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Abstract

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Philosophers of Catastrophe: Early Twentieth-Century Jewish Proponents and Opponents of Objectivity in Science

by Steven Gimbel and Stephen Stern

The Second World War ended with the exposure of the Nazi death camps and the threat of global nuclear annihilation. The former disclosed the depths of human depravity and the latter warned us about the severity of the consequences that could await us as a result. The grimness of each, much less both, had the effect of shielding from our collective consciousness the equally dire warnings from the First World War that had occurred only a couple of decades earlier.

World War I was catastrophic. Twenty million died. Millions more were wounded. The nations of Europe were left in social, political, and economic shambles. But what truly left a sense of crisis on the Continent were not the results, but the means that achieved them. Munitions were dropped from the sky. Chemical weapons wafted across the battlefield causing soldiers' lungs to bleed so that they would drown in their own blood. Technologically advanced weapons were able to destroy more human life in a flash than would be claimed in weeks of combat a century before. Trench warfare had replaced the icon of the brave, noble warrior with the miserable, cold, wet, starving animal hiding in a hole until ordered to charge, at which point they would be mercilessly slaughtered with no strategic advantage gained.

When the fighting ceased and reflection could begin, what arose was not only horror at what Europe had done to itself, but culturally a sense of utter bewilderment as to how this could have happened. Pre-war, the Continent congratulated itself on being the pinnacle of sophistication. In all elements of

human endeavor—art, architecture, science, technology, philosophy, economic output—it seemed as if Friedrich Hegel was correct that they were on the verge of the end of history. Combining Hegel’s dialectic with Darwin’s theory that suggested progress, to many on the Continent, it seemed that humanity had evolved to its ultimate form. The purpose of all previous history had been to produce this generation. They, the turn of the century Europeans, were the ultimate expression of the perfection of God and science.

And as if in the time of a single heartbeat, the zenith of cultural development had devolved back to savage barbarians. Surveying the bloody battlefields and the social-political chaos after the Great War, Europe was left grappling with the self-reflective question, “How did *we* do this?” It would make sense, in their minds, to see such mindless carnage from the East or from the Americas where such ruthless brutality would be expected from their supposed inferiors, but this happened in Europe. How could Europeans have done this?

Those who wrestled with this question included Jewish philosophers,¹ some of whom, like Franz Rosenzweig and Hans Reichenbach had served in the war. But this commonality of experience did not result in similar analyses. Indeed, quite the opposite. Rosenzweig, and other thinkers like those of the Frankfurt school, argued that science, with its supposed objectivity, had allowed us to see people as mere objects and this dehumanization was the cause of the moral depravity of the war. To undermine the notion of objectivity and re-elevate subjectivity was the key to rehumanizing ourselves. Reichenbach and others, like Karl Popper, saw the objectivity of science as essential to creating a post-nationalized future in which we would all become fellow citizens of the world with equal claims to dignity. When technology fell into the hands of nationalists, the result was the tragedy of the Great War. One set of Jewish philosophers considered undermining the claimed objectivity of the scientific worldview to be necessary for a better future, whereas the other set argued exactly the opposite, that the embracing of the objectivity of science contained the seeds of a more humane tomorrow.

That leaves us with an intellectual context in which Jews are disagreeing with other Jews, hardly a novel predicament. The standard Hellenic-inspired epistemic approach leads us to the question, “Who wins?”, that is to say, which of these mutually exclusive alternatives is superior and to be celebrated as the fact of the matter and which is deficient and thereby eliminated? We contend that this is the wrong question, based on the wrong approach. Rather, we ought to alter our epistemological standpoint and adopt a pilpul-inspired orientation, what we term a “neo-Talmudic” approach, wherein we no longer see each

fundamental metaphysical *Weltbild* as excluding the other, but instead as a participant in an unceasing dialogue contributing ineliminable, but frustrating insight with which the other conversant must wrestle. It is the debate between the embrace and rejection of objectivity in science, not the conclusion of the argument and the awarding of the trophy, that allows us to glimpse facets of the wisdom we seek.

OBJECTIVITY AND THE UNIFICATION OF HUMANITY

The patron saint of humanistic objectivity is its greatest practitioner, Albert Einstein.² Shortly after the end of the Great War, Einstein wrote the following:

At a sitting of the [Prussian] Academy [of Science] during the War, at the time when nationalism and political infatuation had reached its height, Emil Fischer spoke the following emphatic words, 'it's no use, gentlemen, science is and remains international.' The really great scientists have always known this and felt it passionately, even though in times of political strife they may have remained isolated among their colleagues of inferior caliber. In every camp during the War, this group of voters betrayed their sacred trust. The International Association of Academies was broken up. Congresses were and still are held from which colleagues from ex-enemy countries are excluded. Political considerations, advanced with much solemnity, prevent the triumph of the purely objective ways of thinking without which our great aims must necessarily be frustrated.³

Science, the epitome of objective thought, Einstein held, served as a bulwark against the sort of irrational destruction that was the War. Nationalism and religious fervor are based on the belief that the accessibility of truth depends upon group membership and national origin. It was this sort of rejection of objectivity that he considered to be the preconditions to the possibility of armed conflict.

The objectivity of science provided a model that should be followed for all human belief in two distinct ways, one epistemological and one sociological, both of which served the cause of global peace and human progress. Epistemologically, science contrasts the natural with the artificial, elevating the meaningfulness of the former. Natural laws, like that governing gravitation, are not affected in the slightest when one crosses national boundaries. The rate at

which a one-kilogram weight accelerates when dropped from a height of one meter is the same in Berlin and Paris. Man-made laws, on the other hand, like those governing the employability of Jews at governmentally funded institutes, will be radically different when one takes but a single step over a border. This shows the weakness of the subjectivity that guides politics in its ability to be influenced by passions that appeal to our lesser selves. Science is impervious to passion and fashion, to bias and hatred, to pride and side taken in any political conflict.

