

An Occasional Thought after the System: Rosenzweig's 'Apologetic Thinking' Revisited

This paper will serve, I hope, as a springboard into a larger project on the nature of Jewish philosophy, especially the widely observed tension between philosophical universalism and Jewish particularism. This tension prompts an array of responses. These range from arguments that would resolve the tension by developing a universalistic side of Judaism to arguments that would reject the tension by demonstrating how philosophy's own pretense to universalism is itself incurably particularistic. My approach differs somewhat. Philosophical universalism, it seems to me all of these arguments assume, constitutes an attack to which Jewish philosophy must respond, but also to which, I take it, Jewish philosophy can only respond apologetically, since any thinking whose theme is determined by an attack is necessarily apologetic. So, whether it defends or denies particularism, Jewish philosophy cannot avoid the charge about its apologetic character. I not only accept this charge, but even make this vulnerable point the centre of my reflections. The recommendation to do so comes from Franz Rosenzweig's essay "Apologetic Thinking," which he published in response to two contemporaneous examples of Jewish philosophy's fundamentally apologetic tendency, Max Brod's *Paganism-Christianity-Judaism* and Leo Baeck's *The Essence of Judaism*. This "Aufsätzchen" or "little essay,"¹ as Rosenzweig called it, is in form and content no more than a book review. Yet, in it, Rosenzweig not only describes convincingly the overarching problem that motivates my project, but also points to some criteria in terms of which an appropriate response might be established. These criteria can be developed, I believe, specifically from Rosenzweig's account of the connection, on the one hand, between the individual's innermost essence and her outermost life, and, on the other hand, between the individual's innermost essence and the innermost essence of every other human being. The position which I ultimately plan to draw out of "Apologetic Thinking" and to defend against some other current proposals about what Jewish philosophy can and should be in the context of contemporary multiculturalism is perhaps

¹ This is how Rosenzweig describes "Apologetic Thinking" to Leo Baeck.

best, if inelegantly, described as an anti-exclusivist-essentialism. Time permitting (which has always sounded to me like the secularized version of “God willing”), I’ll get to say a few words about this view at the conclusion of my paper.

That I begin my reflections on Jewish philosophy with Rosenzweig should, it might be thought, require no justification, least of all in this context. For it is often said, and even more often repeated, that Rosenzweig is the greatest modern Jewish philosopher. Logically, of course, nothing could be repeated more often than it is said, since to repeat something is to say it again, hence always at least once more than the first statement. But, although a logical impossibility, the sentiment reflects an everyday reality, namely, that statements originally said thoughtfully are frequently repeated mindlessly. Hence Rosenzweig’s subtle joke in the opening lines of “Apologetic Thinking:” the only statements repeated even more often than said are dogmas – which, as Jews dogmatically and mistakenly repeat, Judaism has none. Jewish philosophers, I suppose, have even fewer dogmas still. Nevertheless, there exists a methodological prejudice according to which my inquiry into Rosenzweig’s understanding of Jewish philosophy should be guided not by an occasional book review, but rather by his system of philosophy, the *Star of Redemption*, the work on which his eminence among Jewish philosophers rests if not exclusively, then overwhelmingly. Indeed, without the *Star*, it is most unlikely that I would even know of “Apologetic Thinking,” let alone propose to feature it in my wide-reaching reflections on Jewish philosophy. Yet, as we’ll see, the argument of “Apologetic Thinking” encourages us to wonder not only about the superiority of systematic to occasional thinking, but also about the appropriateness of systematic thinking as the mode and model of a reflection on Jewish philosophy.

Now, although Rosenzweig’s essay itself provides me with a theoretical justification for privileging this occasional book review over his philosophical system, its claim that an accusation determines in each case the theme of apologetic thinking recommends also that I clarify the external factor that has led me to revisit Rosenzweig’s interpretation of the advantages and limits that have historically defined Jewish philosophy. My

questions would not have taken their current direction without the publication of Benjamin Pollock's *Franz Rosenzweig and the Systematic Task of Philosophy*.

