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Ghosts, God and the Problem of Dirty Hands

Abstract

Under the rubric of the problem of dirty hands, Sartre and Camus explored a new approach to political necessity. Yet it has always been difficult to translate the powerful dramatic image of dirty hands into a coherent account of a philosophical problem. Many Anglo-American philosophers have argued that such an account is impossible. In *Dawn*, however, Elie Wiesel resolves the relevant paradoxes by imaginatively exploiting the religious consciousness of the novel's main protagonist. Specifically, Wiesel adapts a traditional Jewish image of ghosts as a means of responding to the problem of dirty hands and then suggests a striking conception of God to complete this response.

1 Introduction

[1] This paper argues that Elie Wiesel expresses a deeply original insight into the problem identified with the title of one of Sartre's plays—*Dirty Hands*. This is surprising because dirty hands is the kind of ethical problem confronted by persons exercising political power whereas Wiesel is renowned for representing the victims of political violence. *Night*, his primordial narrative, is a fourteen-year old boy's horrifying account of the Nazi death camps. *Dawn* followed by *The Accident* provide fictional responses to that experience and complete a trilogy. The leading characters in these two novels emerge from the reality of *Night* along paths defined by very different choices, but they both carry a tremendous ethical burden. In the post-Holocaust world, Wiesel says, they must 'fulfill one command, one commandment: to tell the story, to bear witness' to all those who died (Wiesel 1985:54). *The Accident* tells the story of a person for whom suicide was an extremely tempting response to the burden of having to live on as a witness. However, this paper will focus on the political response represented in *Dawn* in order to explore an intriguing way of dealing with the problem of dirty hands.

[2] Section one will elucidate the claim that *Dawn* offers a paradigm case of dirty hands, but several Anglo-American philosophers have expressed serious doubts as to whether the problem can be coherently defined. Thus I need to address explicitly the difficulties of *definition* posed by an analytical method that is alien to Wiesel. Sections two and three elucidate *Dawn's response* to the problem of dirty hands, and success, I argue, depends on the way Wiesel draws upon the methods of post-war French philosophers with whom he was very familiar.¹ He

1. Wiesel's thought has been well studied from a theological perspective in Walker (1988) and Berenbaum (1980), for example. Dwelling on the problem of dirty hands opens up the possibility of a different approach. In particular, when asked about those 'major secular figures, literary or philosophic' who have influenced him, Wiesel answers: 'the strong influences are the

exploits, that is, 'the indirect communication of... value-images through imaginative literature that has become the hallmark of existentialism' (Flynn 1984:34). Wiesel's 'value-image' can be described more specifically as 'the survivor.' This distinctive 20th century literary protagonist recurs throughout his work, exhibiting the common consciousness of those who had physically survived the Nazi evil, but were left tortured with doubt and depression: 'They were abruptly forced to realize to what extent they were depleted. And vanquished. And stigmatized. And alone' (Wiesel 1962:5). In giving philosophical expression to that consciousness, Wiesel explicitly refers to Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* and to that feeling of absurdity brought on by the perceived discrepancy between human hopes and a reality indifferent to them. Nevertheless, the success of Wiesel's response to the problem of dirty hands also depends upon his ability to exploit religious resources quite alien to the atheism (or paganism) of such philosophical 'masters.' This is evident in the key roles played by 'ghosts' and God that will be discussed in section two and three, respectively.

2 Defining the Problem of Dirty Hands

[3] Elisha, *Dawn's* survivor, is offered asylum in Paris, but liberation from the Nazis brings on new suffering: 'I spent most of my time in my room, reading a book or sitting with my hands over my eyes, thinking about the past' (Wiesel 1961:13). A Zionist, Gad, manages to motivate Elisha, and after moving from Paris he confronts a Palestinian reality that calls for political action rather than the religious understanding cultivated by his boyhood mentors. *Dawn's* narrative, therefore, is appropriately framed by a piece of reasoning that has its source in Machiavelli. In other words, twenty centuries have proved that 'if ever it is a question of killing off Jews everyone is silent,' hence Jews must resort to every method of 'intimidation, terror and sudden death' in order to achieve 'an independent homeland... where every human act would be free' (Wiesel 1961:16). In the death camps, Elisha learned that 'Hitler is the only one who's kept his promises to the Jewish people' (Wiesel 1960:77) and after the war Gad convinces him that 'we can only rely on ourselves' (Wiesel 1961:26). However, the narrative is also colored by a Zionist variation on Sartre's notorious claim in his preface to Franz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, namely, when a Jew kills an oppressor, he or she also kills the person who was oppressed and, at the same time, creates a free person (Fanon 1968).

[4] Elisha, then, fires on English soldiers in skirmishes but he remains at a distance from the targets. So he does not immediately recognize the brutal significance of Gad's reasoning. That comes only when the English decide to hang an imprisoned Zionist, and an English soldier is captured in return. For Elisha is ordered to execute him. As he considers the order to kill another person in the most direct and deliberate manner, an exclamation by a character in Sartre's play, echoes in the background: 'How you cling to your purity, young man. But purity is

existentialist philosophers and writers. When I studied at the Sorbonne, they were *the* masters' (Wiesel 1985: volume 2, 112).

an idea for a yogi or monk. . . Well, I have dirty hands. Right up to the elbows, I've plunged them in filth and blood' (Sartre 1949:222). Sartre himself recognized that there were no truly sympathetic characters in *Dirty Hands*. From the point of view of the 21st century, moreover, his exploration of the forced 'compromise between the ideal and the real' in politics can easily appear too caught up in the internal machinations of 1950's communism (Sartre 1976:210). In *Dawn*, by contrast, the fact that it is a Holocaust survivor who is in the process of becoming an executioner seems to provide a dramatic example perfectly suited for negotiating the complexities of the problem of dirty hands. Nevertheless, this goes against conventional wisdom in Anglo-American treatments of the problem. Bernard Williams for example, says he is not interested in 'drastic' cases of dirty hands but rather in the 'everyday part of the business' of political morality (Williams 1978:62). The most compelling example of dirty hands in Leslie Griffin's careful examination of the problem does concern Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Hitler assassination plot, but the overall argument focuses on the everyday conflicts between religious and political morality (in the contemporary North American context) (Griffin 1985).

