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Moralization and Method in Gavin Langmuir’s History of Antisemitism

In the midst of his tendentious account of William’s death and afterlife, Thomas of Monmouth composes an imaginary speech for the Jews who are accused of the crime and pictures them deliberating among themselves about the consequences of discovery.

Our people will be utterly driven out [funditus exterminabitur] from all parts of England . . . we, our wives and our little ones will be given over as a prey to the barbarians, we shall be delivered up to death, we shall be exterminated [dabimur in exterminium].

Further on in Thomas’s narrative, he reports the words of an ecclesiastical synod that is alleged to have announced, “unless [the Jews] at once came to purge themselves [of the accusation against them] they must understand that without doubt they would be exterminated.” Though the Norwich Jews do not appear to have been attacked, Thomas later remarks, “the rod of heaven in a brief space of time exterminated or scattered them all [exterminaverit sive disperserit].”

Some of the unsettling effect of these words is a product of translation: the first definition of exterminare is “to drive out or away, expel,” while the third, a late Latin evolution, is “to abolish, extirpate, destroy.” The Victorian translators Jessopp and James modulate between these meanings, moving easily from “driven out from all parts of England” to the blunt force of “exterminated,” depending on the context of the passage. I am not sure we can settle the problem of which definition a learned high medieval
audience heard or understood most readily in this word, nor is it clear what force the idea of “extermination” would have carried for that audience. But the ambiguity of the verb seems to confirm the ease with which human groups can move from the idea of expulsion—driving out or away—to murder. In other words, the etymological history of extermination already suggests a narrative we have come to recognize as familiar, a narrative of how Jews become increasingly exterminabilis (able to be destroyed, or perishable) as history approaches the twentieth century.

For anyone inclined to interpret Thomas’s text as an early forecast of a gathering storm, his account offers the illusion of speaking back: it is as if this twelfth-century text is not only important for its testimony to the historical phenomenon of anti-Jewish hostility but prescient as well. However this historical narrative, while familiar, is also oversimplified, since conditions of medieval Jewish life could vary widely in different European locales and across the span of the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, this teleological reading is frequently repeated in post-Holocaust histories that portray medieval anti-Judaism as an explicit anticipation of modern forms. It is because of the real history of violent sentiment—which has obviously had more than etymological consequences—that Thomas’s efforts at verisimilitude cut close to the bone in passages like these. The Jews he accuses of murder worry over their parvuli, their little ones; they occupy hired houses and live in the expectation they may be forced out at any moment (1.24). The speeches Thomas creates for them are obvious rhetorical fictions, in keeping with medieval conventions of historical writing, and yet their fear seems startling and real. It is as if for a fleeting moment, a trace of realism has escaped the confines of Thomas’s caricature of the Jews of Norwich. And yet, as I discussed in the previous chapter, Thomas had his own reasons for emphasizing Jewish fear and powerlessness—for him such reactions were proof of divine displeasure with the Jews.

Whatever Thomas’s intentions, the problem of Jewish extermination raised by his text remains one of the most potent ethical challenges faced by the modern historiography of medieval anti-Jewish violence. For some scholars, Thomas of Monmouth’s account of his single-minded investigation into William’s death has served as a mooring point for explaining the emergence of the ritual murder accusation. For the historian Gavin Langmuir, this text takes the form of an originary narrative.

Thomas of Monmouth was an influential figure in the formation of Western culture. He did not alter the course of battles, politics, or the
economy. He solved no philosophical or theological problems. . . . Yet . . . he created a myth that affected Western mentality from the twelfth to the twentieth century and caused, directly or indirectly, far more deaths than William’s murderer could ever have dreamt of committing. (TDA, 234–35)

This statement presents us with themes that are problematic from the perspective of the early twenty-first century. “Western mentality” is apparently a unified and describable phenomenon from the twelfth century to the twentieth; a simple teleology leading inevitably from medieval acts of violence to the Holocaust is presumed, taken as a matter of common knowledge. And in Langmuir’s rhetoric we can see a desire to assign moral responsibility to particular historical persecutors of Jews, and not just to some anonymous group, but to one in particular, Thomas of Monmouth, who becomes the perverse prime mover behind centuries of cruelty.

Many elements of this general historiographical narrative have been observed already, from Baron’s famous critique of the “lachrymose conception” of Jewish history (cited with the regularity of a proverb), to David Nirenberg’s salvo, in his book Communities of Violence, against longue durée perspectives that privilege broad questions of psychology over specific local circumstances and strategies. Recent scholarship on Jewish history in medieval Europe, and of Jewish-Christian relations in particular, has complicated both the methodological picture and the historical narrative Langmuir presents here. Scholarship by Jeremy Cohen, David Biale, Elliott Horowitz, and Israel Yuval, among others, has enlarged and challenged this stark picture of a one-dimensional model of conflict between an intolerant Christian community and its passive Jewish victims. As we make a conscious effort to rethink teleological narratives that presume a straightforward completion of medieval persecutions in the Holocaust, it may seem like an odd moment to return to Langmuir’s work and ask about its ethical commitments. Some of the answers may even seem obvious. Langmuir is a post-Holocaust scholar searching for answers about the origins of a defining event of modernity; his work represents a common approach to specific historical problems of continuity and repetition. How can we explain the recurrent persecution of Jews in Western history if we do not have recourse to some idea of the endurance or continuity of that persecution? If Langmuir’s answer reflects his position as a North American scholar influenced by the currents of collective memory that have focused such attention on the Holocaust since the late 1970s, why should we be surprised?
Yet this felt sense of a scholarship that needs no explanation, of a moment in intellectual history whose pursuit of specific goals seems practically self-evident, suggests precisely why it is necessary to revisit what remains an influential cultural narrative for understanding medieval Jewish history, and the historical unfolding of Jewish-Christian relations in particular. If ethics structures problems rather than solves them, in other words, it is critical to ask how Langmuir’s structuring of the problem of ritual murder has functioned in this scholarly history. In my introduction, I suggested that one way of understanding Langmuir’s work is to acknowledge that it occupies a position along an existing moral-ethical continuum. At one end lie moralizing determinations of historical responsibility that tend to equate responsibility with blame, and seek judgments (implicitly or explicitly) about events. At the other is an ethics of contingency and mutual implication that emphasizes the interconnectedness of historical communities and seeks to understand intergroup conflicts while drawing back from judgment. The terms of Langmuir’s project are both moral and juridical, and they are expressed in familiar terms: he writes with the victims in mind, and his work is concerned with both exonerating and remembering those Jews who feared being “turned over as prey to the barbarians.” Langmuir’s scholarship represents a culmination of psychohistorical analysis that emphasizes the importance of psychological processes like identification and projection, and seeks to understand their operation within history. In medieval studies, the idea of a “persecuting society” has become a kind of shorthand for such approaches, while there are obvious parallels between this framework and arguments about modern “perpetrator history,” a similarity I address below. If this comparison seems to muddy historical distinctions, that is no accident: the effort to understand the persecuting mind is often shadowed by uncertainty about how universal or transhistorical such mental processes might be.9

In Langmuir’s studies of specific cases of the ritual murder accusation, his evaluations focus on the question of historical responsibility and reinforce a clearly defined border between irrational persecutors and their victims. What I want to trace here is the operation of an interpretive system that assigns responsibility for the origins of antisemitic beliefs, even as it distances us from any sense of complicity with the irrational minds of persecutors. Langmuir has done as much as any scholar writing on this topic to define the space of historical uncertainty surrounding the ritual murder accusation as a specifically moral space. He insists upon the unreality, the essential falsehood, of the legend and implies that to probe these irrational
historical forces too deeply is to risk moral compromise. In this ethical economy, the idea of responsibility is clearly associated with assigning blame and making determinations of guilt and innocence in the historical record. While this moralization of history is understandable, however, if taken as a refusal of self-examination, it carries political dangers of its own. As Judith Butler reminds us, in her trenchant rereading of Levinas, there is a risk that we merely reverse the poles of a conceptual system built on exclusion, and designate a new other, in the form of the perpetrator, without fully understanding the forces that lead to persecution.

