

**The Phenomenological Uniqueness of the Holocaust: Some Philosophical Remarks  
on Katz's *The Holocaust in Historical Context*.**

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I doubt if I am the only reader to find Steven Katz's new book, *The Holocaust in Historical Context*,<sup>1</sup> frustrating. The author brings to bear a vast erudition; sometimes one cannot help but feel that he brings it to overbear. While he accurately and perceptively roots out the logical errors of those whose work he discusses, he seems to have been less careful in his own logical house-keeping. Given his own concern for logical precision, I offer the following comments. Let me say that I would not normally turn the tools of knit-picking logical analysis on history in this way. Such tiresome pedantry is apt to give philosophers a bad name. But since Katz is so willing to detect logical errors in others, and to resort to quasi-logical formalisms, it seems not inappropriate to apply the same standards to the author himself. I do not offer these remarks in a spirit of controversy. I am sympathetic to many of Katz's main proposals and I believe it is possible to state them, as he often does, without confusion. But the book seems to me, in those philosophical areas in which I have some competence, to be over-inflated and consequently unnecessarily obscure.

I begin with some comments on a section in chapter 1 entitled "A Definition of Phenomenological Uniqueness." The basic claims of this section can be stated as follows:

The Holocaust is unique by virtue of the fact that never before has a state set out, as a matter of intentional principle and actualized policy, to annihilate physically every man, woman, and

child belonging to a specific people. The property here stated with respect to which the Holocaust is unique can be described as "phenomenological" in the sense that it applies to things of *this* world, not of some transcendent realm. The claim that the Holocaust is unique in this respect is thus testable and ascertainable in the ways (whatever they are) that any immanent historical claim is.

Katz refers to this whole package as his "definition" of the phenomenological uniqueness of the Holocaust. Strictly speaking, however, it would be more accurate to say that it contains a definition of "phenomenological uniqueness" (i.e. being the only event in history so far to have some property which qualifies as phenomenological in the sense indicated) and the assertion that the Holocaust meets this definition. However, I shall continue to refer to Katz's definition.

I quote in full the passage to be analyzed, adding numbers for ease of reference subsequently:

Is the Sho'ah [Holocaust] unique? To answer this question we have, of necessity, to specify in what particular sense we are using the notions "unique" and "uniqueness" -  $\emptyset$  is unique in respect of conditions  $A, B, C, \dots X$ . As already indicated, my individuating criteria - conditions  $A, B, C, \dots X$  - will not include moral or transcendental criteria. Instead, the criteria proposed will be what I prefer to call phenomenological criteria, that is, what I shall define is the phenomenological uniqueness of the Holocaust. This I understand as follows: "The Holocaust is phenomenologically unique by virtue of the fact that never before

has a state set out, as a matter of intentional principle and actualized policy, to annihilate physically every man, woman, and child belonging to a specific people." To put it schematically:

(1)  $\emptyset$  is uniquely  $C$ .  $\emptyset$  may share  $A, B, D, \dots X$  with  $\Delta$  but not  $C$ .  
 And again  $\emptyset$  may share  $A, B, D, \dots X$  will all  $\Delta$  but not  $C$ . (2)  
 Everything essential turns, as it were, on  $\emptyset$  being uniquely  $C$ .  
 This entails that the Holocaust would not be the Holocaust if the property of "intentionally pursuing the physical annihilation of a people without remainder" were not present. (3)  $\Pi$  lacking  $C$  is not  $\emptyset$  - an occasion of mass death that does not include the necessary intentionality is not comparable to the Holocaust, at least as regards this property  $C$ . (58)

I begin by analyzing the section marked (1). What is the logical form of these sentences? Unfortunately, the semi-formalism of Katz's writing obscures the fact that they do not wear their logical form on their sleeves. The main problem concerns the term " $\emptyset$ ." Is this meant to refer to an individual, or is it a concept expression? If the former, is it a name or a variable? In favor of taking it as a name is that this formalism is designed to illuminate the claim that the Holocaust is unique, where "the Holocaust" is a name of a particular event. However, Katz also writes: "for any  $\emptyset$ ,  $\emptyset$  has  $C$ " (63). In logic, quantifiers, such as "for any," bind variables, so this locution suggests that " $\emptyset$ " is a variable. The sentence just quoted essentially represents the English sentence "everything has  $C$ ."<sup>2</sup> This is clearly not Katz's intended meaning, which is, rather, something like this: any holocaust has  $C$ . This leads us to the possibility that " $\emptyset$ " is a concept expression, presumably representing the concept *holocaust*. This interpretation could then

