

Reading Rosenzweig's Little Book

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Abstract

In this article the author addresses the issues that Franz Rosenzweig raises in his *Büchlein* as they affect the former's own very personal manifestation of Judaism. The article therefore covers not only the contents of the "little book", but aims more generally to say something about aspects of Rosenzweig's thought that the author finds problematic. The article begins by looking at three notions that are often used in connection with the sorts of issues Rosenzweig raises (atheism, religion, and spirituality), goes on to stress the importance of Rosenzweig's "religious existentialism", and ends by keeping its distance from some of Rosenzweig's central claims, with an eye to both reconciling the author's religiosity with a plausible naturalism and salvaging a suitable space for philosophical speculation about God.

Keywords: atheism, religion, spirituality, religious existentialism, Rosenzweig

In this article I will discuss Rosenzweig's *Büchlein*,¹ but I do not want to simply interpret the "little book"—that I did in chapter one of my *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life*.² I want to address the issues that Rosenzweig raises as they affect my own very personal manifestation of Judaism. So my article will range more widely than just the contents of the "little book", and also say more about aspects of Rosenzweig's thought that I find problematic. To do that, I will begin by looking at three notions that are often used in connection with the sorts of issues Rosenzweig raises: atheism, religion, and spirituality.

1. Atheism, Religion, and Spirituality

The terms "atheism", "religion", and "spirituality" are terms just about everyone thinks they understand. Yet all of them have many meanings. To the Greeks and the

¹ Rosenzweig 1921a.

² Putnam 2008.

Romans, “atheism”, for example, meant disbelief in the gods (in the plural), and to the Jews, Christians, and Muslims, denial of the existence of “God” (in the singular), but “God” too has many possible understandings. (The situation is not improved by the fact that some people insist that their own understanding of these terms is the only right one.) For example, for most traditional Jews, Christians and Muslims, God was conceived of as a person or personality who was aware of and sometimes answered petitionary prayers. In other words, he was a supernatural being who could and sometimes would help you. The football player who crosses himself when he runs out to the field is acting as if he believed in such a God, and perhaps he does. From his point of view, someone who denies that is an atheist. Yet there are great theologians, including Maimonides, who thought that belief in a “magic helper” God is, in effect, *idolatry* although the traditional Jewish petitionary prayers are, nonetheless, obligatory, according to them, not because they effect God in any way, but because of their positive effect on the person who utters them. (Of course, Maimonides’ theology was, in many ways, intellectually elitist: only those capable of philosophical meditation are capable of receiving God’s “overflow”, according to this great medieval Jewish sage.) For Maimonides, it is thus the “worshipper on the street” who is an atheist—an atheist without knowing it, since all idolaters are atheists without knowing it, in traditional Judaism. One person’s “atheism” may be another person’s “belief in God”!

“Religion” is another term with many understandings. For many years, I was a member of what corresponds to a “religion department” at Harvard, the interdisciplinary “Committee for the Study of Religion”, and in that committee, as in, as far as I know, all religion departments in non-denominational schools in the United States, Confucianism is one of the faiths that is studied, along with Buddhism, Taoism, and many others. The Committee avoids speaking of “religions”, however, preferring a finer-grained subdivision of what are often referred to by that term into “religious traditions” and “communities of faith” within those traditions. I once heard the great chairman of the Committee at the time I became a member, Wilfrid Cantwell Smith, make the bold claim that “I could show you as much variety in Methodist communities in London in 1815 as is supposed to exist among the ‘world religions’”. Yet Confucianism is not theistic at all, nor are many varieties of Buddhism. Yet all of these are unmistakably forms of spirituality. But what is “spirituality”?

What I am referring to by that term has two aspects. One I will illustrate with a reference to a French scholar, Pierre Hadot. A mutual friend who was very close to Hadot and also a former student of mine, Arnold Davidson, made me aware of Hadot’s remarkable writings about the history of philosophy many years ago, a selection from which Arnold edited under the title *Philosophy as a Way of Life; Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, and reading Hadot made me aware that ancient philosophers in particular saw philosophy not as a set of propositions to be discussed and criticized—although, to be sure, they did that too—but as a regimen of spiritual exercises, or as he puts it “a mode of existing-in-the-world, which had to be

practiced at each instant; and the goal of which was to transform the whole of the individual's life".³

Referring to the practices involved in such a "mode of existing in the world" as *spiritual* exercises points to another aspect that they have: that the transformation in question is experienced as putting the individual in touch with something (or some-things) *higher* than herself. While that "something higher" may be conceived of as God, it also may not be. The "way of heaven" of which Confucianism speaks is not God, nor is the Tao, nor the mystical "emptiness" (which is somehow also a full-ness) of Zen Buddhism, nor the natural forces and powers of paganism and neo-paganism.