Some readers may be tempted to interpret my assessment of Langmuir’s work as a disagreement with his moral desire to speak out against persecution. That is not the case. Langmuir is not somehow wrong to worry about questions of historical responsibility and justice; indeed, as my references to public conversations about the Holocaust suggest, his work touches on some of the most fundamental historical and ethical questions of our time. I also write as someone profoundly influenced by Langmuir’s theories in my early professional training. In a real sense, he has shaped my own understanding of the questions at stake. I am not claiming that we should not be morally outraged by persecution, nor that we should stop trying to understand its causes. What I am suggesting is that we also have an obligation to understand what other kinds of cultural work are involved in our efforts at explanation, what other purposes—ethical, political, and methodological—might be served by a moralization of history.

**Naming and Blaming the Irrational Self**

Gavin Langmuir is best known for two far-reaching volumes of work published in 1990, a book of new and collected essays, *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism* (*TDA*), and a reevaluation of the historical evolution of anti-Jewish prejudice called *History, Religion, and Antisemitism* (*HRA*). Together these works run to nearly 800 published pages and represent an ambitious effort to address questions such as the difference between anti-Judaism and antisemitism, the nature of religion and religiosity, and the psychosocial origins of persecution. In disciplinary terms, Langmuir’s scholarship appears as a condensation of a post-Holocaust tradition of historiography as moral analysis. He is an heir of historians like Norman Cohn and Joshua Trachtenberg, who understood antisemitism as an inherently psychosocial phenomenon bound up in Christians’ neurotic needs. Other figures, like R. I. Moore, author of *The Formation of a Per-
secuting Society, and Lester K. Little, who wrote Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe, also tended to interpret medieval anti-Judaism, among other forms of minority persecution, as essentially the outcome of psychological resentments and anxieties among a medieval Christian majority. But if Langmuir’s work represents a distillation of such ideas, it is also a powerful theorization of this global, psychosocial model of historical interpretation and ought to be understood as an ambitious philosophy of history as well as an extended piece of historical analysis.

I understand Langmuir to be a theorist as well as a historian, though this might sound surprising, given his staunch adherence to a kind of logical positivism he labels “rational empiricism.” His treatment of others interested in theorizing historiography, such as Hayden White and Michel Foucault, might be described as skittish, since he occasionally invokes their work in passing but does not engage it, even when some of his conclusions echo theirs. Yet I do not want to lose sight of the fact that rational empiricism is itself a theoretical model and operates just as other modes of theory do, by offering a framework for interpretation that provides a meaningful set of guidelines for making sense of evidence. Langmuir himself makes a straightforward argument for the necessity of using some theoretical framework for understanding the past. He argues that explaining a historical figure’s actions by recourse to his beliefs is a kind of tautology: it is not enough to know that what a person believed was related to how he acted—we must also try to understand why he believed what he did. Antisemitic belief, therefore, is an inadequate explanation of antisemitism. “Even if we know that someone killed Jews with a sword,” he writes, “to explain the action satisfactorily we have not only to describe his beliefs about Jews but also to explain why he believed what he did about Jews. And it would have to be an explanation that satisfies us, whether we are Jews or non-Jews” (HRA, 52). Langmuir’s theoretical enterprise hangs on the principle that reconstructing proclaimed beliefs is not enough. A satisfactory interpretation of historical events will also offer an explanatory paradigm that stands outside yet still addresses the world of historical actors themselves.

But if Langmuir is a theorist, his work also has the value of a kind of Cartesian thought experiment. Though he is relatively innocent of theory in its more recent formulations, he has set himself the task of reexamining first principles, tackling problems like: What is religion? What is objective knowledge? What is antisemitism, and what motivates it? These are high philosophical stakes by any definition, and putting the problem of anti-
semitism alongside questions about the nature of religion and objective knowledge demonstrates that for him this is an issue of major importance for the Western tradition. In Langmuir’s work, questions about antisemitism are also related to broader issues, like the nature of historical and other differences, and how we understand other minds. Antisemitism may “stand for” these more general issues, but it is also a key question itself, a kind of metaphysical problem that must be addressed, and for which there is a moral demand for redress. Yet if antisemitism is a moral problem, it nevertheless remains one that cannot be resolved; in Langmuir’s analysis the antisemitic mind is invoked as a forbidden space, one we cannot enter without risk of complicity. While it is obviously true that we cannot enter the minds of historical actors, I argue that Langmuir’s moralizing ethics demands that we also must not enter that space sympathetically. What I am calling a moralizing ethics is the process by which Langmuir makes moral judgments about historical actors, consigning their actions to the realm of a choice, made against reason, to gratify an immoral desire. Yet because antisemitism is rooted in what Langmuir describes as universal psychological processes, it may also be a phenomenon in which we are all implicated. For Langmuir, this paradox functions as a kind of repressed knowledge.

Langmuir defines rational empirical thought as “the kind of thinking, whether primitive and pretheoretical or highly developed, that has enabled human beings to develop tools and demonstrate their efficacy by results in principle observable and repeatable by anyone else” (HRA, 46). As Robert Stacey remarks in his review of Langmuir’s work, “Rational empiricism is thus simultaneously the fundamental structure for human consciousness . . . and the essential investigative method by which human action must be understood” (96). With rational empiricism, Langmuir searches for solid ground for what he hopes will be an objective history, but he also registers the distant influence of poststructuralism’s antifoundationalist critiques, which echo just behind his justification of his project.

Of course, to believe that rational and empirical thinking is necessary to reduce error in historical research and inform moral and political decisions is not something that can be decided by rational methods. It seems an act of faith or moral decision; and when emphasized, it resembles a religious commitment. . . . But the use of rational empirical thinking is not an act of faith or moral decision in the usual sense. It is something we can no more abandon than our trust in our bodily processes, for it is a universal human characteristic. (HRA, 45–46)
Langmuir acknowledges the bugbear of relativism lurking in the shadows but insists upon the universalism of certain mental processes as the key to an objective explanation of antisemitism. Human beings, regardless of their place in time or cultural context, are capable of rational empirical thought, whether this is pretheoretical or self-conscious. The potential for rational thought—and its opposite, irrationalism—thus becomes the foundation for a transhistorical theory that seeks to account for the continuity of antisemitism in Western history. At the same time, because Langmuir views temporality as unified by a few shared human characteristics, he is able to rescue the Middle Ages as both point of origin and usable past for thinking about modern phenomena like the Holocaust. Langmuir argues that medieval hatred of Jews is tied to modern forms of antisemitism—particularly Nazi antisemitism—by its irrationalism. The Nazis, he argues, were not merely the heirs of a Western tradition of antisemitism but also the followers of a “religion” defined in secular terms, which encouraged the spread and acceptance of irrational antisemitic ideas.

While rational empirical thought may be a universal potential of the mind, it is the distinctive status of the irrational that most clearly characterizes antisemitism in Langmuir’s framework. He argues that the difference between anti-Judaism and antisemitism, regardless of when or where they occur, is that anti-Judaism is a dislike of Jews based on a rational assessment of characteristics that either a few members or the whole group actually possess, such as their unbelief in the Christian messiah, for instance. Antisemitism, however, is an irrational reaction to Jews based on imagined characteristics they do not possess, such as horns growing out of their heads. Often such beliefs are the product of irrational projection—a Christian who cannot believe that the bread and wine literally become the body and blood of Christ in the eucharist, for example, might project his disbelief onto Jews, who he imagines will steal the consecrated host and test or punish it in various ways. Langmuir describes irrationalism as a failure of the mind’s rational capacities, which can be reinforced by authority figures, such as leaders of the church, or aggravated by rapid social change. He argues that “by the late Middle Ages, in order to dispel doubts about their religion and themselves, many Christians were suppressing their capacity for rational empirical thought and irrationally attributing to the realities they denoted as ‘Jews’ unobservable characteristics” (HRA, 302). According to Langmuir, this irrational suppression can be cured by the application of rational empirical thought itself: “None, save the com-
pletely nonrational, suppress their rational empirical capacities completely, for to do so would entail rapid extinction. Indeed, it is that continuing, if restricted, confidence in rational empirical thinking that may make it possible to overcome irrationality” (*HRA*, 257).

