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Religious Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig

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The Charm of F. Rosenzweig's Philosophy

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Abstract. The philosophical works of F. Rosenzweig have particular meaning for both academic and existential inquiries and interests, as he deeply re-observes the religious life of Judaism and Christianity through the reflection of human existence. Fear of death, observation of Plato's understanding of Eros, overcoming of atheism of Goethe in the experience of faith — these key motives form a challenging discourse of Rosenzweig's theological and philosophical thought, which invites reader into a truly charming spiritual journey. The article provides an intriguing introduction to the issue of *RUDN Journal of Philosophy*, which is dedicated to F. Rosenzweig and provides a scope to various aspects of the philosophy of one of the most prominent German-Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century, including topics such as criticism and reception of German idealism and existentialism, «new thinking» as a philosophical system, philosophical interpretation of biblical texts, Kabbalah and mysticism.

Keywords: Rosenzweig, Plato, Goethe, religious life, fear of death, Eros, faith

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The First Impression of Rosenzweig's Writings

The encounter with Franz Rosenzweig's philosophy is a revealing of the field of modern Jewish theology. His writings invite the reader to rethink the meaning of traditional terminology of religion, like scripture, revelation, and redemption. His famous book, *Star of Redemption*, is demanding to renew religious life — by giving a new meaning to the religious calendar, the high holidays, the circle of Sabbaths by weekly Torah portions, and rereading of various prayer blessings.

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The encounter with Franz Rosenzweig's philosophy is an extensive meeting with existential philosophical thought. His introduction to "The Star of Redemption" touches on the primary elements of existence and the most significant foundations of human life [1]. Rosenzweig writes about the individual: death, the fear of death, and the desire to live. He writes about the deep meaning of relations: the meaning of love, the dialogue between people, the family meals, communal belonging, and the experiences of the individual within society and the state. Rosenzweig's philosophy is an initiation for a new dialogue about life itself. Or we may say that it is a conversation that requires us to get back to life itself and to give real meaning to life itself.

These two descriptions of Rosenzweig's philosophy require an explanation. We, the readers, are invited by Rosenzweig to a double journey, religious and personal. Rosenzweig's writing processes concepts that are taken from the religious terminology, and specifically from the religious discourse of Judaism and Christianity. Yet, his ideas and his phenomenology are dedicated to human experiences and daily events. Formally, the title of the book is dedicated to the idea of "redemption", and the central concepts that structure the book are "creation" "revelation" and "redemption". The lexicon of this work suggests new interpretations of the expressions like "miracle", "God", "kingdom of heaven", and "prayer". A close reading and deep understanding of the book may reveal another lexicon, that is dedicated to the experiential, existential lexicon.

Perhaps this is exactly the secret of Rosenzweig's "charm", the ability to re-observe the religious life through the reflection of human existence. His thinking allows a person to observe religious ceremonies and religious writings as one who thinks about his own life. It is not an alienated discourse, but, on the contrary, it is a close and challenging discourse. The charm of Rosenzweig's writing is found in the way the reader believes in Rosenzweig's philosophical writing because he believes in the life experiences that form it.

From Death to Life — From Fear to Love

The opening paragraph of the book, "From death, from the fear of death, all knowledge of the all begins" [1. P. 3] — resonates within the reader's mind with a unique way of reading, as if he is reading and looking at foundational experiences of life. Rosenzweig describes the deep meaning of the fear of death, as an event that attacked the individual and his will to continue to live: "Let man creep like a worm into the folds of the naked earth before the fast-approaching volleys of a blind death from which there is no appeal; let him sense there, forcibly, inexorably, what he otherwise never senses: that his I would be but an It if it died; let him therefore cry his very I out, with every cry that is still in his throat against Him — from whom there is no appeal, from whom such unthinkable annihilation threatens" [1. P. 3].

"Love is strong as death", Rosenzweig quotes a verse from Song of Songs and described the similarity between the experience of love and the experience of the fear of death. For Rosenzweig, the deep meaning of love is an event of revelation.

As the beloved is attacked by the love of the other, man is surprised and attacked by the revelation of God. The attack of love is an event that is beyond oneself, in a way that the person responds to it, even though it comes to him from the outside. Personal and private life experiences of being in love with the other, or being loved by the other, resonate with the reader. In these words, I would like to argue that the great journeys to which Rosenzweig invites us, the worldwide explanations, and the descriptions of the great religions, hide the deepest story of the book — the intimate core of the entire book.