Even a few years ago a distinction between the “systematic” and the “occasional” – let alone a distinction between the “systematic” and “apologetic” – would hardly have impressed me or, I assume, anyone else as corresponding to fundamentally different standpoints that Rosenzweig adopts in his major and minor works. To be sure, just as today, so then too, everyone agreed that the *Star* is his magnum opus and that none of his other texts matches its philosophical breadth and depth. But, a few years ago, everyone also agreed that Rosenzweig belongs in the camp of the existentialists who, in their commitment to the engaged and embedded nature of thought, oppose the occasion-less, once-and-for-all-time standpoint that the great system builders at once adopt as their ideal and present as their achievement. Moreover, the incredible story of the wider social and personal conditions in which the *Star* was composed rarely goes untold in the secondary literature.² The *Star*, according to this previously uncontested view, is an occasional book that itself champions the situational nature of authentic human thinking. So, if in the past one spoke of Rosenzweig's “system,” then this term was likely being used casually as a synonym for any sort of philosophical project, program, agenda, or set of commitments.

Meanwhile, Pollock has forced us not only to take more seriously the importance of “system” for Rosenzweig, but also to understand the term much more strictly. Rosenzweig, we are shown, means by a “system of philosophy” the complete articulation and realization of the identity and difference of all that exists, and in understanding “system” thusly he intends to fulfill the ambitions of the German Idealists who are his nearest philosophical kin, albeit also therefore his primary philosophical targets. Rosenzweig, according to Pollock, therefore composes a system of philosophy that, as Hegel and Schelling promised but couldn't deliver, grasps *all* beings both in their unity as constituents of a single, common reality and in their diversity as distinct, individual beings. This claim, meticulously and compellingly documented in Pollock's

² Rosenzweig on “war books” and the possibility that the *Star* itself is such a book.

study of Rosenzweig's thought both leading up to and in the *Star*, challenges the prevailing scholarly view that regards Rosenzweig as a philosopher fundamentally opposed to systematic thinking. It also entails, however, that in form as well as in content the systematic nature of Rosenzweig's magnum opus – itself, more of a *summa theologica* than a חיבור גדול – stands in conflict with the occasional character of his subsequent book review. Does Rosenzweig, just a few years after the *Star*'s completion, turn from systematic thinking that grasps the All to a thinking that only responds to this or that occasion? When we regard the *Star* retrospectively in the light of "Apologetic Thinking," are we to conclude that Rosenzweig's system is fundamentally *not* a Jewish book? Or, is it instead the first non-apologetic, Jewish philosophical system? And, if it is, should it also be the last of its kind?

These are the questions that I've been occasioned to ask by Pollock's book, which certainly deserves more attention than I can give it here. I must be selective, and therefore also careful not to misrepresent his detailed and integrative interpretation of the *Star*. In fact, I might have already done so. By implying a seemingly absolute distinction between situated and situation-less thinking, I have obscured precisely the point at which, according to Pollock, Rosenzweig improves on the earlier systems of the German Idealists who too-hastily adopt an Absolute standpoint that cannot preserve the individual perspective of the time-bound and death-fated human being. Rosenzweig recognizes, in other words, that the task of system could not yet have been realized by Hegel or Schelling since the individual's perspective remains irreconcilable within their accounts of the All and thus makes their systems susceptible to charges of one-sidedness. Pollock's interpretation accordingly highlights this point at which Rosenzweig's system diverges from those of his forebears, labeling it "system as quintessentially human knowledge." The phrase reflects a commitment to the view that humans cannot rise beyond the limits of their finitude to the standpoint of the Absolute; but it also means to suggest, I believe, that no other knowledge surpasses the comprehensive grasp achieved with the completed system. System is at once paradigmatically human and paradigmatic knowledge.

Pollock's defense of the claim that for Rosenzweig systematic thinking never transcends the condition of human finitude is staunchest and consequently also most strained when he inquires about Rosenzweig's own position, as author of the *Star*, in relation to the Jewish and Christian liturgical communities within which and from out of which a vision of the redemptive unity of the All is granted to human beings – that is, exactly in the section of the *Star* which I might have alternatively focused my own inquiry into Rosenzweig's understanding of Jewish philosophy. The vision provided by each community's liturgical calendar could not be identical with that provided by the other's, since then one of them would be redundant within the system. But, if different, then neither of these supposedly synoptic visions could be more than partial, an inference that must make us wonder whether, according to Rosenzweig, an ultimate and direct vision that fulfills the system's promise of a complete redemptive unity is ever granted to a human being, and, if it is, when and to whom.