[5] The idea that it is best 'to look at the problem as it occurs in less extreme circumstances' is explicitly justified by H. Oberdiek (1986). He claims that extreme cases are dazzling, but they blind us to the reality that political agents are constantly in danger of dirtying their hands in sleazy though relatively mundane ways. The advantage of concentrating on the latter kind of actions, he argues, is that one must try to understand and assess them in terms of a complex network of moral principles and conventions. Extreme cases, on the other hand, tend to take place in 'state of nature situations' in which agents cannot rely on any accepted moral structures or limits. In this sense, of course, Wiesel is *not* representing an extreme case. *Dawn* does often refer to the Zionists as terrorists and Elisha describes himself as part of a group of young people who were 'apprentices of a school of terrorist techniques' (Wiesel 1961:25). Yet they only target English soldiers, eschewing the random violence against civilians that has come to define terrorism. Elisha, moreover, receives his orders after his leader has 'announced a new line of action, reprisals' (Wiesel 1961:6), and the concept of a reprisal is part and parcel of the rules or conventions of war.² *Dawn's* scenario, therefore, can be summed up as follows. By killing the English soldier, Elisha will cross a moral limit he was brought up to obey, but he certainly has not entered some state of nature where everything is permitted.

[6] This summary statement has to be couched in relatively neutral terms because differences of opinion regarding paradigm cases of dirty hands are symptomatic of the difficulty in *defining* the problem. Before I can explore Wiesel's manner of *responding* to it, then, I must try to clarify the puzzling nature of Elisha's transgression. There are two main lines of interpretation. The first is best identified with Michael Walzer's classic defense of the moral significance of dirty

2. My understanding of the relationship between reprisals and 'just war theory' follows that of Michael Walzer (1977:207-12).

hands (1974). His argument starts with Machiavelli's premise that 'good' people have engrained moral habits that prevent them from committing the 'evil' acts that might be politically necessary. Hence Walzer must take seriously the corollary that a virtuous Jew such as Elisha must 'learn how not to be good' (Machiavelli 1980:84) in order to become an effective political agent. His crucial point, however, is that none of Machiavelli's protagonists possess the requisite 'inwardness' that enables them to respond appropriately when it is necessary to contradict morality. The emotional experience of transgression – the horror suffered by Elisha when contemplating the execution – is completely alien to Cesare Borgia, for example. As a result, Machiavelli cannot acknowledge a defining feature of dirty hands. This comes out in the very different understanding of the central difficulty embodied in the question 'how can I do this evil deed?' Machiavelli concentrates on the *technical* skills required for success whereas Wiesel is concerned with Elisha's ability to overcome the *emotional* resistance to such a deed (and then to live with what he has done afterwards).

[7] The conclusion to be drawn from Walzer's argument is paradoxical. The feeling of guilt carried by a person who has committed a politically justified crime is the sign by which we recognize the moral politician. As Leslie Griffin puts it: 'it is by his dirty hands that we know him [the moral politician]' (Griffin 1985:34). Dirty hands might not be something we strive for, but it is defined as a worthy state. Although he uses less charged language than Walzer, Bernard Williams concurs. The politicians we most admire are those 'who will hold on to the idea, that there are actions which remain morally disagreeable even when politically justified' (Williams 1978:64). Recognizing the 'morally disagreeable' nature of such actions, Williams adds, engenders a 'reluctance' to act (even though the actions are eventually performed, as is necessary). This reluctance, moreover, suggests that the politician will likely *not* do something wrong at those times when it is not politically justified. This admiring view of dirty hands is completely opposed by a second line of interpretation that I will identify with R. M. Hare. Hare's argument needs to be examined in some detail. Still, a key criticism is that any interpretation attributing such moral significance to an agent's emotional disposition – regardless of whether the intensity of guilt is described as horrific or merely disagreeable – is based on the fallacious equation of 'having sinned with a sense of having sinned' (Hare 1974:60).

[8] Consider *Dawn* in the light of Hare's claim. In particular, it might appear that the strength of Elisha's belief that he will actually be doing something wrong in performing the reprisal is indistinguishable from his sense of horror at performing it. If Elisha's certitude is juxtaposed with his rock-solid commitment to doing as he is ordered, then *Dawn's* dirty hands logic appears to be primarily a psychological problem. This impression is aesthetically enhanced by the lack of conventional suspense in the narrative. Wiesel, in other words, does not encourage the reader to wonder whether Elisha will *decide* to become an executioner. Instead, the reader is absorbed by the spectacle of him trying to *understand* his transformation from victim to executioner. From Hare's perspective, Elisha's fundamental acquiescence to his transformation reflects the absence in *Dawn* of

moral deliberation. After all, in agonizing over the nature of his transgression he evades ‘the agony of mind which comes, in difficult cases, from calculation of the consequences of alternative actions’ (Hare 1974:60). The moment this ‘calculation’ comes to the foreground, moreover, the neglected question of whether Elisha was in fact doing something wrong becomes a live issue.

[9] Recall, for instance, that he is contemplating an action that is, in principle, sanctioned by the conventions of war. The English were about to execute a person whom the Zionists considered a soldier captured in battle. A reprisal killing (one soldier for one soldier) might be justified, therefore, by the aim of ensuring that the English uphold the relevant rule in the future. Dwelling on the details and balancing all the variables relevant to the Palestinian context, one might come to the opposite conclusion. Nevertheless, if Elisha concludes that the reprisal was morally justified then he would not be doing something wrong (or criminal) in following his orders. On the other hand, if it was not justified then he ought not to kill the hostage despite his orders. The relevant point is that in neither case would the feeling of guilt be appropriate. Hence Hare’s line of interpretation effectively *dissolves* the problem of dirty hands and, at the same time, suggests a psychological explanation for the appearance of the *alleged* problem, namely, an unrealistic attraction toward ‘clean hands.’ A theist, for example, might be convinced ‘that God has laid down some relatively simple rules and that by observing these we can keep ourselves unspotted and safe from hellfire’ (Hare 1974:60). The sixth commandment that Elisha will disobey is a perfect example of such a rule, but if Elisha would only realize that no moral principle is ‘epistemologically sacrosanct’ (Hare 1974:60) then he could deliberate as to *whether* the principle applies in this situation. Believing *a priori* that he will be acting wrongly, however, his attention is focused on the terrible vision of his hands that will no longer be clean.