Rosenzweig opens his short book, “*Understanding the Sick and the Healthy*” [2], with two prefaces — one addressed to the experts, and the other addressed to the readers. The literary sophistication is visible. This mode of writing that asked the expert not to read the book is, of course, an invitation to read it, with a warning: do not philosophize the philosophy. Please read the book carefully, and know that I have prepared myself in advance to disregard all the professional criticism that you will send against the book, and towards me. And, as it is well known. Rosenzweig also chooses to end his book, knowing that the expert reader did not walk away from the book but was tempted to look at it. This double opening seeks to create a clear connection between the professional world and life itself. Rosenzweig creates the conscious connection between life itself and philosophy. It is possible that beyond that, the new role he seeks to assign to philosophy is a healing process of life.

To examine this claim, it is useful to look again at the frame story of the entire book: from Death to Life. I would like to look at this framework anew, with a fresh look, as if this is the first time we meet this framework. This renewed reading becomes Rosenzweig’s personal invitation to re-experience the fundamentals of human existence: the fear of death that attacks man, the surprise of the love that comes to us from our partner, the desire to hear someone call our first name in the crowd, the hope for tomorrow, To the desire to exist with a sense of certainty, and the passion for life. This renewed reading is Rosenzweig’s call to focus on existential experiences, to events that can happen and to remember that it is unnecessary that they happened.

The words in which Rosenzweig describes the anxiety of death, which attacks man, are like a description of an actual event, an experience of fear that comes to a man at a certain moment. It is as if Rosenzweig pushes the reader interested in philosophy to leave his comfort point as a learner, as a reader of texts, as a conversationalist about death in the history of religions and philosophy, and to be attentive to the difficult experience of the terror that falls on man, in the face of death. That is: not death itself is the subject of the discussion, but the living person who meets his fear of death. The words with which Rosenzweig opens the second part, about the love that attacks man, seek to be an actual description, a description of an experience, one that forces the reader to ask himself whether he knows or understands Rosenzweig’s words.

The Model of Plato: A Philosophical Invitation back to Life

Young Rosenzweig wrote in his diary, “Ich glaube an Πλάτων [Plato]” — “I believe in Plato” [3. S. 37]. And I may add that this is not just the young Rosenzweig, but the philosopher Rosenzweig as well. Plato’s presence in “The Star of Redemption” is greater than one might think by relying solely on the references found in the index. My focus is on Plato’s Symposium and the discussion therein of love and Eros. Rosenzweig’s attitude towards love and Eros as a revelatory event was shaped specifically concerning how Eros is discussed in Plato’s *Symposium*.

The process put forward in the Symposium moves from a previous tragedy to a shared discourse on love, leading to the love of wisdom — i.e., philosophy — and from there back to concrete life. The move proposed by the “Star” is from the tragic hero who confronts death, to the revelation of love, and thenceforth to fellowship and the shared meal. The place occupied by “wisdom” in the Symposium is taken by “truth” in the Star, but both leave the door wide open, at the end of the day (or the end of the night), back into life.

One of the important characteristics of the discussion of Eros in both works is that it is couched not in philosophical language but specifically in the language of literature and artistic tools. It should therefore not be surprising that part of Rosenzweig’s discussion of the significance of Eros should occur within the context of another discussion, that regarding art and aesthetics. To be more precise, does art have the power to take a man out of himself and to open him towards the “beyond?” The initial answer given by Rosenzweig, that found in Part I of “the Star”, is based on the element of Creation and is therefore negative: art is mythological, it is based upon itself and emerges from itself. “The mythical element founded the realm of the beautiful” [1. P. 80].

However, Rosenzweig admits (regarding Kierkegaard) that art has the power to prepare man for the religious stage, a stage established by openness towards love and religious revelation. The significance of this stage lies in the transition from Revelation to Redemption — by including or addressing fellowship as the common meal, or “the banquet” as it is called in the Symposium, or perhaps the Passover Seder in Jewish tradition. It ought to be noted that these transitions are not captured in words or literal contents but through their being on the order of “an event, an experience in the real world. Perhaps, for Rosenzweig at the time of writing the Star, the same question was important both for him personally and for the philosophical discussion” [4. P. 108]. Therefore, his suffering raises the question of both the status of suffering in the world of art and its meaning in the world of the symposium (or the banquet). The responses to those questions would entail attribution of the tragic dimension to Christianity and revelation to Judaism. If one may indeed suggest such a reading of the Star, one might say that the Star, like the Symposium, is none other than a book of “transition (or journey) into life” employing philosophy. Love experienced in life is stronger than any love that may be described by artistic modes or philosophical language. It thus becomes clear that the love experienced by man seeks to be shaped anew. Love’s goal is accomplished through the instruments of art, which allow one to listen to his inner, eternal element, embodying the going forth to the Divine.

