

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Neither Answered Nor Absorbed: The Irreducible Antinomy of Personal Address and Impersonal Ground in the Theology of Recovery

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Abstract

A previous study argued that the spiritual trajectory of the Twelve Steps, read alongside the Hasidic recovery of relational address, resolves the ancient quarrel between a personal God who is addressed as Thou and an impersonal Infinite into which the self is absorbed; it proposed that Hasidism reorients mystical depth toward relational responsibility rather than dissolution.¹ The present essay revisits and partly recants that conclusion. It argues that the resolution was premature, and that the deepest honesty available to the theology of recovery is not synthesis but the steady inhabitation of an antinomy that cannot be closed. Drawing on William James's account of the wider self through which saving experiences arrive, Martin Buber's insistence on the irreducibility of encounter, Elliot R. Wolfson's apophatic phenomenology of identity-in-difference, and the Chabad doctrine that the divine Essence transcends the categories of being and non-being, the essay reads Step Eleven's movement from a transcendent Higher Power toward 'conscious contact' not as a passage from transcendence to immanence but as the moment at which the two grammars—address and ground, Thou and depth—become simultaneously unavoidable and mutually irreducible. The recovering self does not discover that it is God, nor that God is merely the floor of its own interiority; it discovers that it cannot say which, and that its sobriety, and its capacity to remain present at the bedside of another's suffering, depend on not deciding. The argument is developed through the author's framework of hermeneutic medicine and therapeutic tzimtzum and is offered as a contribution to philosophy of religion, Jewish mystical studies, consciousness studies, and the still-unwritten theology of recovery.

Keywords: I–Thou, Relational Non-Duality, Apophatic Acosmism, William James, Subliminal Self, Martin Buber, Elliot Wolfson, Tzimtzum, Higher Power, Conscious Contact, Twelve-Step Spirituality, Antinomy, Hermeneutic Medicine, Therapeutic Presence, Chabad, Ein Sof, Addiction Recovery.

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1. Introduction

1.1 The Dilemma, Restated as a Confession

There is a question that has organised the better part of my theological life, and I have not solved it. I have written around it, written toward it, and on one occasion written as though I had answered it. I had not. The question is deceptively simple, and it can be put in the vocabulary of the recovering alcoholic as readily as in the vocabulary of the kabbalist: when I turn, in the hour of my powerlessness, toward that which is greater than myself, do I turn toward someone, or do I turn into something? Is the Higher Power a Thou who hears me, or is it the impersonal ground of my own deepest interiority, the floor beneath the floor of the self, encountered when the constructed ego has finally exhausted its sovereignty? The tradition of recovery speaks, in Step Three, of turning one's will and one's life over to the care of God—the word care presupposing an addressable other. Yet by Step Eleven it speaks of conscious contact, of prayer and meditation, of intuition and the still small voice—a vocabulary that has migrated, almost without anyone noticing, from petition to awareness, from the God who rescues from outside to the God who is somehow found within.²

In an earlier essay—Neither Object Nor Abyss: Relational Theology from Hasidism to the Twelve Steps to the Bedside—I proposed that this migration is not a contradiction but a maturation, and that Jewish tradition, and Hasidism above all, had already shown how mystical depth could be reclaimed for relational responsibility without dissolving the self into an impersonal Infinite.¹ I argued that the I–Thou survives even the most radical metaphysics, because the God who transcends being and non-being is more, not less, capable of genuine encounter. I still believe much of that essay. But I have come to suspect that its conclusion was a consolation I permitted myself rather than a truth I had earned. The present essay is, in part, a recantation. It is written in the conviction

that the dilemma is not a problem to be solved but an antinomy to be inhabited, and that the spiritual genius of recovery—and the clinical genius of presence at the bedside—lies precisely in the refusal to decide.

An antinomy, in the strict Kantian sense, is not a muddle awaiting clarification. It is a pair of contradictory propositions each of which can be established by apparently valid reasoning. The thesis here is that the Ultimate is a personal Thou, irreducibly other, who may be addressed but never possessed. The antithesis is that the Ultimate is an impersonal ground, the Ein Sof beyond all attributes including the attribute of personality, into which the self is gathered as a wave into the sea. The history of religion is in large measure the history of partisans of the thesis warring with partisans of the antithesis: Buber against the mystics, the covenantal West against the non-dual East, Maimonides' ethical distance against Abulafia's absorptive *devekut*. What I want to argue is that the recovering self, and the physician who has learned to sit inside the room of another person's dying, lives at the exact seam where thesis and antithesis touch—and that this seam is not a defect in the spiritual life but its most exposed and most truthful location.

This is not a counsel of confusion. It is a discipline. To inhabit an antinomy is harder than to resolve it, because resolution offers rest and the antinomy offers none. But the rest offered by resolution is, I will argue, purchased at the cost of something essential: the person who has decided that God is finally only the depth of his own consciousness has lost the One he can cry out to at three in the morning; and the person who has decided that God is finally only the Thou over against him has lost the intimacy that makes the cry feel like coming home rather than shouting across a void. The mature recovering self refuses both losses. It keeps the cry and it keeps the homecoming, and it pays for keeping both by never being permitted to say, with finality, to whom or to what it has come.



