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Leora Batnitzky: Idolatry and Representation □ □

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Introduction

Reconsidering Rosenzweig and Modern Conceptions of Idolatry

FRANZ ROSENZWEIG has long been interpreted as an existentialist philosopher who rejected philosophy for the sake of religion, and reason for the sake of revelation. These longstanding interpretations of Rosenzweig have persisted despite the fact that Rosenzweig himself was deeply critical of the term religion, claimed to have written not a Jewish book but a philosophical system, and continually qualified his understanding of revelation. This book reconsiders Rosenzweig's thought in the context of these tensions in interpretation and attempts to reorient thinking about Rosenzweig in terms of his approach to the problem of idolatry.

"Idolatry" is perhaps the one religious category that has taken on and maintains the most secular and critical power. Friedrich Nietzsche claims idolatry is the worship of a transcendent God at the cost of finite man. Karl Marx maintains it is the deification of money. Francis Bacon argues that it is sophistry in the face of logic. For Theodor Adorno, it is the claim to have arrived at a truly just society. Indeed, as epitomized best by Nietzsche's thought, modern notions of idolatry are often used to describe precisely what is wrong with religion itself. Rosenzweig's view of idolatry is a distinctly modern one in that it also offers a criticism of "religion." Rosenzweig's effort to think about idolatry as a modern possibility takes the form of a Jewish critique of modernity and some of its views of religion, ethics, national identity, art, and language. His criticism of modernity, however, is not a rejection of modernity. It is not an attempt to reach back for a pre-modern conception of idolatry (if this is even possible). Rather, it is an attempt to think critically about the complex interaction between Judaism and modern thought and to demonstrate the critical potential of this interaction for contemporary understandings of ethics, national identity, art, and language.

There are compelling reasons to reconsider the philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig. As Rosenzweig himself noted, his work *The Star of Redemption* is a book that people seem to buy, but that no one seems to read.¹ This is not entirely its audience's fault. Rosenzweig's style is dense and his prose is cryptic. But the misunderstanding of Rosenzweig goes beyond the inherent difficulty of his prose. Rosenzweig's arguments themselves are multilayered and multidirectional, embodying in fact the very

problematic that animates his work: the complex relations between Judaism and modern thought. Because of the complexity, and indeed the textuality, of his arguments, most of Rosenzweig's interpreters (both his contemporaries and our own) have failed to appreciate his fundamental concern: the question of the *possibility* of religious authority in the modern world.

This means that Rosenzweig's philosophy is not accurately described as existentialist, neo-Hegelian, or, as has been advocated most recently (and anachronistically), postmodern.² The inherent fallacy of these interpretations of Rosenzweig's thought is that each in its own way conflates Rosenzweig's views of philosophy and Judaism.³ The existentialist portrait conflates Rosenzweig's commitment to truth and reason with its own commitment to the rupture of revelation.⁴ Conversely, the neo-Hegelian portrait conflates Rosenzweig's view of revelation's rupture with its own arguments about truth and reason.⁵ While the postmodern portrait of Rosenzweig's thought gets past the existential/neo-Hegelian dialectic, it nonetheless succumbs to the same fallacy by conflating Rosenzweig's view of Jewish particularity with a notion of philosophical particularity.⁶ Each of these views fails to appreciate the ways in which philosophy and Judaism always exist for Rosenzweig in incommensurable, yet hermeneutically complex tensions.⁷ The aim of this study is to avoid such confluations by reconsidering, both philosophically and historically, Rosenzweig's thought in relation to German-Jewish arguments about Judaism and idolatry in the modern world.

Reading Rosenzweig's project through the rubric of a polemic about idolatry, this study attempts to return to the culturally critical import of his work. To do so, we must return to some of Rosenzweig's fundamental questions about human finitude. Rosenzweig argues that the Judaic prohibition on idolatry is central to reassessing the meaning of human finitude. Idolatry for Rosenzweig stems not from how we think about God but from how we worship God. The way we worship God is intimately connected to our lives as finite human beings. Rosenzweig maintains that a reassessment of human finitude is especially necessary after the crisis of reason in the first part of this century, a time at which the prospects of reasoned enlightenment and historical progress seemed all but destroyed. Rosenzweig's idiom is not our own, but at the end of this violent and bloody century his concerns remain ours.

For Rosenzweig, Judaism and its ban on idolatry can and should be seen as the crucial intellectual and spiritual resource available to modern readers for revitalizing the meanings of human finitude for human interaction. We may thus use Rosenzweig's thought to ask what it means to speak about idolatry as a modern possibility.⁸ Just as Rosenzweig argues that the avoidance of idolatry is intimately connected to understanding

our lives as finite human beings, so too he argues that idolatry is central to reassessing the modern meanings of art, language, and national identity.

