

Book Review

Author: Hilary Putnam

Title: *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life: Rosenzweig, Buber, Levinas, Wittgenstein*

Publishers: Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indianapolis, 2008

121 pages

Reviewer: Peter Collins

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ujah.v12i1.12>

Although the general title of Hilary Putnam's *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life* tends to be somewhat ambiguous and potentially misleading, the subtitle *Rosenzweig, Buber, Levinas, Wittgenstein* provides some assistance – with one qualification. The heart of the book, an analysis of the principles of Franz Rosenzweig (1889-1929), Martin Buber (1878-1965) and Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995), is succinctly and clearly expressed. As for the general title, the author certainly would not want the thought of these three philosophers to be equated with “Jewish philosophy.” Concerning the subtitle, Wittgenstein was not a practicing Jew – no doubt, at least a partial reason for the author's referring in the conclusion to his “‘3/1/4’ Jewish philosophers” (108). In the last paragraph of the book, the central theme is illuminated: for these three renowned, twentieth-century Jewish philosophers, “philosophy was indeed a *way of life* – but only when it leaves the page and becomes ‘experiential’” (108) (emphasis added). This life-centered approach to philosophy did not originate with these

three, of course; in fact, it is as old as philosophy itself – and a major reason why philosophy potentially appeals to persons other than professional philosophers.

The author introduces this central theme in his first chapter with a reference to a “brilliant collection of essays” by Pierre Hadot, entitled *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (1995). Hadot believes “that the ancient idea of transforming one’s way of life and one’s understanding of one’s place in the larger scheme of things in the human community is one that we must not lose. Philosophy certainly needs analysis of arguments and logical techniques, but is in danger of forgetting that these were originally in the service of this very idea.” Of *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life*, its author comments, “I have begun with this idea, the idea of philosophy (or *Philosophia*) as a way of life and not an academic discipline” (In this last citation, one might wonder about the dichotomy: “philosophy as a way of life and not as an academic discipline.” This raises many questions, but it appears to me that the issue is not philosophy as a way of life *or* as an academic discipline, but rather how to develop the content and teaching of philosophy so as to promote philosophy as a way of life.)

Despite the convergences of the principles of these three philosophers, “arguably, the greatest Jewish philosophers of the twentieth century” (1), they “certainly do not agree completely, nor can any of them be summarized in a few words” (7). The following commentary is intended to consider each of the three distinct from the other two, but with serious attention to the central theme: the meaning of philosophy in service of *understanding* and *living* one’s life. Other underlying currents uniting these three philosophers include 1) the concept of “moral perfectionism”; 2) the focus

upon a philosophy of the person; and 3) human interrelationships (communities) as a central consideration, with particular focus upon the meaning of love. The “moral perfectionism” (the first of these three themes) raises the question, “Am I making the best effort I can to reach my unattained but attainable self”? this “attainable self” represents a moral ideal in tune with the notion of how one is supposed to live (59). We will follow the order of the author in discussing Rosenzweig, then Buber, and finally, Levinas.

First of all, then, what is Rosenzweig’s central contribution to “philosophy as a guide to life”? According to the author, one of this Jewish philosopher’s fundamental principles is an “utter distinctness” among God, man and the world. To Rosenzweig the “distinctness of God from the other two means, in particular, that all theologies that make God in any way a human construct are ‘atheistic theologies.’” The author also suggests the possibility that “insisting on the distinctness of Man and World is Rosenzweig’s way of rejecting the idealist view that the World is a human construct...”(103). For this Jewish philosopher ““God, man and the world are... in transition, the three of them constantly joining and interweaving and separating. The undulations of beseeching and receiving, receiving and thanking go on incessantly. Man asks, God gives, the world receives and thanks – and then man asks anew. There can no dead season... the process must be continual””(34). According to Rosenzweig, a proper relationship of human persons to god, other human beings, and the world is not in knowing or not knowing, but in *acknowledging* the reality of the other. “...as a profoundly religious thinker, albeit also a profoundly humanist thinker, Rosenzweig 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” (26).

As for this process of “acknowledging,” Rosenzweig blatantly rejects the traditional metaphysician’s search for the “essences” of God, man and the world (18, 27). While this is not an attack on the philosopher’s capacity to *wonder*, it is a critique of any tendency to restrict genuine wondering to the philosopher. In Rosenzweig’s view, “In that extraordinary thing called ‘ordinary life,’ wonder arises and dissolves in the flow of life released into the flow of life” (28). In fact, he sees the philosopher as typically attempting to seek an imaginary position “outside the current, outside demands of life and the flow of time,” stemming from a “fear to live” (29). In any case, the author of *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life* says that Rosenzweig is not anti-philosophical in this posture, but is “calling for a different sort of philosophy, an existential philosophy that he includes Martin Buber among its exponents) (30).