2. A digression about my own religiosity

As I explain in the Introduction and the Afterword to *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life*, my own religious life involves saying the Jewish prayers and studying Jewish texts, including the Jewish Bible (the "Tanach") and the Talmud as well as Jewish philosophy. And I conceive of this study and prayer as a system of spiritual exercises in Hadot's sense. But I do not believe that the Jewish Bible, or any book, for that matter, is "the word of God". I am aware that the God I pray to is a human construct, although, in my view, we construct our various versions of "the available God"⁴ in response to deep human needs that we do not "construct". I say this because this is absolutely not the view of Franz Rosenzweig. The idea that God is a human projection was anathema to Rosenzweig, and when he found it in some of Buber's early writing, he denounced it as "atheistic theology". Yet, even if mine is an "atheistic theology", I find much of value in Rosenzweig, as well as in Buber and Levinas, whom I also wrote about in my book. For me they are examples of different but wonderful expressions of the human need for a spiritual dimension to life. And the very diversity of those expressions is of value for me, as it is for another Jewish thinker I very much admire, Jonathan Sacks, who wrote *The Dignity of Difference* while he was Chief Rabbi of Great Britain.⁵

But I digress. Coming back to Rosenzweig, the very fact that Rosenzweig did not approve of the kind of theology, naturalistic theology, that best reconciles my own spiritual needs with my critical intelligence, has led me to ask just how Rosenzweig managed to reconcile, or at least to combine, the existentialist side I describe with sympathy in my book, and what I will call his "metaphysical theism". I will focus mainly on Rosenzweig's *Understanding the Sick and the Healthy* (*Büchlein vom guten und kranken Menschenverstand*, in German). That means, of course, that I am going to discuss things in Rosenzweig that I disagree with, and not only things I admire.

³ Hadot 1981, transl. p. 265. I quote these words on p. 12 of chapter one of my *Philosophy as a Guide to Life*.

⁴ Available God, from Kaufman 1993.

⁵ Sacks 2003.

3. Rosenzweig's "Little Book" (*Büchlein*)

Since few if any of you will have read *Understanding the Sick and the Healthy* itself, and not everyone will have read chapter one of my book, the one that discusses it, I will briefly sketch the contents of Rosenzweig's *Büchlein*. The "illness" that Rosenzweig imagines the "patient" to be suffering from is *philosophy*. (The likening of philosophy to an illness is the similarity between Rosenzweig and Wittgenstein, that I also discuss in my chapter.) And Rosenzweig explains that although the number of philosophers is small, the philosophical disease is capable of striking non-philosophers too, at any time. But what is the philosophical disease?

The philosophical disease that Rosenzweig attacks throughout the *Büchlein* is looking for "essences": wanting to know the "essence" of the world, the "essence" of the human being ("Man") and the essence of God. And in the various chapters of the *Büchlein*, Rosenzweig wittily describes and attacks all the philosophical positions known to him, especially but not exclusively in German philosophy. The strategy is to show that each of the metaphysical theories reduces its supposed subject—the world, the human being, God—to something so utterly different from what "common sense in action" takes the world (or anything in it—say "a slab of butter"), a human being (say, one's beloved), or God to be, that, for all intents and purposes, the world turns out to be *nothing*, the particular human being turns out to be *nothing*, and God turns out to be *nothing*. For example, the empiricist philosopher-scientists whom Rosenzweig knew about held that statements about matter are, when properly understood, statements about sensations. For great German scientists like Mach and Boltzmann—and this was true of the analytic philosophers of the time, especially the logical positivists, as well—science does not describe an independently existing reality, it just tells you that "if I have such and such sensations, then I expect such an such sensations to follow", e.g., if I (seem to myself to) put a burning match to a piece of paper (or have visual impressions as of doing that), then I can expect to have visual impressions of the paper burning. [Here I have expanded on an argument on p. 69 of the *Büchlein*.] In other words, science itself, according to its great positivist representatives, does not even pretend to tell you the *essence* of physical reality; it only tells you about *appearances*. To ask for more is to talk "nonsense" according to the positivists. And the idealist philosophers (Hegel and Co.)? For the Hegelians, the empiricists' and positivists' "sensations" are aspects of Mind. But what is Mind? If the world is Mind, it obviously cannot be just *my* Mind, that would be too solipsistic. So it must be "consciousness in itself", or perhaps "consciousness for itself"—something we do not experience the world or anything in it *as*. The philosophers' world ends up being *nothing*, or at least nothing that common sense in action is aware of.

