CHAPTER 1

Franz Rosenzweig and Emmanuel Levinas: A Midrash or Thought-Experiment

There is much excitement at this time in the works of two modern Jewish philosophers, Franz Rosenzweig and Emmanuel Levinas. Many contemporary Jewish thinkers see their challenging but potent writings as important examples of the contribution that Jewish philosophy can make to Western thought, and as signposts to speak of the meaning of Jewish existence in the modern or postmodern world. In order to initially explore the insights that they present, I would like to offer some reflections in the form of a narrative that juxtaposes their writings. Obviously, such a juxtaposition gives a distinctive coloring to this inquiry, especially in light of the different ways in which Rosenzweig[1] and Levinas[2] have been read, and the multiple contexts into which their works can be placed.

I have termed my narrative reflections a *midrash* in order to further highlight the selective nature of this treatment. It is not an attempt to list all of the themes or views that Rosenzweig and Levinas share,[3] but to probe certain issues that strike me as relevant and rewarding in the context of contemporary discussions in a variety of disciplines about Jewish philosophy, modern philosophy, language, and the nature of the human.

The point of departure for this narrative—as well as its continual element of orientation—is the criticism by Rosenzweig and Levinas of the notion of the person which philosophers have termed "Cartesian." This notion has its foundation in René Descartes's "cogito," the famous dictum that, "I think, therefore I am." The Cartesian self is a human portrait that accentuates the rational and autonomous features of life. This is not just the notion of the thinking-I, but of the I for which self-consciousness—as well as self-realization through the individual's acts of free choice—are taken to be fundamental.

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However, an understanding of the work of these Jewish philosophers cannot be divorced from some of their central life-experiences. In light of this, I want to begin with brief biographical portrayals.

Franz Rosenzweig

The major movements in Rosenzweig's life are dramatic and condensed within a few years.[4] Born in 1886 to an acculturated, middle-class Jewish family in Cassel, Germany, Rosenzweig's education was typical of those young Jews who saw it as natural for them to participate in the life of the nation. He studied medicine, history, philosophy and law in various German universities. This personal and academic trajectory was altered by two events in 1913.

The first was a discussion with a passionate Christian, Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, that brought him to see the relevance of religion—or at least Christianity—for modern life. The second was a religious "conversion" at a synagogue on *Yom Kippur* (the Day of Atonement) in which he, for the first time, experienced the living power of Judaism.

From that time onward, Rosenzweig dedicated his remaining years to studying Judaism and writing about its relevance in the modern world. Importantly, he also concretely endeavored to provide a Jewish foundation for his contemporaries through establishing an adult educational institute—the *Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus* in Frankfurt—and translating Judaism's past sources. Diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis in 1922, he continued to write and to inspire others until his death in 1929.

Emmanuel Levinas

Born in Kovno, Lithuania, in 1906, Levinas received his early education in both Hebrew and Russian at home.[5] During World War I, the family moved to the Ukraine, and Levinas was admitted to a Russian gymnasium there in 1916. In 1920, the family left the Soviet Union and returned to Kovno, where Levinas's education continued in a Hebrew gymnasium. In 1923, he left to attend the University of Strasbourg in France, where he began to study philosophy. His work in that field included study with the famous thinkers Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger in Germany.

Levinas fought in the French army during World War II, but was caught by the Germans and taken to Germany as a Jewish prisoner of war. Although he was not held in one of the death camps, he has written in the autobiographical reflection, "Signature," that "the presentiment and the memory of the Nazi horror" (1990, 291) dominated his life history.[6]

After the war, he returned to France. He was an administrator and director of a school for the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, while also holding a number of university positions. In 1973, he was appointed to the Sorbonne.

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After more than six decades of active lecturing and writing about Judaism, philosophy, and the relationship between the two, he died in 1995.

THE CRITIQUE OF PHILOSOPHY

Rosenzweig and Levinas are highly critical of what they hold to be a single philosophic tradition emerging in ancient Greece and continuing through nineteenth-century German lands, or, in their terms, from "Iona to Jena" and beyond.[7] This tradition took the Cartesian self as its true content. They criticize it, not just in the vein that this philosophic endeavor misses something—that is, that it does not see what lies beyond or beneath the panorama of the philosophic vision. They contend that philosophy has ignored—or, better, has not heard—a cry that has its origin outside of the insular totality of the self's world. The nature of this cry, and its ramifications for giving orientation to a person, are central foci for Rosenzweig and Levinas. They speak of how encountering other persons saves the self from the dead end, or the violence, of self-enclosed totality.

