Die Schuldfrage*. The second part, “Vs. the Unspeakable, the Unshowable, and the Unthinkable,” begins with an essay that identifies the aesthetic, moral, and philosophical uses of silence and its analogues (including visual absence and intellectual *aporia*) in responding to the Holocaust. This section is followed by a reflection on the representation and misrepresentation of the Holocaust, primarily in literature and film. These essays sustain the theme of philosophical witnessing introduced in the book’s first part; in subsequent chapters, however, this theme fades from view. The next two essays offer various observations under the rubric of “applied ethics,” as well as a discussion of Theodore Kaufman’s *Germany Must Perish!* (self-published in 1941), which Nazi propagandists used as evidence that there was a Jewish conspiracy to destroy Germany. But it is not clear how either of these chapters sheds light on the larger issue of what can (or should) be said, shown, or thought about the Holocaust. The third and final part of *Philosophical Witnessing*, “The Presence as Future,” reflects on some of the ways the Holocaust has shaped—and may continue to shape—both institutions and individuals, and includes chapters on group rights, metaphysical racism, “hyphenated Jews,” and the lessons of “reconciliation” in post-Apartheid South Africa.

The first thing to be said about philosophical witnessing in relation to the Holocaust is that there has been precious little of it. Lang notes that few of

the many, mostly German or Austrian philosophers who managed either to survive the Holocaust or to leave Europe prior to the Nazi deluge—a group that includes Theodor Adorno, Hannah Arendt, Martin Buber, Marvin Faber, Emil Fackenheim, Herbert Feigl, Aron Gurwitsch, Carl Hempel, Hans Jonas, Paul Oskar Kristeller, Emmanuel Levinas, Herbert Marcuse, and Leo Strauss—made the Holocaust an explicit theme in their work. (Arendt, Adorno, and Fackenheim are exceptions.) And although one might suppose that the Holocaust would “hold the attention of anyone thinking seriously about the human condition” (p. 8), it is rarely mentioned in contemporary philosophical discussions of ethics and politics. What accounts for these striking omissions?

Lang observes that the anti-historicist tendency of contemporary philosophy, together with philosophy’s preference for drawing universal conclusions, militate against serious engagement with a concrete historical moment. I believe he draws nearer to the mark when he comments that “the extraordinary improbability . . . of the Holocaust” is “partly responsible for the philosophical silence that followed it” (p. 14). Viewed philosophically, the Holocaust is “improbable” because it is inconsistent with the guiding presupposition of normative ethics and politics—namely, that human social existence is characterized by intelligible and relatively stable moral structures. Precisely this presupposition is called into question by the behavior of the perpetrators, the bystanders, and—in their most degraded condition—the victims of the Holocaust, in which one may observe very few exceptions to the twin principles articulated by certain Polish peasants in Claude Lanzmann’s film *Shoah*: one can get used to anything, and if you cut your finger, it doesn’t hurt me. One suspects that at least some academic philosophers choose to ignore the Holocaust so as to avoid having to confront the implications of this scandalous fact. Needless to say, those who do so are not genuine lovers of wisdom.

Lang touches on the problem of the philosopher’s proper nature when he observes that the “special force” of “witnessing” derives from the “speaker’s presence in the event witnessed” (p. 14). (In reading these words, I thought especially of the extraordinarily humane presence of Jan Karski during and after his visits to the Warsaw ghetto.) Conversely, those who were physically present in the Holocaust, but morally and intellectually absent, can hardly be said to make good witnesses. This is where Lang’s two main themes—philosophical witnessing and the Holocaust as presence—come together. The Holocaust has a permanent place in the record of human experience, and in this minimal sense will always be “present,” or available to philosophical reflection. But Lang rightly stresses that *we* are obliged to be fully present to the Holocaust, attending with heart and mind to every dimension of its significance. Only in this way can we open ourselves to its deepest lessons.

Yet the work of philosophical witnessing in relation to the Holocaust cannot proceed in the absence of the necessary conceptual tools, and contemporary

philosophy's tools are woefully inadequate to the task. The "constructivist" conception of truth that in recent decades has become prominent in philosophy and the humanities, for example, reduces facts to interpretations, and thus calls into question the very concept of historical evidence. But, for those with eyes to see, the Holocaust *itself* bears witness to the truth; because its "brute facticity" refutes epistemological constructivism, it may serve as a "criterion for truth" in the post-Holocaust world (pp. 19, 27). This suggestion is inspired, not least because it brings to light what is (negatively) implicit in our recognition of the moral significance of Holocaust denial. In a word, Lang emphasizes that the historical and philosophical study of the Holocaust is a moral act that relates essentially to reality; in studying the Holocaust we attempt to establish, as accurately as possible, what *actually* happened, and to discover therein the truth about ourselves and our world.

Lang also insists that the process of philosophical discovery should not be cut short by claims that the Holocaust is fundamentally unintelligible. In particular, he maintains that the burden of proof is on those who insist that traditional "instruments of measurement" fail to encompass the enormity of the event, or that "there is no adequate way of speaking about the Holocaust" (pp. 38, 80). If I understand Lang correctly, we are entitled to draw such conclusions only after we have exhausted all available alternatives. This will take time; even after sixty-five years, there is no consensus on the basic theological issues posed by the Holocaust (see pp. 41–47), and the analogous process of philosophical reflection is, by comparison, still in its infancy.

One final thought: Lang's fifth chapter, "Holocaust-Representation in the Genre of Silence," reminds us that much meaningful reflection on the human condition in relation to the Holocaust is to be found in the arts, and particularly in literature. The writings of Borowski, Levi, Améry, and Appelfeld, among others, have yet to be fully mined for significant insights, and the philosophical witnessing for which Lang so powerfully calls would do well to begin with them.

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Picture Imperfect: Photography and Eugenics, 1870–1940, Anne Maxwell (Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2008), 286 pp., cloth \$79.50, pbk. \$45.00.

In this detailed study, Anne Maxwell provides a unique perspective on visual culture and its relationship to racism. Rather than focus on racist writings and theories that influenced the eugenics movement, she concentrates on how the