

# Franz Rosenzweig's Critique of Traditional Philosophy as 'Sick' and Rosenzweig's Proposal for a 'Healthier' Philosophy

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## **Abstract**

In this essay, I will argue why Rosenzweig believes that traditional philosophy's way of thinking or method will lead to an unsuccessful or 'sick' human life. By traditional philosophy, Rosenzweig is basically referring to the old method of enquiry, whereby philosophers prioritise the 'essence' of things as meaningful. First, I will discuss Rosenzweig's idea of what a healthy philosophy is. Rosenzweig's image of a healthy philosophy is one where we do not let our wonder hold us back; this is what past philosophers mistake for Rosenzweig. To wonder in itself is not wrong, but it is wrong or 'sick' to be paralysed in wonder - instead we need to allow life itself to dissolve the wonder for us otherwise one becomes 'paralysed' in wonder. Secondly, I will discuss Rosenzweig's critique on traditional philosophy's misguided approach to life. It is misguided because they reject 'death' as a part of life. Here, I will argue that although thinkers such as Montaigne do accept death, Montaigne does so in such a way as to fight it, which for Rosenzweig is still rejecting death. Lastly, I argue that Rosenzweig's task is not to abolish philosophy but rather, to open up a new way of philosophising that does not take an objective and disinterested stance to the problems in life.

**Keywords:** Rosenzweig, Traditional Philosophy, Healthier Philosophy

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**Essay**

To understand what Rosenzweig held to be a successful and healthy philosophy, it is important to know what he would call an 'unsuccessful' or 'sick' philosophy. According to Putnam (2008, p. 17), Rosenzweig's aim in *Understanding the Sick and the Healthy* (1999) is to show the absurdity of traditional philosophy – more specifically, the “illusion that philosophy can deliver knowledge of ‘essences’”. So for Rosenzweig, traditional philosophy is unsuccessful because it rejects reality as mere appearance and instead, searches for what lies beyond or what actually is, rather than just living life as it is experienced in our everyday lives. In this essay, I shall explain and assess Rosenzweig's diagnosis of “*apoplexia philosophica*” in more detail (1999, p. 59), as it will be crucial to understanding successful philosophy – i.e. philosophy that is not paralysed by wonder. In my view, one crucial point about understanding Rosenzweig's approach is that he does not aim to satisfy his readers by argumentatively proving or convincing us that his image of the successful philosophy is the right one. Rather, he invites us to experience his image of a successful philosophy whilst using irony to show the absurdity of the past traditional philosophical method. To show this, I will mention Rosenzweig's view on death as a part of life. He also makes mention of language and its role in revealing to us the proper understanding of reality, which I find convincing and in the following I will show why. Lastly, despite the overt theological import in his work, I will show that his philosophy can be made accessible to secular scholars.

First of all, why is traditional philosophy unsuccessful? What is it failing to capture? For Rosenzweig (1999, p. 40), the answer is that traditional philosophers detach or distance themselves from the “continuous stream of life” and this is caused by their stubborn desire to remain in wonder – i.e. to remain in a state of contemplation. In short, traditional philosophy makes one numb to life. Now Rosenzweig (1999) argues that wonder can happen to anyone. For example, a child may wonder about adulthood but once he becomes an adult, the wonder is extinguished. So it is evident that Rosenzweig does not think of wonder as being unsuccessful, but rather that life itself will cure us of our wonder. However, the philosopher is too impatient to let life dissolve the wonder for him – he wants to dissolve the wonder in his own way (Rosenzweig, 1999). As a result, the philosopher desperately searches for the essence of things, specifically of reality. But why is that so wrong or so 'unsuccessful' for Rosenzweig? It could be argued that since we have a capacity

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for self-reflection, we ought to use it to understand our experience and our relationship with our experiences so that we may achieve a better understanding of our role in life, thus making it successful.

The problem for Rosenzweig is that philosophers such as Hegel or even Kant put too much emphasis on using the faculty of thought to understand reality as a whole (Mack, 2003). According to Rosenzweig, the idea of understanding our experiences as pure thought is really the philosopher's attempt to escape death. In other words, what is unknowable cannot be in existence and since death is unknowable, death therefore does not exist. So, the search for essence and immersion in wonder ultimately stems from a fear of death (Gibbs, 1992). However, why does the search for essence out of a fear of death make philosophy unhealthy and unsuccessful? For Rosenzweig such an attempt is unsuccessful and even absurd because it is circular. By asking for the essence, the answer will always be "whatever it is, it is not what it appears to be" (Rosenzweig, 1999, p. 66). Of course, what it appears to be is "the world" but then we are directed back to the original question: what is the *essence* of our world? (Rosenzweig, 1999, p. 66). Indeed, it would seem that the philosophical movement is redundant because it does not further our understanding of the world and our place in it as the method results in a tautology. To put it in Rosenzweig's words, the philosopher who searches for the essence becomes stuck in a state of "paralysis" (Rosenzweig, 1999, p. 40).