Sociologically, this objectivity provides the template for cooperative progressive human endeavors. The international scientific congresses and conferences Einstein mourns the loss of demonstrated how influence and collaboration could cut across geo-political lines. Einstein, of all people, was no Pollyanna when it came to conflict within science. He was the most well-known lightning rod of intellectual disagreement of his time. But some of those who opposed him the most passionately were among his countrymen and some of those who defended him (and were also among his best personal friends) would be seen as enemies in Germany. Whether Einstein was right or wrong about his theory of relativity had nothing to do with the passport he held and everything to do with the way the universe itself worked. The global partnership of scientists demonstrated that cooperation and unification across social and religious boundaries was possible; shallow political divisions could be put aside for a greater shared human goal.

But, that, of course, was not a view shared by all scientists. Two German Nobel laureates, Phillip Lenard and Johannes Stark, were among the leaders of the Aryan physics movement that objected to relativity theory on the grounds that it is Jewish physics, that is, that Einstein's work was based upon inferior Semitic forms of thought. A superior approach is to be found in German physics, "I could have said Aryan physics, or physics of the Nordic type of peoples, physics of the probers of reality, of truth seekers, the physics of those who have founded scientific research."⁴ We rightly mock this sort of sentiment today. But in doing so, we implicitly nod at Einstein's argument concerning the power and meaning of scientific objectivity.

Hans Reichenbach

Einstein's first seminar on his general theory of relativity was held in 1919 at the University of Berlin and was attended by eight students. One of them was Hans Reichenbach. Originally trained as a civil engineer, he came to realize that his

real interests were more ephemeral, laying at the intersection of mathematics, physics, and philosophy. He turned his studies to the theoretical, learning from some of the greatest minds of history: Max Planck, David Hilbert, and Ernst Cassirer. He finished his doctoral dissertation on the foundations of probability theory in 1915.

As a newly minted doctor, before he could turn to the Academy, geopolitics intruded.

... the war broke out and I myself was a soldier for 2½ years. However, already at that time I viewed the war as a great tragedy and I have always felt since that scientific-minded people have the particular duty to fight the spirit which breeds such catastrophes for humanity.⁵

Reichenbach served on the Russian front in the army radio troops' signal corps until a serious lung illness (from which he would suffer after-effects for the rest of his life) led to his being stationed back in Berlin. There, he worked as a radio scientist while taking courses at the University. That led him to Einstein's classroom at a time when Einstein had not yet garnered international fame. The two would become friends and it would be a relationship that changed his life and changed philosophy.

Einstein's seminar had led Reichenbach to realize that the new relativity theory undermined Kant. This was during a period where the neo-Kantian movement led by Hermann Cohen and championed by Hermann von Helmholtz seemed to offer the most promising approach to understanding the new world being exposed by modern physics. But even that approach did not seem capable of handling the radical conceptual shift Einstein was demanding. The understanding of the universe that emerged from relativity theory was not only revolutionary for science, it exposed the need to completely rebuild the foundations of all human knowledge.

In his first two books, *The Theory of Relativity and A Priori Knowledge* and *An Axiomatization of the Theory of Relativity*, Reichenbach (working closely with Einstein) sought to set out the objective grounds on which one should rationally accept Einstein's work (remember that at this time, Einstein's views were not widely, much less universally held, even in the scientific community).

He accepted the Kantian challenge to the possibility of objectivity and modified the concept of the synthetic *a priori* into what Michael Friedman has called the "relativized *a priori*."⁶ Reichenbach agrees with Kant that there must be *a priori* categories that form the precondition for the possibility of experience, but instead of implanting these in the structure of the mind rendering

them necessary and unrevisable in light of evidence, they become theoretical presuppositions, that is, essential parts of specific scientific theories. The theory is an intertwined combination of elements that are theoretical and those that are empirical, and the empirical content makes a scientific theory objectively testable as a cohesive unit. The job of the philosopher of science is to separate out and make explicit the theoretical *a priori* elements from the empirical elements and thereby explicating the grounds on which a theory would be supported or undermined by observable evidence. So, we have a sort of theoretical holism that allows us to objectively assess the fit between theory (as a whole) and the world.

On the basis of this work, Einstein tried to get Reichenbach a position in the philosophy department at the University of Berlin. But two factors led to a strong denial. The first is that the department did not recognize philosophy of science, especially technical philosophy of physics, as philosophy. But the other reason is that Reichenbach earned a reputation at Berlin having been the leader of the University's Socialist Student Party, the author of their platform, and of their manifesto, *Socializing the University*. His leftist political activities made him philosophically radioactive in the period between the wars. Ultimately, Einstein pulled some strings and got Planck to create a chair in the foundation of physics in the physics department and appoint him there, where he stayed until Hitler's election to be Chancellor, at which time he fled to Turkey.

But in his time in Berlin, he was a subterranean political force. This aspect of Reichenbach is not usually stressed in the scholarly literature, partly because Reichenbach is read almost exclusively by analytic philosophers of physics only interested in his work on physics, but also because the route he took to political influence became indirect.