For both Rosenzweig and Levinas, there is a natural, but, nevertheless, inauthentic concern or obsession of the self with itself.

Rosenzweig utilized the ancient Greek figure of the tragic hero to express this natural potentiality of human life (1972, 76–79), a potentiality which he believed had, in some sense, been overcome.[8] This tragic figure lives a life of isolation and self-containment which culminates in his or her self-destruction. The hero is driven, from within, by a distinctive character, and remains unrelated to anyone outside. This self trusts only in itself, and, consequently, remains essentially speechless. Rosenzweig characterized the hero's speech with others as frigid, but he has also noted that, for Greek drama, even this limited form of dialogue was less important than the solitary act of soliloquy. The sovereign event of this character's life—that is, the event that fully expresses the nature of the Greek hero and provides whatever meaning there is to that life—is the destined encounter with death.

As for Levinas, throughout his works, he demands that the self be torn from its natural obsession with itself. Prior to being forced to respond to the other, the individual takes himself or herself as the primary value, merely playing with, living on, and enjoying that with which he or she comes into contact. The consequences of this combination of self-absorption and manipulation are many. One of them is ennui. Levinas defined this as an "enchainment to itself, where the ego . . . ceaselessly seeks after the distraction of games and sleep" (1981, 124).

Both Rosenzweig and Levinas portray the individual as seeking to incorporate all that is different from the self, all alterity, into a single total system of thought and life that is coterminous with himself or herself. Levinas

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noted that a fundamental critique of this totality bound his work to Rosenzweig's when, in his first major book, *Totality and Infinity*, he wrote that "[w]e were impressed by the opposition to the idea of totality in Franz Rosenzweig's *Stern der Erlösung*, a work too often present in this book to be cited" (1988, 28).[9] For the two authors, not only is the self the originator of this idea, but the traditional philosophic endeavor constitutes its clearest expression.

In the Introduction to part 1 of his *The Star of Redemption*, Rosenzweig provides a critique of the idea of totality, which he depicts in terms of the cognition of the All (1972, 3–22). He holds that cognition of the All is the individual's response to the threat of death—that is, the threat that one's particular life will cease. The history of philosophy is animated by an answer to this fear. From Greek times to its modern culmination with Hegel, philosophy has sought a so-called "one thing" that forms the basis of everything else in the universe. Because philosophy is fundamentally idealistic, according to Rosenzweig, this one thing has been the thinking-I. Philosophy maintains that the thinking-I is the essential I—that is, the only real and permanent part of the person—and that this essence is identical with both God and the world. It concludes that death is an illusion, because what is ultimately real in the individual cannot die. The essential I continues to be part of the All of the universe, regardless of what happens to the body.

In "The New Thinking"—an essay which Rosenzweig allowed to appear at the beginning of a later edition of *The Star*—the interrelationship of self, philosophy, and totality reappears. However, it is not the threat of death that animates this depiction of philosophy's identification of self with *das All*. Rather, Rosenzweig speaks of philosophy's fundamental reductive method, which insists on collapsing the human experience of persons, the world, and God back into the self (1970, 190–192). He once again states that what emerges in the modern period under the label of "Idealism" is a perennial philosophic theme.[10]

The connections among self, philosophy, and totality are also very prominent in Levinas's work.[11] In broad outline, Levinas holds that philosophy, as ontology, expresses a fundamental feature of humans—namely, the urge toward totality. By this, he means that philosophy, through the exposition of that which exists or Being, incorporates all that is different from the self—that is, alterity, into a single universal system.

Levinas insists that, despite first impressions, the basic absorption of everything into the self, or the solitude of the self, is not broken even through the act of knowing (1989, 76–78). Through knowledge, a system of interrelationships binds all things together into an identity with the self. For Levinas, Western philosophy, from Parmenides to Hegel, can be properly characterized as monist. The totalizing spirit of this endeavor necessarily brought it to deny all that lay outside of the self—that is, all transcendence.

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Levinas's work draws much of its energy and eloquence from an ethical protest against the political ramifications of, or correspondence with, the egocentricism of traditional philosophy. His opposition to the philosophy of being is his rejection of a system of thought that he believed supported and justified the chauvinism, arrogance, and violence of the West. He speaks of this philosophical underpinning as a "philosophy of power" (1988, 46). He sees it as issuing in a notion of the State, as well as real states, in which opposition and difference are systematically, but usually quietly, crushed. The "tyranny of the State" is just this "non-violence of the totality," this violent nonviolence (1988, 46).[12] Levinas has in mind the domination and murder committed by Europe against the "other," whether that so-called "other" consisted of "foreign" communities close by or "barbaric" peoples in distant lands.