[10] A Wiesel survivor is especially vulnerable to this kind of psychological explanation. After all, *Night* describes the tremendous striving for religious purity in the young Jew—an overwhelming desire to worship God, obey his laws and hence keep his hands perfectly clean. Hare’s overall line of interpretation, however, has been remarkably effective in undermining the credibility of the very problem of dirty hands because he exploits the latter’s inconsistency with a widely accepted ethical theory. A more sympathetic appreciation of the problem can only be had, therefore, if this inconsistency is addressed. In brief, the key argument is this. If moral deliberation is concerned with the consequences of actions and if deliberation is shaped by a unitary value – utility – then there is always, in principle, a ‘right answer’ to the question of right *or* wrong in specific situations. Persons alleged to be suffering from dirty hands believe they are doing what is right *and* wrong. Hence the metaethical premise that it is possible to determine the right action ensures the dissolution of the problem. As a consequence, a psychological explanation of an irrational state needs to be substituted for a philosophical exploration of a moral problem.

[11] Oberdiek sharpens the edge on this conclusion. If a person is doing wrong he ought not to do it, but if he is doing what is right ‘and *believes* himself

to be guilty, what he needs is therapy not penance' (Oberdiek 1986:54). Looking ahead to the next two sections of this paper, it is significant that Oberdiek's sarcasm tries to undercut a potential religious approach to dirty hands. For he is implying that the religious guilt on which 'penance' depends, can be little more than a vague substitute for moral guilt that is, *ex hypothesi*, irrational. Of immediate significance, however, is the clarity with which Oberdiek expresses the central criticism carried by the Hare line, namely, that someone who believes she is doing right *and* wrong needs a therapist to help her 'get over it.' The latter formulation suggests two essential features of a definition that can resist the relevant criticism. The first simply consists in an explicit adoption of Walzer's metaethical premise regarding the incommensurability of values (in this case the incommensurability of moral and political values). As such, Elisha will be doing something that is *morally* wrong and *politically* right rather than reacting irrationally by evading the deliberative process that can determine what is right or wrong. Stated more positively, he is exhibiting an appropriate emotional reaction to a situation that resists a rational resolution. The injunction to 'learn how not to be good' embodies a genuine paradox, not just theoretical confusion.

[12] Secondly, then, it is not necessary to refer a person suffering from dirty hands to a psychiatrist or counselor immediately. There is now a place for a legitimate philosophical treatment of this suffering, and one of the first things to be examined is an ethical blind spot inherent in Hare's utilitarian approach. In other words, Hare assumes that the agonies of deliberation (in all situations, not just those that have traditionally been identified under the rubric of dirty hands) lie in *determining* what action is right in a ratiocinative process. Hence, when that decision is made – and weakness of will notwithstanding – *performing* the action is as uncontroversial as moving a chess piece after the decision has been made to move this particular piece to that place. In many difficult situations, by contrast, the hard part of deliberation is figuring out *how* to perform the action. I might decide to tell the truth even though this will hurt a number of people (and despite the comforting white lie that is available) but then realize that how I am going to do this is as difficult a question as whether I am going to do it. In sum, a decision or discrete action must be understood as part of the total performance (as it is elaborated over a relevant time span). Simone de Beauvoir gave an excellent exposition of the existentialist position in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (De Beauvoir 1948) but more recent work in neo-Aristotelian virtue theory and moral psychology is also conducive to this point of view.³ Many philosophers, accordingly, have started to use fictional models and to appeal to moral exemplars as the means of elucidating just how actions emerge from situations saturated with a cluster of idiosyncrasies defining social and personal identity. Indeed, Walzer's philosophical analysis of dirty hands, we will see, draws heavily on Camus's play, *The Just Assassins*.

[13] In this broad ethical context, then, I can conclude the discussion of the

3. The literature is growing but two books by Martha Nussbaum (1990) and D.Z. Phillips (1982), and a collection by Kruschwitz and Roberts (1987) are good examples.

definitional ambiguities of the problem of dirty hands. First of all, the problem is bound up with a characteristic of action in general, namely, that the degree of moral difficulty lies as much in performance as it does in deliberation. The two dimensions are, to be sure, intimately connected but in different cases the weight falls more on one than the other. When it falls on deliberation – for example, a relatively mundane case could involve immense detail and myriad principles – then the discursive reasoning of a philosopher or theologian might best represent the moral situation. In a profoundly troubling case, on the other hand, the rationales for divergent options could be self-evident, and then the talents of a novelist or playwright might best represent the way a person performs her chosen line of action. Nevertheless, in cases that specifically involve dirty hands, this characteristic of action is magnified to the extreme. Such a claim is consistent with my earlier point that *Dawn* does not represent an ‘extreme’ case. For then the reference was to Oberdiek’s use of the word to signify some state of nature situation in which everything is permitted. It should now be apparent that *no* case of dirty hands is extreme in that sense. Hence my present point is quite different. That is, in so far as a person confronts the familiar difficulties of performing moral action in a situation that must be understood in terms of incommensurable values, she might take on the task of doing what is morally wrong *in a manner that is morally right*.

^[14] In highlighting this performative dimension of an action, I am obviously defining the moral situation partly in terms of the specific character and role(s) of the agent who must act in it. *Dawn*’s protagonist is a survivor, and this reaffirms the value of using Wiesel’s example as a paradigm case of dirty hands. After all, a survivor occupies a place on the opposite end of the moral spectrum from a potentially psychopathic Machiavellian protagonist who cannot fulfil the definitional criteria of dirty hands. The experience of a devout Jew in the death camps certainly does not guarantee the emotional reaction (to the execution) deemed appropriate by Walzer’s line of interpretation. For Elisha could be overwhelmed by vengeful hatred of a perceived oppressor, or his identification with the victim could engender a pacifistic refusal to kill. As a contingent fact of his personality, however, Elisha does exhibit the ‘appropriate’ emotional complex. So, a moral person burned by his experience of evil now tries to perform an execution (that he believes can be justified on political but not moral grounds) in a morally right way. There can be no doubting the dramatic impact of Wiesel’s representation of moral action *in extremis*. Still, there is one crucial qualification to be made. The emotional reaction of a person who suffers from dirty hands is only one of two conditions that are necessary in order to perform what is morally wrong in a manner that is morally right. The emotional reaction, that is, forms part of the *definition* of the problem of dirty hands but it must be clearly distinguished from a possible *response* to the problem.

