Understanding
the Sick
and the
Healthy

A View

of World,

Man, and God

Franz Rosenzweig

Translated and with an Introduction by Nahum Glatzer

And with an Introduction by Hilary Putnam

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With a New Introduction by Hilary

Putnam

Understanding the Sick and the Healthy

A VIEW OF WORLD, MAN, AND GOD

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My words are too difficult for you;
Therefore they appear to you as simple.
JUDAH HA-LEVI, The Book of Kuzari

Why is truth so woefully
Removed? To depths of secret banned?
None perceives in proper time! If we
But perceived in proper time, how bland
The truth would be, how fair to see!
How near and ready to our hand!
GOETHE, Westöstlicher Diwan

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INTRODUCTION, 1999

Hilary Putnam

In terms of his depth, his originality, his immense learning, the power of his mind, and the compassion of his vision (not to mention his wide influence on non-Jewish as well as Jewish thinkers), Franz Rosenzweig ranks, along with Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas, as one of the most important Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century. Yet I must confess that it was not until I discovered this "little book" (literally translated, the original title is "The Little Book of Healthy and Sick Human Understanding") that I felt the power and the appeal of Rosenzweig's vision. In large part, this is because the book that made Rosenzweig famous, *The Star of Redemption*, is so *very* hard to read. The *Star* is an anti-Hegelian book written in what, at first blush, looks like Hegelian jargon—a critique of theology as conventionally understood, written in the form of what seems to be a theology, a critique of philosophy written in a prose which is not only learned but also highly idiosyncratic. Since this was the only work of Rosenzweig's that I had read, I did not expect to

find him an author who could speak to my own condition. Yet this book (in addition to being an excellent preparation for reading the *Star*, that is, for understanding what the *Star* is really about, what it is "doing") presents the same vision in a radically different way. As a book intentionally written for non-philosophers, it eschews all philosophical jargon. Both the (anti-)philosophical vision and the religious vision are presented in a beautiful, simple, compelling prose. To my enormous surprise, I found *this* work reminding me of the last philosopher in the world I had expected to compare with Franz Rosenzweig, namely, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and I propose to explain a part of the illumination I find in Rosenzweig by presenting such a comparison.

Wittgenstein? Rosenzweig and Wittgenstein? Yet, on reflection, the comparison should not be as startling as it first seemed to me, for both thinkers are influenced by Kierkegaard¹ (if Wittgenstein was not a theist, he nonetheless had an obvious sympathy with religion), and both share a profoundly critical attitude toward the traditional philosophical search for a theory of the "essence" of things. I cannot imagine Wittgenstein reading through Rosenzweig's The Star of Redemption. Yet I can very easily imagine him reading and enjoying Rosenzweig's "little book" [Büchlein]. (It was Wittgenstein, after all, who remarked, "When Tolstoy just tells a story he impresses me infinitely more than when he addresses the reader",² and in the present book Rosenzweig adopts the manner of a storyteller.)

The roots of philosophical illusion

Although Wittgenstein says that the roots of philosophical illusion lie deep in our language and deep in us, he never attempts to provide a detailed account of those roots.³ For Rosenzweig's purposes, however, it is essential to do just that. But why should Rosenzweig concern himself with philosophy at all? And especially why should he do this in a book which is explicitly written for non-philosophers, and which "experts", that is, philosophers, are explicitly warned away from reading?

One answer which does not work is that Rosenzweig is (only, or at least primarily) concerned with attacking *Hegelian* philosophy. Not only

does this answer not fit the text (Rosenzweig mockingly describes ideas drawn from materialism, empiricism, positivism, Vaihinger's then wellknown philosophy of "Als Ob" (As If), and not just Hegelian ideas), but it makes the paradox even more intractable. Could Rosenzweig really have supposed that the average German Jew of his time was in danger of becoming a convert to Hegelian metaphysics? But the answer is not really so hard to find. What philosophy represents here is not a technical subject at all, but a temptation to which all who think of themselves as religious may be subject at one time or another: the temptation to substitute words, especially words which have no religious content because they have no internal relation to a genuine religious life, for that kind of life. This is the very temptation that Kierkegaard was centrally concerned with combating. Kierkegaard didn't combat the temptation to substitute abstract talk for actually living the religious life because he imagined that most nineteenth-century Danish Christians were about to become metaphysicians—obviously not! Rosenzweig did not think that most twentieth-century German Jews were about to become Hegelians. These existentialist thinkers saw metaphysics as an exaggerated form of a disease to which we are all subject. It is this "disease" that the "physicians" in Rosenzweig's parable are out to diagnose and cure.