The notion that traditional philosophy is at an end is shared by Rosenzweig and Levinas, as well as many other thinkers today. Rosenzweig contrasted the "old thinking" of traditional philosophy to the "new thinking" of the "speaking-thinker" (1970, 196–201). The former builds mathematical and logical systems out of reason, while the latter uses speech as his or her medium and gives prominence to both time and other persons. Rosenzweig designated the old thinking as "logical," while the latter he saw as "grammatical."

A central focus of an important essay that Levinas wrote on Rosenzweig is the idea that philosophy has reached a dead end (1990, 185–186). Their treatments of this theme mirror each other so closely that, in the first pages of the essay, it is extremely difficult to disentangle Levinas's views from his presentation of Rosenzweig's position. Levinas holds that the end of philosophy is the end of thinkers who stay within themselves—that is, who think as an isolated and isolating occupation. Rather, philosophers must turn to life, to the recognition that they are persons who live with other persons. While this is still a form of thinking—and not just individual, idiosyncratic rantings—it is a thinking built upon life. Only it can "escape the totalitarianism of philosophy" (1990, 186).

Thus, both philosophers share the view that a wider notion of reason must be the basis for a new type of philosophy. In addition, they see language as the new organon for this endeavor. Levinas writes that "if the face to face founds language . . . then language does not only serve reason, but is reason" (1988, 207). By this, he means that reason should not be understood as impersonal structures or laws. Reason or rationality is constituted by, or arises out of, the dynamics of human interaction.

The view that traditional philosophy has come to an end is vividly reflected in the variety of genre and philosophic styles utilized by these two men. Although philosophers have experimented with writing styles throughout the modern period—Kierkegaard and Nietzsche stand as notable examples—none, perhaps, went further than Rosenzweig. After his two-volume

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dissertation on the political philosophy of Hegel and *The Star*, Rosenzweig recognized that he could no longer write books. Even this *Star* is a strange piece. The central section was composed as letters (love letters?) to the wife of his friend, Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy.[13] Rosenzweig said that he needed to "see the 'other' " in order to write (1970, 91). Most of his later work consists of long letters and some essays. His small book, *Understanding the Sick and the Healthy*, is in the form of letters from a doctor describing the treatment of a patient struck down by a special case of paralysis, *apoplexia philosophica*. The writing, to which Rosenzweig dedicated much of his time during his last years, was a translation and notes on the poems of the medieval Jewish poet and philosopher, Jehuda Halevi. The notes to poetry were seen by him as the "practical application" of the new philosophic method of speech/thinking (1970, 201). In his commentary on these powerful religious poems, Rosenzweig addresses both the poet and his own readers.[14]

Levinas has often reflected upon his own startling style of writing. It follows upon his understanding of the betrayal, by both philosophy and most writing, of the responsibility for other persons. While many of his books and essays utilize some of the structures and terms of phenomenology, there are frequent twists or interruptions.[15] Levinas speaks of ethical language as the interruption of phenomenology (1981, 193).[16] The repetition that hammers, but never flattens, is well illustrated by the following sentence.

> The most passive, unassumable, passivity, the subjectivity or the very subjection of the subject, is due to my being obsessed with responsibility for the oppressed who is other than myself. (1981, 55)

Some of his phenomenological descriptions of the caress are fully poetic in their power and sensuality. Equally important are those philosophic excursions by way of interpretation of Talmudic texts.

MEETING THE OTHER

It is only through the encounter with the other that meaning is created, and stagnation and death are overcome. Not only is life hollow without other persons, but the "new" would be an impossible category if there were only that which the self can give birth to from within itself. Rosenzweig affirms this insight in a number of different contexts. He holds that the isolated self—that self of the tragic hero—becomes an eloquent, speech-filled soul only through the transforming love by God and the neighbor.[17] As *The Star* puts it,

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> Only the soul beloved of God can receive the commandment to love its neighbor and fulfill it. Ere man can turn himself over to God's will, God must first have turned to man. (1972, 215)

> . . . where someone or something has become neighbor to a soul, there a piece of world has become something which it was not previously: soul. (1972, 235)

Rosenzweig believes that a person becomes fully human through the transforming powers—that is, the divine powers, inherent in language. For example, it is upon hearing one's name and responding that the self becomes visible, even to itself (1972, 174–175).