^[15] To identify the emotion with the response (and reduce the way one performs the action to the emotion evoked by the thought of performing it) would be to align Wiesel with Julia Kristeva’s argument regarding Raskolnikov. Dostoevski’s character, she says, ‘is not a nihilist but a man of values’ because not

only is he ‘conscious of his transgressive act’ (180) but his consciousness implies suffering. Hence ‘his suffering is the proof of’ his commitment to those values that contradict moral convention. In the context of *Dawn*, however, interpreting Elisha’s suffering as an adequate response to his transgression invites a charge of self-indulgence. This would be trying, as Walzer puts it, ‘to resolve the problem of dirty hands entirely within the individual conscience’ (Walzer 1974:79). Dirty hands must include the *inward* reaction, but also an *outward* response that can add shape and evoke the insight characteristic of an admirable performance. This implies that a complete definition of the problem includes a response to it. Still, although the next two sections will argue that *Dawn* does represent a adequate response to Elisha’s dirty hands, there is no need to decide right now whether it is best to operate with a more restricted or richer definition. The point to consider is whether an argument regarding Elisha’s response can elaborate and strengthen the central claim made in this section, namely, that Wiesel is dealing with a legitimate philosophical problem.

3 Elisha’s Ghost Story

[16] This section shifts from a more analytical approach to the problem of dirty hands, to one that better suits Wiesel’s narrative account of Elisha’s response to the problem. Wiesel makes a general comment on the character of his writing in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech: ‘I am not a real philosopher who must iron out ideas and give them shape and moral structure. I just try to provide them with tales as raw material’ (Wiesel 1985:252). Given contemporary debates regarding what it is that constitutes a ‘real’ philosopher, there is some irony in Wiesel’s modest disclaimer that he is just a tale-teller. For it might be argued that philosophers should leave behind any ambition of expressing transcendental truths and start devising stories for the edification of humanity. Still, it is interesting that a writer such as Richard Rorty can tell thoroughly intriguing ‘stories’ of his own about the philosophical tradition which humanity has outgrown. Whereas when he turns from deconstruction to the imaginative narratives that will replace the tradition, he appeals to other writers—for example, Proust, Nabokov and Orwell (Rorty: 1989). This might simply be a matter of recognizing one’s limitations. Regarding dirty hands, however, discursive analysis can dissolve the problem and partially rehabilitate it too, but an adequate response requires a narrative account of the total performance. Hence it is a real disadvantage to be dependent on other people’s stories. The response contained in Walzer’s line of interpretation – derived from Camus’s *Just Assassins* – is a case in point.

[17] Walzer believes that Camus’s assassins can be described as ‘just’ not because their assassination serves the political good (although it does) but rather because they accept punishment for their moral wrongdoing. Their decision to die constitutes what I have called an outward response to a crime that must be distinguished from the appropriate inward response. Voluntarily accepting death *authenticates* their feelings of guilt. It is noteworthy that Walzer uses the concept of penance to capture this ‘most attractive’ feature of Camus’s thinking: ‘it

requires us at least to imagine a punishment or penance that fits the crime' (Walzer 1974:81). For this concept is an integral part of a traditional moral outlook. In the final sentence of Gore Vidal's *Lincoln: A Novel*, for example, Lincoln's personal secretary muses that he was 'more than ever convinced that Lincoln in some mysterious fashion, had willed his own murder as a form of atonement for the great and terrible thing he had done by giving so bloody and absolute a rebirth to his nation' (Vidal 1984:657). Camus's assassins, that is, share with a soon to be assassinated Lincoln the profound need to deal with their dirty hands, and Vidal uses the same sort of moral vocabulary as Camus to articulate a response: willing one's own death consists in the *penance* that is necessary for *atonement* of the moral wrong. In the light of Richard Swinburne's analysis of the relevant concepts, however, it is clear that Camus's atonement model is not at all adequate to the task.

[18] 'Dealing with guilt,' Swinburne says, 'is not unnaturally seen as removing it' (Swinburne 1989:81), and atonement is the process in which the guilt produced by wrongdoing rightly 'disappears' (Swinburne 1989:87). On the face of it, this is consistent with Camus's dirty hands narrative because 'on the scaffold' the assassins 'wash their hands clean' (Walzer 1974:80). As Leslie Griffin reiterates, once a wrongdoer has 'undergone the penalty, her hands are clean again' (Griffin 1985:34). Yet a complication starts to emerge. Even if we assume that voluntary death does offer a good fit for the assassins' crime, various forms of dirty hands provoke different intensities of guilt (from the 'disagreeable' feelings of Bernard Williams's subjects, to the horror experienced by a Wiesel survivor). And insofar as it is extremely difficult to determine fitting penance in anything other than capital cases, Camus might be offering an exceptional rather than a paradigm case of dirty hands. For example, the consequences of a politically necessary lie can ripple through many lives causing all sorts of suffering and discomfort, but it is implausible to imagine appropriate penance in the form of a liar engineering an equally damaging lie against her own self, family and friends. Indeed, the very idea of understanding penance in terms of a conventional model of legal punishment – where fittingness is achieved by a rough conversion into the currency of fines, prison sentences or even death – is likely to hinder any effort to capture moral complexity. Swinburne's approach is much more plausible. For he retains penance as an essential aspect of atonement, yet requires the penance in a specific case to be part and parcel of a customized mix of apology and reparation directed to the person who has been wronged.

[19] If one takes this approach and focuses on the victim's role in the restorative process of atonement then a complication in Camus's model starts to look like a fundamental weakness. For instance, Walzer finds the 'moral extremism' of this model attractive – because voluntary death provides a way of removing guilt in the most drastic cases of dirty hands – yet he is wary of the counter-intuitive implication that the assassins 'die happy' (Walzer 1974:81). In a qualified form, though, this implication is unavoidable given the root metaphors that express Camus's moral logic: knowing that their hands are being cleansed, the assassins must at the very least feel relieved of a huge burden at the moment of death. The

flaw in this reasoning lies in not recognizing that it is precisely in cases 'where the victim is dead' that it might not be possible to 'make adequate atonement' (Swinburne 1989:88). In fact, according to Swinburne's account of atonement one must further conclude that it is not possible to use an atonement model for understanding any case of dirty hands at all. For an integral part of atonement is a wrongdoer 'privately and publicly *disowning*' her act (Swinburne 1989:82, emphasis added), and a minimal condition of disowning an act is the agent's acknowledgement that the same decision would not be made if she could do things over again. Quite simply, since the act was wrong it ought not to have been done. Regarding any case of dirty hands, therefore, an atonement model generates a conclusion identical to that of Hare's utilitarianism: the very paradox that defines the problem must be dissolved, and the question of an appropriate response to dirty hands becomes irrelevant.