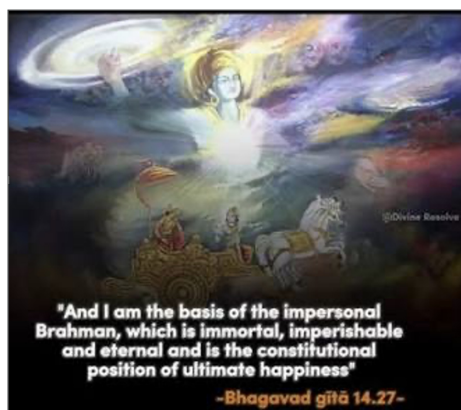
2. The Great Divide and Why it is Overstated

It is customary to map the dilemma onto a civilizational geography: the relational, covenantal, personalist West against the absorptive, non-dual, impersonal East. On the Western side stand the God of Abraham who calls a man by name, the Christian personalism of a God who is three persons in loving relation, the Islamic insistence on a transcendence so absolute that it forbids any merging of creature and Creator, and—its philosophical crystallisation—Martin Buber's I and Thou, in which the Eternal Thou can never be reduced to an It.³ On the Eastern side stand Shankara's Advaita Vedanta, in which the distinction between ātman and brahman is finally unreal; Nāgārjuna's emptiness, which voids even the voiding; and the Zen realisation in which subject and object, worshipper and worshipped, collapse into a single suchness.

The geography is too tidy, and the tidiness is itself a symptom. Jewish mysticism has always harboured its own absorptive extreme: Scholem read classical Kabbalah as a symbolic theosophy oriented less toward personal encounter than toward mapping the inner life of God, in which the human being participates through theurgic alignment rather than dialogue, and in which Ein Sof lies beyond will, attribute, and relation altogether.⁴ Moshe Idel recovered the ecstatic strand in which Abraham Abulafia's letter-permutations aim at a devekut that trends toward merger, so that the prophet who achieves union speaks with God's voice rather than to God.⁵ The non-dual temptation is not an

Eastern import into a pristinely relational Judaism; it is native, perennial, and strong. Conversely, the Eastern traditions are not without their own relational counter-currents—the bhakti devotionalism of a Ramanuja, the personal Amida of Pure Land Buddhism—so that the supposed monopoly of the East on non-duality is as overstated as the supposed monopoly of the West on encounter.

Why, then, do modern seekers feel so compelled to choose? Part of the answer is sociological: the twentieth-century traffic between a disenchanted West and an idealised East made 'non-duality' a commodity, a spiritual technology promising the dissolution of the very anxious self that consumer modernity had inflamed. Part of the answer is genuinely philosophical: the two grammars do make incompatible demands. If the Ultimate is truly a Thou, then difference is ultimate, and my responsibility to the other—divine and human—is non-negotiable, because the other is not me. If the Ultimate is truly non-dual, then difference is penultimate at best, an appearance to be seen through, and the urgency of responsibility risks being relativised into the play of a single consciousness with itself. The stakes are not merely metaphysical. They are ethical, and they are clinical. A physician who has decided that the patient's suffering is, at the deepest level, a perturbation within a single cosmic consciousness destined for reabsorption has been handed a powerful anaesthetic against compassion. A physician who has decided that the patient is irreducibly other has been handed a heavier and more honest burden.



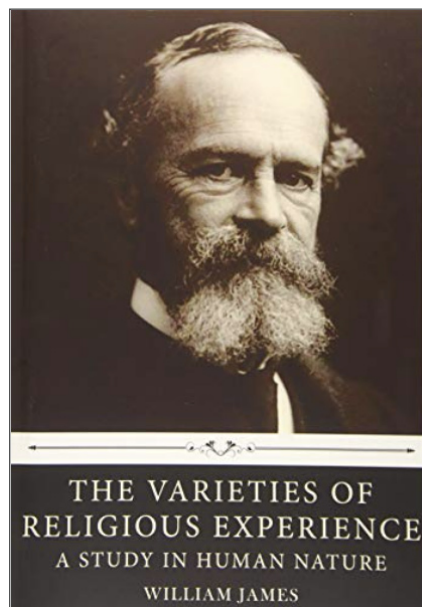
It is worth dwelling on the Eastern witnesses with more care than the polemical use of them usually permits, because the antinomy I am defending is precisely what the most rigorous non-dualists themselves refuse to flatten. Shankara's Advaita is routinely cited as the purest statement of the antithesis: ātman is brahman, the self is the Absolute, and the perception of difference is avidyā, ignorance to be dispelled. Yet Shankara preserves, at the level of vyavahāra (conventional reality), the entire apparatus of a personal God (īshvara), worship, and devotion, insisting only that these are penultimate to the pāramārthika (ultimate) realisation of non-duality. The two levels are not reconciled; they are held in a hierarchy that the living devotee inhabits from below. The bhakta who worships and the jñānin who knows are not two stages of one person so much as two truths that the tradition declines to collapse. Even in the system most committed to the antithesis, the thesis is not abolished but suspended.

Nāgārjuna presses further and, paradoxically, toward my own position. The Madhyamaka doctrine of śūnyatā, emptiness, is not the assertion that nothing exists—a nihilism Nāgārjuna explicitly repudiates—but the refusal of every fixed metaphysical position, including the position that there is no position. Emptiness is itself empty; the via negativa voids even its own voiding. The famous tetralemma—it is not the case that X, nor that not-X, nor that both, nor that neither—is a logical machine for refusing exactly the kind of forced disjunction that the dilemma of personal-versus-impersonal demands. Read this way, Nāgārjuna is not the champion of the antithesis but

the great Eastern theorist of the refusal of resolution. He would not say that the Ultimate is the impersonal ground rather than the personal Thou; he would say that the very question, framed as a disjunction requiring one answer, mistakes the conditioned, dependently-arisen character of all such concepts. The kinship with Wolfson's apophasis is not superficial. Both are disciplines for not deciding.