Pollock explains tentatively Rosenzweig's answer to this difficult question, which arises, as his step-by-step interpretation of the *Star* shows, from the system's inner logic. Pollock proposes:

“as a possibility – and only as a possibility – that Rosenzweig understands his own capacity for an immediate vision of the unity of the All...to be rooted in his unique ability to stand ‘beyond life’ and see from a standpoint that is Jewish and Christian at once. From this standpoint, Rosenzweig – and the few Jews and Christians like him – sees the unity of the star in its wholeness and immediacy which is otherwise seen in partial, mirrored form within the Jewish and Christian liturgical communities.”

But lest one infer from this conjecture about Rosenzweig's rare visionary capacity that here Pollock contradicts his own account of “system as quintessentially human knowledge,” I must also cite his summary of the full course of his interpretation:

“The first chapters of this study showed how Rosenzweig embarked on a quest for systematic knowledge which eschewed the Absolute standpoint of the German Idealists and thereby came to articulate a conception of system as quintessentially human knowledge. The completion of that knowledge in vision at the end of the

Star well takes Rosenzweig to the very ‘limit’ of the human standpoint – to a ‘beyond life in life,’ to a ‘beyond-world in the world itself.’ But the divine face seen in this immediate vision at once directs him back from this limit to consider his own face; and it directs him back to the place and the time he occupies ‘in the middle of life.’ To recognize what one sees immediately in the star-figured unity of the All...as nothing other than the same truth which one ‘perceives in the middle of life,’ one may suggest, is to recognize the fundamental link between one’s awakening to free selfhood in the middle of the All and the ultimate unity of the All which will be in the redemptive future.”

Rosenzweig, in other words, ultimately achieves a standpoint beyond Judaism and Christianity, but not a standpoint that eradicates the distinction between the finite human self and the infinite divine other, and thus even at its culmination Rosenzweig’s system remains, Pollock implies, quintessential but nevertheless “mere” *human* knowledge.

In the rest of my paper, I want to ask specifically how this view of quintessentially human knowledge compares with the kind of apologetic thinking that Rosenzweig describes admiringly at the conclusion of his little essay. More specifically still, I want to try to explain the alternative way in which apologetic thinking understands the task of grasping the identity of identity and difference that systematic thinking takes as its goal. To answer these questions, I look more closely at the form as well as the content of “Apologetic Thinking.”

First its form. I’ve already described it as a book review. That characterization is obvious enough since in it Rosenzweig reviews books by Brod and Baeck. But, as a literary genre, the book review can take diverse shapes. The shorter variety offers little beyond a summary, while the more expansive kind engages critically with a book’s details. In a third type, which one might find today in *The New York Review of Books*, for instance, multiple books related to each other thematically are often reviewed together and so the reviewer takes it as her task to frame – typically in the introduction and conclusion – their common theme in general terms, that is, beyond the terms proposed specifically by any of the books under consideration. So, although

the author's reflections are occasioned by the publication of specific books, these reflections respond to the occasion by trying to situate the books within broader cultural trajectories and intellectual currents. Here, then, the book review as a literary genre reaches its limit: the author's analyses and meditations exceed the books that occasion them without however becoming entirely independent of their occasional origins in the these new publications. "Apologetic Thinking" is just this type of review.

So much for the form of "Apologetic Thinking." As for its content, let me concentrate on four key arguments that Rosenzweig makes: (1) why Jewish thinking is necessarily apologetic; (2) how Jewish apologetic thinking compares with Christian systematic thinking; (3) the regrettable inclinations to which Brod's and Baeck's apologetic thinking succumb; and (4) the character of apologetic thinking in its noblest sense.

It is important to notice that Rosenzweig's claim isn't that Jewish philosophy goes awry when drawn into apologetics, but that except for apologetics there is no Jewish philosophy. The apologetic character of Jewish thinking follows, in other words, from the fact that philosophy is exogenous to Jewish culture. Hence, again, the joke to which I previously alluded from the opening lines of the review: although Judaism's basic dogmas are attested throughout any *siddur* or derivable from the more metaphysical sections of the Talmud, Jewish dogmatics or systematic self-reflection on Judaism's core beliefs is so foreign to Jewish culture that Jews naively believe that they have no beliefs. The absence of any internally-motivated Jewish self-reflection is especially noticeable, Rosenzweig continues, in the fact that the doctrine of Israel's chosenness, which permeates and informs every aspect of Jewish life, almost never³ rises to self-consciousness as a belief that Jews must and do affirm, let alone becoming the fundamental dogma in a philosophical system.