Langmuir’s distinction between rational and irrational thought is mediated by a third category, that of nonrational thought, which encompasses both the complex of ideas and perceptions we have about the world that constitute our identity, and those ideas we cannot prove by rational thought but still believe because they operate in accordance with our other knowledge about the world. Thought about divinities, for example, falls in this category of nonrational belief for Langmuir, since claims about such beings are an important part of how many people structure their existences, yet they cannot be established empirically. “There is no necessary conflict” between rational and nonrational thought in such a case, he writes, “because many of the relations that nonrational thinking establishes between experiences and symbols are of a type that cannot presently be, or can never be, invalidated or validated by rational empirical thought” (*HRA*, 152). Thus we can believe in divinities and accept scientific claims without conflict. The tissue of associations that binds together symbols, experiences, and rational empirical thought is a medium of being. Langmuir writes, “It is our understanding of what we cannot express as knowledge” (*HRA*, 154–55).

However, while rational and nonrational thought often do not conflict, a problem emerges when rational knowledge—about the nature of bread and wine, for instance—clashes with nonrational beliefs such as those about the bread and wine as a symbol for the body and blood of Christ. When people are confronted with two contradictory claims on their beliefs, or when they mistake a symbol for an empirical reality, irrationality is sometimes, though not always, the result.

What is often overlooked in summaries and critiques of Langmuir’s work is the thesis of misrecognition that lies behind it. When Christians accept irrational beliefs about Jews, when they are influenced by those beliefs in their actions toward Jews, they are mistaking a symbol for a reality. For example, Langmuir writes that the “clearest example of the problems that can arise when expressions of religiosity are mistaken for empirical propositions is provided by the history of the Eucharist” (*HRA*, 249). In the well-known New Testament passage when Christ proclaims that the bread and wine before him are his body and blood, Langmuir remarks, “his manifestly nonrational utterance was identical in form with a rational empirical proposition” (*HRA*, 250). This evoked no conflict as long as his
followers understood the gesture and its reenactment in terms of symbol or metaphor. “But when some of [Christ’s] followers understood his utterance both as a command and as a proposition about a change in the physical reality of the bread and wine themselves, they confused metaphor with empirical proposition and introduced a latent conflict between their non-rational and rational thinking about bread and wine” (HRA, 250). The conflict introduced by this confusion is central to Langmuir’s definition of historical (as well as present) reality: what is real is also empirical, verifiable, rational. The internal conflicts that produce irrationality are defined primarily by their deferral or refusal of the real.

Langmuir’s argument about the misrecognition of symbols extends to Jews, who take on an unreal reality as dangerous, concrete exemplifications of doubt and anti-Christian forces of malevolence. The empirical reality of an individual Jew is understandable primarily as a symbol, “Jew.” For Langmuir, the ability to discern the difference between these two orders of thought, between empirical reality and metaphor, is also a moral divide that separates rational from irrational belief, and that offers a scale of judgment for evaluating the actions of historical figures. In Toward a Definition of Antisemitism, Langmuir defines “chimerical” fantasies about Jews primarily in these terms: “chimerical assertions present fantasies, figments of the imagination, monsters that, although dressed syntactically in the clothes of real humans, have never been seen and are projections of mental processes unconnected with the real people of the outgroup. Chimerical assertions have no ‘kernel of truth’” (TDA, 334). This unreality has morally abhorrent consequences, and Langmuir suggests that recognizing the illusory quality of such fantasies will allow us to disperse them. This becomes clear, for example, as he describes the emergence of the well-poisoning charge of the later Middle Ages, when Jews were accused of spreading the plague by contaminating water sources. Referring to the flagellants who traveled from town to town, punishing themselves and eventually attacking Jews as well as some local priests, Langmuir writes that “even though their travels should have made them more aware than most that Jews were dying of the plague like Christians,” they were unable to exercise their rational capacity to infer obvious conclusions from such observations and “acted desperately to restore their self-confidence by extirpating Jews” (HRA, 302). This case seems to offer a straightforward example of Langmuir’s criteria of rational and irrational potential in operation. The flagellants were in a position to see the evidence that disproved their belief in Jewish guilt, but they clung to their irrational conviction nonetheless.
Langmuir’s language indicates clearly that a moral judgment of their behavior is called for: experience “should have made them more aware than most,” and since they refused to recognize what they should have been able to see, these anonymous Christians are therefore blameworthy for their actions. There is an ironic repetition of the very medieval rhetoric Langmuir criticizes here. Medieval Christians castigated Jews for their willful “blindness” and unreasonable refusal to recognize the Christian messiah; Langmuir’s antisemitic innovators refuse to recognize the demands of reason.

In *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism*, Langmuir groups his studies of the ritual murder legend under the heading “Irrational Fantasies.” Here, we do not have to search for the ethical substructures of his interpretation, since these are open and explicit. The best known of these essays, “Thomas of Monmouth: Detector of Ritual Murder,” subjects Thomas’s narrative to a close and suspicious rereading and reconstructs the process of his investigation from his written account. Langmuir points to the circumstantial nature of the evidence, the second- and sometimes thirdhand accounts on which Thomas’s claims are based, and the obvious benefits for the monastery, and Thomas himself, if William is accepted as a saint. Langmuir is unambiguous about the end point of his search for explanation, writing that Thomas of Monmouth’s text is “our most direct evidence for the first medieval accusation that Jews were guilty of ritual murder, a myth that spread, caused the death of many Jews in different localities, and influenced Luther and Hitler among others” (*TDA*, 210). Langmuir even goes so far as to equate medieval and modern accusations, speaking of a “medieval and modern myth” (*TDA*, 211). But if one desired effect of his work is an understanding of the Holocaust, the more immediate goal is to assign responsibility (framed as blame) for creation of the myth of ritual murder.

The emphasis on responsibility is not new. However, Langmuir self-consciously shifts the question away from the murky terrain of the “Who done it?” that was the focus for early interpreters who sought to understand “what actually happened” in Norwich in 1144. Langmuir sees this as a red herring taken up by scholars who mistakenly framed their questions in the same terms as medieval accounts that were preoccupied by the desire to locate a murderer and, more to the point, establish Jewish guilt. Instead of “Who did it?” Langmuir asks “Who propagated it?” What emerges is a reassuring narrative of historical culpability, in which the perverse creativity of a willful individual answers the question of origins for us. Langmuir says that “we may feel reasonably sure that the fantasy that
Jews ritually murdered Christians by crucifixion was created and contributed to Western culture by Thomas of Monmouth about 1150” (TDA, 232). It is not difficult to detect just beneath the surface of this argument an ethical story of its purpose: if we cannot answer the question of who killed William, we can still hope to know who is responsible for the murders of all those Jews who will be killed as a result of his story.

Langmuir’s moral project is concerned with explanation, but for him the task of explanation should not be equated with understanding. Langmuir suggests that we may explain the thoughts of historical persecutors, but it is in the realm of irrational conviction that historical actors are judged culpable for their actions, and it is precisely here that understanding falls short. As I indicated above, the result is a paradox: historical agents are blamed for an irrational process that may not be entirely within their control. And if it is a universal human tendency, then the potential for irrationality may implicate us all in the dynamics of persecution. Langmuir’s structure of blame is reinforced by his determined recourse to the realm of self-delusion, rather than prosaic questions of politics or even personal self-interest, in the search for explanation. Why emphasize self-deceit over self-interest? The answer may lie in the question of definition itself: for Langmuir, beliefs and rationalizations can be susceptible to delusion and irrationality, but while self-interest may involve moral turpitude, it is also manifestly rational. Emphasizing the irrational quality of antisemitic beliefs is one way Langmuir protects the category of the rational from complicity after the fact with antisemitism.