Secondly, on the subject of death Rosenzweig (1999, p. 103) contends that death "is the ultimate verification of life, that to live means to die". In Cohen's reading of Rosenzweig, we see that traditional philosophy fails because it does not accept the fact of our death. Traditional philosophy does not want "[to] face the fearful and bleak realities of mortality" (Cohen, 1994, p. 70). Should we accept Cohen's reading for Rosenzweig, if we rid death from reality then we would not be able to recognise the value of life. Indeed, I argue in favour of Rosenzweig, the fact that the past philosophers even pursue essence in hope of escaping death already presupposes a value in life. It is exactly the fact of our death that the philosophers are so eager to reject, which actually makes the experience of living valuable. So, not only is traditional philosophy fearful of death but it also strives for a 'death-free' life.

An alternative position however can be observed in Montaigne, who contends that philosophy should help us to prepare for death. Montaigne (1877) argues that the ancient Greek philosophers were wrong for trying to solve the problem of death by annulling it. Rather, we should “learn bravely to stand our ground, and fight [death]...disarm [death] of his novelty and strangeness...converse and be familiar with [death]”. Although it seems that Montaigne avoids past traditional philosophy's mistake of escaping death, it is arguable that he is still subject to Rosenzweig's criticisms. This is because Rosenzweig wants to *acknowledge* death as a part of life, as opposed to fighting it off like Montaigne. However, it is also arguable to say that if one has fought off death, one has already acknowledged death. So although it seems that the argument at this point is equivocal, what I want to draw from this is that philosophy can actually help embrace both death and life. In agreement with Putnam (2008, p. 30), Rosenzweig is not “anti-philosophical” but rather he is trying to set philosophy back on the correct path – that is, to embrace death as a part of life.

Thirdly, it is necessary to discuss Rosenzweig's account on the understanding of the self and its relations. Nietzsche's account on the self, according to Rosenzweig, manages to escape Hegel's mistake of trying to “comprehend all of being through thought”. That is, Nietzsche does not start from the assumption of an objective truth, but rather from the subjective individual (Cohen, 1994, p. 70). However, Rosenzweig argues that Nietzsche's attempt is insufficient and that his paganism is “inferior to the revealed religious alternative offered by Christianity and Judaism” (Cohen, 1994, p. 70). What Rosenzweig means is that although Nietzsche's subjectivity of the ‘I’ can overcome Hegel's abstracted ‘self’, it is however too self-obsessed since it pays no attention or more specifically “love”, to the ‘thou’ or ‘you’ (the neighbour) (Cohen, 1994, p. 77). Furthermore, Rosenzweig argues that Nietzsche's ‘I’ deceives itself into thinking that the ‘self’ can ‘create’ its own life when really life is already created for them and is there for them to experience (Cohen, 1994). Of course, it would seem that Rosenzweig's account at this point is largely based on the Abrahamic religions, thus making it non-accessible for everyone.

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Having said that, I think that what everyone can take from his account is his consideration of *relations*. Life's disposition seems to already compel us to live in a community – for example, the fact that we are able to speak our opinions or have a voice already implies that we are not supposed to live in isolation. In fact, Rosenzweig goes further by examining the peculiarity of 'language'. Rosenzweig argues that life becomes unsuccessful when we are viewing reality with "inappropriate conceptual pictures" (Putnam, 2008, pp. 10-11). He argues that the patient (i.e. the traditional philosophers) "stubbornly [stares] at whichever peak happens to be visible at the moment" or that they do not see the "peaks" clearly enough due to "clouds" (Rosenzweig, 1999, p. 60). Rosenzweig's use of metaphorical image is by no means used to confuse us - the three peaks simply refer to the "irreducibly fractured reality": 'God, Man and the World' (Cohen, 1994, p. 46). To further explain this, Rosenzweig simply means that we should never separate these three 'peaks', only seeing one of them as our reality. Rather, for him all three are fundamental elements of our reality.

So, Rosenzweig (1999) argues in order for philosophy to be 'healthy', one should not endeavour to reduce reality to either of the three 'peaks' or try to know reality as either of these elements in isolation but rather, just to simply acknowledge and experience reality as having these three separate elements. For Rosenzweig, not only are these three elements irreducible and separate but they are also interrelated. The three elements are related in this way: The 'world' is related to God because God created the 'world'. 'Man' on the other hand, stands in a relation of 'revelation' with God, for He reveals His love for us (Cohen, 1994). Lastly, "man's relation to the world and to his fellow man is redemption" (Cohen, 1994, p. 46). So what Rosenzweig wants to say is that we need to have a proper understanding of ourselves and of our relation to those around us; for Rosenzweig, we need to acknowledge life as having an inherent demand that we communicate God's revelation of love with one another.

From what we have said thus far, it could be claimed that Rosenzweig is anti-philosophical and he also does not seem to provide sufficient evidence on why his paradoxical view on life is not absurd like that of the philosophical. First of all, I think that even to demand evidence for Rosenzweig's account of the successful philosophy already shows that one has completely misunderstood him.