But probably most telling of the historical facts that Rosenzweig adduces in the essay's introductory section is the absence in Jewish intellectual life of a struggle between different schools of thought within a

³ Halevi's *Kuzari* is the one notable exception

common thinking,⁴ a phenomenon, he suggests, characteristic of a culture in which thinking attains self-sufficiency. Instead of internal philosophical disputes, Jewish culture knows the struggle over thinking itself, by which Rosenzweig means specifically the centuries-long Maimonidean controversy that concerned whether philosophy ought to have any place within Jewish cultural life. As Rosenzweig observes:

“One did not become a Jewish thinker in the undisturbed circle of Judaism... Anyone who was supposed to reflect on Judaism has somehow, if not psychologically then at least spiritually, to be torn at the border.

Therefore, however, his thinking was then determined by the power which had led him to the border, and the depth horizon of his gaze was determined by the degree to which he had been carried to, on, or across the border.”

If philosophical self-reflection does not arise autochthonously within Jewish culture, it is because philosophy is regarded there as an unwelcome guest. From this observation follows Rosenzweig’s assessment of the overriding historical tendency of Jewish philosophy, namely, its apologetic character. Jewish philosophy does not know or benefit from the repose of a cultural life in which philosophy does not begin with accusations or, at a minimum, influences from outside the community perceived by the community as threats.

The situation within Christianity is quite different. Christian thinking tends towards systematics, which the essay’s introductory section contrasts with Jewish apologetics. As Rosenzweig comments, whereas Christianity has the towering figure of Augustine who sets the philosophical agenda for subsequent millennia, Judaism has “swimmers in the sea of Talmud;” and whereas Christianity fosters Aquinas, whose *Summa Theologica* is “a mighty system of a comprehensive Christian science,” Judaism produces Maimonides, whose great philosophical work, the *Guide of the Perplexed*, “would disappoint anyone who approaches it in the expectation of finding a system,” for its individual treatises are strung together on the apologetic thread of a defense against philosophy’s attack. But from the obvious deficiencies of Jewish apologetics, don’t presume the utter superiority of Christian systematics. First of all, despite its systematic ambitions, Christian thinking

⁴ Rosenzweig’s claim is perhaps wrong, but consider Scholem on the Kabbalah in contrast to philosophy as a native to Judaism.

never overcomes its apologetic origins. Even more importantly, apologetic thinking has, as Rosenzweig explains, “what systematic thinking cannot have so easily: the fascination – and the truthfulness – of thought reacting to the occasion” even if “therefore a limit is also set for it which only systematic thinking removes: exactly the limit of the occasional,” for “only systematic thinking determines the circle of its objects itself; apologetic thinking remains dependent on the cause, the adversary.” Perhaps more unexpected here than the sudden revelation of the strength of apologetic thinking is the exposure of a basic deficiency in systematic thinking: its inability to remain fresh and spontaneous in response to new situations. Nowhere in the *Star*, as far I can see, does Rosenzweig acknowledge the implications of this line of thought for his system. That the need for spontaneity would disappear at the end of days, that is, with the system’s completion, we can easily accept, since, by definition, nothing significantly new could occur at that point and human history would have reached its end. Until then, however, systematic thinking would have to be supplemented – strange as it may sound – by apologetic thinking, by a thinking that can offer fresh responses to novel occasions.