In examining the 1255 ritual murder case of Hugh of Lincoln, which resulted in the judicial murder of nineteen Jews, for example, Langmuir highlights the role of Sir John of Lexington, a knight in royal service and part-time keeper of the Seal, whose family connections in the neighborhood of Lincoln are detailed by Langmuir at some length. Counting brothers and cousins among the local clerical elite, Langmuir makes a persuasive case that the Lexingtons have local politics all sewn up. When John of Lexington arrives to investigate the ritual murder accusation, therefore, it is not unreasonable to assume that he might have an incentive to solidify the case for a local saint whose shrine would certainly bring financial benefits to Lincoln Cathedral and his brother Henry, the cathedral’s new bishop. Langmuir provides evidence for making such an argument, yet he only briefly acknowledges the pull of family interests. Instead, he pursues an explanation that privileges belief, and specifically irrational belief. “A strong case can be made that John did not believe the
confession [of the Jew Copin] but sought to bolster the reputation of the new saint in his brother’s cathedral,” he writes, but “by the same token” John of Lexington “must have wanted to believe the fantasy, to overcome his doubts [about the guilt of the accused Jews] if only he could find some confirmation” (TDA, 261). Such an interpretation requires a surprising level of historiographical speculation, but for Langmuir irrational investment is the only way to explain what he regards as a manifestly illogical conclusion of guilt. A little later, Langmuir says that perhaps “initially [John of Lexington] wanted no more than a confirming confession but was . . . forced to rationalize his deed, and ended by believing the story himself” (TDA, 262). We are left to conclude that self-delusion may trump even self-interest as a psychological force at work in antisemitic beliefs. At the very least, Langmuir suggests that irrational belief may be as influential as the self-serving rationality associated with the pursuit of status and monetary rewards.

Yet this focus on irrational belief, a process that may not be within the conscious control of the believer, paradoxically bolsters Langmuir’s case for blame. John of Lexington is still culpable for producing the first trial for ritual murder in England, not just because he chose to act cynically for the benefit of his well-connected relations, but because he ended by believing the accusation and promoting it. He is responsible because he should have known better, in Langmuir’s terms, but chose not to examine his beliefs rationally. Langmuir makes this clear when he writes that John of Lexington

was a learned man whose horizon was European, and he had had considerable judicial experience. Yet he supported an accusation that was practically unsupported by evidence. . . . John conducted the investigation himself and must have known better than anyone how flimsy the evidence was, and how strangely the accusation resembled the legends of Norwich and Gloucester. (TDA, 261)

In other words, this sophisticated and experienced knight should have been able to perceive the falsity of the accusation as easily as any modern observer. While I sympathize with Langmuir’s faith in the power of rationality, I question the application of modern standards of reason to medieval actors—a theme taken up by some other readers as well.

Langmuir argues that both Thomas of Monmouth and John of Lexington should have had the ability to recognize a patent falsehood by exercising their powers of self-examination and reason. However they chose in-
stead to believe a lie. The assignment of responsibility in Langmuir’s work revolves around the idea that these antisemitic innovators should have known better, but chose not to. I employ this formulation deliberately, because it captures the morally prescriptive character of Langmuir’s evaluation. Historical figures like Thomas of Monmouth and John of Lexington are not only subjects of investigation, they are also subject to censure—they have been found guilty of a moral failing, in this case, a failure of self-examination and rational thought as well as basic fairness. If rational and irrational thought are always potentials within the human condition, then a choice between them is always available as well. Langmuir’s emphasis on the choice between these potentials is how he handles the paradox of a blameworthy irrationalism, which may arise from conditions that are unconscious, unquestioned, or culturally sanctioned. In Langmuir’s work, this decision is analogous to a choice between good and bad action—it is a moral choice.

Other scholars have raised questions about Langmuir’s interpretive model here. Robert Stacey and Anna Sapir Abulaafia have both asked in different ways whether it is appropriate to argue that medieval persecutors should have known better when it is not clear that they could have known better, at least not in Langmuir’s terms. Stacey and Sapir Abulaafia suggest that medieval definitions of the rational differed from our own without being any less internally consistent. They argue that even among the clerical elite, it is not clear that accusations of Jewish violence would have violated medieval expectations of rational argument. By what evidence were medieval Christians supposed to see the transparent falsity of the accusation, particularly since, as Langmuir remarks, “they knew that Jews had different religious beliefs and practices, but they had little knowledge of what Jews actually believed and what their religious practices were—save that they had been told that they were old, useless, and bad”? (HRA, 298). Critics of Langmuir’s work have taken up this question in different ways. Of the host desecration charge, Marc Saperstein asks, somewhat glibly, “Can we be sure that every Jew thought of the consecrated host as nothing more than a cookie? Could any historian swear as an expert witness in a court of law that no Jew ever came into possession of a consecrated wafer and acted toward it with contempt, perhaps in order to demonstrate the absurdity of the Christian belief?” Robert Stacey argues, in relation to the 1255 ritual murder case in Lincoln, that by thirteenth-century standards, there were even good “rational empiricist” reasons to believe the accusation.
We moderns, of course, do not regard miracles as probative; we do not trust confessions, especially when extracted by torture . . . and our American legal system does not regard a series of previous charges as being in any way relevant to determining the truth of a new charge. The thirteenth century, however, took the opposite view on all three counts, and in each case the position taken was fully in keeping with the best rational empirical knowledge of the day. (“History, Religion, and Medieval Antisemitism,” 99)

Whose standards of rationality and falsehood finally matter in this determination? How does our negotiation of the problem of blame shift if we acknowledge that the original audiences for such accusations might have had “reasonable” grounds for believing them, despite their falsity?

Langmuir acknowledges this problem and again casts the issue in the form of a misrecognition, though now the terms are more epistemological than symbolic. A claim of ritual murder might seem plausible to an audience, Langmuir suggests, because “it may be hard to distinguish between the statement as an assertion and the statement as a hypothesis. Since the crime could have been committed by Jews, that could be an acceptable hypothesis to investigate; yet if their guilt is asserted with complete conviction without any investigation, it is a chimerical assertion” (TDA, 337).

You shall know them, it seems, by their works. Those who generalize from claims about specific events to argue for the guilt of the whole group, or presume guilt in advance, demonstrate the operations of irrationality at work. But when this irrationalism stems from mistaking a hypothesis for a fact, the work of drawing distinctions between rational and irrational thought, or between anti-Judaism and antisemitism, begins to look less straightforward than Langmuir suggests. Though medieval people were not modern rational empiricists, they were capable of acting consistently within a historical model of rationality while still giving credence to accusations like ritual murder. However, the issue at stake is only partly historiographical. In fact, Langmuir’s arguments recall an unmistakable Judeo-Christian tradition. Clear determinations of guilt are made, and the evil of antisemitism is described as the result of a choice, against reason, to gratify an emotional desire. Irrational thinking is a potential that, when activated, becomes the ill-gotten knowledge of persecution, a parallel to the biblical fall from innocence. In Langmuir’s work, this knowledge operates as a danger we must become aware of without accidentally partaking of it.
This moral barrier is in turn meant to serve laudable preventative ends—Langmuir suggests again and again that if we learn to recognize the processes of irrationality then we can learn to prevent them, and so say “never again” with some confidence.

Exemplary Evils

What may be less obvious than the prophylactic intention behind Langmuir’s work, however, is its fundamentally defensive structure. Langmuir’s theory works to prevent the exploitation of inflammatory accusations by overt antisemites. He does this, first of all, by insistently linking what is real with what is rational, and describing what is unreal as irrational or fantastical. The boundary between the real and the unreal rules the consideration of historical indeterminacy off-limits, and narrows the space available for historical speculation, a conceptual space often exploited by antisemites. This pattern is evident, for example, in Langmuir’s distinction between anti-Judaism and antisemitism. The much-discussed massacres of Jewish communities in 1096 by soldiers massing for the First Crusade are finally anti-Jewish rather than antisemitic, according to Langmuir, and the motives of the persecutors are comprehensible as the result of a process of rational thought. The crusaders “killed Jews because they were Jews,” he writes, “because Jews were people in the midst of Christendom who stubbornly rejected the nonrational beliefs of Christianity and persisted in adhering to their Judaic religion to the point of martyrdom” (HRA, 293). One might hope to reason with or bribe crusaders, something Jews did successfully with many passing recruits. One cannot reason with a persecutor caught up in delusions. Beyond the boundary of hostile—yet still rational—decisions lies an irrational realm we can describe, but never fully understand. Later medieval massacres of Jews, Langmuir argues,

were triggered, not by a summons to crusade and the attendant accusation of deicide, but by the new irrational accusations of conspiratorial ritual crucifixion, ritual cannibalism, host desecration, and well-poisoning. Someone would accuse the Jews of one of these crimes, and the accusation would inspire mobs to roam from town to town killing Jews for a crime no one had ever seen them commit. . . . [Those who died] were the defenseless victims of their killers’ delusions. (HRA, 305)

This specter of mass violence takes some of its terrifying aspect from what seems to be the ultimate insufficiency of explanation. Langmuir reinforces
the status of the irrational as something that cannot be encompassed by rational thought—it is a fury, a feeling, a force impossible to understand. The boundary between explicable bad conduct and irrational violence is a boundary meant to reinforce the difference between upstanding rationalists and the worst historical agents they study. I use this comparative term advisedly. Langmuir’s analysis implies—even if he does not say so outright—that irrational violence is more inexplicable than violence premised on a “realistic” conflict of interests, though he considers all violence deplorable.