The absurdity of metaphysics

The similarity between Rosenzweig's criticism of philosophy and that of the later Wittgenstein extends also to their criticism of the metaphysician's search for an account of the "essence" of things as a search which is hopeless, not because it is too difficult to find the essence of things, but because the project is, in some sense, absurd. Both Wittgenstein and Rosenzweig direct us away from the chimera of a philosophical account of the "essence" of this or that to the ordinary use we make of our words. At the same time there is an obvious difference in their projects: for Wittgenstein, returning to the ordinary use of our words is to be aided by a precise and careful account of that use, by a "grammatical investigation". There is no such project in Rosenzweig; indeed, the present book, taken by itself, can seem—must perhaps seem, if taken apart

from what Rosenzweig has written elsewhere—to be advising us to turn our backs on philosophy once and for all. Yet, as Wittgenstein recognized, if there is a way past philosophy in the sense of absurd metaphysics it must lead through philosophy in a different sense. Did Rosenzweig really not know this?

It is clear from what Rosenzweig wrote elsewhere (I shall give some examples later in this introduction) that he was fully aware of the need for another sort of philosophy. And I suspect, although I cannot of course prove, that the reason he decided not to publish the *Büchlein* may well have been precisely that, taken by itself, it seems excessively "anti-philosophical". Yet if one sees it as a Kierkegaardian work, one can understand both the quasi-fictional device it employs (narrating the course of a "disease" and its "cure" by a "sanatorium") and its deliberate one-sidedness.

The absurdity of metaphysics is, accordingly, not something that Rosenzweig argues for, as Wittgenstein argues that one or another metaphysical explanation of how it is possible to follow a rule, or possible to refer to things, or possible to do mathematics, collapses into absurdity when carefully probed, but rather something that he tries to make us feel by ironic redescription. (Although the Jewish religious sensibility is very different from the Christian, the devices of irony and parable remind one of A Pilgrim's Progress. Indeed, a possible alternative title for our "little book" might have been A Patient's Progress.) Thus Rosenzweig's first example of a philosopher's search for essences is the deliberately absurd one of a philosopher's seeking to know the essence of a particular piece of butter.

Let us return to the example of the pound of butter. If we imagine the mental process of the buyer, we discover two possibilities: either he left home with the intention of buying, or he decided to do so when he passed the shop. Both possibilities have one thing in common—the slab of butter he finally buys is a very definite slab. Now, when did it become that particular piece? The instant the man at the counter sliced it. Or, perhaps, even earlier. If the latter, it may have happened when he discovered the butter in the shop window. What had it been previous to this? Nothing. And if the buyer did set out from home with the intention of buying butter, was it only butter in general that he had in mind? Certainly not. (p. 47)

Rosenzweig is well aware that philosophy journals do not contain papers about "the essence of butter". Yet one can easily imagine a present-day philosophy conference at which the following arguments are advanced:

Prof. A: Suppose I want a slab of butter. It could be that, unknown to me, there is no butter in existence—it was all destroyed a few minutes ago. But I still want a slab of butter. That is true whether there actually exist slabs of butter or not. So the expression "a slab of butter" cannot have its normal function of referring to slabs of (actual) butter in "I want a slab of butter". What "I want a slab of butter" actually means is that I want there to be an X such that X is in my possession and X has the attribute Being a Slab of Butter. The expression "slab of butter" has what Frege called an "oblique" sense and reference. It really refers to the attribute Being a Slab of Butter when it occurs as the object of the verb "to want".

Prof. B: Talk of "attributes" invokes immaterial, mysterious, hard-to-identify Abstract Entities. All that is mystery-mongering. What the sentence means might be expressed by saying, "I want-true the sentence 'I have a slab of butter'".

Prof. C: What of third-person sentences, such as "John wants a slab of butter"?

Prof. B: That means: John wants-true "I have a slab of butter" spoken by John.

Prof. C: So "Pierre wants a slab of butter" means "Pierre wants-true the English sentence 'I have a slab of butter' spoken by Pierre"? What if Pierre doesn't know English?

[Recall Rosenzweig: "If a philosopher, however, should turn his back on our slab of butter, claiming it cannot be butter, because the French call it beurre, the proper place for him would be an institution accommodating philosophers exclusively" (p. 53).]

