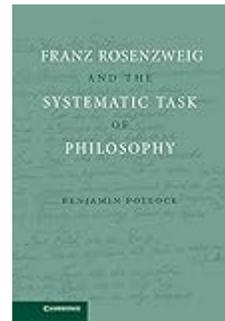




Benjamin Pollock. *Franz Rosenzweig and the Systematic Task of Philosophy.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. xiii + 338 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-51709-6.



Reviewed by Cass Fisher (University of South Florida)

Published on H-Judaic (October, 2009)

Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

Rosenzweig's Philosophy as Systematic Task and Vision of the All

For many in the field of modern Jewish thought, Franz Rosenzweig's life and work are powerfully compelling both personally and intellectually. Rosenzweig's biography with his near conversion; the writing of his magnum opus, *The Star of Redemption* (1920), from the bunkers of World War I; his renouncing a university career for the work of adult education; and the full paralysis brought on by ALS, which cut his life short but failed to stymie his intellectual life, draws a dramatic arc to his biography that seems more legendary than real. It is no small wonder that Rosenzweig's writings inspire as much as his life. The immense difficulty of Rosenzweig's work combined with his highly rhetorical writing style has allowed scholars with sharply divergent philosophical and theological commitments to offer competing interpretations of his thought. The earlier view of Rosenzweig as a religious existentialist has been supplemented in the last fifteen years by claims that Rosenzweig was a lapsed Hegelian, a precursor to postmodern thought, a proponent of a noncognitive hermeneutic philosophy, a post-metaphysical philosopher with similarities to Mar-

tin Heidegger, and a philosopher of life and language akin to Ludwig Wittgenstein. Benjamin Pollock's book, which argues persuasively that Rosenzweig's project is a continuation of the systematic conception of philosophy as it developed in German Idealism, should help curb the need for ever-new reappraisals of Rosenzweig's thought and, in doing so, shifts the focus back to Rosenzweig's philosophical and theological arguments.

The first chapter, "System as Task of Philosophy: 'The Oldest-System-Program of German Idealism,'" illuminates Rosenzweig's early ideas on the philosophical concept of "system" by undertaking a close reading of his 1917 essay (referenced in the chapter subtitle), in which he argued that a manuscript believed to be an early text by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel was actually authored by Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling. Pollock's insightful reading of Rosenzweig's essay makes two points that become thematic throughout the remainder of the book. Most important is a concept of system that continued to guide Rosenzweig in his writing of *The Star* during the following year. Pollock summarizes Rosenzweig's

position by saying: "system inquires into the unity that holds between the Being which is identical for all that is *and* the unique difference inherent to each particular being" (p. 23). Readers of *The Star* will see in this definition Rosenzweig's defense of the particularity of the elements God-World-Human in the first part of the work and then his efforts to chart their relationships and ultimate unification in the process of Creation-Revelation-Redemption in parts 2 and 3. Pollock's close reading of the essay also illuminates Rosenzweig's understanding of system as task. He argues that by designating the manuscript "oldest" and "system-program," Rosenzweig was attempting to recover the original idea of system building as an ongoing philosophical task in contrast to the completed system that Hegel set forth. At the end of the chapter is an excursus on the influence of Rosenzweig's cousin, Hans Ehrenberg, on his concept of philosophical system. With the publication in recent years of additional letters from Rosenzweig, scholarly interest in his intellectual circle has grown.