And Zen, so often invoked as the solvent of all duality, in fact stages the antinomy with peculiar sharpness in its devotional practices. The kōan is not a riddle with a non-dual answer; it is a device for exhausting the discursive mind's demand for an answer of any kind, dualist or monist. And the Pure Land traditions of Mahāyāna, which the Zen-fixated Western imagination tends to forget, ground an entire soteriology in the personal address of Amida Buddha and the recitation of his name—bhakti at the heart of the supposedly non-dual East. The lesson is not that the East is secretly relational, any more than that the West is secretly absorptive. The lesson is that every tradition deep enough to be worth consulting harbours both grammars and, at its most rigorous, declines to let either silence the other.

My claim, then, is not that the divide is illusory. My claim is that the seeker is wrong to think the divide must be settled by choosing a side, and wrong again to think it can be dissolved by a clever synthesis that splits the difference. The divide is real and the choice is refused. That is the antinomy, and the remainder of this essay is an attempt to show why refusing the choice is not cowardice but the highest form of fidelity to the phenomena.



3. William James and the Discovery of the 'More'

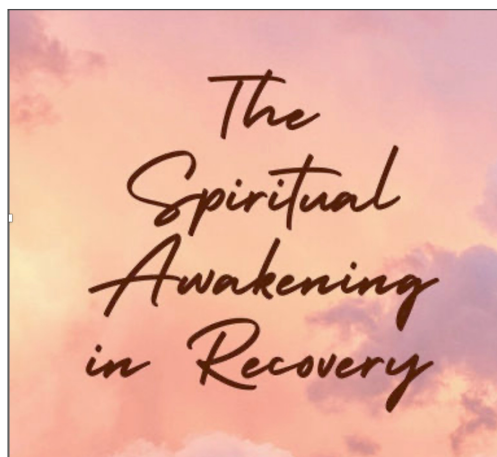
The figure who first taught me that the antinomy might be inhabited rather than resolved was William James, and he taught it almost against his own intention. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James repeatedly observes that the transformative religious experiences—conversion above all—arrive not from the focused centre of the conscious ego but from regions of the mind that lie beneath the threshold of ordinary awareness. He calls these the 'subliminal' or 'subconscious' regions, borrowing the term from Frederic Myers, and he proposes that the saving experiences of the twice-born soul well up from a 'wider self through which saving experiences come.'⁶

What is decisive for the present argument is the precise location at which James leaves the question. He does not say that the wider self is God; that would collapse the antinomy into psychology and hand victory to the antithesis. Nor does he say that the wider self is merely the channel through which a wholly external God reaches in; that would collapse it into supernaturalism and hand victory to the thesis. He says, with a deliberateness that has too often been read as mere caution, that the subconscious self is the intermediary—that on its hither side it is continuous with our ordinary psychological life, and that on its farther side it opens toward a 'more' whose ultimate nature he refuses to specify. 'The further limits of our being plunge,' he writes, into a dimension that is not the visible world.⁶ He will say that something real comes through; he will not say whether that something is the depth of the self or an Other beyond it.

This is not the failure of nerve of a man who could not make up his mind. It is the report of a radical empiricist who has resolved to describe what is given and to refuse what is not. And what is given, in the conversion experience and—I will argue—in the experience of recovery, is exactly the ambiguity. The recovering alcoholic at the moment of surrender does not experience a clearly external rescuer, nor a clearly internal resource; she experiences a turning over, a giving way, in which the help that arrives feels at once more intimate than her own heartbeat and more other than anything she could have manufactured. James's genius was to build a philosophy capacious enough to hold that report without flattening it. The 'more' is the name of the antinomy itself, written as a single word.

It is worth pausing on the relationship between James's subliminal self and the kabbalistic ayin, the divine 'nothing' from which the self emerges and to which it returns. Both name a region from which the determinate self is generated and which the determinate self cannot survey. But there is a difference that the antinomy will not let us erase: the ayin of the kabbalist is, however apophatically, divine—it is God in the mode of concealment—whereas James's subliminal is officially neutral as to its ultimate ownership. The recovering self-lives in the gap between these two descriptions. When it reaches the depth, it cannot tell whether it has reached the floor of its own psyche or the hem of God's garment, and the tradition of recovery, with a wisdom it has never fully articulated, declines to make it choose. 'God as we understood Him' is not a concession to pluralism. It is a refusal of premature metaphysics. It is the antinomy, codified.

There is a deeper Jamesian warrant for this codified refusal, and it lies in the much-maligned essay 'The Will to Believe' and in the pragmatic theory of truth. James's argument there is not, as the careless reading has it, a licence to believe whatever one pleases. It is the precise observation that there is a class of questions—he calls the options 'genuine': living, forced, and momentous—that cannot be decided on intellectual grounds before one acts, and on which the refusal to decide is itself a decision with consequences. The existence and nature of a Higher Power is the genuine option par excellence for the person whose life has become unmanageable. She cannot wait for metaphysical certainty; the waiting is itself fatal. She must act—must turn her life over—and the turning generates the only evidence that will ever be available, which is the evidence of its fruits. This is the epistemology beneath 'God as we understood Him.' The phrase does not ask the newcomer to resolve whether the Power is personal or impersonal, transcendent or immanent, Thou or ground. It asks her to enter into relation with it on the strength of its fruits and to let the question of its ultimate nature remain genuinely, permanently open. Pragmatism, so often accused of dissolving truth into utility, here does something subtler: it identifies a question whose truth can only be lived and never settled, and licenses the living without the settling. That is the antinomy in its epistemological dress.



4. Recovery as a Spiritual Phenomenology

Consider the Steps not as a creed but as a sequence of experiences, a phenomenology of the self in the process of being unmade and remade. The first movement is apophatic: a negation of the self's sovereignty. Step One—the admission of powerlessness, the unmanageability of the life—functions as a negative theology of the self. I am not sufficient unto myself. Ernest Kurtz named the central insight of Alcoholics Anonymous with a single hyphenated word: not-God.⁷ The recovering person ceases to attempt to occupy the position of God; the deconstruction of the autonomous, omnipotent ego is the precondition of everything that follows. This is not primarily a psychological event, though it is that. It is a metaphysical one. The self that has been trying to be its own ground discovers that it has no ground of its own, and in that discovery a space opens.