Prof. D: I suggest: "X wants a slab of butter" means "X wants-true some sentence which stands in the relation of synonymy to the following English sentence: 'I have a slab of butter'".

Of course, the participants at such a conference would probably deny that they are seeking the "essence" of butter. They would say that what they are looking for is "the right semantics for 'want-sentences'". But the notion of "the right semantics" in play here is quite obviously an essentialist one. The "right semantics" does not have to represent a way any actual speaker really understands such a sentence; it only has to correspond to a philosopher's "intuitions". Contemporary "semantics" is just old-fashioned metaphysics in disguise.

(It is instructive to compare the above Rube Goldberg accounts of the "semantics" of the verb "want" with Wittgenstein's straightforward remarks about wishes in *Philosophical Investigation*, §§440-441):

§440: Saying "I should like an apple" does not mean: I believe an apple will quell my feeling of nonsatisfaction. *This* proposition is not an expression of a wish but of nonsatisfaction.

§441: By nature and by a particular training, a particular education, we are disposed to give spontaneous expression to wishes in certain circumstances . . . In this game the question whether I know what I wish before my wish is fulfilled cannot arise at all. And the fact that some event stops my-wishing does not mean that it fulfills it. Perhaps I should not have been satisfied if my wish had been satisfied.

What makes the butter I buy "the butter I wanted", if it is, is that I describe the butter I buy as "what I wanted". There is nothing in the butter itself, nor in the feelings of satisfaction/nonsatisfaction, and so on, which accompany the purchasing and eating of the butter, that makes the butter "the object of the desire" apart from what Wittgenstein calls "the language game" and Rosenzweig calls "the name". And "the name" functions perfectly well without the help of any essence. As Rosenzweig puts it:

I transform the representation of my wish, as yet resembling the image in my memory, into what I see in the shop window. If we consider the matter without prejudice, we observe that after this change has taken place, nothing but the word "butter" remains the same. Is this all, then, nothing but a mere word, a name? All else has changed; the name remains. This is the first fact that must be stated. And what do we gain by such a statement? Above all, we make sure that no one is tempted to assume that the name is the "essence" of the thing. (p. 48)

But not nominalism

It is important not to take Rosenzweig's (or, again, Wittgenstein's) rejection of the search for essences as itself a positive metaphysical claim. The danger is, perhaps, more easily seen if we change our example of a metaphysical problem to, say, the famous "problem of personal identity"; indeed, Rosenzweig does clearly have this problem in mind when he writes, concerning "the courtship which precedes marriage",

Since time must elapse, the answer is unavoidably given by another person than the one who was asked, and it is given to one who has changed since he asked it . . . a whole lifetime is involved in question and answer. The lovers dare not deny, not even Romeo and Juliet, that changes, involving both of them, will inevitably take place. Nevertheless they do not hesitate. Indeed, the man who proposes and the woman who replies do not reflect upon these vicissitudes. They cling to the unchangeable. What is the unchangeable? Unbiased reflection reveals once more that it is only a name. (p. 49)

If we make the mistake of supposing that Rosenzweig is here making a metaphysical claim, say, the metaphysical claim that there is nothing that the different things gathered under a name really have in common ("Nominalism"), this could be taken to say that what we refer to as a "person", as "John", say, or "Sally", is really a succession of different persons; indeed, the contemporary philosopher Derek Parfit has argued for just this point of view. According to Parfit,4 each of my momentary selves, my "time-slices", has the right to be considered a different individual, and the idea that the self that will be called "Hilary Putnam" in a week's time is in any sense more "identical" to me than is a perfect stranger thousands of miles away is just a persistent illusion. But this view is just as metaphysical as the view it opposes, the view that there is some self-identical entity, some "substance", in traditional metaphysical terminology which is present as long as I am myself, and which is my "essence". In traditional religious thought, and also in the psychology of Descartes and other Rationalist philosophers, this substance was identified with an immaterial soul; but even if there are/were immaterial souls, could *they* not consist of different (immaterial) substances at different times? And would it make any difference to our personal identities if they did? And if there are no immaterial souls, does it make any difference to our personal identities if our bodies consist of different matter at different times?

Both Locke and Kant answered "no", but they did not deny, as Parfit does, that it makes sense to think of myself as the same person at different times. Nor does Rosenzweig. Indeed, as Rosenzweig points out, thinking this way is essential to our lives. As he writes, "common sense in action is concerned that the name, not the 'essence', remain" (p. 49). Or as Wittgenstein might have put it, "In this game the question whether the person we call 'Sally' is 'numerically identical' to her former self cannot arise at all".

