

# What is Orientation in Thinking – and in Life? Or: Why is Rosenzweig relevant today?

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An interesting fragment, probably written by Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) in 1954 yet published only recently,<sup>1</sup> evinces a leading preoccupation with the question of orientation: what makes orientation possible? Life, Levinas wrote, is oriented from the very beginning, and the question of meaning arises when this orientation is lost. This is not merely a logical, or, for that matter, empirical question, nor is it a purely historical one, even if it does have a historical dimension. From where do we get our first orientation, and how do we find it again, once it has been lost?

Levinas turned to Franz Rosenzweig in order to elaborate a philosophical answer to his question. It is also in order to find an answer to a question quite similar to Levinas' that in our days so many of our contemporaries turn to Rosenzweig and particularly to the *Star of Redemption*,<sup>2</sup> a work that is driven, from start to finish, by the search for a polar star, an orientation point. The many answers commonly given today to the question of orientation, be they historical or political, do not appear satisfactory any more. Rosenzweig, too, was dissatisfied by the answers that were available to him. What he judged to be particularly disheartening was the attitude of his fellow historians—and indeed, one should not forget that he was a historian by training. He also believed that his judgment had been fully confirmed by the collapse of Germany after World War I. So he looked for another level of inquiry and another kind of answer, one whose aim would not only be to satisfy intellectual needs, but also to regenerate man as a whole. "Understanding the Sick and the Healthy," the essay he wrote in 1921,<sup>3</sup> is driven by this question, as is the *Star*, which was published for the first time in the same year, and which ends with the famous words: "Into life."

More than a century before the publication of the *Star*, in the years 1801/02, the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel drafted an Introduction to philosophy in which he insisted that "the true need of philosophy arises from nothing else but this: to learn from it and through it how to live."<sup>4</sup> Rosenzweig, who had written his PhD thesis on Hegel's conception of the state,<sup>5</sup> always remained indebted to Hegel and to his political philosophy, which also contains a full-fledged philosophy of history. The twofold historical path that Rosenzweig sketched in the third part of the *Star*—one for the eternal people, another one for the "peoples of the world"—was framed in Hegelian terms, but it deliberately parted from Hegel's own philosophy of history by being explicitly eschatological in nature. His eschatological reading was taken over by influential interpreters and readers, for example by Karl Löwith,<sup>6</sup> and used mainly to criticize the philosophy of history as a whole, as a discipline. But Levinas used it differently: already in the Preface to *Totality and Infinity*, he endeavored to rehabilitate the "extraordinary phenomenon of prophetic eschatology." The eschatological promise of the *Star of Redemption* accounts for much of the interest in Rosenzweig in our days. It is still very powerful, and indeed it deserves to be taken into consideration.<sup>7</sup>

But it was Schelling, not Hegel, who Rosenzweig deemed his true philosophical source of inspiration. Had Schelling completed his *Ages of the World* fragments, Rosenzweig once wrote in a letter,<sup>8</sup> there would have been no need for him to compose the *Star*... So he wanted to finish what had been left unaccomplished.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Emmanuel Levinas, "Carnets de captivité suivi de Ecrits sur la captivité et Notes philosophiques diverses," in *Oeuvres* 1, ed. Rodolphe Calin and Catherine Chalier (Paris: Grasset, 2009), 262–265.

<sup>2</sup> The German text is available today in a paperback edition: cf. Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988). First English translation by William W. Hallo (New York: Reinhart and Wilson, 1971). Second English translation by Barbara E. Galli (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, *Understanding the Sick and the Healthy: A View of World, Man, and God*, trans. Nahum N. Glatzer, with a new introduction by Hilary Putnam (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 5, ed. M. Baum and K.R. Meist with T. Ebert (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1998), 261. Cf. also in English H.S. Harris, *Hegel's Development. Night Thoughts (Jena 1801–1806)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), here chap. V: 'Through philosophy to Learn to Live', 191ff.

<sup>5</sup> Rosenzweig reworked and expanded his thesis, which was published after the war under the title *Hegel und der Staat* (2 vol., 1920, rev. ed. in one vol. 1962), now in paperback: Franz Rosenzweig, *Hegel und der Staat* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History. The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1949).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Myriam Bienenstock, "The Concept of History: A Greek Idea, or an Invention of Prophetism?" *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 20, no. 1 (2012): 61–76.

<sup>8</sup> Letter to Hans Ehrenberg, March 19, 1921. In: Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Mensch und sein Werk. Gesammelte Schriften I. Briefe und Tagebücher* (Haag: Nijhoff, 1979), vol. 2, 701.

Specifically, Rosenzweig wanted to take further Schelling's meditation on time: no orientation in time is possible as long as one remains caught in a mythical past, where the past and the present are not distinguished from each other. Introducing such a distinction had been one of Schelling's aims in the *Ages of the World*. To this end, Schelling had turned to the story of Creation in Genesis I, and Rosenzweig followed suit. Schelling's interest in Kabbalistic sources, which is evident in the *Ages of the World*, also opened up new, fascinating perspectives to Rosenzweig. The questions Rosenzweig asked still fascinate today.

Soon after completing the *Star*, Rosenzweig was affected by a severe degenerative disease that led to his demise, after several years of enduring an increasingly disabling illness. During these years, he devoted himself to studying the manifold Jewish sources of learning—not just Kabbala, but also other, classical sources: the Bible, the Midrash, and Talmud. We cannot know exactly how his thought would have evolved, had he lived longer. But there is little question that the main thrust of his activity would have been oriented towards furthering Jewish education. It is with good reasons that his insistent call of latter years for studying Jewish sources, and also for educating new generations according to their guidelines, frequently serves today as a model. At times, however, Rosenzweig's works have been used in a manner that goes against his intentions. Because the young Franz Rosenzweig was raised in a family of thoroughly assimilated Jews and had come very close to conversion—only to reverse the move and return to Judaism—he is put forward as a kind of icon for “dissimilation”: a word he himself had coined, in comparison with and in opposition to “assimilation.”<sup>9</sup> Rosenzweig would not have welcomed “dissimilationist,” ghetto-like forms of Jewish life, of the kind we witness today in many countries—would he have insisted, up to the last weeks of his life, upon translating the Pentateuch into German,<sup>10</sup> had he not been convinced of the importance of that language, and with it of German culture? He always remained intensely aware of the huge debt he owed to German culture, knowing that without it—without German idealism and without German philosophy as a whole, he would have achieved very little. For us to appreciate the present relevance of the new life-orientation that he impressed upon his contemporaries, it is imperative to keep this background in mind—and to think of Kant's urgent plea at the end of his famous pamphlet “What is Orientation in Thinking” (1786): “not to contest reason in what it makes the highest good on earth, namely, the privilege of being the ultimate touchstone of truth.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. on this point Myriam Bienenstock, “Assimilation – dissimilation. Rosenzweig sur l'école,” in *Héritages de Franz Rosenzweig “Nous et les Autres”*, ed. Myriam Bienenstock (Paris: éd. de l'éclat, 2011), 140–148.

<sup>10</sup> *Die Schrift*. Aus dem Hebräischen verdeutscht von Martin Buber gemeinsam mit Franz Rosenzweig. 4 volumes, (Gerlingen: Lambert Schneider, 1976, rev. ed. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1992).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Kant's Political Writings*, ed. H.S. Reiss, transl. H.B. Nisbet, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 235–249.

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