be developed in two ways. We could either take " $\emptyset$ " as a predicate in first-order logic, or we could treat it as a name of a concept in second-order logic. In support of some such reading there is the (misleading) evidence of the apparent quantification examined above and the fact that Katz also speaks of "the concept  $\emptyset$ " (59). Also, prior to the passage under discussion, Katz used the symbol " $\emptyset$ " as a predicate, when he wrote: "For any predicate  $\emptyset$ ,  $X$  is not  $\emptyset$ " (43). Let us try looking at some of these possible interpretations in more detail.

Taking " $\emptyset$ " as a name of an event, we can rewrite (1) in the vocabulary of first-order logic as:

[A] ( $\emptyset$  is  $C$ ) and ( $(x)(\text{if } x \text{ is } C \text{ then } x = \emptyset)$ ).

[A] says that the event named by " $\emptyset$ " has the property  $C$ , and is the only thing that does so. This seems to represent Katz's views but there are several problems with it. First, all those parts where Katz speaks of "the concept  $\emptyset$ " and so on would need to be amended. Another serious problem with [A] will emerge later, when we come to look at (2). But a third problem can be stated now. If " $\emptyset$ " functions simply as a *name*, then it is difficult to see what the point is of the whole logical apparatus that is introduced. It simply restates what has already been said, without extending it in any way, in an obscure and confusing way.

Suppose, then, we treat " $\emptyset$ " as representing a concept, the concept *holocaust*. In that case, to make his definition relevant to *the Holocaust*, that particular event, we will need to add the claim, nowhere specifically made by Katz, that the event of the Holocaust does indeed fall under the concept *holocaust*. This is not a trivial claim, as can be seen from the oft-

repeated example that the individual designated by the singular term "the Holy Roman Empire" does not fall under the concepts *holy*, *Roman* or *empire*. But suppose this extra claim made. We now have two options. We could ascend to second-order logic, and treat " $\emptyset$ " as a name of a concept. Roughly speaking, (1) would now it go something like this (I use the symbol " $\ni$ " to mean "has as part of its definition" and "CON" as a variable ranging over concepts):

[B] ( $\emptyset \ni C$ ) and (CON) (if  $\text{CON} \ni C$  then  $\text{CON} = \emptyset$ ).

In English, this says "the concept *holocaust* is the only concept that has *C* as part of its definition." But of course, this claim is obviously false. The concept *either a party or C* has *C* as part of its definition but is clearly not the concept *holocaust*. I therefore reject this reading categorically. However, as we shall see, it does capture something of what Katz seems to want to say.

The second option in taking " $\emptyset$ " as a concept is to treat it as a predicate in first-order logic. This would give us:

[D] ( $\exists x$ ) ( $x$  is  $\emptyset$  and  $x$  is  $C$ ) and ( $y$ ) (if  $y$  is  $\emptyset$  then  $y = x$ )

or possibly

[E] ( $\exists x$ ) ( $x$  is  $\emptyset$  and  $x$  is  $C$ ) and ( $y$ ) (if  $y$  is  $C$  then  $y = x$ ).

[D] says that one and only one event was a holocaust, and that event was *C*.

[E] says that some event was a holocaust and is the only event that has *C*.

The difficulty in deciding between these two readings stems from the fact

that Katz nowhere characterizes the concept *holocaust*. Thus we cannot be sure that when he speaks of the uniqueness of the Holocaust he is talking about the fact that only one event was a holocaust [D], or that the Holocaust is unique among holocausts in having *C* [E].

There are problems with both [D] and [E]. [E], as indicated, leaves open the possibility that there are other holocausts which are not *C*. This makes it, at best, an odd way of expressing the uniqueness of the Holocaust. As for [D], it leaves open the possibility that there are other events which are not holocausts but do have *C*. This seems not to be Katz's view. One might think to do better with:

[F]  $(\exists x)(x \text{ is } \emptyset \text{ and } x \text{ is } C) \text{ and } (y)(\text{if } y \text{ is } \emptyset \text{ or } y \text{ is } C \text{ then } y = x)$ .