Levinas is equally expressive about the way in which relationship brings health to the isolated self. He tries to construct an understanding of the individual human that is not just a duplication of the Cartesian story of the ego. It is not self-consciousness that brings authenticity, according to Levinas, but, rather, it is "my inescapable and incontrovertible answerability to the other that makes me an individual 'I' " (1986, 27). He refers to discourse as a "traumatism of astonishment," that ruptures the self and introduces the new (1988, 73).

Levinas agrees with Rosenzweig that the deepest things in life—those which found the possibility for our existence—are gifts from others. The confidence that one has in truth, as well as the sense of the meaningfulness of one's own life, derive from meeting others and being responsible for others. Similarly, according to Levinas, the uniqueness of the self is confirmed by the realization that there are responsibilities that only I can fulfill (1985, 101; 1986, 27).

However, there are noteworthy variations in the two thinkers' treatments of the need to step beyond the self, or have the self transformed. In most places, the setting aside of the self or ego is not the focal point of Rosenzweig's interest. Rather, the interhuman phenomena of speech and love hold his attention, and the transcending of the ego which results from these events is of secondary interest. The self is forgotten through participating in the life of speaking to others and loving others.[18]

With Levinas, the issue of the overcoming of the self is fully emergent. He sees an intense conflict between the individual's natural love of the self and the demands of ethics. For example, he has written that "No one is good voluntarily" (1981, 11); and that, for ethical thought, "*the self* as this primacy of what is mine, is *hateful*" (1986, 26). Levinas believes, perhaps, that the ramifications of self-absorption/projection are more dire than does Rosenzweig. Reflecting this concern, he utilizes more forceful language, as it were, to

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describe this process. For him, the overturning of the ego requires an acute rupture or tearing open of the self. As he puts it, it is as if the alterity of the other "devastates its site [the self] like a devouring fire, catastrophying its site" (1989, 176).[19]

There is a philosophic step or presupposition that precedes the reconstitution of the self through the encounter with the other. This is the recognition that, to be a self is to be separate—namely, separate from all totalities. The view that the recognition of a distinct self, including a sense of boundaries and a limited autonomy, as a foundation for the later development of the self through relationship, is something that Rosenzweig and Levinas share with some current clinical psychological theorists.[20]

Part 1 of *The Star* has the principal purpose of combatting the monism of Idealism by insisting on the separateness and autonomy of the philosophic elements of "God, man, and world."[21] Rosenzweig writes that "the premise of separate existence" is necessary in order for us to see how these separate elements are spanned (1970, 198). For him, our life is made up of experiences of such spanning.

The necessity for an understanding of the person that respects the integrity of both the human and particular humans is argued in an additional way in *The Star*. Early on in his discussion, Rosenzweig proposes a "metaethical" theory of "man" (1972, 62–82).[22] This position treats the human on its own terms, liberating a philosophic anthropology from the domination of any rational or ethical system.

The importance of separation for Levinas's argument is well illustrated by three early section headings in *Totality and Infinity*: "Separation and Discourse," "Separation and the Absolute," and "Separation as Life." In these sections, Levinas gives special attention to features of the individual's life that rest upon the premise of separation—namely, the experience of time, the idea of Infinity, and the solitude of enjoyment. He also utilizes the term *atheism* to refer to the self's autonomy (1988, 53). By this, he means an understanding of the human individual as someone who stands outside of the divine totality or any other systematic whole.

To be human is to be there for another—to say, as Abraham said, "Here I am." It is important to emphasize that, for Rosenzweig and Levinas, the transformative encounter in human life is not with nature, but with persons. Even the so-called "dialogue" with sacred texts is modeled upon the exchange between persons.[23] They also share an understanding that the fullest expositions of the interhuman realm require[24] the use of religious midrash, that is, the utilization of religious language or terms such as *God, commandment, neighbor,* and *soul*.[25] These terms permeate Rosenzweig's *The Star* as well as Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise Than Being*.

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Thus, both Rosenzweig and Levinas describe the overcoming of the individual's innate isolation and self-obsession through the life with others. Further, what makes life with other persons possible is the divine action prior to or behind, as it were, these relations. For Rosenzweig, God's revelation is experienced in the divine/human powers of speech and love (1972, 156–204). For Levinas, God's concern for the other that gives substance and form to all human interaction is felt immediately in the turning of one person to another (1985, 109; 1986, 24–25).

