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Is Revelation in the World?

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ONE OF THE MOST pivotal moments of Peter Eli Gordon's masterful *Rosenzweig and Heidegger* occurs when, late in its pages and at long last, he turns to the fact that its titular protagonists were not just Jew and German, artificially divided from one another by the vagaries of later history. They were also theist and atheist: one believed in God and the other did not. And each staked out his commitment for or against religion early in life in an event indissociably biographical and theoretical. Heidegger's adamant denial of God's existence and Rosenzweig's lifelong allegiance to the revelatory divine were bound up with the core purposes and program of each, undoubtedly driving life and work as fundamentally as any other single commitment. Gordon's text succeeds as well as it does—and there is no question about its overall success—by framing matters as if mainly ethnic, cultural, and political sympathies had led to the division unthinkingly inserted between his figures; this division's undoing is required by disinterested historical study that reveals the anachronism of those retrospective judgments. But what if the true rift between the figures were not imposed after the fact, a construction of later interpretation and ethnic demarcation, but one that a true measurement of resemblance and difference must place center stage?

So it is with considerable drama that Gordon finally turns to the apparently harsh reality that Heidegger disavowed God while Rosenzweig affirmed him. And his confrontation with it is both intriguing and misleading. Overall, Gordon wants to claim that Rosenzweig's concept of redemption as "redemption-in-the-world"—collective and historical in its parameters, holist and temporalized in its ontological basis, and structurally proleptic in its ultimate promise—in effect comes near to making Rosenzweig the very sort of atheistic theologian he began his career criticizing. Throughout his book, Gordon is most interested in those moments in Rosenzweig's corpus which allow him to be presented as a charter member of the German philosophical tradition, especially as un-

derstood, after Immanuel Kant, as a quest for a *philosophy of the conditions of human experience of the world from the inside*. The God of Rosenzweig's theism, for Gordon, must accommodate himself to these conditions, and therefore Rosenzweig verges on a philosophy that no traditional or sustainable God-concept can withstand. It is not so clear why the articulation of a new God-concept would verge on unbelief, but Gordon wants, nevertheless, to argue that as a result of its "Heideggerian" commitments Rosenzweig's thought "stood in uncomfortable proximity to the atheism it denied" (p. 234). Gordon already advertises in his introduction that if Rosenzweig's goal is to update theology no less than philosophy, in part by grounding theology in a new philosophy, then it is not evident that the "obvious prominence of theological materials" in his thought by itself wrecks a comparison with an equally novel atheism. Anyway, what if the prominence of Heidegger's atheism in fact obscures a raft of theological commitments encrypted in it? "It remains to be seen just how significant [the] contrast really is," Gordon therefore says (p. 37). And when he in the end comes to treat the problem frontally, he acknowledges that "any comparison that did not take cognizance of their disagreement concerning theism and atheism would be neglecting a crucial topic." The point once again, in nearly identical language, is "to understand what kind of disagreement it really is" (p. 232).

Yet Gordon's treatment of the question, tantalizing as it is, ends up ignoring the large body of evidence most revealing about and challenging to his overall comparison; and seeing how suggests a useful perspective from which to reread his book. For what is missing throughout the study is quite simply one of Rosenzweig's central themes: revelation. Put briefly, then, my claim is that with equal if potentially contradictory fervor, Rosenzweig also wanted to craft a *theology of God's creation of the world and revelation to it from the outside*. Restituting the post-idealist conditions of human interpretation and experience counts as only part of Rosenzweig's self-imposed task, and if Gordon's claim is that these two missions simply cannot coexist, then that fact does not make Rosenzweig more like Heidegger but less so (even when the latter is interpreted as internalizing to philosophy a theology he officially disclaimed). Put differently, and more positively and constructively, Gordon's study not only helps isolate how Rosenzweig differed in the end from Heidegger but what the nodal points of Rosenzweig's philosophy were considered all by itself.