Pollock's discussions in the excursus and in chapter 2 make a valuable contribution toward understanding Rosenzweig's relationships with his interlocutors. In the second chapter, "A Twofold Relation to the Absolute: The Genesis of Rosenzweig's Concept of System," Pollock utilizes Rosenzweig's correspondence to analyze the development of his concept of system in the years leading up to his writing of *The Star*. Whereas the first chapter emphasizes the lines of continuity between Rosenzweig and German Idealism, the second chapter details Rosenzweig's critique of Idealism and his first efforts to set the notion of system on a new track. Pollock argues that Rosenzweig's critique of Idealism begins with his view that an absolute knowledge that fails to account for the individual cannot comprehend the relationship between the particular and the All. Rosenzweig's solution to this problem is to transform absolute knowledge into "human knowledge" that is grounded within the person (p. 115). The individual, and not just the philosopher, becomes the bearer of the system through the fact that she is "absolute expression of individual truth and the partial expression of the whole truth" (p. 81). Now that the systematic task of understanding the particular and the All becomes a human task, Rosenzweig must give an account of how one is to approach the All. Pollock has a very interesting discussion of how the work of Rosenzweig's friend, Victor von WieszÄcker, led Rosenzweig to the view that it is the "coitus" of two disciplines that produces knowledge of the All. As Rosenzweig argues extensively in *The Star*, those two disciplines are philosophy and the-

ology. These disciplines mirror the individual's twofold relationship to God as a part of the world and as an individual. The second half of the chapter brings these ideas together through an analysis of a letter that Rosenzweig wrote to a second cousin, Rudolf Ehrenberg, on November 18, 1917. The letter is a preliminary sketch of the still embryonic *Star* and, as such, came to be known as the "Urzelle [germ-cell] of *The Star of Redemption*." One topic that surfaces repeatedly in Pollock's analysis of the Urzelle is the role of revelation in disclosing the truth of system. "System," as Pollock says, "is precisely the content of revelation" (p. 108). Those familiar with *The Star* will realize that this point is at odds with his view there that the full and only content of revelation is the command "Love me;" While Pollock does an excellent job of uncovering the influences on Rosenzweig's thought and mapping its development, he rightfully reminds his reader that his subject at this stage is still in transition (p. 109).

With the third chapter, "Alls or Nothings: The Starting-Point of Rosenzweig's System," Pollock begins his exegesis of *The Star*, devoting one chapter to each of the three parts of Rosenzweig's work. Chapter 3 deals with part 1 of *The Star* in which Rosenzweig establishes God, World, and the Human as irreducible elements. This section of *The Star* is notoriously difficult as its argument is based on a form of mathematical logic that Rosenzweig borrowed from Hermann Cohen. Since the publication of *The Star*, Rosenzweig's readers have struggled with how to understand the contribution of this section to the larger argument. Pollock's attention to the role of system in Rosenzweig's thought brings much-needed clarity to a subject that has remained inscrutable for many of Rosenzweig's readers. Pollock argues that the decisive feature of Rosenzweig's argument is his unique understanding of the concept "Nothing." Whereas in idealism there is a singular Nothing that produces the All, for Rosenzweig, each of the three elements—God-World-Human—emerges out of its own distinct Nothing. This is crucial for Rosenzweig's understanding of system in that systematic knowledge has its origin not in identity but in difference (p. 144). That each of the three elements struggles to attain existence out of its own Nothing is part of what gives movement to Rosenzweig's system as it is the subsequent relations between the elements that prevents them from falling back into their respective Nothings. Pollock's presentation of part 1 of *The Star* is also notable for his adopting an approach to the elements that is not only epistemological but also ontological (p. 160n56). Such a reading is critical to Pollock's claim that part 1 of

The Star is more than a critique of idealism. Rather, in part 1, Rosenzweig establishes the elements, God-World-Human, in a manner that will allow them to achieve their factuality in parts 2 and 3.

