Jean Wahl’s *Human Existence and Transcendence* is a very important yet almost completely forgotten work in the history of twentieth-century French philosophy. It arose from a lecture given in 1937 and was expanded into a short book in the troubled years that followed. Apart from its intrinsic interest as a discussion of being, the absolute, and transcendence, the work is valuable insofar as it became a focal point for a great many European intellectuals. Their responses to Wahl’s thoughts, especially on transcendence, at once clarify many issues to do with existentialism as well as hint how it was to be transformed by a later thinker such as Emmanuel Levinas (whom we see here as a young man in full flush of enthusiasm for Heidegger).

Is transcendence exclusively a theological notion, or can it be put to philosophical use? This is Wahl’s animating question, and the question that excited or upset those who heard his lecture and the others who responded to it by mail. Wahl answers his own question: transcendence can indeed be lifted from the matrix of theology, reset as a concept, and then used to clarify the human situation. Of course, he was not the first or the only person to move in this direction. Heidegger had already rethought transcendence in *Sein und Zeit* (1927), having brooded on the concept’s roots in the medieval tradition of the transcendentals: being, beauty, goodness, truth, and unity. Such things do not themselves settle into the Aristotelian categories but are found in all of them; they cross (trans) from one category to another. Centuries later in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781; 1787) Kant redirected this tradition, distinguishing between the transcendental and the transcendent. The former give conditions of possibility for knowledge; the latter exceed all possible knowledge. So Kant gives only a negative sense of transcendence. It is Heidegger who gives it a positive sense,
which is human Dasein’s openness to pass from beings to being. This is fundamental-ontological transcendence, and it is this radical understanding of the concept that Levinas wishes to impress on Wahl in his letter to him after the lecture had been given.

In his letter Levinas points out that in rethinking transcendence Heidegger breaks decisively with theology. Here theology is regarded as limited by ontic concerns; one desires to pass from this world to another world above or beyond it, though this second world doubtless resembles ours in many ways (hell, purgatory, and heaven as evoked in Dante’s Commedia, for example). Wahl is not entirely at ease with Levinas’s response to his lecture, and he could well point out that his rethinking of transcendence as transascendence also overcomes a naïve theology: one transcends without term; there is no fall back into the immanence of a higher place. He also could remind Levinas of transcendence’s other dimension, transdescendence, in which one is taken without term down into the depths. In later years Levinas will gladly learn from Wahl: Totalité et infini (1961) could not have been conceived without the transascendence of the other person, and much that Levinas fears is perhaps contained in the thought of transdescendence.1 If transascendence is coordinate with the holy (and hence the ethical), its negative counterpart converges with the sacred.2 Wahl himself cites D.H. Lawrence—he may well have The Plumed Serpent (1926) in mind—as a witness to the transdescendent.

Not that Wahl’s rethinking of transcendence is limited to the uses to which Levinas finally put it. His distinction illuminates a whole tendency of modern European thought, the quest to explain phenomena by way of what preconditions them, whether that be by way of preexistent constitution (Fink), the neutral (Blanchot), or la difféance (Derrida). Perhaps one could extend the explanatory power of transascendence further back into the history of philosophy, from the critical philosophy to structuralism, but let us not try to press too hard on it. Already, with Levinas, Blanchot, and Derrida, it has done a job of work, as has its correlative idea, transcendence, which also quickens all three in their understanding of ethics. The work of transascendence is not yet over, and ironically it may well be the theologian’s task, rather than the philosopher’s, to continue it. For despite
the power of various caricatures, in which Heidegger and Levinas both indulged themselves, Christian theology has never been committed to transcendence in the limited sense of passing from one world to another. The radical rethinking of God as infinite, as proposed by Saint Gregory of Nyssa in his argument with Eunomius, yields a massive elaboration of the Pauline figure in Philippians 3:13 of reaching forward to what is before him (δὲ ἔμπροσθεν ἐπεκτεινόμενος). For Gregory, the Christian life is continual transcendence of self into the abundant life of God. In this life, we do not believe in God so much as believe ourselves into God. And so it will be throughout eternity, though no longer in the mode of belief. One fruit of Wahl’s famous lecture may well be to return the Christian to the most powerful contemporary advocate of Nicene orthodoxy and the boldest of the Cappadocian theologians. For Gregory’s insistence on the metaphysical infinity of the divine shored up not only the divinity of Christ, which Eunomius had called into question, but also allowed for a better theological grasp of God as triune and stressed the importance of the apophatic strain in theology.