And yet, *Rosenzweig and Heidegger* refuses to reach this conclusion, and it is interesting to see how and why. After all, Gordon does not intentionally take his book in the direction I am suggesting. In fact, the omission of Rosenzweig's theology from Gordon's book is rather glaring when one

comes to think of it. In form, it offers itself as a historical narrative of the “chief stages” (p. xxviii) of Rosenzweig’s trajectory. But one finds nothing about Rosenzweig’s formative association with his theological friends Hans Ehrenberg and Eugen Rosenstock, and his choice of revelation against relativism in the renaissance of contemporary theology that also indelibly marked Rosenzweig’s early career. The chief testament of this period, Rosenzweig’s essay “Atheistic Theology,” does not really figure in Gordon’s argument. And then one comes to Gordon’s lengthy and loving treatment of Rosenzweig’s *Star of Redemption*. Again, revelation is left out. It is neither analytically marginalized nor controversially interpreted: it is simply omitted. But in the central section of his book, on revelation, Rosenzweig hoped to show his continuing allegiance to his early theological friends who had tutored him on the importance of the revelatory God lost in the nineteenth century, thereby making good on his demand in “Atheistic Theology” for a theology that genuinely deserved the name. The question is therefore whether and how the seemingly different but very real Rosenzweig of “Atheistic Theology” and the core of *The Star* fits into a portrait limned in his absence. To understand the nature of Rosenzweig’s harmony and dissonance with Heidegger, what kind of disagreement there really is between them, in any case, seems to require acknowledgment and analysis of this material too.

Now for corrective, expository, or strategic purposes there is nothing in itself wrong with the choice to focus selectively on the set of unexpected affinities that, as Gordon shows, unites Rosenzweig and Heidegger, to the detriment of whatever might divide them. (In his exposition of *The Star*, which concentrates on one-ninth of that text, Gordon openly and justifiably eschews the design of comprehensive exposition [p. 121].) But revelation is not simply a theme postponed in Gordon’s book, whose status it leaves in abeyance, for Gordon clearly believes his book has serious implications for its treatment; the trouble is that his suggestions in this regard fail to convince and indeed participate in the analytical suppression of revelation rather than finally facing up to the challenge it poses.

Gordon’s late confrontation with his protagonist’s theism, in which he touches on Rosenzweig’s portrait of a temporal God from late in *The Star*, approaches and avoids the problem in an especially revealing way (p. 205). For is it really plausible to rest the case about the significance of the contrast between the atheism of the one thinker with the theism of the other on a comparison of the one’s “authenticity” with the other’s “redemption,” given how centrally *revelation* figured not simply in Rosen-

zweig's thought generally but also in *The Star* quite specifically, and how different that theme makes Rosenzweig's thought look from any atheist doctrine? From an architectonic and evidentiary perspective, because of the sheer prominence of revelation in *The Star* and throughout Rosenzweig's writings (a prominence never mentioned), Gordon's discussion is rather like comparing two items but excluding from the comparison what the casual and superficial observer would take as their most obvious and flagrant difference. It is suggestive to remark that Rosenzweig's redemption is like Heidegger's authenticity. But how could that argument possibly save oneself the trouble of even acknowledging Rosenzweig's commitment to revelation—one whose equivalent is either impossible or much more difficult to locate in Heidegger's thought?

So Gordon's disposition of the challenge of Rosenzweig's fervent theism at the end of *Rosenzweig and Heidegger* is both hasty and puzzling. In the brief section that otherwise comes closest to the topic of revelation, Gordon's strategy, deployed but not defended, is to infer conclusions about Rosenzweig's views on divine revelation (which Rosenzweig in a long theological tradition defined as love) from conclusions about Rosenzweig's views of human relations. Citing an important passage from Rosenzweig's recently published correspondence with Margrit Rosenstock-Huessy to the effect that "love does not overstep the bounds of life," Gordon says this means that "love remains on the level of factual action" (p. 203, n. 15). In a more recent writing, Gordon cites this letter to "Gritli" again and repeats his conclusion: "In *The Star*, either the 'face' of the other is experienced as being-in-the-world or it cannot be experienced at all."¹ In both cases, however, Gordon is taking his conclusion as his premise: he writes as if a general comparison of Rosenzweig with Heidegger meant that the latter's vocabulary were straightforwardly applicable to the specific problem of Rosenzweig's views about revelation. But that assumption begs the precise question at issue. What of Rosenzweig's announced intent to find a divine standard outside the vagaries of wayward human history and interpretation? What of the fact that *The Star* balances its portrait of human finitude with an insistence on divine infinity? What of the fact that its theology relies everywhere and insists strenuously upon a category difference between God's revelatory love and interpersonal affection? And that Rosenzweig presents the former as the source of or

1. Peter Eli Gordon, "Franz Rosenzweig and the Philosophy of Jewish Existence," *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. M. Morgan (Cambridge, forthcoming).

template for the latter?² If he calls neighborly relations “love in the world,” does that not mean that the revelatory love from which they are explicitly derived is not wholly so? In summary, didn’t Rosenzweig *reject* exactly the project Gordon attributes to him—in Rosenzweig’s words, the “attempt at a resolute transformation of Judaism into something this-worldly”?³