Langmuir’s discussion of ritual murder reinforces his division between the rational, real realm of interaction that includes moral as well as immoral potential, and the irrational, fantastical realm of persecution, with its great potential for immoral acts. In “Toward a Definition of Antisemitism,” reprinted in the eponymous book, Langmuir writes that the “clearest example” of a chimerical accusation against Jews is ritual murder.

Had ritual murder occurred, that conduct would have been so corporeal that it could have been directly observed. But not only do we have no satisfactory evidence that Jews ever—to say nothing of a habit—committed ritual murder; a careful examination of the evidence makes it apparent that those who initiated the accusation had never observed that conduct themselves. (TDA, 334)

The accusation is therefore chimerical (Langmuir’s preferred term), since it concerns actions that are “unobserved and unobservable” (TDA, 336). In History, Religion, and Antisemitism, he reiterates the central point: “Shortly after 1096, some individuals began to attribute to Jews characteristics that neither they nor any others had observed” (HRA, 298). Again, Langmuir describes ritual murder as the primary example of an irrational thought process at work. “The falsity of the fantasy should be apparent,” he writes, “although many have believed it right down to the twentieth century” (HRA, 299). Though Langmuir is right about the falsity of the legend, what he subtly elides here is the volatile question of historical indeterminacy.

Debates about the “reality” of the ritual murder accusation have been a perennial feature of discussion about it, and Langmuir’s insistence on the falsity of the charge is an implicit response to prior attempts to rehabilitate it. While it may seem obvious to anyone with a cursory knowledge of Jewish tradition and the difficulties of Jewish life in medieval Europe that Jews would hardly be likely to engage in corporate plots of ritual murder, there is still an obvious gap between what has “never been observed” to take place and what the historian can reconstruct of the events leading up to an
This question of what “actually happened” in a given case is closely related to another historically explosive issue: the sometimes open and sometimes implicit struggle over the question of guilt, more specifically, the guilt or innocence of that artificially invoked entity, “the Jews.” This gap between event and reconstruction, between claims of guilt and determinations of innocence, has traditionally been exploited by anti-semitic interpreters and is hedged about with a genuine sense of danger in Langmuir’s work. He wants to rule out serious consideration of the accusation as a historical fact and describes such consideration as the sign of complicity with historical persecutors.

Langmuir returns to the sheer improbability of the accusation in order to suggest that the question of Jewish guilt or innocence is an unproductive, indeed taboo, area of inquiry. In “Historiographic Crucifixion,” he writes:

> It is empirically possible that one of the alleged victims of ritual murder was killed by a Jew but so improbable compared with other probabilities as not to deserve mention. Yet it was this carefully preserved loophole that enabled [certain scholars] to engage in wishful thinking and conjecture what happened in one case—the case that initiated the long series of generalized accusations of ritual murder.” (TDA, 296–97)

What Langmuir describes as a “loophole” is the space of interpretive uncertainty, and it marks the uncomfortable juncture where historiography meets politics. Langmuir responds to this risky indeterminacy by foreclosing it, and insisting on a moral, and fundamentally memorial, determination regarding the guilt of persecutors and the innocence of their victims. The language of the loophole describes the impossibility of positive knowledge where ritual murder accusations are concerned, in the sense that we can never know what “actually happened” in a given case, thanks to the filters of bias, suggestive rhetoric, and predetermined conclusions that surround the surviving historical testimony. On an epistemological level, the problem is irreducible. There is not now, nor will there ever be, some magical instrument for determining what actually happened in Norwich in 1144, or in many other examples of the ritual murder accusation.

On an ethical level, this indeterminacy has had unpredictable consequences, as the question of what we know or cannot know shades almost inevitably into the question of who is responsible, and for what. The loophole is also the space of an alibi, which allows those who would like to excuse Christians for the persecution of Jews, or worse yet, to continue to demonize Jews, to find some purchase for their arguments. I would like to
suggest that Langmuir resolves both the epistemological and ethical problems by mapping them onto one another. Refusing to inquire into the issue of historical indeterminacy is one way of foreclosing the possibility of antisemitic exploitation. I am not implying that we should reopen the question of whether Jews engaged in conspiracies to kill Christian children. My point is larger: it is not Langmuir’s claim that is in question but his defensiveness, and his determination to decide the issue in advance, to rule certain areas of inquiry as dangerous and off-limits. We can agree that the blood libel is a historiographical fantasy and still ask what is at stake in such strong moral prohibitions within a tradition of historiography that appeals to notions of objectivity and disinterestedness. What is at risk in this language of danger? What is secured by patrolling the boundary line between licit and illicit questions?

In the course of Ariel Toaff’s controversial argument, in *Pasque di sangue*, about the alleged use of human blood among a small group of Jewish “fundamentalists” during the Middle Ages, he invokes Langmuir as a primary example of a scholar for whom the question of the “reality” of the blood libel was decided, as he put it, “a priori.” The moral boundary Langmuir traces around the ritual murder accusation is, according to Toaff, past due for a test. It was precisely by using the language of taboo that Toaff framed his book and later defended it against criticisms. Yet what Langmuir is protecting, with his fence around the question of the accusation’s illusory “reality,” is more than some outmoded propriety, as Toaff suggests. Instead Langmuir understands—correctly, as the reception of Toaff’s work indicates—that approaching the problem of methodological indeterminacy is intertwined with a troubling ethical indeterminacy. In my introduction, I referred to Hayden White’s argument that historical relativism has its limit in cognitive responsibility to the evidence. Without such responsibility, we do not have history. Yet in a case where the evidence itself is veined with contradictions, bias, and fantasy, the standard of “cognitive responsibility” becomes difficult to define. And in a space of speculative historical reconstruction, ideological interests can all the more easily steer interpretation. Langmuir suggests that to speculate improvidently about a sensitive historical issue like the ritual murder accusation is to court moral compromise: within the horizon of the loophole, the investigator risks undermining his own status as an ethical observer. Entering the space of a “chimerical fantasy,” in other words, puts us in danger of being taken over by it, becoming the tool of a powerful cultural narrative we cannot control.
The sense of a danger that has not yet passed away lies behind Langmuir’s vehement insistence on the obvious falsehood of the legend, and his criticism of those who fail to rebut it adequately. That this project is fraught with anxiety is easy to see. Robert Stacey telegraphs this in his review: “No sane individual will today fail to recognize that this charge [ritual murder] is entirely chimerical. It has no kernel of truth about it; I trust it will be obvious that I am not attempting to revive it” (“History, Religion, and Medieval Antisemitism,” 99). The taboo object always threatens to escape historiographical control, and no rhetorical fence seems quite strong enough to contain it. Langmuir himself worries over those who have “believed [the accusation] right down to the twentieth century” (HRA, 299). This ghost, the shadow of a belief so powerful that it has assembled mobs to roam the streets, hangs over every discussion of the ritual murder accusation, and has shaped the terms of conversation.