Reichenbach was, like Einstein, a non-Marxist socialist. He argues that while socio-economic class is certainly an explanatory factor in sociology and politics, the Marxist picture is grossly oversimplified. Humanity is simply more complex than Marx describes. From *Socializing the University*,

The materialist conception of history is the view that the evolution of spiritual and intellectual values is a direct function of economic conditions. Politicians who espouse its principles rest content with improving economic conditions, for they are convinced that a spiritual transformation then will follow and that battles for intellectual reform are therefore superfluous, serving merely to dissipate available forces. Their outlook begins with the fact that stratification of human beings according to their education and culture essentially

coincides with stratification according to their standard of living; and they seek to employ for the purposes of social reform the sociological law which gives the expression of this fact. That the existing state of affairs is as described must be conceded. However, exception must be taken to the way in which it is interpreted in historical materialism, for this sociological law has validity only as a proposition about average conditions. The intellectual and spiritual variety within each social stratum is so great that a poverty of intelligence and cultivation is encountered as frequently among the rich as cleverness and creativity among the poor.⁷

This is written in 1918, just three years after his dissertation on the foundations of probability.

To understand the connection, one must understand the place of probability in the physics of the time. Just before Einstein's revolutionary theories of relativity, the cutting edge of physics was statistical mechanics and the question of atomism. The notion of the atom was controversial in the scientific community because explaining observable behaviors on the basis of unobservable entities seemed not only unscientific in its reference to a metaphysical entity, but also impractical, because if atoms existed, there would be so many of them that we could never accurately describe their interactive behavior. The mathematics describing such a system would be beyond human capability.

But a generation or so before Einstein and Reichenbach, the work of Rudolf Clausius and Ludwig Boltzmann showed that we could build statistical models that described the behavior of gases in increasingly accurate and sophisticated ways. The deterministic equations we inherited from Newton had to be replaced with newly derived statistical methods that accounted for average kinetic energy and mean distance between collisions for large ensembles of particles. Before Reichenbach sought to give an epistemic foundation to relativity theory in 1920, he was seeking to give an epistemic foundation to this statistical approach to nature in 1915.

In a gas, you had particles moving at different speeds, in different directions, but it was their collective behaviors that gave us observable properties like temperature, pressure, and volume. In the same way, societies were comprised of people of different socio-economic class and different cultural and moral proclivities. Just as we could only speak of the macroscopic properties of a gas using statistical means, we would need to approach the sociological in the same way. In every socio-economic class, there would be those who could be elevated if given the proper boost. We can affect the system as a whole, by

effecting those human molecules who are given less than what they need from their socio-economic condition.

How can these individuals be affected? Education. But the formal means of education were controlled by the State and the bureaucracy of the institution, neither of which had an interest in the broader effect. So, Reichenbach decided he would need to find informal means of educating the public.

He had a background in radio, so he began there. He became a broadcast personality with a radio program where he explained the science of the day in layman's terms. Professors in Germany were figures of immense status and the image was of a staid, stuffy, arrogant intellectual above the rabble. But Reichenbach was described by his students as playful, laid-back, incredibly clear in his explanations of difficult ideas, and always having a gleam in his eye. This translated well to the airwaves. He filled a role much like Carl Sagan in the 1980s or Neil deGrasse Tyson today. In addition to radio, he wrote popular science articles for magazines and books aimed at a general audience. Bringing the objectivity of science to the populace was a political act. It was not only designed to be informational, it was designed to be transformational.

This side of Reichenbach is largely ignored because, again, he is generally considered by philosophical technicians doing technical philosophy. But it is also the case that, especially in the United States, this sort of popularizing is seen as "selling out," as not doing "real" work. The place and importance of the public intellectual has been greatly diminished. But for Reichenbach, it was the political work required of intellectuals if we were to avoid catastrophes like the Great War.

He had done his "serious" philosophy showing where the most important scientific theories of his day must be understood as giving us objective truth about the universe. But this was only half the job. We also needed to use that to improve society. In learning about the world, we can make the world better. He says so himself in his popular book *From Copernicus to Einstein*:

Why do we need to know whether the sun revolves around the earth or vice versa? What business of ours is it, anyway? Can this knowledge be of any use to us? No sooner have we asked these questions than we become aware of their foolishness. It may not be of any use to us, but we want to know something about these problems. We do not want to go blindly through the world. We desire more than mere existence. We need these cosmic perspectives in order to be able to experience a feeling for our place in the world. The ultimate questions

as to the meaning of our actions and as to the meaning of life in general always tend to involve astronomical problems.⁸

The objective truths of science give us an orientation towards the universe that shapes our notion of humanity and is essential for constructing a more perfect society.

Karl Popper

Sharing Reichenbach's politics and belief that objectivity and education in science was the key to overcoming class oppression and creating the social conditions for global peace after the Great War was Otto Neurath in Vienna. Where Reichenbach took his message to the airwaves and the popular press, Neurath focused on a different sort of educational medium—working people's science museums. Where Rosenzweig's approach to adult education was the lecture hall, and classroom and Reichenbach's engaged the media of leisure-time entertainment, Neurath sought to construct self-guided places of self-education.⁹

He knew that the language of science was mathematics and that the language was too intricate to teach to those with limited background. So, he sought a new means of mathematical communication. Instead of the formal symbolic language of equations, he would use pictures and graphs that could convey the quantitative relations to anyone. For this, he developed a pictorial language, isotype. When you look at the symbol for men and woman on a restroom door or see the symbols on a light at an intersection telling you when it safe or unsafe to cross, you are looking at Neurath's isotype.

Neurath was a founding member of the Vienna Circle of Logical Positivists, the Austrian outpost of the movement Reichenbach was launching in Berlin. The group included some of the most important intellectuals of the time, such as, Moritz Schlick, Rudolf Carnap, and Kurt Gödel. It was, however, very exclusive and one of the people it excluded was a younger Viennese scholar who would perhaps go onto be the most famous and influential of them, Karl Popper.