While these questions might suggest a quite different Rosenzweig than one finds in Gordon’s book, my chief point is about how surprisingly far-reaching Gordon’s claims are given the selectivity of his focus and evidence. If this argument is plausible, an alternative follows. It might be possible for Gordon to extend his case to surmount the most difficult obstacle to the claim that Rosenzweig verged inadvertently on the rejection of his own fervent theism—“on a wholly temporalized and immanent theory,” one “without room” for revelation (p. 222 n. 45). But a very different way is also paved, one might argue, a way toward an even more novel and fundamental consideration of Rosenzweig’s doctrine. Is revelation, too, in the world? No question goes more directly to the heart—and perhaps the tensions—of Rosenzweig’s project. And yet if it is a real accomplishment of Gordon’s book to allow the question to be posed and faced in its true complexity, the book also leaves out the materials that would allow for it to be answered.

Since the publication of his book, it bears noting, Gordon has subtly altered his view, in effect acknowledging the partiality of his original reading, as well as the spectacular contest of energies in Rosenzweig’s thought that the comparison with Heidegger fails by itself to capture. “Rosenzweig shared a great deal with the Protestant crisis-theologians of the 1920s (e.g., Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, and Friedrich Gogarten),” he writes.

Drawing inspiration from Kierkegaard, these passionately religious thinkers shared in common the fear that historicist contextualism ran the risk of neutralizing revelation. But it is remarkable to see how Rosenzweig’s magnum opus, *The Star* tries almost desperately to render revelation compatible with the author’s own historicist commitments. In the central chapter on revelation, Rosenzweig seeks to explain how God, the “metaphysical,” can appear to humanity. But if a divine mani-

2. Whether this position is contradicted by the letter Gordon cites is a question with which I cannot deal in these remarks, the point of which is to suggest the omission of evidence rather than where exactly it points.

3. Franz Rosenzweig, “Atheistische Theologie,” *Kleinere Schriften* (Berlin, 1937), 289.

festation can be intelligible within the bounds of human experience, it must assume a place in history as well. Revelation, Rosenzweig concludes, thus finds its highest “certainty” not as a phenomenon incommensurable with history, but rather, precisely “in” our *Geschichtlichkeit*, or “historicity.” This is an intriguing claim, and it is evidence of a thinker who can abandon neither religious transcendence nor the historicist doctrine that threatens to dissolve it.⁴

In these few lines, Gordon has said more—quite literally—about the existence and prominence of revelation in Rosenzweig’s thought than in his earlier book. Note, however, that even in what one might legitimately read as a self-correction the threat is still from temporal holism and collectivist historicism to Rosenzweig’s theism, as if the reverse relationship were not possible, as if those commitments were not themselves under threat from revelation. Put differently, there is still a curious asymmetry, still an insistence that holism is the “core” view and revelation is something Rosenzweig has to try “desperately” to make compatible with it. The truth is that he strained just as much the other way. Neither view is at the core—or both views are. Similarly, while Gordon argues in the book, as noted, that Rosenzweig “verged” on full temporalization of God, he elsewhere acknowledges in passing that “Rosenzweig is . . . careful to indicate that there is an aspect of divine being that is wholly dissociated from time” (p. 190). So why does Rosenzweig not equally “verge” on the rejection of temporal holism, too? The fact that Heidegger himself went all the way is no answer. And so the bias persists even in the attempt to correct it.

The dispute, seemingly scholastic, actually goes to the heart of Rosenzweig’s thought—and of the course of modern Jewish philosophy. Clearly, Gordon’s overextension of his comparison to Heidegger as if it obviously covered Rosenzweig’s theory of revelation too, with the need for little further argument, follows mainly from his plausible interest in freeing up Rosenzweig from Emmanuel Levinas’s interpretive legacy, which has recently come to pervade scholarship on the subject (pp. xxi, 9–11, 132, 199, etc.). Gordon’s aim of showing Rosenzweig to be propounding a theory of temporal holism, as Heidegger did, makes him particularly devoted to emphasizing the distance between that theory and any claim that intersubjectivity involves an otherworldly encounter with

4. Gordon’s “Angelus Novus,” a review of David N. Myers, *Resisting History: Historicism and Its Discontents in German-Jewish Thought* (Princeton, N. J., 2003), *JQR* 95.4 (2005): 760.