[20] Before exploring the extra-moral, religious dynamics of Wiesel's narrative, it is helpful to summarize the contrast with the moral logic of atonement. First of all, it makes no aesthetic sense to talk of disowning one's action in *Dawn* because the focus is on Elisha's consciousness in the period before the execution of John Dawson when a simple refusal to perform a morally wrong act would avoid the question inconsistent with atonement. Recognizing that 'I ought not to dirty my hands in the first place,' in other words, Elisha would not have to grapple with the question that consumes him, namely, '*how* can I do what is wrong?' Unlike Camus, however, Wiesel does not identify an appropriate response with devising a way of removing the guilt brought on by the execution after it is performed. For Elisha quickly realizes the impossibility of this task. He knows that victims (in *Dawn*, *The Just Assassins* and *Lincoln*, etc.) remain dead no matter what happens afterwards. Once his hands are bloodied they remain bloody forever:

There lies the problem: in the influence of the backdrop of the play upon the actor. War has made me an executioner, and an executioner I would remain even after the backdrop had changed, when I was acting in another play upon a different stage (Wiesel 1961:69).

[21] This crucial realization is shaped by Elisha's experience as a Wiesel survivor whose *raison d'être* is to bear witness to those who died at the hands of the Nazis. He cannot be anything other than exceptionally sensitive to the consciousness of a victim. Everyone, he says, might forget his action: 'But the dead... would remember. In their eyes I should be forever branded a killer' (Wiesel 1961:69). Elisha's experience, of course, cuts two ways. Perhaps he would resist the decision of Camus's assassins to die voluntarily not because of any inconsistencies and misconceptions but because that would mean doing to himself what the Nazis did not succeed in doing. Nevertheless, however one might speculate about the causes of Elisha's beliefs, *Dawn's* scenario is brutally clear. Its protagonist is both committed to doing what he thinks is wrong and is certain that his hands can never be cleansed.

[22] With these necessary conditions for responding to the problem of dirty hands in place, it is now possible to consider what is the right way for

Elisha to perform the execution—*the way that might enable him to live with it afterwards*. Everything depends upon Elisha’s religiosity and I will closely examine two essential features of his performance. Section three concentrates on the role of God. In the remainder of this section, I will examine the role of the ghosts in *Dawn*. For Elisha endures the wait before the execution deadline in ‘a night of many faces’ (Wiesel 1961:56). At first, the Zionist fighters sit around drinking tea, and ‘in order to kill time,’ Elisha says, ‘we spoke of our memories, of such of them that centered on death’ (Wiesel 1961:38). After a while, however, his companions tire and start to slip in and out of a sleep that eludes Elisha. Ghosts from the past then enter the room and haunt him in his solitude. It does no good to interpret these ghosts as Elisha’s externalized conscience because this is a person who scarcely needs to be told that what he is going to do is morally wrong. Nor would that interpretation do justice to the subtlety of Wiesel’s ghostly aesthetics.⁴ It is noteworthy, for example, that Elisha’s ghosts appear with no dramatics and without any attempt at strong visual definition. They do appear ‘suddenly’ (Wiesel 1961:54) but that nod to convention is muted because Elisha’s consciousness initially registers only the extreme stuffiness of the room. ‘No wonder’ the room is stifling, Elisha says, because ‘ever since midnight the visitors had been pouring in’ in the form of ‘names without faces or faces without names’ (Wiesel 1961:54). This seemingly off-hand entrance is set up by the mention, earlier in *Dawn*, that according to Jewish tradition the dead rise from their tombs at midnight to pray in the synagogue. The appearance of the ghosts, then, is an unexpected, but unsurprising and logical occurrence.

^[23] In that one respect, Wiesel is in the same position as Shakespeare who knew that Hamlet (and the play’s Elizabethan audience) would immediately understand the ghost of Hamlet’s father to be a restless occupant of purgatory—‘till the foul crimes done in my days of nature are burnt and purged away’ (Shakespeare 1963:58, I,v,12–13). It is true that *Hamlet’s* ghost is more frightening than *Dawn’s* ghosts but this is wholly due to philosophical differences in the interpretive background. For the souls of the dead in purgatory could actively beseech and receive help from the living. By rectifying the present situation in Denmark, Hamlet could alleviate the suffering of his dead father. Not to do so would leave himself vulnerable to revenge by the ghost. In *Hamlet in Purgatory*, by contrast, Stephen Greenblatt emphasizes that Jews lack the Christian interest in the after-life and specifically the concept of purgatory. Jewish tradition, that is, lacked the cognitive space in which the dead could pursue their survivors and be helped by them in any way. Indeed, the *kaddish* functions as an act of memory with almost nothing specific being said about the dead (Greenblatt 2001).

^[24] The philosophical significance of the ghost motif in *Dawn*, then, is thoroughly bound up with the aesthetics of Wiesel’s religiosity. *Night’s* narrative of entering and surviving the Holocaust, for instance, is voiced by a sensitive,

4. Ellen S. Fine (1982:31-46) explores the Lazarus like quality of Elisha with clarity, but her interest is in *Elisha’s ghost-like characteristics* rather than the status of the *ghosts themselves*. My reference below, to the ‘cognitive and social background’ of ghosts depends on R.C. Finucane’s helpful overview (1996) of the various cultural transformations of ghostly appearances.

studious boy whose consciousness is structured and emotionally textured by the enigmatic stories of the Hasidic masters and the ‘revelations and mysteries of the cabala’ (Wiesel 1960:3). In *Dawn*, Elisha listens to Gad’s Zionist political with the same consciousness: ‘I listened with my eyes and mind wide open. Just as I had listened as a child to the grizzled master who revealed to me the mysterious universe of the Cabala, where every idea is a story’ (Wiesel 1961:16). Faced with the problem of dirty hands brought on by his involvement in Palestinian politics, Elisha does not talk like a character in a play by Sartre or Camus—a character who would, in some sense, have to respond to Walzer and Hare on their terms. Instead, his struggle with dirty hands takes place in a world ‘where every idea is a story.’ He does not engage in discursive reasoning but moves from one story or dramatic memory to another in a kind of ‘cinematic meditation’ on dirty hands.⁵ Still, it is possible to tease out and ponder the idea of Elisha’s ghost story. Consider, for instance, that purgatory reflects a curiosity in the dead – in the perspective of the dead who have a vested interest in the living – whereas the Jewish background of *Dawn* highlights the perspective of the living.