Thus, more pointedly, for both, there are no authentic ethics that arise naturally from the individual's reason, for this is suspect. Every legitimate ethic, the realm of relations between humans, reveals at least a trace of God's revelation. This is, for Rosenzweig, God's revelation that is already immanent within our speech and acts of love (Rosenzweig 1972, 201). With Levinas, the commandment not to kill is God's shattering message that bursts through the face-to-face encounter (1985, 89).

Rosenzweig and Levinas hold that language or speech is the key for understanding the interhuman realm. With Rosenzweig, there is an excitement and an amazement about the powers of language as living speech or *parole*, and not as mere structure, that carries through all of his work.[26] He believed that language was as natural and as necessary to human life as oxygen was to living things. He did not regard language as some ill-shaped foreign implement, but the medium into which individuals are born and through which they live and grow. Without language there is no human life.

For Rosenzweig, the study of language was the study of all the social processes that surround speech. The speech act thus uncovered, and also developed, the basic trust that persons have for one another, as well as the ways in which individuals draw out or create each other.[27] He spoke of the transcending of self-concern through the call of another and of the maturation that appears when responsibility is given and accepted.

Of all of the activities of speech, Rosenzweig was most fascinated by the function of names—that is, proper names (1972, 186–188; 1995, 216–218). He considered allowing the statement already in *The Star* that "For name is in truth word and fire, and not sound and fury" (1972, 188) to stand as the motto for the whole book.[28] The calling of a person's name by another was, according to him, a paradigm of transformation. Through such a call, the two persons are tied together and plunged into the world. In the call, the caller wills to put herself or himself into relation through question or through request. The life of the one called is also obviously transformed, because some type of response cannot be avoided.

Rosenzweig's love of language brought him to see its liberating powers. Freedom was not lost, in his view, by a request or imperative. Rather, it

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was created.[29] For him, new possibilities arise as a consequence of being called, and the free life is the one in which such interactions or opportunities continually arise. He had no ear for a discussion of freedom that limited the individual's life to the expression of the isolated self's own determinations and choices.

Although I will discuss the use of religious categories further on in this book, the theme of the divine character of language naturally arises here. Rosenzweig saw language as nothing less than a divine gift. Its potency or creativeness is an extension of God's first act. For Rosenzweig, God is revealed in words, and redeems humans through the process of our address and response. In this sense, all language is revelation. He found that the biblical love poem, *The Song of Songs*, provided the validation for his insight into the divine nature of speech (1972, 199–204). *The Song of Songs* is the story of the exchange of "I" and "Thou" between God and humans, just because it is fully a sensual love poem. Rosenzweig believed that, in such language, the dichotomy between transcendence and immanence evaporates. He could not separate the words of love between persons, from lover to beloved, or friend to friend, or neighbor to neighbor, from the words of love that are addressed by God (1972, 199).

Rosenzweig had a deep trust in language (1972, 151). He was more interested in all the ways in which language works, than in the few times when it seems either to fail or to distort.[30] While it is misleading to think that Rosenzweig did not recognize that language can be manipulated or distorted, I find that his primary concern was to testify to its powers.[31]

There are some strong parallels between Levinas's reflections on language and what we have just discussed. This is especially evident in the sense that, for both philosophers, the social processes that surround speech are more important than are the analyses of linguistic structures. More significantly, they agree in giving priority to speech over writing, and to criticizing those who see language as deriving from thought rather than the other way around. However, there are some marked differences between the view-points of the two philosophers.

First, the theme of the distortion of language is prominent in Levinas's writings, particularly in the work, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*. Second, with Levinas, the treatment of language is often located within a wider discussion of "the face."

For Levinas, language pierces the individual's armor of self-concern. It uproots this natural attitude and brings the person to experience responsibility for, and to come to the aid of, the other. Language is creative. Not only does it awaken responsibility, it creates the power to respond (1988, 178). Levinas describes some of the features of human interaction that language awakens as the power of welcome, of gift, full hands, and hospitality (1988, 205).

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In that fundamental encounter with the other that is language, the new appears. We learn something from our meetings with other people. We are given insights, orientations, and ideas that we did not possess before. "Teaching" is the term which Levinas uses to denote the fact that something new emerges from human interaction (1988, 180). He is quite insistent that we recognize that teaching is more than maieutics—namely, the technique of helping the student to recall the truth that is latent within himself or herself (1988, 51,180). Without the notion of teaching—which is based on receiving something from the outside—we would be assigned the terrible destiny of living from our own resources alone. There would be nothing in our lives but that which we found within.