This will have to serve to give you flavor of Rosenzweig's critique of metaphysics, minus the wonderful language and the lightly worn erudition. I have to skip over Rosenzweig's critique of philosophers' accounts of the essence of "Man" for reasons of space. The critical point comes when Rosenzweig comes to philosophers' account of the nature (or "essence") of God. Rosenzweig has no trouble disposing (to his satisfaction) of what he calls "mysticism" (by which he means one contemporary German variety of mysticism), a doctrine which insists that God is "wholly

other". Like the doctrines that make the world and its matter into Mind, and Mind into consciousness-in-itself, this makes God "nothing", according to Rosenzweig. And idealism, which makes God, Man and World all into Mind (= "nothing"), and Spinozistic pantheism which makes God into Nature (= "nothing"), are all convicted of making God into "nothing" as well.

What makes philosophy a disease, in Rosenzweig's eyes, is that while it starts from something valuable—namely, "wonder", that is, a sense of the miraculousness and mystery of the existence of the world, of humans, and of God—freezes that wonder by turning it into philosophical wheel-spinning.

[*A critical remark:* Rosenzweig seems to believe that accepting any of these philosophical conceptions of God is incompatible with a meaningful spiritual experience of God's reality, but I don't believe this is true. Maimonides, for example, thought that God has no properties, that is, no predicate that applies to anything else applies to God. Even "exist" does not apply to God. Nor does "not-exist". Nor does "either exist or non-exist"—God does not have to obey the Law of the Excluded Middle! This should make Maimonides' God a "nothing" for Rosenzweig (who does not discuss this negative theology, as far as I know). Yet anyone who has read *The Guide to the Perplexed* must know that Maimonides did feel a profound sense of spiritual connection with God, an "overflow" from God, as he describes it. And I am sure that many 19th century and early 20th century Idealists found *spiritual* and not only intellectual sustenance in the Hegelian idea that everything that exists, including one's own consciousness and the world outside it, is part of God. It is just not true that one has to have the "right" theology, if there is such a thing, to have a meaningful spiritual life.]

4. Existentialism

In my book, I refer to Rosenzweig, Buber, and Levinas as "existentialists", because I take the heart and soul of religious existentialism, beginning with Kierkegaard, to be a battle against turning religion into mere dogma. That is not to say that a religious existentialist must lack a creed; Kierkegaard was, after all a Christian, and one with Christian beliefs. But for him, if Christianity becomes *only* a set of beliefs, then it is no longer a religion, no longer Christianity, no longer of any value at all. What the European bourgeoisie of Kierkegaard's time regarded as Christianity he viewed with much of the same disgust as Nietzsche did.

In Christianity, although not in Judaism, the dichotomy between "faith" and "works" is fundamental, and Christians have spilled a lot of the blood of fellow Christians over disputes about "salvation through faith" versus "salvation through works". But from Kierkegaard's point of view, the 19th century bourgeois "Christians" misunderstood both "works" (which they understood as "good deeds") and "faith" (which they understood as "belief"). For an existentialist, Christian or Jewish, the "transformation of the whole of an individual's life" of which Hadot speaks involves a transformation of both the notion of "faith" *and* the meaning of "good deed". Faith ceases to be equated with belief in some propositions, and good deed ceases to be equated with some conventional notion of doing one's duty.

I say this, because if Rosenzweig had accepted such doctrines as “Torah misinai” (the Torah was dictated to Moses on Mount Sinai), this would *not* in itself have been incompatible with his being an existentialist. But what makes him a difficult thinker—and makes his disgust with theologies according to which God is a human projection, theologies which he denounces as “atheistic theology”, while insisting on certain fundamental theses about God and Redemption, problematic—is the difficulty of determining just why and how he tolerates certain deviations from traditional belief and not others. If we can determine that, then I think we will get a better picture of this complex thinker.

5. Rosenzweig’s toleration of (or indifference to?) certain traditional beliefs

Here are some examples of Rosenzweig’s non-traditional side. I discuss these in the second chapter of my book, the chapter (mainly) on Rosenzweig’s *The Star of Redemption*.⁶ I point out that although, in a letter to the leaders of the Free Jewish Institute of Learning of which he was one of the founders, he dismisses text-critical approaches to Judaism (Wellhausen), psychological approaches (William James and Freud), and sociological approaches (Weber), he does *not* say that the text-critical scholars are *wrong* (as Hertz, does, for example, in many of the comments in his widely used edition of the Pentateuch). What he says is that “we” (practicing Jews) know Judaism “differently”. And he goes on:

What do we know when we do? Certainly not that all these historical and sociological explanations are false. But in the light of the doing, the right doing in which we experience the reality of the Law, the explanations are of superficial and subsidiary importance.⁷

So the truth or falsity of the doctrines of the infallibility and divine origin of the Bible, which text-critics like Wellhausen call into question, is “of superficial and subsidiary importance!”