^[25] To define ghosts quite neutrally as the dead that come back to life and haunt the living, obviously involves no commitment to the existence of ghosts. Yet Horkheimer and Adorno’s brief essay, ‘On Ghosts,’ implies that the Jewish perspective has no advantage over the Christian regarding the ontological problem of ghosts. For ‘absolute nothingness is inconceivable’ hence it does little good to focus on the experience of the living at those times when the living are trying to conceive the dead (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972:215). Nevertheless, the dead can *in some way* continue to *influence* those who survive them, and Wiesel, no less than Shakespeare, is attempting to represent this influence. Indeed, the powerful and often bizarre way we are affected by the dead is what motivates us to engage in that impossible task of conceiving the dead. Ghosts, let us say, exist as sensory manifestations of volatile affects and, as such, they can be an aesthetically potent way of trying to conceive the troubling *relationship* between the living and dead. However, what exactly is the motivation fuelling this complex relationship? Freud claimed that belief in ghosts is rooted in ‘hostile feelings harbored by the survivors against the dead’ (Freud 1950:78). This hostility is only one dimension of the highly ambivalent relationship because those who mourn the dead also feel affection for them. In fact, according to Freud, the feeling of satisfaction evoked by someone’s death is so disturbing to the survivor that it is repressed and then unconsciously projected onto the dead. Hostility toward the dead, in other words, is transformed into the hostility of a ghost toward the living, against which the living must defend themselves.

^[26] These Freudian speculations illuminate the specific circumstances of a Wiesel survivor. When the father in *Night* finally died on January 29, 1945, the Nazis had destroyed all possibility of performing the traditional mourning rituals

5. This phrase is taken from V.S. Pritchett’s review of Wiesel’s *A Beggar in Jerusalem* (1970). Pritchett aptly notes that many of Wiesel’s tales are ‘perilously suspended between a *nouveau roman* and a new Jewish Psalm,’ reiterating the influence of postwar French aesthetics and philosophy on Wiesel.

expressing love and respect: ‘There were no prayers at his grave. No candles were lit to his memory. His last word was my name. A summons to which I did not respond’ (Wiesel 1960:106). His son does not even weep. Indeed, had he been able to fathom his feelings he ‘might perhaps have found something like—free at last!’ In contrast to the ‘primitive peoples’ examined in *Totem and Taboo*, the boy is very conscious of the original feeling of satisfaction at the death of the father. However, this might intensify the ambivalence of his emotions and create a variety of damaging scenarios for the future of a Wiesel survivor. After all, a primary function of mourning rituals is to provide a means of working through hostile feelings and letting go of those who have been lost. In *The Accident*, Eliezer is so traumatized that he cannot stop remembering the dead. In Nietzsche’s words, the ‘power to forget’ that is ‘a preserver of psychic order’ and health, shuts down (Nietzsche 1969:57). So he identifies his own self with the dead and his suicide attempt takes place within this state of melancholia.⁶ Elisha’s involvement in the Zionist movement has absorbed his attention and given him the promise of a new life. So the situation in *Dawn* is more complicated. On the one hand, his ambivalent feelings have in fact been actively repressed. On the other hand, the hostility he consequently projects onto the ghosts does not have a straightforward Freudian look because he is not conscious of the ghosts coming back ‘eager to kill’ him (Freud 1950:79). Rather, they have come to *morally judge* him.

^[27] More accurately, Elisha *initially* thinks that the role of the ghosts is to stand in judgement over him: ‘in their frozen world the dead have nothing to do but judge, and because they have no sense of past and future they judge without pity’ (Wiesel 1961:70). They also ‘judge in advance’—before a crime has been committed. Since his crime is murder, he is convinced they are condemning him, and Elisha rationalizes, exclaiming to his father’s ghost ‘Don’t judge me. Judge God’ (Wiesel 1961:72). According to Camus’s model of dirty hands, his redemptive insight ought to come with an acknowledgment of their judgement and acceptance of punishment. Wiesel’s profound insight, on the contrary, lies in a radical revaluation of the relationship between living and dead that has the effect of *eliminating* guilt from each side. From the perspective of the living, there can be no doubt that a Wiesel survivor lives with a degree of guilt with regard to those who died (bound up with the relief at having lived). When the burden of living weighs the survivor down, however, there is likely to be a reversal of the Freudian claim that the dead ‘is envious of the living (Freud 1950:75). The survivor is likely to be *envious of the dead*. Pondering the ghosts, Elisha says: ‘as I let my eyes wander about the room I realized that all of those who had contributed to. . . the formation of my personal identity were there’ (Wiesel 1961:54). How could he not conceive with envy all those people, now dead, who have helped shape his personality? For *he* is the victim who in order to make a new life must become an executioner. Weighed down with the specific problem of dirty hands, his envy will

6. The psychology is elucidated in *Mourning and Melancholia* (Freud 1957) and *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (Kristeva 1989). Christopher J. Frost examines the differences between a psychological and religious interpretation of this state of consciousness in the Hasidic tradition and Wiesel’s work in particular (Frost 1985).

be heavily mixed with other hostile feelings—betrayal and desertion by the dead, for example.

[28] From the perspective of the dead, on the other hand, it soon becomes apparent that assignment of guilt is not the point. Consider that the ghosts are *silent*. There are two exceptions. His mother sobs ‘poor boy’ over and over again, as if acknowledging the appropriateness of his envy. There is also a small boy who is perhaps the ghost of the Elisha who will die when he executes Dawson—in the following, therefore, I will refer to him ‘Elisha’s ghost.’ He makes the crucial statement: ‘We’re not here to sit in judgement. We’re here simply because you’re here. We’re present wherever you go; we are what you do’ (Wiesel 1961:75). The ghosts are present in order to *witness* Elisha’s murder. There is no moral judgement in these silent witnesses, as is evident in the act of self-recognition they evoke in Elisha. ‘With all those who had formed me around me,’ he says ‘I had no right to stop up my ears and close my eyes’ (Wiesel 1961:62). If Elisha is going to take the irredeemable step of killing the prisoner then he must do so in full view of those who have taught him never to murder. This is *how* it must be performed. Elisha’s ghost says that ‘we want to see you turn into a murderer’ (Wiesel 1961:57) and Elisha recognizes that ‘in murdering a man I was making them [the dead] murderers’ (Wiesel 1961:58). Wiesel is not implying some notion of collective responsibility. Rather, in accepting the obligation to perform his action out in the open rather than in secret, Elisha renews his commitment to the moral community that defines his transgression.