Rosenzweig finds exactly this sort of fresh thought in Brod’s book, *Paganism-Christianity-Judaism: A Confession of Faith*. The subtitle summarizes much of what Rosenzweig appreciates about Brod’s book: the narration of a personal journey that discovers its answers to questions of faith not primarily in books about Judaism but rather in life, whose own teachings are then brought to bear on Jewish texts, most significantly for Rosenzweig, on midrash, to which Brod supposedly brings an intensity and methodological seriousness that is utterly new. But Rosenzweig also finds in Brod’s book another deficiency of apologetic thinking beyond the basic dependency that Rosenzweig describes in his introductory remarks. Brod unnecessarily and unfortunately feels the need to evaluate Christianity alongside his appreciation of Judaism, the result of which is “unfair idealizing.” This tendency to distort “the other” precisely by constructing a version of his religious life through a few quotations of his most cherished dogmas is, according to Rosenzweig, the gravest danger of apologetic thinking. Apologetic thinkers like Brod take into account the full depth and breadth of their own actual lives, but consider only a select part of the other’s actuality, more often than not a part presented in

the other's books rather than lived in the other's life. In doing so, Brod disobeys what Rosenzweig calls "the first duty of theoretical neighborly love," namely, "that we never forget to ask ourselves about each opinion that we form about another person: can the other, if he is as I here depict him, still – live? For that is what he wishes and ought to do – 'like myself.'" "Living," it must be noted, should not be understood here merely in the biological sense, for Rosenzweig is discussing a duty of theory not of practice. Instead, the wish that the other has – and ought to have – to live is to be understood, I suggest, in terms of a narratively coherent life. And this duty of theoretical brotherly love towards the other strikes me as a minimal standard of charity rather than a high-minded ideal: Rosenzweig doesn't require us to imagine and then admire the best possible versions of the principles by which others live, only not to attribute to them principles so incoherent and so unappealing that their lives would be unlivable. I will return later to this theoretical duty towards others, which Rosenzweig considers just as important as its practical counterpart.

Rosenzweig claims to detect the same flaws of apologetic thinking in Baeck's *Essence of Judaism* as he identifies in Bord's book. Rosenzweig, however, can make stick his charge that Baeck, too, unfairly idealizes Christianity only by referring to another of his books, *Romantic Religion*. Nevertheless, even Baeck's title signals the apologetic impetus of his *Essence of Judaism*, which is written expressly in response to the unflattering picture of Judaism depicted in Adolf Harnack's *Essence of Christianity*. But the title of Baeck's book also permits Rosenzweig to levy another criticism related to Baeck's apologetic objective, namely, that Baeck's defense of Judaism emphasizes the *essence* of Judaism at the expense of the full flesh-and-blood actuality of Jewish life. It seems, in other words, that whereas Brod forgets to ask himself whether the Christian other, if he is as I, Brod, here depict him, can still live, which he wishes and ought to do "like myself," Baeck forgets to ask himself whether I, Baeck, and other Jewish selves like me can live as I have depicted the essence of our existence. Rosenzweig thinks that Jewish readers reach a point at which they can no longer go along with the abstraction that Baeck identifies as Judaism's essence, and it turns out to be the same point at which Christian readers will follow him most eagerly.

This criticism of Baeck's essentialism is of a piece with the view that Rosenzweig defends in other essays and lectures composed around the same period as "Apologetic Thinking." He contends that all of the various efforts to reduce Judaism to its legal, national, or ethical essence are fundamentally mistaken in that they narrow those elements of life that might spontaneously become meaningful to a fully Jewish person, to the person for whom Jewishness would not be one compartment of herself but rather expressed in her entire being. In "Apologetic Thinking," this criticism of Jewish essentialism is tied to the danger of a distorted self-understanding, a danger that accompanies the propensity of apologetic thinking to lapse into unfair idealizations of the other. As it turns out, though, the one who falls prey to this danger is not so much Baeck as it is Brod, and precisely because he insists on understanding himself in contrast to the Christian other.

Whereas Baeck's essentialism excludes as inessential too of much of everything that invariably makes up a fully Jewish existence, Brod's essentialism excludes everything which might be counted as Jewish from Christian others, who nevertheless are human just like himself. According to Rosenzweig: "As Brod discovers in Judaism the things that lift him beyond the living needs of his thinking, he is similarly, all-too-similarly prepared to discover in them the 'specifically Jewish,' and he does not pose to himself the question whether the remedy that he discovers for his human need is not just – as human as the need, and whether Judaism has a part in it only by virtue of its participation in the human." This observation about Brod's human need, the remedy for which he finds in Judaism – and only in Judaism! – echoes Rosenzweig's insistence on a duty of theoretical brotherly love that at least lets the other live "like myself" and anticipates the anti-essentialist-exclusivism on which Rosenzweig elaborates at the end of the essay.