This tells us that only one event is both a holocaust and has *C*, and that no other event is either a holocaust or has *C*. However, in that case, it is really not clear why we need both the concept *holocaust* and *C* to make the point about the uniqueness of the Holocaust. Still, [F] may be a possible representation of Katz's view.

To summarize so far, [A] seems the best of the formalizations we have considered, if we try to make sense of Katz's logical symbolism. However, it faces the two problems already stated: it is inconsistent with other things Katz writes and it lacks any generality over the direct expression of his views in English. And there is a further problem to be discussed shortly.

Let us go on to examine (2). Katz says "Everything essentially turns, as it were, on  $\emptyset$  being uniquely *C*. This entails that *the Holocaust would not be the Holocaust if the property of 'intentionally pursuing the physical annihilation of a people without remainder'*<sup>3</sup> were not present." This essentialist claim, which I have italicized, is *not*, however, entailed by

either [A], [D], [E] or [F]. That it is not entailed by [A] is the third problem with that way of understanding Katz's definition. It can be seen that [A] does not entail the essentialist claim from this counter-example: that I am the only person to have the property of paying the rent at 842 N. Dillon Street does not entail that I would not be me if someone helped me out with the rent. (Similar examples will show that [D]-[F] won't support the essentialist claim either.) So no claim about essence seems warranted by any of the more plausible candidates we have looked at for analyzing the unique possession of *C* by an event.

[B], the claim about the analysis of the concept *holocaust*, supplemented by the claim that the Holocaust was a holocaust, would entail the essentialist claim. It would be a conceptual necessity that any event that fell under the concept *holocaust* had *C*, since *C* is part of the concept *holocaust*. Unfortunately, as we have seen, [B] is wholly implausible. However, it may have been because he was illicitly reading (1) in terms of [B] that Katz was led to make his essentialist claim in (2).

All these formalisms aside, it should be clear in any case that whether an event has some property uniquely is a totally different issue from whether it has it essentially.

New complications arise when we move on to (3). Katz appears to switch the issue from identity to comparability. He now discusses under what conditions an event could be compared to the Holocaust: " $\Pi$  lacking *C* is not  $\emptyset$  [again we are not told anything about the logical form of " $\Pi$ "] - an occasion of mass death that does not include the necessary intentionality is not comparable to the Holocaust, at least as regards this property *C*." All claims in (1) and (2), even supposing they were clearly expressed and obviously true, would not establish this new claim of incomparability. Just as uniqueness and

essentiality are quite different issues, so is comparability different from either of them.

Katz quite correctly pointed out at the outset of the passage that claims about uniqueness make no sense unless one specifies under which respects one is considering the event. Every event is unique under some descriptions and not unique under others. The same goes for comparability. It makes no sense to say "a is comparable to b" *simpliciter*. Any two events are comparable in some ways and not in others. Quite properly then, Katz tells us the property with respect to which no event which lacks *C* can be compared to the only event which has *C* - namely, *C* itself. But this makes the claim of incomparability trivial. It is as if one were to say that no-one who is not the Pope can be compared to the Pope, with respect to their being the Pope! Precisely what is of interest are the other ways in which two events which fail to share some important property are comparable or incomparable. Given that I'm not the Pope, in what other ways are we comparable? Given that no other event has *C*, in what ways are other events comparable to the Holocaust?

Having discussed Katz's definition of the phenomenological uniqueness of the Holocaust, I would like to make two related points, one pertaining to the term "phenomenological" and the other to the issue of uniqueness.

Why does Katz use the term "phenomenological" to qualify the uniqueness of the Holocaust? I have already suggested what I take to be the meaning of the term in this context: that the uniqueness of the Holocaust resides in this-worldly, historical characteristics. But why that particular term? Katz follows the passage we have just been examining with an eight point explanation of his use of the term. The first two points recapitulate the meaning given to the term, and seem unobjectionable. 1. re-asserts the opposition to transcendental uniqueness and 2. claims that the uniqueness is in terms of causal and logical categories that apply to all historical events. Unfortunately, 3.-8. are not as plain sailing.