The Role of the Personal within the Philosophy of Love

The *Symposium* is presented as a philosophical dialogue about love, but this dialogue cannot evade the fact that personal experience is a substantive part of the philosophical and the abstract. As a result, we cannot separate personal factors — the direct, loving contact among the members of the group, the personal relationship between Socrates and Diotima, and, of course, the intimate, loving relationship between Socrates and Alcibiades — from their philosophical referents.

We can thus see the chain of connections extending from the personal story to the public arena, to the Divine and possibly abstract significance, pulling us toward admitting that addressing the Divine does not entail addressing the abstract. This is perhaps the most important secret embodied in the *Symposium* — that which is assumed to be abstract is not abstract. Love always transcends itself to enter life. Art does not have the power to encompass love, while love is fashioned by art to go beyond it.

Rosenzweig begins his treatment of love and Eros as early as the first book, stemming from his discussion of the concept of Creation. The anchor of that discussion is his attitude towards death and man's fear of death, whose stamp is on all of life. This is just like Plato's description, in the name of Socrates, of the desire to give birth (or sire) as man's attempt to overcome his limited nature — and the fact of his death. Rosenzweig describes it through the development of the creative person's self, which makes creativity and art possible. The philosophy of love begins from the personal, the individual grappling with his mortality, and as a tragic hero standing before death and saying "I", or "Here I am".

Beyond the Zenith of Atheism

In 1914, Franz Rosenzweig published an essay titled "Atheistic Ideology" (See [5]) which examines the philosophical role of atheism in the development of theology. In this text, Rosenzweig scrutinizes the meaning of the new Protestant theology based on Christ's personality and highlights the atheistic implications of this theology, in the sense of man creating God in his image. He then considers the significance of these ideas for Judaism and Jewish thought.

In one of his letters dating from 1917 he explains that in its original version, this essay contained a fundamental statement regarding the relationship between pure philosophy and "revelation," a phenomenon that is met with a distinct sense of "reluctance" on the part of man. The deep meaning of revelation can be realized only after the achievement of the atheistic position of pure philosophy, which encompasses no element of revelation. In this context, Rosenzweig refers to two figures who posed a challenge for him in writing about revelation: Hegel and Goethe: "namely, the absolute self-consciousness of each, Hegel's as that of the last philosopher, of the last pagan brain, and Goethe's as that of [...] the first Christian, as Christ wanted him, thus of the first 'man straightforwardly' — 'the great pagan' and the decided non-Christian..." ("Urzelle" to the Star of Redemption, 1917) [5. P. 50]. What comes as somewhat unexpected in Rosenzweig's account is its depiction of the essay's major role in laying the foundation for his book "The Star

of Redemption”. According to Rosenzweig, the essay was the “*Urzelle*” (“primal cell”) in which the book took form. And so it came to pass, in a manner that may appear somewhat ironic to the reader, that the essence of atheism was defined as the foundation of revelation and, possibly, of faith itself.

It was Margarete Susman that characterizes Rosenzweig’s project as theology that has “gone beyond the zenith of atheism”. She articulates that the atheism addressed by Rosenzweig’s book is the atheism of Goethe and that the redemption that lies beyond this atheism becomes clear and gains voice only in light of the words of Mephistopheles in Goethe’s *Faust*.

How Rosenzweig moves from the logical scientific order to the world of revelation and words handed down by God — as movement from “creation” to “revelation,” from “death” to “life,” or, from a linguistic perspective, from the rational perspective from which a person experiences reality, which involves classification and interpretation, to the experience of revelation, which speaks in the language of the present. Revelational language is the language of unmediated relations between God and human beings and between individuals, or, to use Buber’s terminology, between the world of “I—It” and the dialogical relationship of a revelation: “I—Thou.”