The issue of the corruption of language is most clearly introduced through Levinas's distinction between "the saying" and "the said." As far as I have understood it, this is a distinction between the ideal possibilities of encounter or language on the one hand, and the reality of the ways in which these possibilities are often limited or subverted (1981, 45–51; 1989, 183). Again, "the saying" is not literally limited to spoken language (1981, 48). It also includes the whole situation of being in relationship, of approach, of giving, and other aspects, that precede or, alternatively, are the foundations for the possibility of speech occurring between persons. "The said" is the limiting of real speech by linguistic structures that inevitably reflect the self's attempt to erase everything that cannot be one with itself. Through the category of "the said," Levinas is suggesting that the actual encounter between persons must be understood in the context of the particular social and political structures of the time. These structures or systems are, to some extent, expressions of the powerful urge toward totality or the domination over what is not "the same."[32]

Readers of Levinas's works recognize that, compared to the eloquence and dramatic effect of his discussion of the impact of the face, every interpretation or commentary appears hollow. The face stands for the whole human body (1985, 97). It is just that Levinas has discovered that the poverty, and vulnerability, as well as the wealth of the human, is contained in the face. In particular, he speaks of the face of the poor and the stranger that overcomes every defense that the self might erect (1988, 213). Confronted by the face of another, silence is impossible, for one cannot be otherwise than responsive and responsible (1985, 88).

All that is found in the encounter with another that, at times, is discussed in the context of language, is depicted at other times by Levinas in terms of standing before another person's face. As he writes, "meaning is the face of the Other, and all recourse to words takes place already within the primordial face-to-face of language" (1988, 206).[33]

The theme of the face is not as prominent in Rosenzweig's work, but it is also not totally absent.[34] The human face appears at the climax of *The*

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Star (1972, 422–424). He sees it as mirroring our understanding of the interaction of God, man, and world that gives orientation to everyday life. While the face of which he speaks is human, he believes that it provides a reminder of God. Thus, for Rosenzweig, in living with other persons, the individual is continually made aware that she or he also lives before the divine countenance.

More importantly, it seems to me that Rosenzweig shares with Levinas a positive attitude toward the body. For both of them, erotic love is a valuable topic for the philosophical understanding of the human. This is illustrated, in the case of Rosenzweig, by the prominent places given in *The Star* to *The Song of Songs* (1972, 199–204) and to a discussion of the kiss (1972, 423). In addition to the theme of the face, the poetic/philosophic description of the sensuous discovery of the other through caress is another testimony to Levinas's view of the philosophic importance of the body (1981, 89–94).

The use of religious categories and terms is an essential feature of the description of the encounter between persons, especially in reflections upon language for Rosenzweig, and the face for Levinas. They share the view that the interhuman realm reveals a trace of the divine. They do not believe that human relationships exist for the sake of the divine, or that religious story diminishes the importance of the human in any way. Yet, their work powerfully implies that an understanding of the relationship between persons requires religious story.

The divine nature of speech is one theme that illustrates Rosenzweig's use of religious story. In his view, speech is human—fully human—because it continually and effortlessly, as it were, brings out the highest in human lives (1972, 202). Yet, precisely for this reason, it is divine. The fullness of the human comes only through a power that stands beyond all humans and draws them upward. The interhuman—Martin Buber's "the between"—is the miraculous place where traces of the divine can best be sensed.[35]

In other words, Rosenzweig believed that the word is recognized as both human and divine, when we acquire an appreciation for how persons are brought to life through speech. God's relationship to speech might be seen in two forms: first, as the origin or source of the trust that enables persons to throw themselves into speech; and second, as the power that transforms persons once they begin speaking. For example, Rosenzweig saw the acceptance of words from a speaker—including our belief that the other is sincere—as being based upon a trust in speech. No explanation can account for this trust, but Rosenzweig found that a religious story about God's creation of language points to the elemental nature of this trust, and to its source in terms of a "person" prior to all human persons. Rosenzweig wrote

> And language is easily trusted, for it is within us and about us; as it reaches us from "without," it is no different from language as it echoes

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> the "without" from our "within." The word as heard and as spoken is one and the same. The ways of God are different from the ways of man, but the word of God and the word of man are the same. What man hears in his heart as his own human speech is the very word which comes out of God's mouth. (1972, 151)

Second, Rosenzweig saw the need to use a religious midrash when speaking of the dramatic ways that other persons empower an individual to change, and the incredible ways that speech allows someone to reach beyond herself or himself—that is, to transcend the self. He spoke of the act of being touched by God's love, often through the speech of one's neighbor, as the transformation of the individual from a defiant and fearful self into an eloquent soul.