3. tells us that Katz is using the term "generically--in a non-Husserlian, non-Shutzian, non-Schelerian, non-Heideggerian, non-Merleau-Pontyan sense" (60). Katz, of course, is quite right to distinguish his use of the term "phenomenological" from its use as a technical term in certain philosophers. But do we really need this list of philosophers who can be associated with phenomenology? Add to this the fact that there is foot-note of nearly half a page in length giving references to works by all these philosophers, in the original languages and in translation, and to two secondary works on phenomenology, and it should be clear why I call the work inflated and the apparatus over-bearing.

When we come to 4., we find that although Katz rejects the entire Husserlian doctrine of phenomenology, something of it echoes in his own definition of the uniqueness of the Holocaust. The echo comes about in this way: Husserl claimed that "phenomenology entails intentionality;" Katz claims the Holocaust is unique because of the intentions of its perpetrators. But the echo here is seriously distorted. Intentionality in Husserl is a technical concept, referring to the way in which experiences are about things. Its use to refer to the plans and pre-meditations of agents is coincidental. Or if it is not, it would at least require a philosophical theory to connect the two.<sup>4</sup> Katz's echo of a doctrine he rejects and distances himself from in any case, turns out to rest on a simple equivocation.

In 5., Katz says that he adopted the term to emphasize "the particularity of phenomena" (60). His point here, one stressed by Emil Fackenheim in various places, that we should confront the "scandal of particularity" and not seek refuge in unfounded generalizations is a good one.<sup>5</sup> Yet how the use of the term "phenomenological" is supposed to help is totally unclear. Finally, in support of the claim that to compare A and B one must know A and B (a claim which, if interpreted liberally is too trivial to need stating, and if taken strictly, is almost certainly false on any substantive

conception of knowing), Husserl is invoked again to exhort us "den Gegenbenheiten in allen Modifikationen nachzugehen" (to explore the given in all its modifications). We hardly need such an authority for such an obvious point--and its not even obvious that Husserl is making the point Katz wants, since "the given" is another technical term of phenomenology.

Indeed, in 6. we are explicitly told that the Holocaust is *not* a given, making the relevance of the quote from Husserl even more attenuated. Not only is the Holocaust not a given, it is not a deduction. What is meant by denying the Holocaust is a given, I don't know; but denying that it is a deduction seems simply a category mistake. Once more, Husserlian apparatus is called in, this time in a secondary work on Husserl from which this totally unilluminating quotation is given in a footnote: "phenomenology is called descriptive because it is not deductive."<sup>6</sup> Rather than being a given or a deduction, Katz tells us that the Holocaust is a "judgment based on reflective examination and construction of definable and delimited phenomena" (61). Again, this seems like a category mistake. The Holocaust itself was not a judgment of any sort. Perhaps Katz means that the assertion that the Holocaust is phenomenologically unique is a judgment etc. As with 5., why any of all this should be suggested by the term "phenomenological" is unclear.

In 7. Katz says that he used this term also to show his rejection of all forms of psychological reductionism. Once again, I ask, why does the term "phenomenological" manifest this rejection? The only sense this terms has been given so far, to refer to this world as opposed to a transcendental realm, is as consistent with a theory that 'reduces' the Holocaust to the psychology of its perpetrators as with one that does not.

I quote the beginning of 8.:

In using the term ["phenomenological"] I accept as incontrovertible that I (and all others who were not there)

cannot experience the Sho'ah [Holocaust] as those involved directly in it did. For me it is--echoing Kant's vocabulary--*phenomena*, that is, something a person makes his or her own through one's own categories and experiences, one's own conditioned consciousness. (61)

So the term "phenomenological" is meant to echo again, this time the different word--"phenomena"--from the philosophy of Kant. The epistemological disclaimer of the first sentence is fine, though as Katz reminds us immediately after the quoted passage, and at other places, this is true of all events and is no bar to gaining historical knowledge and understanding of those events. The presence of Kant, here, however, seems totally inappropriate. Katz himself seems to realize this, since in a footnote he adds: "I use the term *phenomena*, but I am not adopting Kant's entire epistemological and metaphysical system." One wonders why Kant needed to be mentioned at all.