Let us return to Wahl. He was a considerable figure in midcentury French intellectual life, and indeed in Franco-American intellectual life. He was fluent in English, and lived for some years in the United States, setting up the discussions among writers and intellectuals known as Pontigny-en-Amérique. In that context he became acquainted with Wallace Stevens. In September 1942 Alfred A. Knopf published the great poet’s Parts of a World, and then, a month later, Cummington Press produced a limited edition of a memorable work in that collection, “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction.” Wahl wrote to Stevens’s friend Henry Church after reading “Notes” and told him of the pleasure he had gained from reading it. Stevens later said to Church, “To give pleasure to an intelligent man, by this sort of thing, is as much as one can expect; and certainly I am most content, in the French sense of that word, to have pleased Jean Wahl.” More, Stevens appreciated Wahl’s insight that in order to articulate a supreme fiction one must first strip away all other fictions. It is pleasant to imagine Wahl, who was a professor at the Sorbonne (albeit not from 1942 to 1945, when he was mostly at Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley,
Massachusetts), reading some lines that come almost at the end of that magnificent poem:

They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne.
We shall return at twilight from the lecture
Pleased that the irrational is rational.5

Those who went home after Wahl’s famous lecture might not have been convinced that the irrational is rational, which in any case was hardly what the lecturer wanted to show, but they were doubtless moved by the prospect of a style of transcendence that was entirely appropriate to human life as it is lived in the streets of Paris, South Hadley, and Hartford, Connecticut.

Wahl had significant, if subterranean, influences on generations of French and American people. He founded the Collège philosophique in Paris in 1945, notable for many events, not the least of which was a paper given on March 4, 1963, by Jacques Derrida which upset his former teacher Michel Foucault and led to a rift between them, the effects of which are still being felt in some quarters of the academy.6 It was Wahl who indirectly taught American professors and their students about French existentialism and, more generally, about the philosophy of existence. Two generations of Americans read Sartre and others through lenses ground by Wahl. If his A Short History of Existentialism (1949) and Philosophies of Existence (1968) have largely served their purposes, a new generation of Americans with different concerns perhaps still needs to read Wahl’s more enduring works, including Études kierkegaardiennes (1938), Le malheur de la conscience dans la philosophie de Hegel (1929), and of course Existence humaine et transcendance (1944).

We now have that last title available in English. So at last Anglophone readers can see an important text in the history of the vicissitudes of transcendence in the twentieth century, both in relation to philosophy and to theology. The book itself is an unusual one; in some ways, as Chris Hackett says in his introduction, it recalls Pascal’s Pensées. All the more reason, then, for it to have a long historical introduction. The editor nicely leads the reader into Wahl’s world, and indicates, with all due lightness, moments when our world unknowingly intersects with
it and other moments when we could profit from knowing it better than we do. He and Jeffrey Hanson have done a fine job of rendering a host of European voices into English. This is an event that allows us to savor a precious moment in French intellectual life and to ponder its many consequences.

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NOTES

Introduction

Jean Wahl, A Human Existence and Transcendence(s)

The philosophy of existence is a philosophy of transcendence.