As noted earlier, for Levinas, the act of looking into a human face embodies the whole encounter between persons (1985, 85–92).[36] Looking into the face of the person that is next to one exposes the vulnerability of the other, along with the direct, if unspoken, command not to kill the other.[37] Face-to-face with the other is the stance that first engenders responsibility. Yet, this face-to-face requires religious story in order to be fully described. The vulnerability of the other is both heightened and made more concrete by discussing it in the light of standing before the poor, the orphan, and the stranger of whom the Bible speaks. The recognition that one must not kill the other who stands nearby is more than the result of some vague feeling not to harm. It is the acknowledgement of the commandment of "Thou shalt not kill!"

While Rosenzweig and Levinas recognize the necessity of utilizing religious story or midrash to illuminate the relationship between persons, they are careful that God does not, thereby, become a philosophical theme. For them, God is not a term in an argument. Story or midrash is suggestive. It does not prove anything, but points to the wondrous elements that lie within the interhuman realm. In other words, the term *God* is not part of some system of the self. The word is used because it allows the responsibility that the individual has for another to be expressed or pronounced in the most forceful way. This responsibility just cannot be communicated outside of the context of such terms as *commandment, neighbor, stranger,* or even *creation*. Levinas wrote in the essay, "God and Philosophy," that

> The religious discourse that precedes all religious discourse is not dialogue. It is the "here I am" said to a neighbour to whom I am given over, by which I announce peace, that is, my responsibility for the other. "Creating . . . the fruit of the lips. Peace, peace to the far and to the near, says the Lord." (1989, 184)[38]

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TWO JEWISH PHILOSOPHERS

There are other dimensions of the works of Rosenzweig and Levinas that might prove to be valuable to explore, and many of the topics discussed here require more analysis. However, as a conclusion, let us reexamine a few elements that have already emerged, and suggest that these might be distinctive to modern Jewish philosophy.[39]

Rosenzweig and Levinas were trained in philosophy, and their works take their point of departure from such pivotal thinkers as Hegel for Rosenzweig, and Husserl and Heidegger for Levinas.[40] However, they stand apart from the major philosophical streams. Both of them offer an ethical critique of earlier—and contemporary—philosophy by insisting on the centrality of the relationship to other persons. As we have seen, this ethical critique incorporates religious story into its philosophical discussion.

At least in terms of their notions of the self, Rosenzweig and Levinas do not represent a purely modern nor postmodern position. They do not speak of the alienated modern self that must battle the outside world, while discovering some hidden meaning within. Yet, they also do not give prominence to the postmodern notion that the self's basic problem is that it is without a center or that it is fragmented and discontinuous. Many postmoderns prominently feature a self trying to recapture or reincorporate the missing, the erroneous, what is unthought, or "the bastard."[41] However, Rosenzweig and Levinas maintain that the healing of the self does not occur through some type of individual contortions. Rather, it comes from the outside. The new—namely, "teaching," is the gift that only another can bestow upon the self. There is no truth more fundamental nor instructive than that children are born out of two.[42]

Unlike much of modern philosophy, Rosenzweig and Levinas do not offer the encounter with one's own death as a criterion of authenticity. The confrontation with death is still just the act of a single person, and an act of solitude. In the work of some thinkers, especially Heidegger, the encounter with death seems to bring the self to denounce an essential relationship to another.[43]

However, Levinas's treatment of death heightens one's responsibility for others. It is this concern for other persons rather than the turning of the self upon itself that is exemplified in the treatment of death in the following lines:

> Always future and unknown it [death] gives rise to fear or flight from responsibilities. Courage exists in spite of it. It has its ideal elsewhere; it commits me to life. Death, source of all myths, is *present* only in the Other, and only in him does it summon me urgently to my final essence, to my responsibility. (1989, 179)

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While Rosenzweig does begin *The Star* with a discussion of the individual's fear of death, the facing of death is important for him primarily because it shatters philosophy's pretension to have included or subdued everything in its system.[44] He does not believe that authenticity arises out of the confrontation with death. For Rosenzweig, facing the future death of the self makes one death/like or mute. It is only within the meeting with the other that speech and life well up.