Langmuir acknowledges the problem of exploitation in terms of responsibility, figured as blame, when he writes:

The possibility that William [of Norwich] had been martyrized [sic] by Jews, at least by some Jews, whether sane, mad, or bad, remained open, a loophole that encouraged conjectures to that effect. . . . And if that was the case, then Jews, not Christians, were primarily responsible for the ritual murder accusation that would haunt them through the centuries. (TDA, 296)

Here, Langmuir seems to substantiate the idea that one accusation stands in for others. He is well aware that earlier hypotheses of “exceptional” Jewish culprits have often led to dubious insinuations of collective guilt (a theme that reappears in public discussion of the Toaff affair, discussed below). One might ask how one guilty Jew, regardless of his mental state, could possibly carry this kind of responsibility. But rather than contest the logic that slips easily from one murder to collective blame, Langmuir appears to underwrite it. If any Jew at any time were guilty, according to this reasoning, then all Jews would be considered guilty and “responsible” for the blood accusation that “would haunt them through the centuries.” Langmuir deals in questions of collective guilt or innocence himself. By doing so he effectively agrees to play on the same terrain as antisemitic invective, always just offstage in his analysis, that argues for an eternal and collective Jewish guilt. Langmuir’s structure of blame ironically replays and inverts an antisemitic structure of guilt and innuendo.
The Limits of Moralization

Despite my critiques, I want to emphasize both the value of Langmuir’s inquiry and its important place in contemporary intellectual thought. Though he is working within a historiographical tradition that tends to foreground determinations of blame, Langmuir also meditates on larger questions about the meaning and trajectory of Western history in light of twentieth-century atrocities. He is ultimately asking a familiar and vitally important question, one that reverberates through post-Holocaust thought: What is Western civilization, that such things could happen here? Langmuir’s moralization is concerned with the realm of the prohibition as Ricoeur describes it. This is the “no” that signals clear boundaries and directives about what we must not do, and the complicities we must avoid. This is both the strength of Langmuir’s analysis, in terms of its arbitration of meaning, and its weakness, in terms of the limits of understanding it makes possible. Langmuir’s moralization of the past may involve false reassurances—that irrational beliefs can be neatly cordoned off from the operations of right reason; that the line dividing persecutors and victims forms two neat “camps” that do not mingle or confuse categories; and that if we are consistently rational, we will not fall prey to psychological mechanisms of hatred. I would suggest that, in addition to Langmuir’s valuable concern with basic historical justice, his conclusions entail ethical challenges to which we must also attend. One risk of this historiographical moralization is that we will have the satisfaction of assigning blame without the penalty of self-examination. As Judith Butler argues in *Giving an Account of One-self*, this is a risk with political as well as ethical consequences, and speaks to the historian’s vision of responsibility, not only at the level of evaluating historical events but in terms of imagining the implications of history for the present and future.

What I offer by way of closing is less a critique of Langmuir’s work than an active contextualization, one that seeks to understand his position on a familiar continuum between the poles of moralization and contingency, morality and ethics. Moralization offers us a sense of justice and judgment, the satisfaction of rendering final verdicts and delivering just deserts. Ethics is more open-ended, less concerned with judgment than understanding the contingencies that influence human action. The tension between morality and ethics, as I am using these terms here, is a classic philosophical problem, a dialectic that is never fully satisfied. Pure judgment appears to shut out the serious consideration of extenuating circum-
stances, even to become an unforgiving fundamentalism. Pure understanding appears to foreclose any meaningful sense of justice at all. Neither approach can be considered a final answer. Between these two terms ethical debates about the proper historical understanding of the ritual murder accusation have recently coalesced. Langmuir’s work represents a venerable view of Jewish-Christian relations in which moralization is prominent. Recent arguments like those of Israel Yuval and Elliott Horowitz occupy a position closer to the ethical, as Ricoeur has defined it: these historians are less preoccupied with the question of blame than with understanding the circumstances that contribute not only to violent acts of persecution but to the misunderstandings between religious communities that feed them.

But this continuum—often a friction—between moralization and ethics is not new to contemporary intellectual history, particularly where studies of Jewish history are concerned. Langmuir’s preoccupation with diagnosing the forms of persecution recalls debates from the 1990s about understanding the ordinary perpetrators of the Final Solution and is linked to American memorialization of the Holocaust, particularly its Jewish victims. This cultural preoccupation, sometimes referred to as the “Americanization” of the Holocaust, has appeared both obvious and puzzling, prompting scholars to ask why events that occurred so far from American shores should have become part of a national tradition. Langmuir, who grew up in Canada but spent most of his working life in the United States, was certainly familiar with these trends, though I do not want to imply that they simply determined his conclusions. Jeffrey Alexander has written about the larger “cultural matrix” in which memory is negotiated, in terms that emphasize the broad and various sociological factors at work. His account emphasizes a transformation in American memory of the Holocaust between the immediate postwar period, when it was described as a representative example of the many atrocities committed by the Nazis, to the post-1960s era, when the centrality of Jewish persecution was emphasized and the word *holocaust* itself emerged as an accepted term to describe it. Alexander describes the earlier framework as a “progressive” narrative, in that it sought to “redeem” the Holocaust by building a better world in its aftermath, while the later narrative is tragic, because it emphasizes the helplessness of sufferers and the universal dimensions of the ethical violation committed by the Nazis (“Social Construction,” 15–45). For Alexander, the emphasis on the global moral lessons to be drawn from the Holocaust is a positive outcome of its universalization, and he is not inclined to
agree with those who see this process as a form of trivialization (“Social Construction,” 60–61).

Within this broad schema of cultural change, Langmuir occupies an interesting position. As a Canadian soldier who fought the Nazis and nearly died of wounds sustained on the battlefield, he belonged to that generation of fighting men who returned home determined to build a society that would be a monument to the progressive ideal Alexander describes, a bulwark against future outrages. But as the husband of a Holocaust survivor, Langmuir knew the costs of the war from the perspective of victims as well as combatants. His project, described in terms of a thirty-year calling in his memorial tributes, had a deeply personal dimension. This may account for the strident tone of some of his arguments, and especially his desire for an absolute rebuttal of antisemitic claims. At a greater remove, he was also a close observer of the major changes in academic and cultural life beginning in the 1970s, and so intimately familiar with the cultural shifts Alexander describes. During this period, he witnessed the formation of Jewish studies departments and programs in the United States, helping to found one himself at Stanford, and he clearly understood that the questions he was asking were central contemporary concerns. It is possible to describe Langmuir’s work as occupying a fault line between the progressive and tragic narratives, emphasizing the hope of finally and definitively falsifying antisemitic claims, while stressing the universal moral implications of his theories.

Langmuir’s theorization of antisemitism also offers us an unexpected vantage point from which to survey these cultural trends, particularly if we situate him as a partner in the debate over perpetrator history in the early to mid-1990s, just a few years after the publication of his major works. These connections are structural, in the sense that they emerge from a broadly shared contemporary context. However the reading I offer here is suggestive rather than comprehensive—I do not pretend to engage in a thorough survey of this complex field, only to point to a critical moment of structural resonance between Langmuir’s work and debates about Holocaust perpetrators that speaks to the larger entanglement of ethics and historiography in the broader culture. In the extended conversation between Saul Friedlander and Dominick LaCapra, for example, a key question is how the historian (or, by extension, his audience) is implicated in the persecuting mentalities he holds at a distance. In discussing “ordinary” perpetrators of the Holocaust, Dominick LaCapra has sketched the concept of a
“negative sublime.” This stems in part from the giddy elation (what Friedlander calls *Rausch*) that sometimes accompanied horrific acts of murder during the Holocaust, when the perpetrators’ consciousness of having transgressed and survived all ordinary moral limits could lend a carnival atmosphere to acts of violence. Friedlander writes that it is at the point of understanding such moments that we remain “blocked”: “The historian can analyze the phenomenon from the ‘outside,’ but, *in this case, his unease cannot but stem from the noncongruence between intellectual probing and the blocking of intuitive comprehension.*” The elation recalled by some perpetrators as accompanying terrible brutality is something we cannot allow ourselves to understand, even if we recognize its presence intuitively. Friedlander suggests that the historian often recognizes such comprehension as an ill-gotten knowledge, which he must block in order to prevent a sense of complicity or implication in the phenomena he studies. For Langmuir, also, intuitive understanding of the perverse satisfactions of persecution is repressed, and then reframed in terms of the irrational. His argument can be distilled to a kind of syllogism: irrational thought processes lead to the worst kinds of persecutory violence; “we” have chosen not to succumb to irrationalism; ergo, “we” are not implicated in the historical dynamics of persecution.

A significant danger of this argument is that we merely reverse the poles of a conceptual system built on exclusion, and designate a new other—now the evils to be feared are the persecutors of Jews rather than Jews themselves—without fully understanding the forces that lead to persecution. Langmuir’s answers may in fact mystify as much as they explain. Persecutors are bad minds with whom we cannot identify; we learn what we should not become from this moral allegory, but not how ordinary people might be implicated in the dangerous knowledge of persecution. Judith Butler frames this problem in stark terms.

