

## Franz Rosenzweig in the Twenty-First Century

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Rosenzweig's has been the essential Jewish philosophical voice of the twentieth century. Will he prove to be just as inescapable in the twenty-first?

The problem to which Rosenzweig responds is characteristic of late modernity. Notwithstanding talk of the post-modern, it is still our problem today. The rational organization of society into the collective agents known as science and the state is no longer a dream, as it was in early modernity. The dream has been realized and, for better and for worse, it has transformed our world. Indeed, it transforms our world again and again, at ever increasing speed. Yet the puzzles of human life have not been solved. In fact, we seem to have deprived ourselves of the ways in which our ancestors—perhaps our great grandparents, depending on one's generation—lived with those puzzles and rendered them, if not soluble, then at least tolerable. At the turn of the nineteenth century, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi taught us to call what is threatening about this condition “nihilism.” In the pursuit of a scientific settlement of philosophy, we have laid the old world waste, losing the orientation that used to render us individuals who stand on solid ground and face in a definite direction. At best, we are disoriented, cast adrift. It is not that we do not *know* ourselves. We *are* not ourselves, or anything else in any stable sense. At worst, destructiveness now passes for our identity.

Rosenzweig did not merely *think* this problem. He *lived* it, and in a particularly Jewish way. His parents' generation had embraced the opportunities of emancipation, leaving the Jewish world of their parents without much thought of the consequences for the Jewish identity to which they remained inchoately committed. Accordingly, Rosenzweig and his cousins grew up amidst the husks of a Judaism drained of its meaning. While others turned for their orientation to Christianity, the religious tradition they knew best, Rosenzweig rediscovered the vitality of Judaism. Along with Nathan Birnbaum, he pioneered a “return to Judaism” that was influential between the world wars, and again from the sixties on. However, unlike Birnbaum, who came to identify closely with the Orthodox Agudath Israel movement, Rosenzweig became a figure with whom members of all strands of contemporary Judaism—except, perhaps, separatist Orthodoxy and radical Reform—could identify. Who else could have the title “*morenu*” (“our teacher”) conferred upon them in a process initiated by an Orthodox rabbi and

completed by a Reform rabbi?<sup>1</sup> A large part of Rosenzweig's ongoing significance consists in the multivalent exemplarity he possesses, not only for those engaged with Jewish philosophy, but more generally for Jewish intellectuals of extremely diverse levels of observance, who see Jewish tradition as providing the resources for a refuge from nihilism.

If Rosenzweig's significance within his generation rested upon his ability to embody the Westernized Jewish intellectual's experience of his time, then his significance today rests in part on the sense that our times are uncannily similar to Weimar Germany in the 1920s. Like Rosenzweig and his cousins, many contemporary Jewish intellectuals grew up without any firm footing in the values of their forebears, and many rebelled against the inchoate commitments of their parents, either by rejecting altogether their parents' values, or by seeking meaning in traditions that would have been alien to their parents, or—perhaps most radically of all—by renewing traditional values not because they were traditional, but rather because they were worth living by; indeed, even worth dying by. At the same time, the retrospective knowledge—inaccessible to Rosenzweig, who died in 1929—that the renaissance of Jewish life in Weimar Germany would eventually succumb to the Nazi onslaught, lends a harsh realism to the sense that we, like Rosenzweig, live under the shadow of a nihilism whose arrival is incalculable, yet all but inevitable.

Of course, Rosenzweig was not only a spiritual exemplar. He also *thought* through the problem that he lived, the problem of late modern nihilism. In particular, he saw both that the German Idealist systems were responses with considerable power, and that they were ultimately doomed to become part of the problem rather than part of its solution. German Idealism has been enjoying one of its periodical revivals in Anglophone philosophy over the last two decades,<sup>2</sup> and Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption* remains at once one of the best measures of its philosophical importance and one of its most significant critiques. To be sure, Buber's *I and Thou* is the most famous attempt at a *dialogical* alternative to German Idealism. But Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption* is far more systematic and philosophically sophisticated.