Popper was the son converted Jewish lawyer and was raised in what he described as a bookish environment. His father was politically active, engaged in social welfare projects that included opening a home for homeless families (one of its tenants briefly was the family of a young Adolf Hitler). This orientation toward the needy was one that Popper shared, describing himself as a

child as a “softy,” moved deeply by the poverty around him and having “fallen in love” in kindergarten with a girl who was blind.

Popper was the only of the figures discussed here who did not fight in the Great War. He was slightly too young, the war having begun on his twelfth birthday, but its effects on him were profound.

I was twelve, then, when the First World War broke out; and the war years, and their aftermath, were in every respect decisive for my intellectual development. They made me critical of accepted opinions, especially political opinions.¹⁰

He had been political in his youth, attracted to the political left because of its concern for the poor, but noticed to his dismay how those who seemed to share his pacifistic and social justice-based concerns in peacetime rapidly bought into the war furor.

Before the war, many members of our circle had discussed political theories which were decidedly pacifist, and at least highly critical of the existing order, and had been critical of the alliance between Austria and Germany, and of the expansionist policy of Austria in the Balkans, especially in Serbia. I was staggered by the fact that they could suddenly become supporters of that very policy.

Today I understand these things a little better. It was not only the pressure of public opinion; it was the problem of divided loyalties. And there was also fear—the fear of violent measures which, in war, have to be taken by the authorities against dissenters, since no sharp line can be drawn between dissent and treason. But at the time I was greatly puzzled.¹¹

What stayed with Popper was the way in which emotions could sway people away from reasoned positions, supported conclusions they had strongly attached themselves to intellectually before the influence of the passions drove them away from their own reasoning.

But Popper’s own emotions were also engaged by the war.

My mother still took us for our summer vacation to the Alps, and in 1916 we were again in the Salzkammergut—this time in Ischl, where we rented a little house high up on a wooded slope. With us was Freud’s sister, Rosa Graf, who was a friend of my parents. Her son Hermann, only five years my senior, came for a visit in uniform on his final leave before going to the front. Soon after came the news of

his death. The grief of his mother—and of his sister, Freud's favourite niece—was terrible. It made me realize the meaning of those frightful long lists of people killed, wounded and missing.¹²

Popper only indirectly experienced the catastrophe, but even as a teenager he recognized it for what it was and his thought, both that connected to his philosophy of science and his social-political thought was an integrated whole informed by the irrationality of those during the War and dedicated to eradicating the preconditions that made the War possible.

The problem, according to Popper, is ideology (ideology from any part of the political spectrum). When one is beholden to a worldview based on interest, emotion, or group membership, the resulting need to maintain it in the face of counter-evidence, what we now call “confirmation bias,” leads subjective desires to corrupt objective reasoning. And this undermines human social progress.

Only political power, when it is used to suppress free criticism, or when it fails to protect it, can impair the functioning of these institutions, on which all progress, scientific, technological, and political, ultimately depends.¹³

We can progress as a society and a species only when we allow objectivity to flourish. It is only when we are open to a free exchange of ideas and the ability to freely compare, evaluate, and criticize ideas in the search for objective truth that human flourishing and the avoidance of war is possible.

. . . civilization . . . is still in its infancy, and . . . continues to grow in spite of the fact that it has been betrayed by so many of the intellectual leaders of mankind. It attempts to show that this civilization has not yet fully recovered from the shock of its birth, the transition from the tribal or ‘closed society’, with its submission to magical forces, to the ‘open society’ which sets free the critical powers of man. It attempts to show that the shock of this transition is one of the factors that have made possible the rise of those reactionary movements which have tried, and still try, to overthrow civilization and to return to tribalism. And it suggests that what we call nowadays totalitarianism belongs to these movements, which are just as old or just as young as our civilization itself.¹⁴

Where Einstein sought to use science and scientific discourse as a template, as a model for political discourse, Popper takes the next step and equates them. The scientific method, the approach that gives science its objectivity is

not only like the sort of reasoning we need in the political realm. It is identical to it.

For Popper, the only statements (scientific, political, or otherwise) that are meaningful are those with testable empirical content. This is entirely independent of subjectivity.

. . . subjective experience, or a feeling of conviction, can never justify a scientific statement, and that within science it can play no part but that of an empirical (a psychological) inquiry. No matter how intense a feeling of conviction it may be, it can never justify a statement.¹⁵

Meaningful claims in science and politics must be objective.

. . . the word 'objective' indicate[s] that scientific knowledge should be *justifiable* independent of anybody's whim: a justification is 'objective' if in principle it can be tested and understood by anybody. . . . Now I hold that scientific theories are never fully justifiable or verifiable, but that they are nonetheless testable. I shall therefore say that the *objectivity* of scientific statements lies in the fact that they can be *inter-subjectively tested*.¹⁶

For Popper, the foundational insight is that, like Socrates, we know nothing. We can never be certain of anything. Certainty is the hallmark of ideology and thereby the bane of humanity. As humans, we are always and necessarily fallible. Everything we believe might be (and will eventually shown to be) wrong.

But that does not mean there are not rational beliefs. There are, but they require the ability to be shown to be wrong, falsifiability. A proposition is falsifiable (and therefore meaningful) if there is some observation that would (if observed) show the belief to be false. The bigger the set of potential falsifiers, the riskier the claim, the better it is and the higher the belief status when it successfully avoids falsification. A boxer can only become the reigning champion if he beats the current champ and all challengers. The more challengers he beats, the more ingrained he is as the champ. In the same way, the more challenges a proposition has and the more it successfully meets, the more we think it likely true. But these challenges, like prize fights held in public and televised around the world, are open to all.

The pseudoscientist and the totalitarian both proclaim "truths" that cannot be challenged. The connection of the Divine right of kings to earlier totalitarians and untestable race theory to the rising National Socialists of the time demonstrated for Popper the connection between science and politics.