On the evening of Saturday, December 4, 1937, Jean Wahl (1888–1974), professor of philosophy at the Sorbonne, spoke to the Société française de philosophie. His topic: “Subjektivität et transcendance.”¹ The transcript of the meeting published in the society’s Bulletin shows how historically remarkable this event was: it brought together a virtual “who’s who” of the Parisian intellectual scene and beyond. Following Wahl’s paper, major contributions to the discussion were offered by Léon Brunschvicg, Gabriel Marcel, René Berthelot, Nicolai Berdyaev (in exile from Russia), Siegfried Marck (in exile from Nazi Germany), and others. Letters of intervention were submitted on behalf of Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, Karl Jaspers, Karl Löwith, Rachel Bespaloff, Denis de Rougemont, Raymond Aron, and Georges Bastide, and others, with responses from Wahl. This was an event that Emmanuel Levinas would immortalize simply as “Wahl’s famous lecture.”² Looking back from the vantage afforded by seventy-five years, one is tempted not only to affirm Levinas’s judgment but to add to it.
by saying that this lecture was, in fact, a watershed. It galvanized and refugured perhaps the key debate of the Parisian intellectual scene of his era, namely the destiny of the notion of transcendence within the ever-broadening and self-purifying conception of immanence developing in the wake of phenomenology, especially that of Heidegger. In the lecture, Wahl expressed this key locus of reflection in the form of a question: Can there be a secular concept of transcendence that allows the thinking of the concrete existence of human being without an extrinsic appeal to an abstract divine, that is, without theology and without even the “secularization” of theological concepts? Or would such a thinking, if it were possible, shorn of every last bit of the theological, empty of every “nostalgia,” and deaf to every “echo” of the religious, leave us merely with a “general theory” of existence, dehistoricized and dehumanized, a meaningless philosophy? The paper Wahl delivered that evening constitutes the first part of the third chapter of the book that is in your hands, and it doubtlessly serves as a point of orientation for this book in its entirety. The transcript of the rigorous discussion and the letters were likewise included in this book when it originally appeared, and they remain in this edition.

Regardless of the answer anyone would desire to give (or begin to give) to Wahl’s question, what matters is the pause that the question requires of us and the attention it demands. In Wahl’s case it would be seriously misleading to think that he posed this question as part of some program to écraser l’infâme, to escape from or neutralize the hegemony of the religious and theological over the meaning of human existence. That is, he did not pose it (at least in the first, motivating, place) for the sake of answering it in any one particular way. Rather, he posed it precisely because it is a philosophical question, one that gives rise to thought, and one that implicitly was giving rise to the order of thinking that dominated his day. It was a question that—as a question: what does it mean to be human? Does the theological wholly determine myself as one who is capable of posing and in fact does pose this question?—fundamentally shaped Jean Wahl’s own thought. And to that degree, Jean Wahl uniquely embodied—if I can risk an
impossible thesis—European intellectual culture of the mid-twentieth century from (and through) the Second World War to (and through) May 1968.

A corollary thesis: *Existence humaine et transcendance* embodies the thought of Jean Wahl in an exceptional if not irreplaceable way.

What have I asserted so far? (1) To reach the heart of Jean Wahl's thought one should read the present book. (2) To understand Jean Wahl means reaching a crucial level of understanding of European thought of the last century. I have also strongly suggested: (3) to understand the philosophical thinking of the last century through Jean Wahl opens up a path for us toward understanding ourselves, its heirs.

These assertions are not offered as theses to be proved, as I have already implied. They are, however, governing convictions that shape my understanding of Wahl, and they are meant to serve you as motivations for your own entrance into his thought and world which you have initiated by picking up the present book.

It is virtually a matter of public record that Jean Wahl was one of the earliest interpreters, and doubtlessly the most important, of Kierkegaard in France. He was also an original thinker of no small magnitude whose influence on contemporary French philosophy could hardly be overestimated. If the former is known well enough, the latter is still barely recognized. Trained under Henri Bergson, Wahl wrote a *thèse complémentaire* on the notion of the temporal instant in Descartes. His *thèse principale* was an exhaustive study of Anglo-American philosophies of pluralism, particularly the pragmatism of William James. He likewise developed an important interpretation of Hegel, reading his later, famous works in continuity with his early religious writings and especially from the vantage of Kierkegaard's criticisms that highlighted the role of the anxiety of the subject in Unhappy Consciousness for Hegel's “system” as a whole.