In the fourth chapter, “The Genuine Notion of Revelation: Relations, Reversals, and the Human Being in the Middle of the System,” Pollock addresses the mechanics of Rosenzweig’s system through the relationships between the elements in Creation, Revelation, and Redemption. God, World, and the Human must undergo “reversals” out of their isolation so that they can act on each other to secure their factuality and bring about the state of redemption. For instance, insofar as creation is a past event, God is in jeopardy of falling back into the divine Nothing without the relationship that is fostered through revelation. As the title of the chapter indicates, revelation plays a central role in Rosenzweig’s system. Pollock, rightfully, emphasizes the personal and transformative nature of the experience of revelation. Rosenzweig argues that it is only in the divine calling of revelation that the individual emerges from the state of self-isolation to become an “I” that is capable of true interaction with others. Pollock poignantly suggests that this “call to I-hood at once expresses itself as the call to system” as the “I” brings with it the consciousness of the particular and the All that is at the heart of the systematic task (p. 242). Rosenzweig’s account of the relations between the elements in Creation-Revelation-Redemption is nearly as complex as his discussion of the self-emergence of the elements in part 1. In his analysis, Pollock displays an exceptional ability to render Rosenzweig’s obscure language and ideas in the most pellucid manner possible. This clarity is in large part due to Pollock’s repeated summaries of his and Rosenzweig’s arguments throughout the chapter. For the odd reader who is not yet persuaded by Pollock’s argument regarding the role of system in Rosenzweig’s thought, these summaries will prove helpful. Other readers are likely to find that this material becomes excessive and unnecessarily lengthens an already long chapter. Perhaps Pollock’s most innovative claims in this chapter are those that deal with the links between experience and thought in Rosenzweig’s philosophy. He argues that the relationships between the elements are intended by Rosenzweig as an account of human experience and that the experience of these relations confirms the theory of the elements in part 1. Summing up this point, Pollock states that “it is the relation of reciprocal confirmation, of promise and fulfillment between our thought and our experience, that alone constitutes unique evidence, to which we all have access, of the le-

gitimacy of Rosenzweig’s account of the All” (p. 246).

In the fifth chapter, “Seeing Stars: The Vision of the All and the Completion of the System,” Pollock takes up one final issue that has vexed scholars of Rosenzweig, the role of religious experience in his thought. The chapter begins with a letter from Rosenzweig during the period in which he was composing *The Star* to Margrit Rosentock, wherein he describes a vision he had of his system in the form of the Star of David. Pollock’s analysis of the letter leads to a discussion of the role of intellectual intuition in German Idealism, which provides access, otherwise unattainable via cognition, to the “Absolute unity of all beings” through such means as art, religion, and love (p. 274). Pollock argues that vision provides a similar encounter with the All in *The Star* as does intellectual intuition in Idealism. Indeed, as the title of the chapter indicates, Pollock believes that Rosenzweig’s system must culminate in such an immediate vision of the All. A problem arises in that the religious experiences that Rosenzweig describes as part of the Jewish and Christian liturgical calendars are mediated through the respective traditions. Pollock also puzzles over the fact that Rosenzweig does not indicate where and when a vision of the All is available in Jewish and Christian worship. This is one of the few points in the book that Pollock’s arguments do not compel assent. While Pollock is certainly right that vision is an important element in the concluding part of *The Star*, one can think of a multitude of reasons why Rosenzweig would refrain from predicting the time and location of the divine-human encounter. Alternatively, Rosenzweig does say that the eternal sheds its transcendence on Yom Kippur and becomes visible to all. Pollock would dismiss this as a mediated experience but his distinction between mediate/immediate experiences is not sufficiently developed to bear the brunt of his argument. Regardless of that point, Pollock’s discussion of vision in *The Star* goes a long way to securing the place of religious experience in Rosenzweig’s thought.

The conclusion of the book highlights a peculiar fact. Whereas recent studies of Rosenzweig have often put him into conversation with other thinkers in a manner that helps to understand and appropriate his thought, by emphasizing his connections to Idealism and its concept of system, Pollock accentuates the dissimilarity between Rosenzweig’s thought and contemporary philosophical sensibilities. It remains an open question at the end of the book what elements of Rosenzweig’s project are recoverable for contemporary constructive work. A matter that I believe most of Pollock’s readers will now agree is closed is that Rosenzweig’s philosophy is deeply indebted

to and in dialogue with German Idealism and its notion of philosophical system. For that significant insight and the advance that it will bring to Rosenzweig studies, we owe Pollock a debt of gratitude.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic>

Citation: Cass Fisher. Review of Pollock, Benjamin, *Franz Rosenzweig and the Systematic Task of Philosophy*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. October, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24750>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.