[29] This sort of communal context is lacking in Camus’ model.⁷ That is why Walzer seeks an outward response to the problem of dirty hands in terms of punishment that atones for the guilt and hence cleans one’s hands. Wiesel avoids the inherent problems of that model by devising an imaginative ritual in which the hands are dirtied in an appropriate way. Horkheimer and Adorno capture the basic reason why the Jewish tradition is capable of generating such an approach. They note that the absence of an authentic, healthy relationship to the dead often spawns a policy of ‘rationalized oblivion’ within which the living repress their knowledge of how the dead influence and affect them (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972:215). That is an attractive option for Elisha. Indeed, Illana, his fellow fighter, urges him to treat any ghosts as *merely* a figment of his imagination. Dispel them as illusions and fantasies. Concentrate, she says, on what will happen when the English are gone, the war is won and everyone leads a normal life in an independent country: ‘you’ll have forgotten this night, this room, me, and everything else’ (Wiesel 1961:66). In this sense, however, it is dangerous to forget

7. S. L. Sutherland develops this weakness of the traditional existentialist approach: ‘the problem of dirty hands, as focused on the intentions of a lone political actor trapped in a vicious scenario, distorts our understanding of the nature of politics’ (1995:503). His analysis of the way public deliberation retrospectively transforms the meaning of an ‘immoral’ act performed by a political agent is persuasive, but he draws the conclusion that such an act is thereby ‘subjected to a public reconstruction that *moralizes* it from the exterior’ (490 emphasis added). Wiesel’s response contains a public dimension, but in line with my argument he rightly refrains from trying to ‘moralize’ or atone for the act.

because to do so means forgetting all those the people who taught him the sixth commandment. Horkheimer and Adorno suggest what happens when the living engage in a policy of rationalized oblivion: ‘the dead suffer a fate which the Jews in olden days considered the worst possible curse: they are expunged from the memory of those who live on’ (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972:216). Ironically enough, it is in his act of disobeying them that Elisha refuses to do this. The presence of the ghosts ensure that he dirties his hands fully conscious of what he is destroying and hence in solidarity with the past as well as the future.

4 God’s Experience of Dirty Hands

[30] The argument that *Dawn* represents an adequate outward response to the problem of dirty hands now needs to address the disturbing fact that the victim seems to exist vaguely on the periphery of Elisha’s consciousness. For unless Elisha can integrate the victim’s perspective into his performance of the execution, *Dawn*’s scenario will remain vulnerable to a charge of self-indulgence. What happens, then, when the executioner, Elisha, finally meets his victim, John Dawson? Wiesel has used Elisha’s ghosts to set the stage for this confrontation but they are not sufficient to complete the performance of Elisha’s terrible task. To do so Wiesel must devise the appearance of *God*, and section three examines *Dawn*’s strikingly non-traditional image of the divine God insofar as it is implicated in the the problem of dirty hands. To begin with the obvious, Elisha and Dawson are political antagonists. In line with his Zionist mentors, Elisha observes that the tragedy of Jews arose partly because of ‘their inability to hate those who have humiliated and from time to time exterminated them’ (Wiesel 1961:98). Liberation depends on ‘learning the necessity and the art of hate’ (Wiesel 1961:98). So, Elisha must conceive Dawson as ‘the enemy’ because ‘the enemy has no story’ (Wiesel 1961:88) and it is far easier emotionally (and more efficient politically) to kill someone with no story to define a face and personality. Still, as Elisha goes in to meet Dawson, the ghosts come with him and hence he is under an obligation not to perform his action in secret. The emotional substance of his obligation consists in purging himself of the hatred that distorts his vision and enables him not to see certain things. In learning how not to be good, ironically enough, Elisha must unlearn the Zionist lesson aimed at teaching him how not to see.

[31] How can this condition of Elisha’s performance be described as something other than a personal attribute? As the two men face each other in the ‘age-old situation’ (84) of victim confronting executioner, Elisha *listens* to Dawson. They talk and tell stories about themselves. Elisha’s response to Dawson sparks a whirl of shifting identities. Elisha, whose father was killed by the Nazis, learns that Dawson has a son his own age, and in killing Dawson, Elisha will also kill the innocent boy he once was. As Elisha extends his awareness of what he is doing, God appears as suddenly but as unobtrusively as the ghosts did earlier on: ‘we were the first – or the last – men of creation; certainly we were alone. And God? He was present, somewhere. Perhaps He was incarnate in the liking with which John Dawson inspired in me. The lack of hate between executioner and

victim, perhaps this is God' (Wiesel 1961:84). That enigmatic and unsettling last line is the key to completing Wiesel's unique response to dirty hands. Yet there are hard questions to be asked about this use of God. Aside from anything else, surely the heart of Elisha's youthful religion – his faith in God – was *destroyed* by his experience in the concentration camps. Loss of faith in any 'survivor' originates in the loss depicted in *Night*, and a defining event was the execution of a ten-year old boy in Auschwitz. This 'beautiful sad-eyed angel' (Wiesel 1960:61) was hanged in front of the assembled camp but he died a slow death because he was so light. Although he never uttered a sound while twisting for over half an hour, other voices started to call out 'where is God now,' and a voice within the narrator answered 'here he is—He is hanging here on the gallows' (Wiesel 1960:62).

[32] Wiesel's version of the 'death of God' story, however, is far different from Nietzsche's. A survivor judges God to be a person whose authority can no longer be accepted or trusted, but the words as well as the voice of condemnation do not constitute disbelief in the existence of God. Rather, Elisha has *disowned* the God he has known. The 'image' of the God he once worshipped is destroyed. Still, a Wiesel survivor is as incapable of conceiving God's non-existence, as Camus' Meursault is of conceiving the converse (in refusing to disown 'this life' at the end of *The Outsider*). This existential fact doesn't exert itself early on in *Dawn* when Elisha is absorbing Gad's Zionism. He does claim that in committing murder one 'plays the part of God' (Wiesel 1961:30). In the political fight for liberation, moreover, he and his comrades eventually 'have to become God' (Wiesel 1961:27). Yet these comments are little more than the metaphorical commonplace used to censure people who act boldly in morally ambiguous life or death situations. Believer or non-believer both can argue that 'so and so is playing God,' and from either perspective the force of the expression '*playing* God' is derived from the contrast with the impossible state of *being* God. When Elisha responds to Dawson, however, Wiesel reverses conventional expectations and gives the most esoteric interpretation of this vocabulary. In other words, he reintroduces God with a distinctive new persona – 'The lack of hate between victim and executioner—perhaps that is God' – and this provides a perfect aesthetic justification for merging Elisha's identity with God's.