The rejection of science and the yoking of human progress and the opening of human society in its ability to scientifically test propositions and human flourishing both show that the objectivity of science and human well-being and moral governance must be seen as inexorably intertwined.

SUBJECTIVITY AND THE RESTORATION OF HUMANITY

Max Scheler, in his book *On the Eternal in Man*, voiced a common view in the aftermath of the Great War. Humanity had conquered nature in its grasp of science and technology and congratulated itself on its wisdom, intelligence, and ingenuity. Humanity used this success as evidence of its superiority and then it turned around and used its advances to destroy itself.

The war, unlike all previous wars in history, was no longer within humanity, no longer in one of its sections. Humanity itself was in the war. . . . Humanity itself was suffering violence committed by humanity. . . . For it is in the whole of humanity itself and it *is* humanity itself, suffering the violence upon violence which it inflicts upon itself. Where is the whole, which when a part strayed into evil ways could lead the part back, teach it and educate it? Nowhere! For mankind has learned how to master everything *beneath* it—plants and animals, sunlight and all kinds of energy—but one thing alone it has not learned to master: *itself*.¹⁷

All of the knowledge of the world and the way it worked, all of the objective truth it had amassed, had the effect of turning humanity itself into an object. Objectivity was not the peak of humanity, it was the bane of humanity. Humans were stripped of their specialness, their privileged place as subjects of lived lives. In the still smoldering ruins of the war, the essential philosophical project was rehumanization.

Teetering on the edge of history between the hell of war behind and the uncertain future ahead, the subjective philosophers of catastrophe took up positions as front and rear guards. Franz Rosenzweig in the front sought to move humanity forward, to redeem humanity. Herbert Marcuse and the Frankfurt School protect the rear and sought to understand how to keep humanity from slipping backward into dehumanization.

Franz Rosenzweig

Franz Rosenzweig was raised in a secular Jewish house. His beloved cousins, like so many others, had converted and so he planned to join them. But he was under the sway of Hegelian philosophy which possesses a stepwise picture of history. Christianity is an essential development in world history, moving beyond the immaturity of Judaism's external imposed laws. If Rosenzweig was to fully realize himself, his personal journey should mirror that of the cosmos. He would thereby briefly embrace his Judaism on the way to his conversion so that he might be truly completed with his baptism.

But that step was never to be. Sitting in *erev* Yom Kippur services, he had a transcendental experience. He contacted his cousins. He would forever be Jewish.

His Judaism came into focus in the trenches of World War I. In the mud and the blood of the trenches, the rats and corpses emitting stench, with bombs and bullets actively seeking to rob him of his being, he realized that he had not only been abandoned, but betrayed by philosophy. Philosophy asserted the primacy of metaphysics. It was the soul that was real, the disembodied essence that was the source of all Being and knowledge. But in the trenches, wet, cold, and hungry, all concerns were diminished before the ever-present fear of death. It was the clinging to life of the living that was the real first truth.

. . . From death, it is from the fear of death that all cognition of the All begins. Philosophy has the audacity to cast off the fear of the earthly, to remove from death its poisonous sting, from Hades his pestilential breath. All that is mortal lives in this fear of death; every new birth multiplies the fear for a new reason, for it multiplies that which is mortal.¹⁸

The "All" is understood in Western philosophy as a metaphysical concept that must be approached objectively, external to the experiences of subject. But this embrace of the objective and rejection of the subjective is exactly the errant first step. Life and its living, that is, ethics, would have to replace the barren metaphysics of Western philosophy as the starting point and foundation of all discussion. It was failure to do so that led to the death and destruction of the war and his realization deep in its trenches was the primacy of the experience of the will of the individual to live in the moment, in the particular, for me to not get hit by that bullet. We strive to know the All, but can only do so from the perspective of our own life.

Standard Western philosophical metaphysics begins with the essence. For Plato, Aristotle, and Hegel, the essence is the eternal, the unchanging,

the perfect, the real. This is contrasted with the material, the ephemeral, the lived, the subjective. The search for the essence forces our eyes upward, into the blank heavens, away from meeting the eyes of the other. Metaphysics is the vain search for that which lays beyond life, thereby deflecting our eyes from life, from the real lived joy and suffering of actual human beings. In its yearning for the ultimate real, it forces us away from the actual. "The terms of life are not essential, but real. They concern not essence but fact."¹⁹

Truth emerges from the experience of the subject. In a letter to Martin Buber, quoted by Nahun Glatzer, Rosenzweig writes,

I readily believe that a Philosophy, to be adequate, must rise out of the thinking that is done from the personal standpoint of the thinker. To achieve being objective, the thinker must proceed boldly from his own subjective situation. The single condition imposed upon us by objectivity is that we survey the entire horizon; but we are not obliged to make this survey from any position other than the one in which we are, nor are we obliged to make it from no position at all. Our eyes are, indeed, only our own eyes; yet it would be folly to imagine we must pluck them out in order to see straight.²⁰

All thinking begins in the world, in life, in experience. But that experience is never atomistic. We live always and necessarily in the company of the other.

To gain insight into the ultimate truth, we should not turn to those who claim to seek it—the Western metaphysicians. Rather, the key to it may be found in the symbol of Judaism, the six-sided star of David. It is created by two interlocking triangles, one pointing up and one pointing down. Each represents different elements of the real.

The three vertices of the upward pointing triangle represent God, World, and Man. The three are necessarily interconnected and for Man to get to God, it must be through the mediation of the world. But this does not mean by understanding the world objectively. It is not a scientific investigation because the world is not furnished with mere things, but with others. We engage the world and thereby engage with God through our engagement with others in the world. It is by hearing the calling of the other, by responding to it with love. Just as we stand face-to-face with death, so too we must stand face-to-face with each other.