Rosenzweig's anti-essentialism is hardly a neglected topic. As I've mentioned in reference to Baeck, one form of essentialism which Rosenzweig opposes and which several scholars have discussed, appears in his criticism of all modern movements such as Zionism, Liberalism, and Orthodoxy that would reduce Judaism to its supposedly core feature or features. Rosenzweig also rejects – in "The New Thinking" as well as in parts of the *Star* – the notion of a timeless essence according to which the living actuality of phenomena counts for

nothing compared with its unchanging properties. This part of his anti-essentialism has perhaps received the most attention. No one, so far as I know, has yet noticed what I am calling the anti-exclusivist aspect of Rosenzweig challenge to the traditional philosophical notion of “essence.” The basic idea, as expressed in the criticism of Brod, is that Jewishness consists of a bundle of possible customs, beliefs, and qualities that can contribute to an *especially* Jewish life without having to be perceived therefore as *exclusively* Jewish. Indeed, since not all of the details that comprise a fully Jewish life could be exclusively Jewish, to insist that some customs, beliefs, and qualities must be exclusive in order to count as “authentic” could only lead to the narrowing down of a completely Jewish life. This insistence, moreover, not only promotes distorted perceptions of oneself and of others, but also permits the exclusion of everything that belongs to “Jewishness” from a shared humanity.

It is precisely the idea of a shared humanity that Rosenzweig wants to defend from the worst instincts of apologetic thinking in the final paragraph of his review. The paragraph is worth citing in full:

“They [Brod’s and Baeck’s books] are both answers to attacks. They have let their theme be determined by the attack. The theme is the very essence. One could think it would now come to its highest awareness. But precisely the apologetic character of the thinking prevents that. Insofar as the thinker looks into his innermost [being], he indeed sees this innermost, but for this reason he is still far from seeing –himself. For he himself is not his innermost but is to the same extent also his outermost, and above all the bond that binds his innermost to his outermost, the street on which both associate reciprocally with each other. Yet, without further circumspection, he equates his inner most with his self and does not sense that his innermost, the more it is innermost, is the innermost of *every* human being. Thus, although he means himself, he speaks of the human being, of all [human beings]. And thus his self, the binding of the elements of humankind into the bundle that he himself is, remains a mystery to him. Apologetic thinking does not cross this barrier. He is denied the ultimate strength of knowing as he is spared the ultimate suffering of knowing. For ultimate knowing no longer defends, ultimate knowing adjudicates.”

As we might expect in any defense of a shared humanity, Rosenzweig appeals here to an innermost self shared by every human being, that is, to something like an underlying, universal human essence. But this innermost, essential self is hardly privileged; indeed, what genuinely matters, Rosenzweig suggests, is how in any case this innermost self comes to expression in the outermost details of a person's life. These details, rather than the innermost alone, are a specific bundle that determines each person's humanity. Now, the bundle is not specific because the details belonging to each person belong to her exclusively. On the contrary, each detail could be shared with this or that other individual without undermining its specificity, and more importantly its worth. Its specificity would be compromised, in other words, only if two bundles in their entirety were identical. This connection, on the one hand, of the innermost with outermost sides of the self, and, on the other hand, of the innermost self of each individual with the innermost self of every other individual escapes the notice of the apologetic thinker, who remains fixated on an essence that is exclusively his and who therefore, says Rosenzweig, never knows himself.

Surely the systematic thinker who grasps the identity and difference of everything which is fares much better at knowing himself as well as others than does the essence-focused and distortion-prone apologetic thinker. But what about in comparison to the lofty sort of apologetic thinker with whom Rosenzweig concludes his occasional thoughts? Surely the systematic thinker knows more even than him, too. He knows the mutually-exclusive essential roles that Jews and Christians play within the inclusive narrative of redemption, and he knows this with the clarity of that rare ultimate vision beyond life from within life. But perhaps for this reason the apologetic thinker who turns defensiveness into candid exposition of himself has a knowledge that is not only much more attainable, but also livable – for himself and for others to whom he has a minimal duty not to misperceive because he knows that, like him, they too want to live. This modest and responsive outlook, which we can expect to find in occasional rather than systematic thinking, seems a more reasonable, if less ambitious place, to begin an examination of Jewish philosophy.