the exterior face of the other in all his transcendent alterity. This denial is the impulse, indeed, of much of Gordon's book. But the terms and zeal of the correction obviate seeing how the mistake itself originally occurred. Did Levinas's thought simply come out of nowhere, as a wholesale fabrication? Far from authorizing the conclusions Gordon suggests, the expulsion of revelation from consideration—or the passing suggestion that revelation either fits with Rosenzweig's "Heideggerian commitments" or drops out—obscures why Levinas could have read Rosenzweig the way he did (drawing not on Rosenzweig's "ethics" but precisely on his theory of revelation). Finally, Gordon's marginalization of revelation equally obscures how the thinking of Leo Strauss, who recognized perhaps better than anyone the existentialist and non-existentialist (modernist and archaic) elements in Rosenzweig's thought, could likewise have flowed from the same source.⁵

Only one question remains. Why the partiality? Why the marginalization of revelation? The glaring selectivity of Gordon's reading forces the question, and I will share my own proposed response. Gordon's choice to push Rosenzweig in the direction of Heidegger's doctrine to or past the limits the evidence allows is unintelligible except as a reflection of Gordon's own constructive rather than historical commitments, as a Jew and as a philosopher. *Rosenzweig and Heidegger* turns out to contain, just below the surface but explaining the agenda and shape of the whole, a *profession de foi* in which Judaism is offered as either most defensible or only plausible (or both) if it is compatible with Heideggerian existentialism—and vice versa. The explanation, in other words, is Gordon's commitment to many aspects of Heidegger's philosophy as having persuasively left prior paradigms of thought behind, and in light of which, and in tune with which, Rosenzweig is in effect credited for updating the Jewish faith. The end result is the startling claim that Heidegger's thought turns out to be Judaic, with Heidegger prostrating himself before "a possibly Hebraic god" (p. 314).

It is not just that this surprising concatenation only results thanks to a fundamentally one-sided view of Rosenzweig's overall endeavor (Gordon's approach to Heidegger's thought is also selective in ways that are both inevitable and illuminating). The very one-sidedness demands re-

5. I acknowledge, of course, the difficulty of the comparative study I recommend. Nevertheless, I have taken a stab at it in my book *Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas between Revelation and Ethics* (Ithaca, N. Y., 2005), esp. chap. 4. On Strauss, see Moyn, "From Experience to Law: Leo Strauss and the Weimar Crisis of the Philosophy of Religion," *The Early Leo Strauss*, ed. P. Bouretz and E. Sheppard (forthcoming).

flection on what accounts for the shape of the book as it stands, and more generally on the alternative between historicism and constructivism in interpretation. Unlike the readings he combats, Gordon's work, it is true, constructs an identity by collapsing the wall others have erected between Jewish thought and the German philosophical experience.⁶ It rejects a "revelatory model" of tradition in the name of a creative and inventive model (pp. 1, 313). But creativity is not just past but present. The historicist restoration of Rosenzweig to "the horizon of German thought" is not just a heuristic device of restitution; it is also an engine for the reinvention of tradition. It makes it possible for Heidegger to worship a Hebraic god; and, perhaps more important, it makes it possible for a Jew as a Jew to kneel with Heidegger before the same altar. If the reinvention of Judaism attributed to Rosenzweig and conducted in the text comes at the apparently steep price of its new proximity to atheist unbelief, Heidegger's inclusion in the "tradition" at least strengthens its intellectual plausibility.

I should state forthrightly, in closing, that I have a stake neither in the search for the true doctrine of the faith—Heideggerian or other—nor in the insulation of a putatively objective historical standard of interpretation from such a search. I wholly concur with Gordon's ultimate acknowledgment that historical investigation is inexpungeably constructive: "Interpretation is a deeply interested activity, guided by personal . . . concerns" (p. 303). Nevertheless, the text has some autonomy, and there are also limits to interpretation. As a historian, I am permitted to worry that the terms of fusion of historicism and constructivism to be found in Gordon's eloquent and provocative work leave out, or distort, the drama and passion of the thought that his interpretation is forced to partially reinvent for it to be carried out and to be made to seem plausible. Just as important, it obscures the sources of later Jewish philosophy. And yet, I am fortunate that apparently serious differences are of little moment to Peter Gordon—especially so, I hope, when they are born of a friendship dear and deep enough to thrive on debate. He will explain what kind of disagreement this one, too, "really is."

6. Gordon, "Rosenzweig Redux: The Reception of German Jewish Thought," *Jewish Social Studies* 18.1 (2001): 22, cf. 43–44.