Condemnation becomes the way in which we establish the other as nonrecognizable or jettison some aspect of ourselves that we lodge in the other, whom we then condemn. In this sense, condemnation can work against self-knowledge, inasmuch as it moralizes a self by disavowing commonality with the judged.

Butler’s arguments recall the uneasiness of LaCapra and Friedlander in their efforts to account for the “blocking” of intuition in relation to the Holocaust. But she also introduces a new consideration: judgment presumes a relation of power, and power may be abused. We might be
tempted to conclude here, with this salutary reminder of the limits of moralization. Yet the open-ended emphasis on understanding over judgment represented by the sphere of the ethical inspires its own discomfitting questions. Neither the limits of moralization nor the open-endedness of ethical inquiry entirely satisfies the ethicomethodological demands of historical understanding.

In the well-known public debates between Daniel Goldhagen and Christopher Browning about the role of ordinary men in the carnage of the Holocaust, readers were presented with a stark choice that highlights the tension between moralization and contingency. In *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, Goldhagen suggests there was something uniquely German about the “eliminationist antisemitism” that led to the Holocaust. As Jane Caplan describes it, he “shifted the focus away from the bureaucrats and technicians of genocide . . . [and] focuse[d] instead on the killers at the apparently unmediated moment of individual choice, as they faced and destroyed their victims: as Germans slaughtered Jews.” The emphasis on choice is hardly incidental: for Goldhagen as for Langmuir, the unmediated choice to murder is what justifies moral judgment. There are few who would disagree with this general principle, though certainly Goldhagen (like Langmuir) was critiqued on other grounds—including the transparency of the choices involved.

Goldhagen’s work was frequently compared to Christopher Browning’s *Ordinary Men*. Browning examines the testimony of men in circumstances similar to those described by Goldhagen, but he emphasizes how the choices of ordinary individuals in police battalions were mediated by cultural and individual factors. These men struggled with the command to kill and some found themselves unequal to the task, even refusing the duty outright or finding ways to evade it. If Goldhagen was accused of reductionism, even racism, for his obsessive emphasis on the uniquely German character of the Holocaust, critics feared that Browning’s account of how ordinary men were transformed into killers risked a leveling relativism, perhaps even encouraging the exoneration of murderers. Browning’s response to such critiques insisted on the ethical importance of his enquiry.

Certainly, the writing of my history . . . requires a rejection of demonization. The men who carried out these massacres, like those who refused or evaded, were human beings. I must recognize that in such a situation I could have been either a killer or an evader—both were human—if I want to understand and explain the behavior of both as best
I can. This recognition does indeed mean an attempt to empathize. What I do not accept, however, are the old clichés that to explain is to excuse, that to understand is to forgive. Explaining is not excusing; understanding is not forgiving.50

Browning invokes understanding as the value driving his inquiry but emphasizes that this effort does not preclude judgment. Yet it is precisely the recognition that “I could have been either a killer or an evader” that disturbs the status quo of moralization, and appears to trouble a final historical verdict. Explaining is not excusing, but a self-knowledge that makes room for the possibility of one’s similarity to the ultimate modern perpetrator inspires uneasiness about the task of judging. This is a tension Langmuir works to mitigate by coupling universal moral weakness with an equally universal potential for choice.

Dominick LaCapra has spoken to the difficulty of grappling with this acknowledgment of one’s potential for such actions.

The inability to recognize oneself, at least potentially, in Himmler may derive from insufficient insight into the self—from what may be radically disorienting or even blinding if it is seen. In other words, it may, as Friedlander intimates, be due to repression or even to the denial of the other within oneself. But an awareness or recognition of the other, to the extent it is desirable, in no sense entails affirmation or acceptance. On the contrary, it requires vigilance and the mounting of conscious resistance to deadly tendencies that are fostered but never simply determined by certain historical conditions.51

Like Browning, LaCapra insists that understanding the internal capacities that enable men to commit mass murder—capacities we may even share—does not amount to acceptance. But this combined self-awareness and vigilance is difficult to understand as a program of ethical action. When it comes to writing history, such a position can easily look like equivocation.

My purpose here is not to dwell on the details of the Goldhagen controversy but only to remark on the obvious congruence between this affair and key ethical themes present in Langmuir’s work and the expanded context of debate undertaken in later chapters. What I am suggesting is that the tension between the moral and the ethical realms is not only perennial but a persistent feature of debates about fraught moments of historical understanding I have termed limit events. What is at stake here is the difference between judgment and understanding, between clear moral meaning and the consideration of historical contingencies. The evaluation of con-
tingencies tends to suggest that even the most heinous offenses may entail more ambiguous moral choices than most of us are comfortable considering. In written exchanges between Goldhagen and Browning, and in evaluations of their work, it is clear that questions of responsibility and ethical evaluation are paramount. Empathy is felt to be dangerous where there can be no forgiveness, and such considerations are bound to tax any moral limit. This debate, like the conversation between LaCapra and Friedlander, highlights some fundamental ethical questions for the historical understanding of persecution: How should we respond to the violation of the most basic precepts of human communal life? How should we understand those who commit such violations? And how are we to evaluate the historical figure who is arguably the ultimate “other” in modern thought—the mass killer?

Historiographical debates about the blood libel obviously do not feature mass killers in the modern sense, but as my analysis of Langmuir’s work indicates, the specter of pogrom and massacre, as well as a retrospective awareness of modern murderers, haunts this conversation. Recent work by Israel Yuval (discussed in the next chapter) testifies to a shift in the ethicomethodological paradigm of historical studies on Jewish-Christian relations in general, and the ritual murder libel in particular, from the moral to the ethical end of the continuum. This change in perspective works on two levels: at one level of remove, we are asked to reframe our perception of relations between historical communities and to hold back the question of blame in favor of a broader understanding of the dynamics of mutual relation. But we are also implicitly asked to think anew about the ethical implications of this history for the present and future. The “moral” of the story is more ambiguous, fraught with the consideration of contingencies and what I call an ethics of implication. I view Gillian Rose as the preeminent philosophical voice of this ethics, but Judith Butler offers a cogent critique of the structure of a moralizing ethics that allows us to glimpse what is meant by responsibility within an ethics of contingency and implication.52

Butler’s ethical argument reframes responsibility by revisiting the demands that emerge from our relations with the other—even or especially those relations that are unwilled or forced upon us. Langmuir, and an ethics of moralization more generally, understands responsibility in terms of judgment; for Butler, and for those who want to hold judgment in abeyance in service of understanding, responsibility must be imagined in terms of responsiveness to the other. For Butler, this means remaining eth-
ically responsive even to the other who harms us, and trying to imagine our relations with the other in terms different from those of retaliation or revenge. This responsiveness means, in fact, transforming our sense of intense vulnerability into an ethic of relationality that “provide[s] a way to understand that none of us is fully bounded, utterly separate, but, rather, we are in our skins, given over, in each other’s hands, at each other’s mercy” (GA, 101). It is this emphasis on relationality and the difficulty of ethical relations that brings Butler’s ethics into conversation with Gillian Rose’s philosophy. Both are concerned with what Rose calls “the broken middle” of ethical (and political) thought discussed in the next chapter: from this vantage, we never begin, in personal, historical, or political terms, from a “clean slate.” Our ethical relations always presuppose prior relations, prior failings, a history capable of generating grudges and bias at least as often as goodwill.

Butler approaches these questions in terms of the formation of the subject, and the ways our self-understanding is always produced within the context of “impingements” by others. Impingements are the multitude of ways that others impose on us, with or without intending to, and by imposing on us, forcibly shape and prompt us to “give an account” of ourselves—that is, to produce a narrative of the self that is being continually revised in relation to new impingements. These impingements need not be hostile, but are a cost and consequence of any relational life lived among others. This is how Butler can write that our relations with others form a “horizon of choice” that “grounds our responsibility” in conditions we do not choose (GA, 101). Part of what this entails is a recognition that every self emerges from a history and a web of relations that he or she does not choose and can never fully account for, but that nevertheless requires a response. Butler argues that this evolution of identity does not result in loss of agency. We are still responsible, but the context of our responsibility is larger: “I cannot think the question of responsibility alone, in isolation from the other. If I do, I have taken myself out of the mode of address (being addressed as well as addressing the other) in which the problem of responsibility first emerges” (GA, 84). Our emergence as subjects in a world we do not choose, yet to which we remain vulnerable, is the basis of our ethical relations with others.