Often in surprising ways, both philosophers' discussions turn toward the theme that the encounter with the other overcomes death. While neither Rosenzweig nor Levinas believes that a person can escape his or her concrete death, they hold that, through the life of speech/love and responsibility,[45] death is not permitted to wipe away all meaning. Rosenzweig begins the core of *The Star*—Book 2: Revelation—with a quotation from *The Song of Songs*. "Love is strong as death" (1972, 156). Later, he adds

> Death, the conqueror of all, and the netherworld that zealously imprisons all the deceased, collapse before the strength of love and the hardness of its zeal. . . . The living soul, loved by God, triumphs over all that is mortal, and that is all that can be objectively stated about it. (1972, 202)

Levinas has written in *Otherwise Than Being* that

> In it [the approach to the other] life is no longer measured by being, and death can no longer introduce the absurd into it. . . . No one is so hypocritical as to claim that he has taken from death its sting. . . . But we can have responsibilities and attachments through which death takes on a meaning. (1981, 129)

Thus, despite the truth that the individual will some day die, the relationship between persons and with God builds up things that death cannot overcome.

In their work, there is a fascination with language. They trust in speech, seeing it as having a source, origin, or foundation that is beyond humans. They are also very positive about the body. Just as language is not some kind of clumsy instrument, they do not have an instrumental view of the body. The body is more than an apparatus of the mind. The body—especially the human face or countenance—is the window to the soul or the whole being of a person.

I think that there is a link between these attitudes toward language, body, and other persons. Rosenzweig and Levinas are critical of views that insist that language is a derivative of—or an almost unnecessary dimension of—thinking. They are equally opposed to the position that the body is a

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crude and almost expendable extension of mind. What they are excited by is the concrete world of the everyday. This is the world of interaction—that is, of persons who are encountered precisely through the specificity of their speech and bodies.

In this world, other people are very important because they liberate the individual from the cage of the self. If this is the case, then the concrete other is not important because she or he is similar to me, or capable of being assimilated into a rational, abstract, and universal system of the same. Rosenzweig and Levinas maintain a pluralism that is not just tolerant of the other, but requires the other as different.[46]

I would like to suggest that the positions of Rosenzweig and Levinas which have just been outlined in terms of death, human interaction, speech, responsibility, the body, and pluralism, are positions common to many modern Jewish philosophers. Some of these views can be found in works by Martin Buber, Abraham Heschel, Emil Fackenheim, and others. For example, Fackenheim once linked the pivotal role of the theme of death in modern philosophy to the influence of Christianity. He contended that, on the other hand, the portrait of humans that views the interaction between persons as an essential feature of existence was a position more in harmony with basic features of Judaism (1973, 215–216).

Finally, despite these pronounced areas of similarity between Rosenzweig and Levinas, it is precisely with reference to religious story that a major difference appears. For both of them, it is vital that God be understood as person. Only the language of person provides them with the resources, for example, to speak of God's concern for the neighbor and the stranger. Yet, with Rosenzweig, there is a celebration of, and joy in, biblical anthropomorphisms. These offer him the means to compose story after story about all of the ways in which God lives with people. In one of the last articles that he composed—on biblical anthropomorphism—he wrote that, behind the biblical stories about the encounters between humans and God, there lies the double assumption of the Bible as a whole.

> . . . namely that God is capable of what he wills (thus even of meeting the creature from time to time in fully bodily and spiritual reality) and that the creature is capable of what he should be (thus even of fully understanding and recognizing God's self-embodying or self-spiritualization turning toward him from time to time). (1937, 532)[47]

By contrast, with Levinas there is a supreme austerity in terms of what can be said directly about the human relationship to God. Beneath his linguistic hesitancy or carefulness is the fear of appropriating God into a system of

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the same, of affirming a "*Gott mit uns*" (God with us). However, this austerity exhibits its own type of grandeur. Levinas has written

> It is not by superlatives that we can think of God, but by trying to identify the particular interhuman events that open towards transcendence and reveal the traces where God has passed. (1986, 32)

I am intrigued by the reasons that lie behind this difference, as well as by the powers and limits of each of these paths. Chapter 2 will discuss these matters.

Is it legitimate to suggest that the opposition to the notion of the self that is tied to the Cartesian "cogito" brings together writings of Rosenzweig and Levinas? Despite the differences between them, it is through a midrash that focuses on this opposition that two central features of their work have been illuminated—the critique of philosophy, and the transformation of the self that arises from the encounter with the other.

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