[33] The identification of Elisha with God is prefigured in the legend of the open sky:

When I was a child the old master told me that there were nights when the sky opened up in order to make way for the prayers of unhappy children. On one such night a little boy whose father was dying said to God: "Father, I am too small to know how to pray. But I ask you to heal my sick father." God did what the boy asked, but the boy himself was turned into a prayer and carried up to heaven. From that day on, the master told me, God has from time to time shown Himself to us in the face of a child. (Wiesel 1961:49)

[34] Then, in *Dawn's* concluding sentence, Elisha looks through a window after executing Dawson and is frightened by what he sees in the dawn sky: 'The tattered fragment of darkness had a face. Looking at it, I understood the reason for my

fear. The face was my own' (Wiesel 1961:102). Of course, God only appears in the *interaction* between Elisha and Dawson. It is by talking with Dawson in a specific way that Elisha shows respect for self and other in a situation that encouraged lack of limits and constraints. This is how he performs *this* morally wrong action in the morally right way. However, in evoking God as the lack of hate between victim and executioner as a means of completing Elisha's response to dirty hands, Wiesel cannot avoid a strange conclusion: *God* experiences dirty hands. Of course, this is a quite logical consequence of Wiesel's belief in the obsolescence of a much older problem than dirty hands, namely, the 'problem of evil.' As it is embodied in *Night's* story, if God could not help the innocent boy on the gallows at Auschwitz either he could not, in which case he was impotent, or he would not, in which case he was malicious or unjust. The despair of a Wiesel survivor in the face of this experience certainly does not reflect an ignorance of the theological avenues available for resolving the problem of evil. Rather, such a protagonist believes it is *impossible* to vindicate providence in the face of the Holocaust. Any post-Holocaust image of God, in other words, must be shaped by the realization that theodicy is no longer possible.⁸

^[35] It is not wildly implausible to subsume the problem of evil under the problem of dirty hands. God pulls no triggers. Still, if he is at all implicated in the world he must experience the problem of dirty hands at the very moment of creation, and forever after. Given the nature of Elisha's consciousness as he interacts with John Dawson at certain moments, moreover, in this one respect Elisha would know what it is like to be God. The success of Camus (and of Sartre too) in expressing, and grappling with, the problem of dirty hands might seem inseparable from an atheistic or pagan vision of life. In addition, the argument could be made that the very *existence* of God (or ghosts) must be independently substantiated before discussing any insights that depend upon Dawn's religious imagery. Nevertheless, even though Wiesel's image of a more vulnerable God who listens to the stories of victims will be of theological interest to some philosophers, the argument of this paper certainly requires no metaphysical commitment to God or to ghosts. For *Dawn* never speaks from outside the consciousness of Elisha. If God *only* exists in the imagination of Elisha then Elisha's performance is surely not diminished, any more than the admirable performance of an athlete would be diminished if, contrary to her understanding, it was not inspired by God. Wiesel uses radically different means than do Sartre or Camus to illuminate the problem of dirty hands, but he is perhaps more successful in doing so.

^[36] I will conclude, however, by expressing some qualifications and worries. When questioned about *Dawn*, Wiesel himself seems to shy away from its most

8. Graham B Walker says 'Wiesel carves out a foundation for an interim understanding of God as a God who listens and remembers the loss of history. This portrait of God reveals that God is one who willingly hears the stories of pain (1988:38).' Walker does an excellent job of showing how Wiesel closes off every single way of vindicating God's goodness in the face of the Holocaust. In a chapter entitled 'Fackenheim's Dilemma,' Kenneth Seeskin addresses the same theological issue raised by dirty hands (1990:189–211) but Wiesel evades the criticism made of Fackenheim by Seeskin.

striking insights. Although he says that the ‘identification’ between Elisha and Dawson ‘is such that there is something going on between the murderer and the victim’ (Wiesel 1985:vol. 3, 250) he does not mention *Dawn*’s powerfully explicit elaboration of the ‘identification’ in terms of God. Wiesel also seems defensive regarding the dilemma that creates the drama in *Dawn*. He affirms the general principle that ‘I am against killing, just as I am against being killed’ (Wiesel 1985:vol. 3, 232) and then emphasizes his personal credibility: ‘I have never killed anybody in my life. I never held a gun in my life’ (Wiesel 1985:vol. 3, 228). It is true that a precise formulation of the problem of dirty hands entails no possible moral justification for Elisha’s action. Still, by directing attention to that facet of the problem exclusively, the political side of the coin is necessarily effaced. More accurately, Wiesel says *Dawn* was written because ‘I wanted to *explore* the other side’ but then shifts into saying ‘I wrote that book *against* political violence’ (Wiesel 1985: vol. 3, 250, emphasis added). It is perfectly possible, of course, that a book written to explore political violence has the effect of working against such violence, but these comments obscure the subtleties of *Dawn*’s exploration of political violence. There are good reasons to think that in this case it is best to trust the tale itself rather than the author’s ruminations about the tale. That said, Wiesel’s hesitancy might be linked to his belief ‘that one of the most important duties we have today is to fight fanaticism’ (Wiesel 1999).

[37] *Dawn*, for instance, elucidates Wiesel’s understanding of the relationship between the Holocaust and the state of Israel:

One does not exclude the other. One is not the answer to the other. Nothing is a greater blasphemy than to say that Israel is the answer to Auschwitz – or that the Six-Day War and the miracle it produced are the answer to Auschwitz. Israel does not set the account straight; what was undone in Europe has not been returned and reunited in Jerusalem. These are, in my view, two separate mysteries. One has nothing to do with the other, except for the fact that we, the protagonists, are the link between them (Wiesel 1985:vol. 1, 252).

[38] Wiesel’s position has remained consistent over the years, and it mirrors the relationship between Elisha’s experience in the Holocaust and his experience as a Zionist fighting to found the state of Israel. ‘Philosophically,’ that is, ‘the two events may seem contradictory’ (Wiesel 1985:vol. 1, 252) because a political good cannot be theoretically reconciled with moral evil. However, these incommensurable events can be bridged practically in a particular protagonist. For example, without reducing one to the other or using one to justify the other, *Elisha* can constitute ‘the link between them.’ Since the defense of the state of Israel depends upon political violence no differently than its founding, this linkage depends, *ex hypothesi*, upon the manner in which this protagonist dirties his hands. According to Wiesel, moreover, what defines an Israeli soldier is a ‘lack of hate’ for his enemy. This claim, to be sure, could be a rationalization of the sort that can fuel a fanatic’s belief that he is doing what is right even though others are morally outraged. That is all the more likely when this quality is identified with God. Nevertheless, given the argument of this paper it is revealing that Wiesel uses the same words

to characterize the consciousness with which an Israeli soldier kills Arabs, as he does in *Dawn* with regard to Elisha's execution of an Englishman.

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