Into that space, in Steps Two and Three, comes the Higher Power—and it comes, at first, unambiguously as Thou. The newcomer does not need, and cannot use, a subtle non-dual metaphysics. She needs an Other strong enough to hold what she can no longer hold. The externality of the early Higher Power is not a philosophical crudity to be outgrown; it is a therapeutic necessity, structurally identical to the function of Maimonides' transcendent deity, whose very otherness creates the space for a transformation the self cannot perform on itself.¹ The addict cannot save herself; she must be saved; and to be saved she must have someone, not something, to be saved by. The grammar here is relentlessly relational. One turns one's will over to the care of a power who can receive it.

The middle steps—the searching moral inventory, the confession made to God and to another human being, the readiness to have defects removed, the amends—are the long labour of purification that the tradition calls, without embarrassment, 'housecleaning.' They

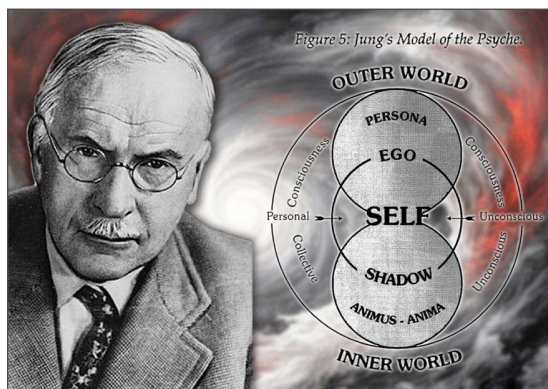
are the recovery analogue of cheshbon ha-nefesh, the accounting of the soul. What matters for the present argument is that throughout this labour the Higher Power remains addressable. Step Five admits the exact nature of one's wrongs to God, to oneself, and to another person—a triadic structure that refuses both the privatisation of spirituality and its dissolution into impersonal process. God is not met in isolation but in the presence of a human witness. The vertical and the horizontal cross.

And then comes Step Eleven, and with it the quiet revolution that occasioned this entire enquiry. 'Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.' The verbs have changed. The earlier steps were verbs of transaction—turning over, admitting, asking, making amends. Step Eleven's verbs are verbs of attention—praying, meditating, seeking contact, listening for a will to be known. The Higher Power who began as an external agent of rescue is now sought in the deepening of consciousness itself. The addict has become a contemplative.

Here is the question that the standard narrative answers too quickly. Has the God who began as radically external become interiorised? Has the Thou of Step Three become the depth of Step Eleven? The tempting answer—the answer I myself once gave—is: yes, and this interiorisation is the maturing of the spiritual life, the passage from a childish God-out-there to an adult God-within.¹ I now think this answer betrays the phenomenon. What actually happens in Step Eleven is not that the external Thou is replaced by an internal depth. It is that the two become, for the first time, simultaneously present and indistinguishable in their effects yet irreducible in their grammar. Prayer and meditation do not move God closer; they move consciousness deeper; and at the bottom of that

deepening the recovering person finds that she cannot say whether the One she has reached is nearer than her own heartbeat or infinitely beyond her. She finds, in other words, the antinomy—not as a problem in a

book but as the texture of her own conscious contact. Step Eleven is not the resolution of the dilemma of Step Three. It is its full disclosure.



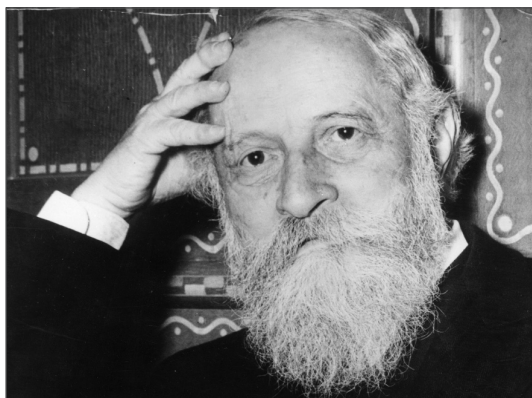
5. Jung, the Self, and the Sacred Depths

No account of the interiorisation of the divine in the recovery tradition can avoid Carl Jung, who stands at its historical headwaters. It was Jung who told Roland H.—the patient whose case reached Bill Wilson through the chain that produced Alcoholics Anonymous—that his condition was beyond the reach of medicine and might yield only to a genuine religious conversion, a vital spiritual experience. And it was Jung who, in his late correspondence with Wilson, offered the formula that has haunted the movement ever since: that the craving for alcohol is, at a low level, the spiritual thirst of our being for wholeness, expressed in medieval language as the union with God; that the helpful formula is spiritus contra spiritum—spirit against spirits, the higher spirit driving out the lower.⁸

Jung's psychology might seem to settle the antinomy decisively in favour of the antithesis. The Self, in his technical vocabulary—the archetype of wholeness, the imago Dei in the psyche, the centre that is not the ego—can look like a thoroughgoing reduction of God to a structure of the unconscious. If the God encountered in the depths is the Self, then the Thou has been psychologised, the antithesis has won, and

the recovering contemplative of Step Eleven is in conversation with no one but the deeper strata of his own mind. This is the reading that has made Jung a figure of suspicion for theologians who wish to defend the irreducibility of encounter.