Responsibility emerges for Butler from the difficult lessons drawn from the experience of impingement itself. Her argument unfolds in tension with Levinas’s meditations on otherness and how the face of the other calls us to responsibility. She takes up the problem of the most difficult
ethical case for Levinas: the status of an other who actively harms and injures us, beyond the unavoidable intrusion or impingement that involves us in a relation with any other. “The other’s actions ‘address’ me,” she writes,

in the sense that those actions belong to an Other who is irreducible, whose “face” makes an ethical demand upon me. We might say, “even the Other who brutalizes me has a face,” and that would capture the difficulty of remaining ethically responsive to those who do injury to us. For Levinas, however, the demand is even greater: “precisely the Other who persecutes me has a face.” (GA, 90)

Paradoxically, this painful relation calls us to responsibility precisely because it is unwilled: it is our feeling of susceptibility, of vulnerability to injury, that enables us to become responsive to the other. Butler reiterates that “our ordinary way of thinking about responsibility is altered in Levinas’s formulation” (GA, 91). Responsibility cannot be separated from responsiveness or relation. In sympathy with Levinas, she argues that the victim of persecution becomes the bearer of a difficult responsibility. However, she reminds us that within this Levinasian vision,

We do not take responsibility for the Other’s acts as if we authored those acts. On the contrary, we affirm the unfreedom at the heart of our relations. I cannot disavow my relation to the Other, regardless of what the Other does, regardless of what I might will. Indeed, responsibility is not a matter of cultivating a will, but of making use of an unwilled susceptibility as a resource for becoming responsive to the Other. Whatever the Other has done, the Other still makes an ethical demand upon me, has a “face” to which I am obligated to respond—meaning that I am, as it were, precluded from revenge by virtue of a relation I never chose. (GA, 91)

This is a hard ethical lesson, and speaks to the challenge of negotiating the claims of justice alongside the aims of ethics. Butler acknowledges that remaining responsive to an other who harms us may feel “horrible, impossible” (GA, 92), yet she argues that it is the ethically necessary alternative to a revenge that would simply reverse and replicate the structures of violence. A moralization that focuses on judgment alone encourages a politics of revenge. “Responsibility thus arises as a demand upon the persecuted, and its central dilemma is whether or not one may kill in response to persecution” (GA, 92). This is where Butler’s ethical inquiry intersects most
powerfully with the demands of politics, and calls up her earlier arguments about the ethical violence that often attends judgment. But it is critical to remember that Butler is not advocating an ethical absolute that would force us to say, for example, that a Himmler or a Göring is undeserving of judgment. She agrees that such judgments are certainly called for (GA, 45). What concerns her is the possibility that the identities of victim and persecutor can become fixed and essential, regardless of changes in circumstances. Under these conditions, cycles of violence may be perpetuated rather than resolved.

Though Butler is mindful of the reality of historical contingency, both she and Levinas speak the language of philosophy—and with specific consequences. The realm of the primary encounter described by Levinas, in particular, refers to an affective dimension of human experience that recurs over and over again within a single life, without, however, necessarily being isolatable to historically specific moments. Our encounters with others are continuous and repeated. Though Butler is concerned with the realm of social relations, she, too, describes the formation of the self within a dynamic of constant relationality in terms that are primarily philosophical rather than historical.

Indeed, Butler is particularly critical of Levinas when he appears to conflate his broad philosophical claims with specific historical categories of experience. Yet this critique does not entail the disavowal of politics. Rather, it is here, in her critique of Levinas, that the political implications of her own arguments come to the fore. Butler describes how Levinas refers to “the essence of Judaism” as the soul of persecution and describes Judaism as the special bearer of the responsibility emerging from persecution. Butler argues this is problematic.

If Jews are considered “elect” because they carry a message of universality, and what is “universal” in Levinas’s view is the inaugurative structuring of the subject through persecution and ethical demand, then the Jew becomes the model and instance for preontological persecution. The problem, of course, is that “the Jew” is a category that belongs to a culturally constituted ontology . . . so if the Jew maintains an “elective” status in relation to ethical responsiveness, then Levinas fully confuses the preontological and the ontological. (GA, 94)

Such a confusion of categories privileges the Jews as a unique class of victims, specific historical victims who nevertheless stand in as universal terms. Butler pursues this train of thought as a way of highlighting the
weaknesses of what I have called an ethics of moralization. If Levinas violates the terms of his own argument, he nevertheless does so in a way that illuminates the real-world politics of historical persecution. There are serious political dangers to the desire for revenge that can follow from a strong version of the ethics of moralization and blame. Mindful of these, Butler remarks,

> It is always possible to say, “Oh, some violence was done to me, and this gives me full permission to act under the sign of ‘self-defense.’” Many atrocities are committed under the sign of a “self-defense” that, precisely because it achieves a permanent moral justification for retaliation, knows no end and can have no end. Such a strategy has developed an infinite way to rename its aggression as suffering and so provides an infinite justification for its aggression. (GA, 100–101)

Though Butler does not connect these two moments in her argument explicitly, Israel appears to be in the background of this critique of an “infinite justification for aggression.” This places her within the same genealogy of intellectual thought as some “postzionist” historians who, I will argue in the next chapter, are preoccupied with questions of Israeli identity that resonate with the issues of ethical relationality Butler raises here. In broader ethical terms, Butler is concerned that the status of victim may become fixed and essential, removed from the specificities of context or change over time.

Butler critiques one end of what I have described as an ethical continuum, highlighting the weaknesses of moralization in favor of an ideal ethical aim. But neither ethical aim nor moral norm has a monopoly on ethical thought—each is always being modified by the other in an ongoing dialectical process. In Butler’s account, the challenges of an ethics of contingency are visible as well as its strengths. Butler’s arguments are more persuasive when she points to the political dangers of a logic of revenge than when she tries to articulate an affirmative alternative. There is something almost millenarian about the new world she imagines when she asks, “What might it mean to undergo violation, to insist upon not resolving grief and staunching vulnerability too quickly through a turn to violence, and to practice, as an experiment in living otherwise, nonviolence in an emphatically nonreciprocal response? What would it mean, in the face of violence, to refuse to return it?” (GA, 100). Despite this appeal to what may be an impossible ideal, Butler is pragmatic when she argues for beginning somewhere in the middle, between a new world and a corrupted
relation of violence. She writes, “This is a situation we do not choose. It forms the horizon of choice, and it grounds our responsibility. In this sense, we are not responsible for it, but it creates the conditions under which we assume responsibility. We did not create it, and therefore it is what we must heed” (GA, 101). Again, I want to emphasize that Butler does not preclude the necessity of judgment, but wants to insist on our continued relationality with others, and (as Rose argues) an awareness that the circumstances of those relations change and evolve. Israel Yuval’s connection to this critique is structural and indirect; he exposes the dysfunctional dynamics of mutual identity formation in medieval Jewish-Christian history, leaving the politics of the present hovering in the background. He emphasizes the conditions that frame choices for historical actors, whether they are victims or persecutors. Yuval also shifts the focus from an explanation that emphasizes responsibility “for” historical events, to one that emphasizes our responsibility “to” an unknown future. The discourse of ethics, in addition to mediating our understanding of the past, also speaks (indirectly) to history’s contemporary relevance.

It is here, at this horizon of choice, in what Gillian Rose has described as the broken middle, in the undesired conditions under which we assume responsibility, that we must negotiate the painful problem of coming to terms with the other-as-perpetrator. Judgment is assuredly necessary. To hold judgment permanently in suspension would constitute a moral outrage in itself. This is something Gavin Langmuir understood very well. The demand for judgment is called up even in Thomas of Monmouth’s unwitting forecast of “extermination.” Yet judgment must be tempered by a recognition of ourselves—or some unwelcome potential within ourselves—in the other. And our condemnation must consist of more than a simple rejection and taking of vengeance upon the perpetrator—even if this is a historiographical vengeance, taken symbolically and after the fact.59 “Violence,” Butler writes, “is neither a just punishment we suffer nor a just revenge for what we suffer” (GA, 101).