In this latter book the reader can begin to see how much Wahl's own thinking develops out of an encounter with Kierkegaard. In this encounter that came to define his philosophical legacy, Wahl brought specific concerns that he articulated under the name of *la philosophie*
de l’existence, or la philosophie existentielle: man is a problem to himself, a problem that cannot be answered except by posing the problem as an insoluble one. He poses this problem by posing the question of being, and he poses the question of being only by posing the question of himself. The perceptive reader could perhaps already intuit that it was not Kierkegaard alone, however. One could almost say that (if he is not directly on the page) Kierkegaard was behind every page that Wahl wrote, and further, Heidegger and Hegel stand there with him. Whatever Wahl’s disagreements with these philosophers (and with Hegel in particular disagreement runs deep), each one of these thinkers lived his philosophy; their thought was an example of a deep and singular articulation of “metaphysical experience.”

There is of course a set of standard views of Wahl’s work: first, there is the one that considers Wahl primarily as an interpreter of Kierkegaard with no lasting philosophical contribution of his own, and, further, sees his philosophy as simply an attempt to secularize Kierkegaard or appropriate him to a general existentialism. Second, there is the complementary view that sees Wahl’s significance primarily in his central, auxiliary role as an educator (in whose debt lies a generation at least of French philosophers). Both of these views are profoundly true. Wahl was in fact an early and influential mediator of the thought of Kierkegaard, Hegel, and Heidegger in French philosophy. To be fair, American philosophy—“pragmatism,” in the form of its most eminent representative, William James—would need to be added to this list. As the present book makes abundantly clear, Wahl ceaselessly wrestled with each one of these figures, seeking not only to understand them more and more adequately, but also—more importantly, at least in his own mind—to understand the significance of their thought, to assess and to respond to their philosophical ideas. The present book also makes plain Wahl’s still important insight regarding abundant parallels between German and French philosophy and Anglo-American philosophy (in the forms of pragmatism and process philosophy especially).

As is perhaps already made patent enough, Wahl was much more than an “existentialist,” and his importance should not be tied to the fate of that “movement” of twentieth-century French philosophy. One very well known index of this importance merits being stated at
the outset. I am thinking of Wahl's influence on his friend, Emmanuel Levinas. The central idea of *Totality and Infinity* (1961) in fact depends on Wahl's thinking about transcendence, which is found at the heart of the present book. There Levinas appropriates the first term of Wahl's distinction between “transascendence” and “transdescendence” (on which more shortly), taking it to name the “metaphysical desire” for the Other that describes the logic of disproportionate alterity and the noncollapsible “distance” that (by contrast to transdescendence) it holds in place. Making explicit reference to the second chapter below (“On the Idea of Transcendence”), Levinas says with noteworthy directness: “We have drawn much inspiration from the themes evoked in that study.” Similarly, it may well be—and there is some indication of this in Levinas—that the second term of Wahl's account of transence, *transdescendence*, is an important origin of his own account of subjectivity, determined by the interiority of the Other within, that is the theme of his second major philosophical work, *Otherwise Than Being* (1974). If this is the case, then Levinas's thought, in perhaps its most basic features, might be said to be first, made possible by the thought of Jean Wahl, and second, a particularly fruitful interpretation and development of it.

*Existence humaine et transascendence* (published in 1944) must have been written sometime between Wahl's lecture in December 1937 and June 1942, when Wahl fled to the United States in order to preserve his life. The note attached to the front page of the book by the (Swiss) publisher, reproduced above, observes that Wahl was not able to review the proofs of the book due to “les circonstances”—the reader will generally comprehend what circumstances these were given the date of publication: Nazi Germany seized Paris in June 1940. This event and the subsequent story of the Second World War unfolded for Jean Wahl in the following way.