I mentioned Locke and Kant, and if I may be permitted to digress, it is interesting to see how they each made a similar point. For Locke what makes me the very person who lived in such-and-such a town as a small boy, who went to such-and-such a high school and college and had suchand-such friends, who got married, worked at various places, wrote and said various things, etc., who did such-and-such and is now ashamed of it or proud of it, etc., is that I acknowledge those events as happening to me and my memories of them as my own. This is another way of making the point that "common sense in action" has no choice but to rely on the language game. For Kant, rational thought itself depends on the fact that I regard my thoughts, experiences, memories, etc., as all mine (that is, the fact that I prefix the "I think" to all of them, not just at the time but also retrospectively). To illustrate Kant's point, imagine yourself going through a very simple form of reasoning, say, "Boiling water hurts if you stick your finger in it; this is boiling water, so it will hurt if I stick my finger in this". If the "time-slice" of me that thought "Boiling" water hurts if you stick your finger in it" was one person, person A, and the "time-slice" that thought the minor premise "This is boiling water" is a different person, person B, and the person that thought the "conclusion", "It will hurt if I stick my finger in this", was yet a third person, person C, then that conclusion was not warranted—indeed, the sequence of thoughts was not an argument at all, since the thoughts were thoughts of different thinkers, none of whom had any reason to be

bound by what the others thought or had thought. We are responsible for what we have thought and done in the past, responsible now, intellectually and practically, and that is what makes us thinkers, rational agents in a world, at all. Kant, like Locke, can be seen as making the point that the "game" of thinking of my thoughts and actions at different times as mine does not depend on a metaphysical premise about "self-identical substances", and is nonetheless a game that we cannot opt out of as long as we are engaged in "common sense in action". Whereas Nominalism leaves us without any coherent conception of ourselves and our lives, rejecting the question that both the Rationalist Psychologist and the Nominalist try to answer directs our attention back to the conceptions that really inform those lives. These thinkers insist that the question, "How many self-identical substances do I consist of" is a question that diverts our attention away from the real issue, the issue of what is required for "common sense in action" [der gesunde Menschenverstand in seinem Handeln].

God

Rosenzweig is a religious thinker. The question he is concerned with concerned with vitally, as a living practical question—is, What does "common sense in action" mean for a religious human being? By treating Man, the World, and God as three "mountains" that his "patient" glimpses from his sanatorium, Rosenzweig means to suggest that a proper relation to God no more depends on a theory, on an intellectual conception of what God "really is", or a grasp of the "essence" of God, than a proper relation to other human beings or to the world depends on a theory of man or the world. Again, a comparison with Wittgenstein may help in grasping the thought. In his masterly exposition and development of Wittgenstein's thought, The Claim of Reason,6 Stanley Cavell interprets Wittgenstein as finding a "truth in skepticism", albeit one whose significance the skeptic distorts and misunderstands. It is true that we do not "know" that there is a world and that there are other people, on Cavell's interpretation, but not because (this is the skeptic's misunderstanding) we "don't know" these things. In ordinary circumstances, circumstances in which neither doubt nor justification is called

for, our relation to the familiar things in our environment, the pen in our hand or the person in pain whom we are consoling, is not one of either "knowing" or "not knowing". Rather, Cavell suggests, it is one of acknowledging (or, sadly, failing to acknowledge). Our task is not to acquire a "proof" that "there is an external world" or that our friend is in pain, but to acknowledge the world and our friend. I suggest that we read Rosenzweig, the religious thinker, as adding that it is our task to acknowledge God (indeed, as a profoundly religious thinker, albeit also a profoundly humanist thinker, he does not think one can acknowledge any one of the three—God, Man, and World—as they demand to be acknowledged unless one acknowledges the other two). But like Cavell's Wittgenstein, Rosenzweig insists that acknowledging is not a matter of knowledge.