Still, given the invocation of Kant's name, one is inescapably led through the following train of thought. If the Holocaust is made one's own through one's own categories and experiences, in anything like the way that Kant thought the phenomenal world was made through the common categories of humankind, then given that Katz's point here is that it is made differently by those who experienced it from the way in which it is made by those who did not, we will have a multiplication of phenomena. There will be "the Holocaust as refracted through the experiences and concepts of those involved" and "the Holocaust as refracted through the experiences and concepts of those not involved." In that case, speaking phenomenally, which Katz seems all too happy to equate with speaking phenomenologically, the Holocaust is not unique. It is made and re-made through all the different ways of experiencing

and conceiving of it. So the reference to Kant, if it has any effect here at all, serves to undermine Katz's thesis, not support it.

I turn now to the question of uniqueness. In chapter 4, entitled "On Intentionality," Katz discusses the definition of genocide. As he rightly insists, it is of no use arguing whether this or that phenomenon was an instance of genocide unless we have some clear conception of what genocide is. And his efforts here are commendable, since he clearly shows that in the often heated and emotional discussions of putative genocides, there are a number of very different conceptions at work.

It soon becomes clear that his definition of genocide is that an event have property *C*, defined above. Thus, the assertion of the phenomenological uniqueness of the Holocaust is equivalent to the claim that the Holocaust is the only instance of genocide in history. There is nothing logically wrong with all this. (I am not competent to judge its factual credentials.) Where I take issue with Katz's methodology is that he explicitly rules out other definitions of genocide on the grounds that they fail to "establish the distinctiveness of the Holocaust" (146). For instance, he rejects a characterization of the Nazis' crime in terms of the destruction of a culture, since this crime is anything but unique. In other words, instead of employing whatever definition of "genocide" he thinks appropriate, and then seeing whether the Holocaust was a case (or, indeed, the only case) of genocide, Katz guarantees the conclusion that the Holocaust was the only case of genocide by seeking a definition of "genocide" which uniquely applies to the Holocaust.

In some sense, this is all a verbal dispute. The real historical work still has to be done to show that the Holocaust has property *C* and has it uniquely, and this issue Katz seriously addresses. I am not accusing him of helping himself to factual conclusions. What he has helped himself to is the proprietorial use of the term "genocide," and given the strong emotions that

surround the use of this term, emotions that he brings to our attention, this appropriation of the word is surely something to be studiously avoided.

I have examined three interrelated issues. First, there was a confusion over the logic of the claim that the Holocaust was unique. This confusion was introduced solely by Katz's mis-placed attempt to apply a logical formalism that had no real role to play. Secondly, I suggested that the use of the term "phenomenological" was made to carry a lot of unnecessary philosophical baggage. Once again, the main point was perfectly clear, and only became confused by the invocation of various philosophies, based, it seems to me, on little more than verbal associations with the term "phenomenological." Finally, we saw a kind of circularity at work when Katz came to define the term "genocide," guaranteeing the conclusion that the Holocaust was the only case of genocide by a verbal sleight of hand. Let me stress, in conclusion, that none of all this should affect our assessment of Katz's substantive claims about the uniqueness of the Holocaust. The verdict on these, though, must come from historians, not philosophers.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Steven Katz, *The Holocaust in Historical Context*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> In all that follows, I treat "C" as a general term, designed to express the predicate "is an event whose perpetrators intended the physical annihilation..." except in [B], where it will need to be construed as a name of that concept.

<sup>3</sup> Of course, this is a property of the people who are the agents of the Holocaust, not of the Holocaust itself. I take it we should really read property C: "being an event whose perpetrators... etc."

<sup>4</sup> For instance, the entry for "Intentionality" (by Roderick Chisholm) in Paul Edwards, *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. IV (New York, 1967) begins as follows: "The term 'intentionality' was used by Jeremy Bentham to distinguish between actions that are intentional and those that are not. It was reintroduced by Edmund Husserl in connection with certain doctrines... The word is now used primarily in the second sense" (201). The article then goes on to deal exclusively with the second sense, the way in which mental states are about things, and the fact that those objects of experience need not exist.

<sup>5</sup> See Emil Fackenheim, *The Jewish Return into History* (New York, 1978), *passim*. and especially 133.

<sup>6</sup> The quote is taken from Suzanne Bachelard, *A Study of Husserl's Formal and Transcendental Logic* (Evanston, 1968). I don't mean to imply that the quotation is unilluminating in its own context.