Nor does Rosenzweig believe in reward and punishment in an afterlife. (Which he never mentions.) Both in the last chapter of the *Büchlein* and in the first part of *The Star of Redemption*, death is something to be faced bravely, not something to be “eluded”. Nor does redemption, in Rosenzweig, involve a future Messianic or post-Messianic era. In one sense, redemption is simply God’s love, which we can experience *now*. Redemption is a *present* event. In another sense, we do perhaps anticipate redemption in some form in the future, but what that means we do not know and do not need to know.

Thus man may act unconcerned with the outcome; he may act according to the requirements of the world as it is today. That day, the day when action is required, lets

⁶ Rosenzweig 1921b.

⁷ From Glatzer 1961, p. 245.

him understand what he must perform. The realm of time is the proper arena for his action. He does not need to wait until truth has risen from the depths.⁸

6. Putting this together

On the positive side, Rosenzweig insists on the reality of God, World, and Man. Each is “something”, and not the vacuous “nothing” that the philosopher substitutes. The world is the world, and not “appearance”, or “consciousness *an und für sich*, or mere “as-if”; Man, the name-giver, is the bridge between God and the world; and God is simply God. The *non-identity* of World, God (no form of pantheism is tolerated by Rosenzweig, any more than idealism), and Man (who is both a part of the world and more than a part of the world) is absolute. These are, I claim, philosophical dogmas for Rosenzweig, however much he denounces philosophy. He may say that these dogmas, indeed the whole of Part I of the *Star*, are of secondary importance, not worth anything by themselves, what is important is “experiential philosophy”, the “new thinking”; but experiential philosophy is, it seems to me, a name for a set of spiritual exercises for those, and only for those, who accept these fundamental premises.

One thing that Rosenzweig's non-traditional side enables him to do is maintain the irrelevance of science and empirical studies generally to his religious faith. Psychology of religion, sociology of religion, text-critical and other historical studies of the history of Judaism are free to discover what they may. It is all “of superficial and subsidiary importance.”

This separation of the spheres is helped by Rosenzweig's positivistic understanding of science as just concerned with regularities in the “appearances”, on which I remarked earlier. At the same time, what I have called Rosenzweig's “religious existentialism” enables him to preach and teach, to experience Judaism and teach others to experience Judaism as (in Hadot's language) “a mode of existing-in-the-world, which had to be practiced at each instant; and the goal of which was to transform the whole of the individual's life.” I have not concealed the fact that it is with his religious existentialism that I sympathize, and not with the residual philosophical dogmas.

7. A question I would put to Rosenzweig, if I could

Rosenzweig criticizes so many philosophies of religion as making God a “nothing”, that I cannot help wondering, what justifies Rosenzweig in thinking that his “God is something” really makes God more than a mere “nothing”? What he tells us is that regarding God as “something” is not to be understood as a claim about God's essence, it is an expression of a return to “common sense in action”. We are to use the *name* “God”, and the other names we have for God, including YHWH and “*elo-him*”, without thinking about or seeking a theory of God's essence, to use these names as “healthy human understanding” (*guter Menschenverstand*) requires.

⁸ Rosenzweig 1921a: 93.

But just how does “healthy human understanding” require us to use the name “God”? We are supposed to realize that God *loves* us; that is the heart and soul of Rosenzweig’s faith experience and his theology. And it is, apparently, to be taken literally—Hands off! You philosophers! But does that mean that God *thinks about us*? Does God have *feelings*? Do God’s thoughts and feelings occur in *time*? No doubt Rosenzweig would say that when we ask these questions we have moved from “common sense in action” to “philosophy”, from wonder at God’s love for us to “frozen” speculation. But is the idea that we can think of God as *loving* (and think of that as simply true, every bit as true as that what I bought at the grocery was a piece of butter) while not thinking any of these “philosophical” thoughts about God really plausible? Like Wittgenstein, Rosenzweig wants a sharp line to separate “healthy” uses of words and “unhealthy” ones, but I am suspicious of the idea that such a sharp line exists.

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