Although he has a religious sensibility, Wittgenstein never calls himself a "theist". But it is clear that for him, too, a religion, if it is to have any value, cannot be a *theory:*

It strikes me that a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence, although it's *belief*, it's really a way of living, or a way of assessing life. It's passionately seizing hold of *this* interpretation. Instruction in a religious faith, therefore, would have to take the form of a portrayal, a description, of that system of reference, while at the same time being an appeal to conscience [*ein in's Gewissen-reden*]. And this combination would have to result in the pupil himself, of his own accord, passionately taking hold of the system of reference. It would be as though someone were first to let me see the hopelessness of my situation and then show me the means of rescue until, of my own accord, or not at any rate led to it by my *instructor*, I ran to it and grasped it.⁸

Fear of life and fear of death

It is important that Rosenzweig's passionate attack on the quest for essences—whether the quest be for an essence of Man, an essence of the World, or a grasp of the very essence of God—is not an attack on wonder. As Rosenzweig writes, "Were it a question of this gift alone, this capacity to wonder, philosophy's rightful claim to superiority could not be disputed" (p. 39). But wonder, Rosenzweig points out, however extensively

(and peculiarly) it may be cultivated by philosophy, is not originally a particularly philosophical activity. Thus, almost immediately after the passage I just quoted, Rosenzweig continues, "But be that as it may, how does our philosopher know of wonder? In any case, where does he obtain the word? Does not the non-philosophizing half of mankind also wonder? The wonder of a child? The wonder of a savage? Does not wonder overcome them a hundred times—even oftener than the philosopher?" (pp. 39–40).

In that extraordinary thing called "ordinary" life, wonder arises and dissolves in the flow of life itself. Even as lovers wonder at each other, "the solution and dissolution of their wonder is at hand—the love which has befallen them. They are no longer a wonder to each other; they are in the very heart of wonder". And life "becomes numb in the face of death—and dies. The wonder is unravelled. And it was life itself that brought the solution" (p. 40).

As Rosenzweig sees it, the philosopher is a being who is incapable of accepting the process of life and what he calls "the passing of the numbness wonder has brought". Such a relief comes too slowly. The philosopher

does not permit his wonder, stored as it is, to be released into the flow of life. Of necessity, he must hook the "problem" from where he stands. He has forcibly extracted thought's "object" and "subject" from the flow of life and he entrenches himself within them. Wonder *stagnates* [emphasis added], is perpetuated in the motionless mirror of his meditation; that is in the subject. He has it well-hooked; it is securely fastened, and it persists in his benumbed immobility. The stream of life has been replaced by something submissive—statuesque, subjugated. (pp. 40–41)

A number of critics of the traditional metaphysical enterprise have noted that the philosopher seeks an imaginary position, one outside the flow of time. He seeks to view everything, even himself, as if he were an "outsider"; he seeks to view the world as if he were not *in* it, to view it "from sideways on", as John McDowell has put it.⁹ By describing this imaginary position as a place outside the current, outside the demands of life and the flow of time, Rosenzweig suggests that this sort of philosophy stems from a "fear to live" (p. 102). But at the close of *Under*-

standing the Sick and the Healthy, just before the epilogues, Rosenzweig gives a deeper diagnosis:

We have wrestled with the fear to live, with the desire to step outside the current; now we may discover that reason's illness was merely an attempt to elude death. Man, chilled in the full current of life, sees, like that famous Indian prince, death waiting for him. So he steps outside of life. If living means dying, he prefers not to live. (p. 102)

It is, of course, easy for a healthy young man to call for the courage to face life, and even to face death. But, as is well known, Rosenzweig displayed his ability to live up to the demands of his own existential philosophy in a most remarkable way. Understanding the Sick and the Healthy was finished in July 1921. Early in 1922 the first signs of Lou Gehrig's disease appeared, and by the end of the year he was already experiencing difficulty in speaking and writing. Within a few years, he was reduced to a condition resembling that of the physicist Stephen Hawking—virtually paralyzed and forced to communicate by means of eye-blinks. (His wife would recite the alphabet, and he would spell out words by blinking at the letter he wanted.) Yet, under these conditions, he remained the intellectual leader of the school for adult Jewish education that he founded, translated the Bible from Hebrew into German together with Martin Buber, and produced a flood of fascinating letters and papers—letters, one must say, which remain full of confidence and free of self-pity right to the end! One's appreciation of Rosenzweig's own life attitude can only be deepened by observing how he managed to realize that attitude, and to live life to the fullest, under such a terrible handicap.

The new thinking is "speaking thinking"

I claimed earlier that it is clear from what Rosenzweig wrote elsewhere that he is not simply "anti-philosophical". Rather, he is concerned with calling for a different sort of philosophy, an existential philosophy which he refers to as simply "the new thinking". (In an epilogue to *The Star of Redemption* he lists, in addition to himself, a number of contemporaries as exponents of the "new thinking", including Martin Buber, Ferdinand Eber, Hans Ehrenberg, and Victor von Weizsäcker. 10) But the