But Jung is more careful, and more useful, than this reading allows. He insisted repeatedly that the psychological statement 'the God-image arises in the psyche' is epistemologically agnostic about whether a God exists beyond the psyche; that psychology can describe the imago but cannot pronounce on its ultimate referent; that the Self is precisely the point at which the empirical psyche opens onto something it cannot contain. In this Jung is the heir of James, and like James he leaves the farther door ajar. The Self is not God; the Self is the place where the question of God becomes, for the first time, experientially acute. Read this way, Jung does not resolve the antinomy in favour of immanence. He relocates it to the centre of the psyche and calls that centre the Self. The God encountered there is encountered as the depth of the self and as that which exceeds the self, and Jung's honest refusal to say which is, once again, the antinomy preserved. Spiritus contra spiritum names a movement, not a metaphysics.



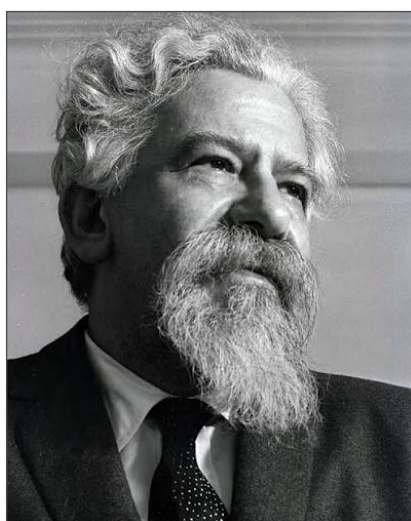
6. Buber's Objection and Why it Must Be Honoured

If James and Jung leave the farther door ajar, Martin Buber stands in the doorway and refuses to let it close. His objection to every interiorising mysticism is the most serious obstacle to a comfortable narrative of the God-within, and the antinomy cannot be honestly inhabited unless his objection is given its full weight rather than smuggled past.

Buber's claim is that the primary word I–Thou establishes a relation that can never be reduced to an experience occurring within the I. The Thou is not had; it is met. The moment I turn the Thou into a content of my own consciousness—an experience I am having, a depth I am plumbing, a Self I am realising—I have spoken the other primary word, I–It, and the relation has collapsed.⁹ For Buber the mystic's union, however exalted, is the supreme temptation of the I–It: it appears to be the highest intimacy and is in fact the highest solitude, because in absorption there is finally no one left to meet. A God entirely interiorised is a God who can no longer be addressed, and a God who

can no longer be addressed has ceased, for Buber, to be God at all and become a province of the self.

Buber further identifies the danger that should most concern anyone who recommends the deepening of consciousness as a spiritual path: the danger that the self-will mistake its own depths for God. Every movement toward interiority risks becoming a subtle narcissism, a self-worship dressed in the robes of contemplation. The recovering person is peculiarly exposed to this danger, because the whole architecture of addiction is a disordered self-relation, and a spirituality that terminated in the self—even the deep Self, even the Jungian Self—would risk returning the addict to the very prison of self-reference from which Step One was meant to release him. This is why the recovery tradition, with an instinct sounder than its theory, never permits the recovering person to graduate from humility. Even at the furthest reach of prayer and meditation, the God of Step Eleven remains greater than the self that seeks Him. Buber's transcendence is the structural guarantee against the spiritual narcissism that would otherwise be the occupational hazard of the contemplative path.



It is here that Abraham Joshua Heschel must be admitted, briefly but decisively, because he occupies a position that none of the other witnesses quite holds and that the antinomy badly needs. Where Buber guards the irreducibility of the Thou, Heschel describes the interior life of that Thou—and describes it in a way that makes the personal pole not the naive option to be outgrown but the harder and more demanding claim of the two. His theology of divine pathos portrays a God who is not the impassive Absolute of the philosophers, serenely indifferent above the wheel of events, but a God who is affected, who suffers the world's injustice as a wound, who is, in the title of his

great work, in search of man even as man searches for God.¹⁰ This is the antithesis's nightmare: an Ultimate so personal that it can be pained. Yet Heschel guards this pathos against anthropomorphic idolatry with exactly the rigour Buber brings to the Thou, insisting that pathos names not a psychology projected onto God but a relation God freely takes up toward the world, a mode of involvement rather than a passion that overcomes Him. For the present argument Heschel does something the others cannot: he shows that the deepening of the spiritual life does not move away from the personal toward an impersonal ground, as the standard maturation narrative assumes, but if anything

intensifies the personal—discloses a God more searchingly, painfully personal the further in one goes. The recovering contemplative of Step Eleven who expected, at the depth, to find the warm anonymity of an impersonal ocean may instead find herself sought, addressed, held to account by a pathos that will not let her dissolve. That this stands in flat tension with the equally truthful reports of absorptive depth is not a defect in the account. It is the antinomy, now sharpened to its finest point: the deeper one goes, the more personal and the more impersonal the encounter becomes, and neither tendency cancels the other. Here is the crucial point, and it is the hinge of the whole essay. Buber's objection is correct. It is not a one-sided emphasis to be balanced against an equally

valid mysticism. It is a true description of something that is really the case: that there is a Thou, that the Thou cannot be reduced to my experience of it, and that the attempt to so reduce it destroys the very thing it sought to possess. And yet—this is the antinomy—the mystics are also correct. The contemplative who descends into the silence and finds there not a partner across a distance but a ground continuous with his own being is not lying and is not merely confused. Wolfson, to whom I now turn, has given us the conceptual instrument for holding both of these correct and contradictory reports without forcing to recant.