German Idealism is an attempt to achieve orientation and individuality, not in reaction against, but rather through and by means of, the nihilistic tendencies of late modernity. If we hold on firmly, Hegel assures us, to the view that modern science and statehood are culminations of human history, then we will see that the destruction of old values has ultimately proved constructive and even preservative, not only of the world we inhabit, but also of our own identities, which we can then affirm. Reason comes prospectively to be, and

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<sup>1</sup> See Nahum N. Glatzer, *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought* (New York, NY: 1961), 130–1.

<sup>2</sup> John McDowell's Locke Lectures, delivered in 1991 and published as *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: 1994) can serve as a landmark.

comes retrospectively to be recognized, in the course of human history, which is lived as destructive, but which is thought as the realization of rationality.

This is a powerful vision. As has often been the case, the prevailing objection is that this sort of Idealism is too subjective, that it can succeed only by assuming that reason—which is clearly an idealized version of *our* reason, hence subjective—creates nature and guides history. But the assumption is both hubristic and in conflict with our fundamental sense that reality is objective.

To my mind, the objection is based on a misunderstanding of Idealism, which actually valorizes a thoroughly objective version of reason. Instead of finding a reflection of our own subjectivity in nature and history, Idealism reveals that what we call reason in our own case is but a distorted image of the natural and historical processes that have given birth to us. Rosenzweig's objection is deeper. He accuses it of understanding reason—and thus both nature and history—in a way that aspires to the timeless monologue of Aristotle's thought thinking itself, with which Hegel's *Encyclopedia* ends. In contrast, Rosenzweig reconceives reason as dialogical, redeeming the unfulfilled promise of Plato's literary form:

The [old] thinker knows exactly his thoughts in advance; that he 'expresses' them is only a concession to the deficiency of our, as he calls it, communicative medium, which does not consist in the fact that we need language, but rather that we need time. To need time means: being able to anticipate nothing, having to wait for everything, being dependent on the other for one's own. . . . To think here means to think for no one and to speak to no one (for which one may substitute everyone, the famous 'universality,' if it sounds better to someone). But to speak means to speak to someone and to think for someone; and this Someone is always a definite Someone and has not only ears, like the universality, but also a mouth.<sup>3</sup>

Dialogical reason is always responsive to the other and always open to being surprised by the other, which can only occur in a time that lacks closure. The problem with Idealism is not that it projects a subjective rationality onto the world, but that it conceives rationality in terms of subjectivity, even if the rational subject is, in the end, the collective subject that Hegel calls spirit.

There is no guarantee, on Rosenzweig's view, that, in late modernity, I can achieve the meaningful life of an oriented individual. Nor is there any guarantee that, if I achieve it, I will be able to protect it against the forces of destruction. But, if I am to achieve it, this will happen through two commitments that are in genuine tension: renewed trust in the values and meanings of a concrete way of life, and unreserved engagement with that way of life's other,

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<sup>3</sup> Rosenzweig, "The New Thinking," in Franks and Morgan, eds., *Franz Rosenzweig: Philosophical and Theological Writings* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2000), 126–7.

even at the risk of one's own annihilation. Reason, on this view, is not subjectivity, not even the idealization of subjectivity. It is a self-trust that enables and obliges one to put one's own subjectivity at risk in dialogue with others. For Rosenzweig, "the old Jewish words come," and the dialogue is with Christians. For others, there will be different words, and different others.

Can Rosenzweig retain his centrality to Jewish thought in the twenty-first century? As thought, his dialogical project remains compelling, if enormously demanding. As life, his continued relevance depends on whether the Jewish philosophical discourse he renewed can rise to challenges that he did not live to encounter: the possibility of organizing science and the state for the sake of genocide, experienced by Jews as the Holocaust; and the impossibility of organizing science and the state, even for the best of motives, without dirtying one's hands, experienced by Jews as the establishment and maintenance of the State of Israel. Despite all the signs we discover in Hegelian retrospect, these have been lived as surprises, profound shocks. Can we find orientation nevertheless? I would wager on the continued relevance of a broadly Rosenzweigian approach: what we need is—in a dialogical sense—time.