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Secondly, following Putnam (2008), Rosenzweig is not necessarily anti-philosophical, but rather contends for a new direction for philosophy. One would be mistaken in desiring such evidence of Rosenzweig's work, precisely because such evidence would be to support the kind of philosophical schema that Rosenzweig made so central to his critique of Idealism/traditional philosophy. So what is this 'new direction' for Rosenzweig? From my reading of Rosenzweig's text, I firmly argue that he is seeking to put forward a philosophy that acknowledges life *and death*, or of reality as it is, without the complications of finding 'essences'. In other words, he demands that we merely live life, as it is. As Rosenzweig (1999, p. 105) himself states in the epilogue to the "expert" (philosopher), that "nothing new [will be added to his] knowledge...that [he] would depart unrewarded". It is clear then, that Rosenzweig is putting forward a movement that involves a phenomenological observation of human experience, as opposed to knowledge (Putnam, 2008). More specifically, Rosenzweig wants to focus on our use of language, as for him, that is where the image of the successful philosophy is most 'revealed'.

Language for Rosenzweig (1999, pp. 70-71) is very peculiar in the sense that it is external to us, yet we use it every day to communicate; not only that but it also draws the "world" into the "stream" of life. What Rosenzweig means is that language is innate in the flow of life – he argues that the successful life is one in which the subject realises that he is created and put in the world by God, and that language enables man to communicate with God and with others. Rosenzweig (1999, p. 73) contends that the word of God cannot be spoken (or recorded) for nobody – there must be a listener. Just as God's word is meant for us, similarly whenever we speak "it implies the presence of the speaker and someone to whom his speech is addressed". The problem with the unsuccessful life is that it stops in the flow of life and begins to question everything, even the language. Rosenzweig (1999) mockingly writes that the previous philosophers cannot even buy a piece of butter without worrying over the certainty of those names (Rosenzweig, 1999, p. 39). What Rosenzweig (1999) wants us to take from this is that we should put our trust in God, that He will sustain the names we have assigned to the world. Of course, the immediate objection seems to be: 'how can we just suddenly put trust in God?' or 'is there even a God in whom to put our trust?' It would seem that either one would have already to be a religious person in order to experience life or if not religious, then one can never experience life.

To such objections, I would argue that regardless of faith, communication is a part of everyone's life and therefore, no one can ever be excluded. Even the traditional philosopher, who equates thought with being cannot deny that their thinking is confined to the realm of language, for one thinks with language. Language would seem redundant if it were not used as a means of communication. The important thing to take away from Rosenzweig's account is to trust in the experiences of life and that someday, one's wonder would be dissolved by life. Of course, there is no guarantee that our trust is the absolutely right thing to do, but such uncertainty is just part of what it means to live. Perhaps life is just paradoxical and that if we are truly to live, then we must embrace this aspect of it, with which our reasoning is of course unhappy. It is also important to see that there is a progress of our trust in names and language as Rosenzweig (1999, p. 74) writes that every time we speak about the world, we speak of a world that belongs both to the creator (God) and the created (Man), and that the world is "realised" when it becomes the world of God and Man - "every word spoken within its confines furthers this end". Although this reply seems very unsatisfying, we must understand that Rosenzweig is not trying to prove anything. As Amir (Amir et al. 2012, p. 48) points out, Rosenzweig is trying to remind its readers of their "basic experience and cognition", as opposed to giving knowledge on how to live. Rosenzweig simply demands that we live.

To conclude, I find Rosenzweig's conception of a successful philosophy convincing. That such an argument is convincing can be found in Rosenzweig's claim that the philosophical movement does take us away from life, by attempting to get rid of death. It is important to see that life is not as a puzzle to be solved but to be lived and experienced. As mentioned earlier, death is simply a part of life – if one wants to live, then one cannot be separated from death. Death as I see it also makes the notion of living valuable. However, Rosenzweig's account of 'relation', as a part of the successful life, could be unconvincing in the respect that he turns to religion. Nor does he seem to give concrete evidence to support why the religious life is not absurd like that of the philosophical. However, as I have shown above, it is not necessary for us to rely on theism for the basis of his claims, as Rosenzweig's elucidation of the phenomenon of language testifies. His idea of revelation in language or trust is indeed one that is worthy of consideration. This is because

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language, as Rosenzweig argues, serves as a bridge between the three fundamental elements of life: World, Man and God. Language itself already presupposes a speaker and a listener, that is, a relation. If we cannot even trust this basic and fundamental capacity, as previous traditional philosophy seems to contend, then we simply cannot live. However, if that is the case, then it does not make sense as to why we speak and the whole point of having a language becomes meaningless. Having said that, I argue that Rosenzweig's task is not abolishing philosophy but rather, he attempts to revise its method of enquiry, in the sense of paving a new way of philosophising that does not become paralysed in wonder and is able to trust that life will dissolve the wonder.

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