7. Wolfson and the Grammar of Identity-in-Difference

Elliot R. Wolfson's reading of kabbalistic ontology is the most sustained attempt I know to think the coincidence of identity and difference without lapsing into either dualism or monism. Across *Language, Eros, Being, Open Secret*, and a series of essays on the apophatic dimensions of Jewish mysticism, Wolfson develops a logic in which the mystic enters a realm of 'identity in difference and difference in identity,' where union does not annul alterity and alterity does not preclude union.^{11, 12} The formula is not a paradox-mongering ornament; it is a precise description of a structure that ordinary bivalent logic cannot accommodate, in which two things are neither simply the same nor simply other but held in a relation for which our grammar has no comfortable name.

What I have elsewhere called, following Wolfson, an apophatic acosmism—an ontology of concealed immanence in which nothing stands outside divine being even while divine essence infinitely exceeds every manifestation—is the metaphysical correlate of

this logic.¹³ Read alongside the rabbinic designation of God as *Makom*, 'He is the place of the world, but the world is not His place,' the structure discloses itself: the world is wholly within God (immanence radicalised past the point at which anything could be outside) and God infinitely exceeds the world (transcendence radicalised past the point at which God could be a being among beings).¹³ Neither pole can be dropped. To drop immanence is to make God an object over against the world, the largest item in the inventory of things—the idolatry that Buber's own transcendence was meant to forbid. To drop transcendence is to make God the sum of the world, the impersonal totality—the absorption that Buber rightly feared. Apophatic acosmism holds both and holds them by means of the apophasis: it is only because the divine essence is unsayable that it can be both wholly immanent and wholly transcendent, since the contradiction is intolerable only at the level of predication, and apophasis is the suspension of predication.

Applied to the dilemma of recovery, Wolfson's grammar yields the following. The recovering self

that reaches, in Step Eleven, the depth of conscious contact does not discover that it is God—the antithesis is false. Nor does it discover a God merely standing over against it across an unbridgeable distance—the thesis, taken alone, is also false. It discovers that God is encountered precisely in the relational space where self and transcendence intersect: nearer than its own consciousness and infinitely beyond it, in a single act of contact that is neither fusion nor separation. This is what the recovery literature, groping, calls ‘conscious contact’: a contact (which implies two) that is conscious (which implies interiority), a touching across a distance that is also a touching at the very centre.

It would be easy—and it is the error I am most concerned to avoid—to present Wolfson’s identity-in-difference as the resolution of the antinomy: the clever third position that dissolves the quarrel between

Buber and the mystics by showing it to rest on a false dichotomy. That is precisely what I argued before, and it is what I now retract.¹ Wolfson’s grammar is not a resolution. It is the most exact possible statement of the antinomy. ‘Identity in difference’ does not reconcile identity and difference; it names the fact that they are co-present and irreducible, that the one cannot be collapsed into the other, that the mind which demands to know ‘but is it finally identity, or finally difference?’ has misunderstood the structure it is looking at. Apophatic acosmism does not tell us whether God is finally the Thou or finally the ground. It tells us that the question ‘finally which?’ is the wrong question, because the apophatic Real is, by its nature, that about which the disjunction ‘either personal or impersonal’ cannot be decided. Wolfson gives us not the answer but the licence to stop demanding one—and that licence, I will argue, is what the theology of recovery most needs.



8. Chassidut and the Essence Beyond being and non-being

The Hasidic tradition, and Chabad in particular, pressed this apophatic logic to a point that bears directly on our antinomy. The doctrine of *ein od milvado*—‘there is nothing else besides Him’—can be read, and has been read, as the charter of an absorptive acosmism in which the world’s apparent independence is simply false and the self’s apparent separateness an illusion to be dispelled. On this reading Chabad hands the antinomy to the antithesis: all is God, the self is nothing, *bittul* (self-nullification) is the goal, and the personal Thou is a concession to the unenlightened.

But the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s exposition of the divine Essence, *Atzmus*, complicates this reading in a way that is decisive for the present argument. In the *Basi Le-Gani* discourse, the Rebbe expounds the Chabad doctrine that the Essence transcends the very categories of being (*yesh*) and non-being (*ayin*)—that God is

neither existence nor nothingness but the ground from which both emerge and in which both are unified, possessing the capacity for both manifestation and concealment precisely because reducible to neither.¹⁴ The implications for our dilemma are profound and have not, I think, been adequately drawn. A God who transcends being and non-cannot be absorbed into, because absorption presupposes a category—a something or a no-thing—into which the self might dissolve, and the Essence is neither. Yet this same God can be addressed, because the Essence, in its very transcendence of necessity, chooses relation over impersonal process. The personal is not, as the absorptive reading would have it, a lower rung to be climbed past on the way to the impersonal Absolute. The personal is what the Essence freely is, beyond the dichotomy of personal-and-impersonal that structures all our lesser thinking.

This is not, I must immediately insist, a resolution either. It is tempting to read the doctrine of *Atzmus* as

the final word that secures the personal God against the absorptive threat: the Essence is beyond being and non-being, therefore the Thou is safe. But the same doctrine that secures the Thou equally unsettles it. If the Essence transcends being and non-being, then it equally transcends the categories of personal and impersonal, of Thou and ground; and the assurance that it ‘chooses relation’ is itself a determination that the strict apophysis cannot underwrite without remainder. The Hasidic hitbodedut of Rebbe Nachman—solitary speech addressed to God ‘as to a best friend,’ in the forest, at night—presupposes absence as much as presence: one speaks into the darkness because the Friend is not present in the way objects are present, and the ga’aguim, the ache of longing, is not a defect to be overcome but the very medium of the relation.¹ The God of Breslov is both intimately addressed and permanently beyond reach, near enough to speak to and far enough to yearn for; and the longing recedes as the seeker approaches, so that the journey never ends. This is the antinomy lived as spiritual practice: the most intimate address presupposing the most radical distance, the depth and the Thou held together in a single ache that would be extinguished the instant either pole were allowed to win.