Where the upward pointing triangle is comprised of entities, the downward pointing triangle is the conceptual. Its vertices represent creation, revelation, and redemption. Creation is not merely God's construction of the world,

but is mirrored in the individual through the building of loving relations in community. The creation of such relationships forces the self out of its subjective bubble. But it is not toward objectivity, but toward a shared subjectivity, an inter-subjectivity, that gives an understanding of the world of another self. This multiplicity is a shock to the “I” and the relation to the other forces it to the realization, the revelation of the breadth of the world beyond itself. It recognizes its freedom and in embracing that freedom. It is through a choice of loving relations within its inter-subjective community that humans are capable of redemption.

The false idol of objectivity caused Western thought to subjugate ethics, the living of the human life, to cold metaphysics. This, as the Great War showed, is a path to ruin. Rosenzweig contended that we must put the ethical before the metaphysical (the essentialist), an ethical that emerges from the “we.” His contemporary Martin Buber put the relationship between I and Thou as primary, but Rosenzweig objects that it is not I and Thou as atomistic entities, but rather the creation of the we. This creation of community, of the subjective self-embedded within something larger than itself leads to revelation that allows it to relate to the we with love and care.

It is that that, in turn, placing the ethical before the metaphysical, elevating the subjective as central to existence, offers the sole possibility of human redemption after the horrors of World War I. For it is the subject who is able to encounter the divine direction. It is Rosenzweig’s demand that God not be rejected by enlightenment ideals that makes empiricists queasy, and it should. Their resistance to this language-game means Rosenzweig’s subject doesn’t own the conversation or even the imminent epistemology of the conversation.

Herbert Marcuse

Rosenzweig’s *Star of Redemption* not only paints the positive picture sketched above which seeks to provide the roadmap to human redemption, but at great length criticizes all elements of prior Western philosophy. The criticism is so withering that Rosenzweig saw himself as having no choice but to abandon the academic philosophical project. Human redemption required a spiritual element that would never be part of the purely intellectual process and so he launched a new sort of institutional project aimed at it: *Die Freie Jüdische Lehrhaus*, a new sort of college, a free institute of Jewish learning in Frankfurt. Lecturing there were some of the great minds of the Jewish world: Martin Buber, Gershom Sholem, and Leo Strauss among them.

Three years after the founding of the *Lehrhaus* in Frankfurt, a second intellectual academy opened in Frankfurt, *Die Institut für Sozialforschung*, known commonly as the Frankfurt School. Like Rosenzweig's, it was based around a project dedicated to the critique of Western thought and peopled by Jewish intellectuals. Some, like Erich Fromm worked at both. But the Frankfurt School had a different orientation, Marxist social criticism. Among its major figures were Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Herbert Marcuse.

Like Rosenzweig, Marcuse was in the German Army in the Great War; but unlike Rosenzweig, he avoided the trenches of the front, stationed safely in the horse stables of Berlin. Like Rosenzweig, he received his Ph.D. in philosophy at Freiburg. But where Rosenzweig was there before WWI and worked with the neo-Kantian Heinrich Rickert, the younger Marcuse studied there between the wars under Edmund Husserl and Rickert and Husserl's student, Martin Heidegger, becoming Heidegger's assistant until he joined the Nazi Party leading Marcuse to relocate to Frankfurt.

Marcuse, like Rosenzweig, was deeply affected by the war in a fashion that caused him to radically change his philosophical orientation away from Hegel and traditional metaphysics. But where this drove Rosenzweig back toward Judaism, it took Marcuse in the direction of social criticism. Both laid the blame for the destruction of culture and human wellbeing at the feet of the technologized society. Science and the technology it created were dehumanizing factors that allowed for the barbarism of the war. Rosenzweig aimed to lay out the path to redemption, where Marcuse sounded the alarm that the modernist forces that gave rise to the catastrophe were still very much active.

The crisis that made the Great War required a combination of a "Warfare state" and a "Welfare state" capable of mass dehumanization. The capacity for this was, in turn, based upon the ability of contemporary industrial society to penetrate the subjectivity of the individual and replace the mind of the true Self—the locus of authentic individual needs, interests, and desires—with false consciousness, that is, with implanted beliefs that no longer address the goals of the individual and, instead, focus on the needs, interests, and desires of the society itself.

Like a parasite, industrial society penetrates the consciousness of the individual and eliminates its negative capacity for thought, its ability to criticize the status quo, its ability to imagine alternative social structures and ways of life, its ability to project itself into the world in any fashion that is contrary to the interests of the State. The subjectivity of the subject, its own self-ness,

is supplanted with an internal orientation that makes the self the slave of the organized social structure without the ability to recognize or question is enslavement.

Introjection suggests a variety of relatively spontaneous processes by which a Self (Ego) transposes the 'outer' into the 'inner.' Thus, introjection implies the existence of an inner dimension distinguished from and even antagonistic to the external exigencies—an individual consciousness and an individual unconscious *apart from* public opinion and behavior. The idea of 'inner freedom' here has its reality: it designates the private space in which man may become and remain 'himself.'

Today, this private space has been invaded and whittled down by technological reality. Mass production and mass distribution claim the *entire* individual, and industrial psychology has long since ceased to be confined to the factory. The manifold processes of introjection seem to be ossified in almost mechanical reactions. The result is, not adjustment but *mimesis*: an immediate identification of the individual with *his* society and, through it, with the society as a whole.²¹

The quintessence of the individual is difference. To be who you are is to be unique, to have your own perspective, your own preferences, your own experiences. But in providing easy access to pleasure and embedding the individual with an all-encompassing mass media, self-knowledge is replaced with mimesis forcing the individual's own thoughts to mirror the interests of the modern industrial society.