Wahl, who had been made professor of philosophy at the Sorbonne in 1936, was, like all Jewish teachers in Occupied France, dismissed from his post when the Sorbonne reopened in November 1940. He was brutally interrogated by the Gestapo the following
year, arrested on the charge of “impertinence” (for denying, during the interrogation, that he was a “dirty Jew”), and sent to the infamous Parisian prison La Santé. He remained at La Santé for thirty-six days and was subsequently sent to the internment camp at Drancy, outside of Paris, where he remained for sixty-four days. During this time Wahl was appointed in absentia to the faculty of the New School for Social Research in New York City: plans were afoot to bring him to the United States through the Refugee Scholars Fund, although there seemed to be no real hope of liberating him from his imprisonment. In the meantime dysentery ran rampant through the camp, and the French police decided to release the sickest prisoners. At the last minute, Wahl, who was not sick, was added to the list: the (French) doctor of his barrack added Wahl’s name after hearing through the head nurse (whose husband was an academic) of his appointment to the New School. Wahl walked through the gates the next morning. Three weeks later he had to make a harrowing flight to Vichy France in the South with the help of an underground network. After living and teaching in Mâcon and then Lyon, Wahl decided to move to the United States when it seemed that Germany would come to occupy all of France (which happened in late 1942). After a month in Casablanca waiting for a ship with Rachel Bespaloff, he arrived in Baltimore in July 1942, almost a year to the day that he was first arrested and sent to La Santé.

In the United States,Wahl participated in the faculties of three institutions, Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts, Smith College, and the École libre des hautes études, the French-speaking university-in-exile, founded in 1942 and attached to the New School for Social Research. Wahl taught philosophy at both Mount Holyoke and the École libre, and he lectured on French literature at Smith. His main position was at Mount Holyoke, where he lived. He helped found and lead the famous Décades de Mount Holyoke (also called Pontigny-en-Amérique), a remarkable gathering of French intellectuals in exile (such as Jacques Maritain, Gustave Cohen, and Rachel Bespaloff) and American thinkers (including, famously, poets Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore). These meetings were modeled on the famous gatherings founded by the intellectual Paul Desjardins, the Décades de Pontigny, an annual meeting of European intellectuals
at a famed Cistercian abbey in Burgundy purchased by Desjardins that ran from 1910 to 1914 and 1922 to 1939 (brought to an end by the German invasion of Poland). Wahl, whose father was a professor of English at Marseille (and in fact succeeded Mallarmé at the post), was completely at home in the English language, as is demonstrated by his many letters, English-language publications (poetry and prose), translations (including scholarly editions of English authors John Cowper Powys and Thomas Traherne and American poet Wallace Stevens), and his 1920 doctoral thesis (thèse principale), translated into English five years later as The Pluralist Philosophies of England and America.

Wahl returned to France in 1945, resumed his post at the Sorbonne, married one of his students (with whom he had three daughters, and a son who died at one month's age), and quickly returned to the center of Parisian intellectual life (e.g., he founded the Collège philosophique, served as the president of the Société française de philosophie, and directed the Revue de métaphysique et de morale) until his death in 1974 at the age of eighty-six.14

Before proceeding to further remarks about Jean Wahl, his “famous lecture,” and this book, it is worth reminding ourselves about the state of what I have called his “orienting question” today. It hardly needs arguing that the notion of the “secularization” of concepts is a theory that itself has an important place in the history of modern thought: an invocation of the names of Karl Löwith, Carl Schmitt, and Hans Blumenberg is sufficient to show it. Ideas within—even fundamental to and defining of—intellectual domains outside of theology (philosophy, politics, sociology, etc.) have a religious and theological origin. The fact that such a thesis does not demand immediate consent with the force of a historical fact for contemporary Western self-understanding testifies precisely to its profundity and significance—if also to our most important blind spot. Yet its importance and centrality is misunderstood if it is not properly contextualized. We ought first to say that such a place afforded to the theological—as the nourishing womb that gave (gives?) birth to reason—is a defining feature of Western intellectual culture.15 More acutely and more adequately