9. The Refusal of Resolution as a Spiritual Discipline

I have now assembled the witnesses, and they do not agree, and I want to argue that their disagreement is the truth. James reports a ‘more’ whose ownership he will not assign. Jung locates the divine at the centre of the psyche and refuses to say whether the centre is God or the image of God. Buber insists, correctly, that the Thou is irreducible to any experience of it. Wolfson gives the grammar of an identity-in-difference that names rather than dissolves the coincidence of union and alterity. The Rebbe expounds an Essence beyond being and non-being that secures the personal God in the same breath as it unsettles every determination of Him. Five witnesses, and not one of them closes the question. The temptation of the systematic theologian is to read this as five partial views awaiting a synthesis. I read it as five precise reports of a single irreducible structure, each declining, with integrity, to say more than can be said.

What would it mean to make this refusal a discipline rather than a mere acknowledgement of ignorance? It would mean, first, resisting the consolation of either pole. The recovering person, like the theologian, is

under constant pressure to settle. The pressure toward the thesis comes from the longing for a Someone who hears—the three-in-the-morning need for a God who is not merely the floor of one’s own consciousness but a Thou who can be cried out to and who answers. The pressure toward the antithesis comes from the longing for rest, for the dissolution of the anxious separate self, for the great peace of the wave returning to the sea. Both longings are holy and both are dangerous. To settle into the thesis alone is to risk the idolatry of a God shrunk to an object, a cosmic person of one’s own manufacture. To settle into the antithesis alone is to risk the dissolution of the self that must remain intact to be responsible, to make amends, to show up at the bedside. The discipline is to keep both longings unsatisfied, which is to say, both alive.

It would mean, second, treating the irresolution as generative rather than privative. An unanswered question can be a wound or it can be a spring. The mark of spiritual maturity, in recovery as in contemplative life, is the transmutation of the first into the second—the discovery that the not-knowing is not a deprivation of the contact but its very condition, that conscious contact is possible only because one does not collapse the contact into either knowledge of an object or merger with a ground. The sacred not-knowing that I have argued is central to therapeutic presence is the same not-knowing.¹ It is not ignorance awaiting information. It is a positive comportment, a way of being in relation that keeps the relation open by refusing to foreclose what the other—divine or human—ultimately is.

It would mean, third, accepting that the refusal is permanent. This is the hardest part, and it is where my earlier essay failed. I wanted the dilemma to be a stage—a tension that the spiritual life passes through on its way to a higher integration. I no longer believe there is a higher integration on this side of whatever lies beyond death. The antinomy is not a phase. It is the permanent shape of finite consciousness in relation to the infinite. The recovering person does not graduate from it; she learns to live in it, one day at a time, which is the only way anything in recovery is ever lived. The physician does not resolve it; he carries it into every room. The refusal of resolution is not a temporary expedient pending better data. It is the truth of the creature’s standing before the Creator, and the sooner it is embraced as such, the sooner it stops being a torment and starts being a home.

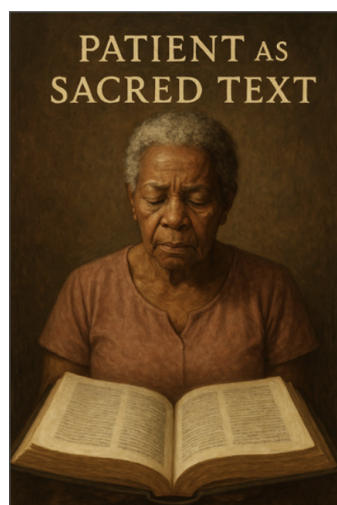
10. The Antinomy Under the Hidden Face

There is a place where the antinomy stops being a matter of contemplative refinement and becomes a matter of survival, and that place is the post-Holocaust condition. I have argued elsewhere, at length, for an uncompromising anti-theodicy: a refusal of every attempt to explain the Shoah theologically, and most emphatically of the obscene attempts to locate its cause in the victims' alleged deficiencies.¹⁶ The God who can be cleanly addressed as a Thou who hears and answers is difficult to sustain at Treblinka; the cry went up and the heavens, in Berkovits's phrase, kept their silence. Yet the God who is merely the impersonal ground of being, the non-dual Absolute into which all difference is reabsorbed, is worse than difficult—it is monstrous, because an impersonal Absolute cannot be protested, and protest is the one indispensable posture of faith after the catastrophe. If God is the ground of which the murderers and the murdered are equally modes, then the difference between them is penultimate, and that conclusion is not to be borne.

The post-Holocaust condition thus tightens the antinomy to an unbearable degree and, in tightening it, reveals why neither pole can be released. The thesis—the personal Thou—must be held, because without it there is no one to whom Job can address his accusation, and the accusation is sacred. The antithesis—the impersonal depth—cannot simply be discarded either, because the personal God held alone, after Auschwitz, becomes the God who could have intervened and did not, the colluding

bystander whose personhood is now an indictment. The doctrine of *hester panim*, the hiding of the face, is the tradition's name for the seam between these intolerable alternatives: a God who is neither absent (which would be the antithesis won, the impersonal void) nor present in the mode of intervention (which would be the thesis won, the answerable Thou), but present-as-hidden, addressed into a silence that is not the same as emptiness.¹⁶

Elliot Wolfson's apophatic discipline does its hardest work here. Post-Holocaust faith, on his account, must remain linguistically wounded; the divine name functions as a regulative limit rather than an ontological substrate; and the believer is permitted neither the consolation of a God who explains nor the oblivion of a God who is nothing.¹⁶ This is the antinomy at its most severe: one must go on addressing a Thou whom one can no longer cleanly believe to be there, into a depth that one cannot allow to be merely impersonal. The Piaseczner Rebbe, teaching in the Warsaw Ghetto, conceded in a marginal note that the present suffering exceeded all prior precedent—and went on teaching, went on addressing, without explaining.¹⁶ That is the discipline of the held antinomy under the most extreme conditions the tradition has known: address without theodicy, presence without explanation, a wounded speech that neither falls silent nor pretends the silence answers back. It is the same discipline, raised to its highest power, that the recovering alcoholic practises in the small hours and that the physician practises at the bed of the dying. The hidden face is the antinomy's most terrible and most truthful form.