What is this “new thinking”? Central to it is the distinction between the questions of *scholars* and the questions of *human beings*, not unrelated to the reference above to “ordinary life.” Also fundamental to it, secondly, is the notion of “speaking thinking,” meaning that “in the active engagement with the *lived* philosophical or theological problems of another human being...a speaker does not know in advance what he will say – or if, indeed, he will say anything.” The author cites Rosenzweig as follows: “Speech is bound by time and nourished by time....It does not know in advance where it will end. It takes its cues from others. In fact, it lives by virtue of another’s life....” Thirdly, the “new thinking” also requires that “Theological problems must be translated into human terms, and human problems brought

into the pale of theology.” Finally, the “new thinking” is characterized by “readiness” rather than “plans.” What does this mean? This is to be understood in terms of Rosenzweig’s “vocation”: to restore a meaningful Jewish life to German Jews through a wide (secular as well as religious) program of education (32). In this regard, he says that ““The highest things cannot be planned; for them readiness is everything. Readiness is the one thing we can offer to the Jewish individual within us, the individual we aim at””(33). Therefore, the new kind of philosophy proposed and engaged upon by Rosenzweig is experiential and narrative. It is *experiential* in that it involves as event between at least two persons over a period of time. It is *narrative* in that the narrator ““does not want to say how it really was, but rather how it came about...””(40).

Rosenzweig also associates the readiness-planning dichotomy with his notion of revelation, which he sees as a “bridge” between the human person and God. Divine Revelation ““is not man’s word *about* God, but rather God’s word *to* man”” it is an *event* between God and man – and an experiential process at that: a meeting between the two (42). In fact, it is more than that: it is a “love affair between God and the receptive human soul.” God loves and tells – in the only command we receive from God – to love Him. However, according to Rosenzweig, this love which we owe to God (which can be commanded, but *only* by the lover) requires a horizontal as well as a vertical dimension. “Love of God’ without a direction out to fellow human beings is not really love of God at all. My love of God must enable me to see how isolated I was, and must allow me to break out of that isolation by loving my neighbor.” This neighbor is the

person who is “nighest,” the one nearest to me regardless of who that might be at a particular time (47-49).

The author summarizes Rosenzweig’s position as follows: “the whole purpose of human life is revelation, and the whole content of revelation is love. The love between the Lover and the Beloved culminates in ‘matrimony,’ that is, redemption.” Redemption has personal, communal, and eschatological dimensions – although the “future occurrence is something that is ‘present’ to the individual Jew *now*” (54). In the undogmatic, pluralistic, Jewish revival which Rosenzweig endeavored to promote in the Western world, “He sought to teach that we are always in the presence of God, that there is essentially just one commandment, the commandment to love God, and only one thing to ask for in prayer: the strength to *meet* ‘the small – at times exceedingly small thing called demand of the day’ with courage and confidence” (35-35) (emphasis added). This “meeting” is truly experiential, personal, and communal – and it calls for readiness in a manner not unlike that which Martin Buber proposes.

Buber is best known for his book *I and Thou*, published in 1923, over forty years before he died. He distinguishes the I-Thou relationship from I-It, the latter referring to *things* in the world. However, this is not a simple matter since any being except God can become an It for a conscious I (always a human person). God can be met only as a thou; all other beings can be met as Thou or It, depending not upon the nature of the other, but the nature of the *relationship*. There are several differences in the two kinds of relationship, largely taken for granted in the author’s summary for the sake of further purposes. One major difference is that the I-Thou relationship is undertaken

primarily for the sake of the other, whereas the I-It relationship represents an engagement primarily for the sake of the I. However, that fact does not render the I-It relationship evil or even undesirable because our use of things – even people (an electrician, a physician) – in some circumstances is judged by all as normal and necessary activity. On the other hand, a non-human – even inanimate – being (a pet dog, a motorcycle) can become a Thou for a conscious human being. Whether the I-Thou or I-It relationship is good or evil depends upon the appropriateness of the relationship in the particular situation.

However, Buber, as Rosenzweig and Levinas, is a religious philosopher. Meeting God (“meeting” designating an I-Thou relationship) is paramount to Buber, but only insofar as “the end [of that relationship] is the transformation of life in the world, life in the *It-world*, through the transforming effect of the recurrent ‘I-You’ relation” (64). This is the aim of Buber’s philosophy. Furthermore, concerning this relationship to God, “It is impossible to describe God or to theorize about him. Indeed, the very attempt causes one to miss the target entirely” (65). “Not only is the idea of theorizing about God rejected by Buber, but so also is the idea of a *theory of religious knowledge*.” God cannot be met or even understood by metaphysical speculation, for “one comes to God by entering into relationship with God, and I-You relation is never a matter of *knowledge*” (66). Beyond this relationship, as such, when a human person meets God, speaks to God, enters into an I-Thou relation with God, all the partial I-Thou relationships with other beings in the world are fulfilled without being obliterated (65). In other words, as noted, one’s relationship to the ultimate Thou (God) *transforms* one’s life in the world.