The social structure provides the individual with an addictive mix of easy pleasure and propaganda focused on the belief that any consideration of alternative ways of organizing ourselves is a threat to the pleasures now enjoyed. This belief in social progress entails that anything that opposes it must be a threat to pleasant living. This becomes the essence of reason itself.

The impact of progress turns Reason into submission to the facts of life, and to the dynamic capability of producing more and bigger facts of the same sort of life. The efficiency of the system blunts the individual's recognition that it contains no facts which do not communicate the repressive power of the whole.²²

Since the imperative of serving the interests of industrial society is taken as the first principle of reason, science, that project seen as the epitome of reason and objectivity, also becomes corrupted.

The trend may be related to a development in scientific method: operationalism in the physical, behaviorism in the social sciences. The common feature is a total empiricism in the treatments of concepts; their meaning is restricted to the representation of particular operations and behavior . . . the radical empiricist onslaught thus provides the methodological justification for the debunking of the mind by the intellectuals—a positivism which, in its denial of the transcending elements of Reason, forms the academic counterpart of the socially required behavior.²³

Science provides the thoughts you are required to believe and these, then, provide justifications for the ways society forces you to act. As such, science becomes a weapon of modern industrial society's fight against true needs, against subjectivity, against authentic being.

The society bars a whole type of oppositional operations and behavior; consequently, the concepts pertaining to them are rendered illusory or meaningless. Historical transcendence appears as metaphysical transcendence, not acceptable to science and scientific thought. The operational and behavioral point of view, practiced as a 'habit of thought' at large, becomes the view of the established universe of discourse and action, needs and aspirations. The "cunning of Reason" works, as it so often did, in the interest of the powers that be. The insistence on operational and behavioral concepts turns against the efforts to free thought and behavior *from* the given reality and *for* the suppressed alternatives. Theoretical and practical Reason, academic and social behaviorism meet on common ground: that of an advanced society which makes scientific and technical progress into an instrument of domination.²⁴

Once dominated, the subjugated non-subjects become drones that self-enforce the needs of the technologized industrial society.

Now, it is precisely this new consciousness, this 'space within,' the space for transcending historical practice, which is being barred by a society in which subjects as well as objects constitute instrumentalities in a while that has its *raison d'être* in the accomplishments of its overpowering productivity.²⁵

If there is a threat to the society, the dehumanized subject becomes not only capable of atrocities, but atrocities become rational. With the loss of one's own subjectivity, replaced with the interests and needs of the structure, anything that threatens the structure, threatens the Self. To make sure that the

differential between the true interests of the Self and the false needs of the society do not come into focus within the mind of the individual, a constant threat level from an enemy (internal or, more often, external) forces the attention to constructed conflict with threatens to destroy the comfort produced by the technological state. In this way the welfare state also becomes a warfare state.

Free institutions compete with authoritarian ones in making the Enemy a deadly force *within* the system. And this deadly force stimulates growth and initiative, not by virtue of the magnitude and economic impact of the defensive 'sector,' but by virtue of the fact that the society as a whole becomes a defense society. For the Enemy is permanent. He is not in the emergency situation but in the normal state of affairs.²⁶

The construction of the warfare state forces reason to accept its presuppositions and in doing so what would otherwise be considered irrational becomes obvious and necessary.

. . . the insanity of the whole absolves the particular insanities and turns the crimes against humanity into a rational enterprise. When the people, aptly stimulated by the public and private authorities, prepare for lives of total mobilization, they are sensible not only because of the present Enemy, but also because of the investment and employment possibilities in industry and entertainment. Even the most insane calculations are rational: the annihilation of five million people is preferable to that of ten million, twenty million, and so on. It is hopeless to argue that a civilization which justifies its defense by such a calculus proclaims its own end.²⁷

War is a natural result, Marcuse argues, of the elimination of human subjectivity. When we embrace the objective, it not only smothers the subjective, but replaces it. The logic of the objective disregards the individual, seeing humans as mere cogs in the grueling and relentless process of maintaining itself. Human life becomes meaningless, satisfied by vapid pleasures and ready to support atrocities to maintain them. Rosenzweig argued in the shadow of the Great War that the rejection of the objective and embrace of the subjective are essential for the redemption of humanity through love, redemption required by the atrocities it committed; Marcuse contends that not following this path and allowing the objective to replace the subjective necessarily results in one-dimensional humans, incapable of seeing alternative, better ways of life and condemned to become mindless drones of a military-industrial culture

doomed to continue to commit such atrocities again and again, convinced of its own rightness in so doing.

A NEO-TALMUDIC PRESCRIPTION

The split between those who championed the objectivity of science and those who sought to undermine its centrality in the European worldview (which roughly maps onto the Continental and Analytic philosophy) has been a methodological and political schism that has dogged the discipline for a century. What has been argued here, and sadly overlooked by those on all sides, is that both of these movements arise out of the concern to heal the world after the cancer of the Great War.

While they stem from a common desire, they differ. There is no denying that fact. The Continental subjectivist approach lays the dehumanization necessary for the War at the feet of the objectivity of science. By objectifying people, removing their humanity and turning them into mere bodies, they are denied the dignity that accompanies the meaningfulness of the lived experience. The Analytic objectivist approach, on the other hand, sees flawed political presuppositions that draw artificial lines that meaninglessly separate people from each other and facilitates the framing of false narratives of us vs. them which cause otherwise rational people to form frenzied mobs seeking to employ violence against those they wrongly see as different. The key to avoiding future war and allowing for human flourishing, the Continentals argue, requires embracing dialogic subjectivity and rejecting objectivity. The Analytics argue the converse.