11. The Bedside: Hermeneutic Medicine and the Held Antinomy

I am a neurologist before I am a theologian, and I do not trust a theology that cannot be carried into the

examining room. The framework I have developed over many years—hermeneutic medicine, the conviction that the patient is a sacred text requiring interpretive wisdom, that the clinical encounter is structured by a *tzimtzum* or self-contraction of the

physician that makes room for the patient's agency, and that healing is a phenomenology of presence rather than a transaction of repair—was built precisely to carry weight at the bedside.^{1, 15} I want to close by showing that the antinomy I have been describing is not an abstraction but the lived structure of clinical presence, and that the physician who has learned to inhabit it is the physician best able to sit with another person's suffering.

Consider the patient before me as the dilemma made flesh. Is this suffering person an irreducible Thou, another whom I can never reduce to the contents of my clinical gaze, whose interiority exceeds every measurement and every diagnosis—the patient as Buberian Thou, to be met and never possessed? Or is this person continuous with me at some depth below the difference of our roles, joined to me in a shared vulnerability, a common subjection to the body's fragility, so that in attending to her suffering I am attending to a depth that is also my own—the patient as the place where the boundary between self and other thins toward transparency? The honest answer is the antinomy. The patient is irreducibly other, and I am joined to her in the depths; and the clinical presence that heals is precisely the one that holds both without collapsing either. To collapse the patient into pure otherness is to risk the cold distance of the technician who treats a case rather than a person. To collapse her into pure identity—'I know exactly how you feel'—is to commit the violence of premature understanding, to dissolve her difference into my projection, to fail to leave her room to be herself.

The *tzimtzum* of the physician is the clinical form of the held antinomy. In contracting myself—in the disciplined self-effacement that makes room for the patient's own agency and meaning—I do not abolish myself, and I do not merge with the patient. I withdraw toward her without disappearing into her. The space that this contraction opens is neither the space between two objects nor the no-space of fusion; it is the relational space, structurally identical to the conscious contact of Step Eleven, in which presence becomes possible precisely because the contraction refuses both distance and absorption. The sacred not-knowing that I practise at the bedside—the refusal to explain the patient's suffering prematurely into a manageable category—is the same not-knowing that keeps the theological antinomy open.¹ I do not know, finally, what the patient is, any more than I know, finally, what God is; and in both cases the not-knowing is the condition of the contact rather than its frustration.

And when, as happens, I sit at the bedside of the dying—when there is nothing left to repair, no intervention left to offer, only presence—the antinomy reaches its sharpest point. The dying person is most absolutely other (no one can die another's death; the threshold is crossed alone) and most absolutely joined to me (I too will cross it; the shared mortality is total). To be present at that bedside is to be present at the exact seam where the Thou and the depth touch, where personal address and impersonal ground are simultaneously unavoidable and irreducible. The physician who has decided that the dying person is finally only another consciousness destined for reabsorption has been anaesthetised against the full weight of this death. The physician who has decided that the dying person is finally only another across an unbridgeable distance has been spared the full intimacy of it. The physician who has refused both decisions—who holds the antinomy open even here, especially here—is the one who can stay in the room.

12. Conclusion: The Confession Completed

I began with a confession and I end with one. The earlier essay proposed that the spiritual journey of recovery, and of the Jewish mystical tradition that illuminates it, is a movement from an external Thou toward an interiorised depth that nonetheless preserves relation—that Hasidism had shown how to have the depth without losing the Thou, and that this constituted a resolution of the ancient dilemma.¹ I now think the word 'resolution' was the error. There is no resolution. There is only the antinomy, held with greater or lesser honesty, inhabited with greater or lesser maturity.

The spiritual genius of the Twelve-Step tradition, and the clinical genius of presence at the bedside, lies not in choosing between Western covenantal theism and Eastern non-dual awareness, and not in synthesising them into a tidy third position, but in the disciplined refusal to do either. 'God as we understood Him' is not a sociological compromise among believers of different creeds. It is the codification, in the plainest possible language, of the antinomy itself: an instruction to remain in contact with the Real without deciding whether the Real is a Thou or a ground, because the deciding is precisely what would break the contact. William James named the 'more' and refused to assign its ownership. Buber preserved the irreducible Thou. Wolfson gave the grammar of an identity-in-difference that names rather than dissolves the coincidence. The Rebbe expounded an Essence

beyond being and non-being. None of them closed the question, and their refusal was not failure but fidelity.

The recovering self does not discover that it is God. It does not discover that God is merely the floor of its own interiority. It discovers that it cannot say which—and that its sobriety, its capacity to make amends, its ability to remain present at the bedside of another's dying, depend on not saying. The soul encounters the divine at the threshold where self and Other become inseparable without becoming identical, and the encounter survives only so long as the threshold is not forced to declare itself one thing or the other. This is not a theology of external rescue. It is not a psychology of self-realisation. It is the steady, lifelong, one-day-at-a-time inhabitation of an antinomy that is not a problem to be solved but the very shape of a finite consciousness held open before an infinite it can neither possess nor become. The wound, kept open, is the spring. That is the only resolution there is, and it is the resolution of refusing to resolve.

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