In fact, “Buber believes that all genuine community, and all genuine moments of transformation in history, require something like a *shared* relation to the ultimate You. All purely materialistic ‘solutions’ to the world’s problems... must fail without such a moment of relationship” (67). Meeting God for Buber is not an option; it is a necessity in order to live a truly human life.

The third and final Jewish philosopher considered by the author as a “guide to life” is Emmanuel Levinas, unique among the three for his attempt to “universalize Judaism: “in essence, *all human beings are Jews*” (69). What could this mean? In his essay “A Religion for Adults,” Levinas writes, “A truth is universal when it applies to every reasonable being. A religion is universal when it opens to all. In this sense the Judaism that links the Divine to the moral has always aspired to be universal.” He goes on immediately to discuss God’s election of Israel as “a particularism that conditions universality” and adds that “it is a moral category rather than a historical fact to do with Israel” (69). In dedicating the book (in which this essay appears) to members of his family who perished in the Holocaust, Levinas says that in doing so he “simultaneously identifies all victims of the ‘same hatred of the other man,’ regardless of their nation and religious affiliation, as victims of *antisemitism*” (70).

The author of *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life* characterizes the “whole philosophy” of Levinas by linking his difficulty in surviving World War II with this philosophical stance: “...what is demanded of us is an ‘infinite’ willingness to be available to and for the other’s suffering. ‘The Other’s hunger – be it the flesh, or of bread – is sacred; only the hunger of the third party limits its rights’” (68). Both this statement and the universalization of Judaism

are not unrelated to the famous claim of Levinas that “ethics is *first philosophy*.” What he intends by this is “not only that ethics must not be derived from any metaphysics ... but also that all thinking about what it is to be a human being must *begin* with an ‘ungrounded’ ethics” (70). He especially rejects attempts to ground ethical behavior toward other persons on the idea that “we are all ‘fundamentally the same.’” The reason he gives is that this invites the principle that not all people are the same, which became no small inspiration for the Holocaust. Also, Levinas refuses to base ethics upon metaphysics because he views the latter “as an attempt to view the world as a totality, from ‘outside,’ as it were” (70). As Rosenzweig, he believes that the real meaning of life for human persons is lost in this scenario.

The key to the ethical stance of Levinas is the fundamental obligation to the other, a description of which he sees as his task – a description which will relieve the burden of seeking a metaphysical foundation. The elaboration begins with a question which goes something like this: what sort of relationship and attitude should you strive for toward one person in a situation in which that relationship was completely unaffected by obligations to all persons? The author comments, “To describe Levinas’s answer in full would require a description of his entire philosophy” (73). That is not provided, but the author does indicate two elements. The first principle attributed to Levinas is the following: “*the fundamental obligation we have... is the obligation to make ourselves available to the neediness (and especially the suffering) of the other person*” – “and to do so without reservation” (74). Levinas believes that without assuming (in the literal sense of taking on) this obligation, the finest code of behavior or best theory of justice will be of no

avail. Also significant is his emphasis upon the *asymmetry* of this moral obligation, meaning that I am responsible to the other *without concern for the reciprocity of the other*. Secondly, this fundamental moral obligation is given in a divine command, regarding which the story of Abraham is cited. This is the source of all human dignity, and it is proposed by the Old Testament in a manner which enables human persons to *know* the command without philosophical justification (74, 76, 86). The author ‘trace’ of the Commander, never an epiphany” – Yahweh is a hidden God (87; see also 82). In summary of Levinas’s position, the author notices his emphases upon 1) the ethical person’s recognizing the presence of the other person, 2) the *alterity* (genuine otherness) of the other person, and 3) the *asymmetry* of the ethical relation. Finally, Levinas is noteworthy for his principle that “Without ethics one cannot even enter into the *world...*” (96).

The author of *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life* would have done well to have minimized attention to Wittgenstein, and even better to have avoided mentioning his own “current religious standpoint,” a substantially unintelligible position “somewhere between John Dewey’s *A common Faith* and Martin Buber” (5, 100). However, this book, in my judgment, is to be recommended for excellent analyses of these three Jewish philosophers: Rosenzweig, Buber and Levinas.