In his close reading of the chapters of Creation in the biblical book of Genesis, Rosenzweig teaches that Genesis 1 describes the story of creation in terms of practical reality by using only the third person, “He,” to refer to God: God commanded and nature obeyed. But, in the second story of Creation presented in Genesis 2 and 3, God makes a personal appeal to Adam: “Let us make Adam.” In the second story, the relationship between God and humanity is extremely personal, and the man it involves is unique and individual. In this context, “Adam” is not representative of humanity in its entirety but a specific person, and for Rosenzweig, the most important issue is the name itself, or, to be more precise, the ability to name. For Rosenzweig, using a person’s name means revelation; it is to recognize this person as a unique human being and to reveal him as a specific individual. In Rosenzweig’s eyes, naming God comes in response to believing: “The name is not sound and smoke but word and fire. It is a matter of invoking the Name, it is this that must be confessed: I believe It.” [“Denn Name ist nicht... Schall und Rauch, sondern Wort und Feuer. Den Namen gilt es zu nennen und zu bekennen.”] [6. P. 202; 7. P. 239]. According to Susman [8], these two sentences are the key to understanding “The Star of Redemption” as a whole.

It is here that Rosenzweig, in the core statement of “The Star of Redemption”, addresses Goethe’s *Faust*. Above all else, the question is one of name and naming; the most important element of Rosenzweig’s debate with Goethe’s *Faust* is about proper names and Faust’s denial of the meaning of the name of God. Although the story of Dr. Faust can be read as the inverse of the story of Job, there is also some parallel between the two: that both figures are compelled to choose between Satan and God. The deep and perhaps unanticipated meaning of Satan lies not in his identity as a demon but in his emergence from nature — the reality — in itself, and that a person’s willingness to stand by faith is, therefore, a choice against nature

and reality (the world of ‘creation’ in the first book of the Star). As already noted, Rosenzweig recognizes that the Satan of Job is aware of suffering’s meaning as a testimony to revelation.

Conclusion: An Invitation

So what is the secret of Rosenzweig’s charm? Is that the transition between the philosophical and the most personal? Is it the new dialogue that he creates with Plato, Hegel, and Goethe? Or maybe, it is the search for meaning in a world that is losing meaning?

To study Rosenzweig’s philosophy is an encounter with philosophy and theology as the most personal story. Rosenzweig’s philosophical writing touches its readers, and its researchers, in deep places, because it forces us to re-experience fear and hope, risk and love.

Following the unique movement of Franz Rosenzweig, is to move away from the most intimate experiences towards the broad worldly perspective and historical view, and go back towards the private and the intimate. This dynamic view gives a comprehensive view of the culture and the religions, the divine revelation, and the religious rituals. But at the end of this journey, we learn that all this journey was directed towards the subject, his individuality, and his real life. The theology of the “Star of Redemption” is like a curtain that covers the most personal and so private observation of the entire book.

And here I would like to point out a broader phenomenon, which concerns not only the writing of Franz Rosenzweig as a man and as a philosopher. After reading a lot of the research on Rosenzweig’s philosophy, I realized that there is a unique character in the study of and the writing about Rosenzweig. The researchers, their mode of writing, expose something unique about Rosenzweig: his philosophical charm. The researchers who are captivated by this charm are busy with a systematic study of his writings, but at the same time, seek to have a dialogue with him. Numerous times you may pause your reading and can be surprised by the closeness and intimacy that they feel in front of Rosenzweig’s complicated and complex texts. Reading “The Star of Redemption” becomes a personal journey, a spiritual journey, a journey of identity. Of course, Rosenzweig invites readers to explore his thinking and teachings, but he also invites them on a personal and spiritual journey. And they willingly accepted his invitation.

As Rosenzweig told us at the end of his book: “Where do the gate doors open to? To life”.

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Аннотация. Философские работы Ф. Розенцвейга представляют интерес и имеют особое значение как для академических исследований, так и для личных экзистенциальных поисков. В своих работах Розенцвейг глубоко переосмысливает основы иудейской и христианской религиозной жизни, связанные с самой сутью человеческого существования. Страх смерти, следование платоновскому эросу, преодоление атеизма в духе Гёте в опыте веры — эти ключевые мотивы задают сложный дискурс теологической и философской мысли Розенцвейга, приглашая читателя в поистине волшебное духовное путешествие. Статья представляет собой интригующее введение к настоящему выпуску «Вестника РУДН. Серия: Философия», который призван раскрыть различные аспекты философии одного из самых выдающихся немецко-еврейских мыслителей двадцатого века, посредством обращения к таким темам, как критика и восприятие немецкого идеализма и экзистенциализма, «новое мышление» как философского система, философская интерпретация библейских текстов, Каббалы и мистицизма.

Ключевые слова: Розенцвейг, Платон, Гёте, религиозная жизнь, страх смерти, эрос, вера

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