The Hellenic-Christian intellectual tradition gives us two options in such a situation: logical or dialectic. The former holds that of the competitors one and only one must be the case. The latter contends that we need a synthesis, some Hegelian combination or Aristotelian middle-path resulting in a single unified approach that incorporates the strengths of each to compensate for the weaknesses of the other, that is, a sort of intellectual group hug, a conceptual kumbaya moment. But the Jewish intellectual tradition offers a third way, a different approach to this pair of conflicting views. In the Talmudic tradition, insight from diverse interpretations and distinct methodologies is unproblematic. It is the unceasing discussion, pilpul-like movement, that is of importance. The need to either settle the dispute or broker a compromise robs us of the

valid insights that both provide and thus this approach necessitates an open-ended pilpul process of always becoming, a give and take that never finds home in “truth.”

Talmudic thought begins from a fixed point, Halakhic law. No one questions the legitimacy of the halakha. But the law itself is general and requires interpretation in the multifaceted complexity of the real world full of lived lives and unforeseen contexts. This intricacy leads to a multiplicity of interpretations by wise sages. The passionate discourse around the different answers and reasonings generates wisdom. And it is this wisdom, not some artificial ceasing of disagreement that is important.

This epistemic approach may be generalized into what we term “neo-Talmudic thought” using the Talmudic approach as a template, but replacing the fixed point. Any text or conceptual presuppositions may be selected as a fixed point. The goal of neo-Talmudic discourse is to wring wisdom from the multiple perspectives of a wide range of interpreters, each contributing insights that would not be gotten from other treatments.

This, we contend, is how one should treat the four figures engaged here. The fixed point is the avoidance of war in the shadow of the Great War and the move toward human flourishing. All four share a complete commitment to this. But just as we may glean insights from both the treatments of Hillel and Shammai, so, too, we should approach the question of subjectivity and objectivity in relation to society. Rather than discounting any of these great scholars, we must find the wisdom contained within their disparate treatments. It is from the ceaseless discussion of this question, how shall we arrange ourselves to maximize human well-being, that we may begin to find the wisdom that may lead to real flourishing. Nevertheless, we admit we do not see able discussion or dialogic engagement between these two camps.

This lack of relation between the two directions must be sustained for each language-game is able to do what these thinkers were aspiring to do, resist fascism. Here is where we find the connection between these camps, not in how they philosophize, but in what is driving them to philosophize. Hope. Hope is realized when resisting dehumanization. Each approach is needed. One may get drunk on subjectivity and confuse it for objectivity. The empiricists help us avoid such drunkenness while risking or confusing their resistance with having truth. Dialogic epistemology worries about belonging and hospitality and response for the other. Simply, like the Derash method, dialogic philosophy ushers in a narrative approach to philosophy. Like the Peshat method, the empiricists worry that narrative produces unhinged dreams capable of wreaking

havoc on our understanding by confusing desirable falsity for difficult truth. Like Peshat, the empiricists demand we stick to the context, the language, the facts so to speak, and stop changing the context by adding imported meaning to the text, meaning that robs the text of its actual context and thereby its content. Each method demands human honesty that gets lost without the other method, not because they go together, but because they will never go together. It is this unending conflict that creates the preconditions for resisting the sort of conflict that leads to the mass murder of WW1. The avoidance of destructive conflict is not based upon finding stable harmony, but rather upon the sort of constructive conflict we find in Talmudic thought. Safety comes not from reconciliation, but continued conversation from a multiplicity of perspectives.

Notes

1. We do not limit our definition of “Jewish Philosopher” to those who philosophize from Judaism, but intentionally employ a broader sense that also includes those who were socially-shaped by having been Jewish, rather than just those coming out of, directly influenced by, or responding to Jewish intellectual traditions.
2. Steven Gimbel and Stephen Stern, “Einstein’s Jewish Science,” *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 10, no. 3 (2010): 25.
3. Albert Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions* (New York: Crown, 1954), 83.
4. Phillip Lenard, “German Physics,” in *Physics and National Socialism: An Anthology of Primary Sources*, ed. Klaus Hentschel (Basel: Birkhauser, 1996), 100.
5. Hans Reichenbach, *Selected Writings, 1909–1953*, ed. Maria Reichenbach and Robert Cohen (Boston: D. Reidel, 1978), 2.
6. Michael Friedman, *Reconsidering Logical Positivism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 68.
7. Reichenbach, *Selected Writings*, 140.
8. Hans Reichenbach, *From Copernicus to Einstein* (New York: Dover, 1942), 11.
9. Elisabeth Nemeth and Friedrich Stadler. *Encyclopedia and Utopia: The Life and Work of Otto Neurath* (Boston: Kluwer, 1996).
10. Karl Popper, *The Unended Quest: An Intellectual Autobiography* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 9.
11. *Ibid.*, 9–10.
12. *Ibid.*, 11.
13. Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London: Routledge, 1945), 2:206.
14. *Ibid.*, v.1, 1.
15. Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (New York: Basic, 1958), 46.
16. *Ibid.*, 44.
17. Max Scheler, *On the Eternal in Man* (London: SCM Press, 1960), 109.
18. Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 9.
19. Franz Rosenzweig, *Understanding the Sick and the Healthy: A View of World, Man, and God*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.
20. Nahum Glatzer, *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought* (New York: Schocken, 1953), 179.
21. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon, 1964), 10.
22. *Ibid.*, 11.
23. *Ibid.*, 12–13.
24. *Ibid.*, 15–16.
25. *Ibid.*, 23.
26. *Ibid.*, 52.
27. *Ibid.*

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