Before turning to the details of Rosenzweig's notion of idolatry, it will be useful to map out a number of modern philosophical constructions of the concept. In their excellent study *Idolatry*, Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit argue that there are three distinctly modern forms of discourse on idolatry, what they call "replacement," "extension," and "inversion" (these arguments are detailed below). Rosenzweig's notion of idolatry cannot be assimilated under any of these three categories, although his view of idolatry has some affinity with a number of thinkers whose views can be categorized according to this schema. Rosenzweig's approach to idolatry is best understood under the rubric of "ethical monotheism," a claim that is developed throughout this book. Halbertal and Margalit do not include modern Jewish views of idolatry as a category of modern forms of the concept "idolatry." The implication of their otherwise excellent book is that Jewish, philosophical views of idolatry end in the thirteenth century with the Spanish rabbinic authority and kabbalist Nachmanides (1194–1270).⁹ Despite this obvious oversight, their categories of modern discourses of idolatry remain a useful grid against which to begin to measure Rosenzweig's more particular and complex notion.

Halbertal and Margalit's first modern category of discourse on idolatry is "replacement." If idolatry is defined as the worship of the alien god in place of the true god, some modern, secular discourses on idolatry merely replace the true god with a new ideal. Francis Bacon replaces the right god with the ideal of the true science of nature. Just as the worship of the true god requires an eradication of all idols, so too Bacon argues the true science of nature requires an eradication of the idols of the mind.¹⁰ Karl Marx replaces the true god with the essence of man. Money is the worship of an alien god at the expense of man's true nature. In Marx's now well known words, "Money is the Jealous God of Israel before whom no other gods may exist."¹¹ While for Bacon, idolatry is an epistemological problem remedied by the right epistemological framework (i.e., science), for Marx, idolatry is an error remedied by the recognition of how meaning is created. Marx argues that we worship the alien god of money and do not recognize that we have created our own gods and endowed them with meaning. Famously, Marx makes the comparison between the worship of the false god of money and the worship of the false gods of religion: "The more the worker exerts himself, the more powerful becomes the alien objective world which he fashions against himself, the poorer he and his inner world become, the less there is that belongs to him. It is the same in religion."¹²

Rosenzweig does not share with Marx the argument that a traditional conception of the right god must be replaced with a nontraditional ideal, but his argument about the root of idolatry does have a significant affinity with Marx's. Like Marx, Rosenzweig argues that the root of idolatry is a misunderstanding about the ways in which meaning is created and human identity is constituted. Marx and Rosenzweig differ on what constitutes the proper interpretative framework for understanding how human meaning and identity are created. For Marx, it is the "essence of man" that constitutes human meaning and identity. When the true essence of man and his labor are replaced by money, idolatry results. For Rosenzweig, on the other hand, it is the pastness of the present that constitutes human meaning and identity. When the power of the past for the present and the future is denied, idolatry follows.

Rosenzweig's central concern about the possibility of religious authority in the modern world is intimately linked to what he argues is modernity's denial of its past. A reconsideration of Rosenzweig's thought thus has broad relevance to contemporary debates about the status of religious traditions in the modern world. Rosenzweig's early twentieth century musings on the nature of religious tradition and the possibility of their modern authority both anticipate and go beyond current arguments by tradition-oriented thinkers, such as Alasdair MacIntyre in the Anglo-American context and Hans-Georg Gadamer in the Continental European context.¹³ Like MacIntyre and Gadamer, Rosenzweig's consideration of the epistemological and ethical status of tradition in the modern world does not attempt to undermine scientific and social scientific worldviews but rather to reorient them in their relation to the traditions and histories upon which they are built. Rosenzweig argues (as MacIntyre and Gadamer do) that the modern person has lost access to her past and that it is essential that we appreciate anew the ways in which our modern identities are constituted by the past. Finally, Rosenzweig concurs with MacIntyre's and Gadamer's respective analyses of the ways in which the individual herself is constituted by the historical structures of communities. This important point only underscores the ways in which the interpretation of Rosenzweig as an advocate of personal revelation is inherently problematic.

In order to stress Rosenzweig's fundamental affinity with a tradition of hermeneutics associated with Gadamer and Heidegger before him, I will use the term "hermeneutic" throughout this book to describe Rosenzweig's concern with the way in which the past constitutes the present. I have in mind here Gadamer's famous statement in *Truth and Method* that "Consciousness of being affected by history [*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*] is primarily consciousness of the hermeneutical *situation*."¹⁴ However, it is at the same time on the issue of effective history that Rosenzweig's thought goes beyond and presents an important chal-

lenge to contemporary hermeneutics. For Rosenzweig, the past not only constitutes the present but also upsets the present in such a way that creates not wholeness but discontinuity. Rosenzweig would agree with MacIntyre's statement that "I am born with a past; and to try to cut myself off from that past . . . is to deform my present relationships,"¹⁵ but whereas MacIntyre emphasizes continuity, Rosenzweig emphasizes discontinuity. For Rosenzweig, the past makes demands on the present, demands that are neither entirely clear nor easily met. To take the past seriously is not only to look to the past but to risk the present for the sake of the past. Most fundamentally, for Rosenzweig, to take the past seriously is to risk our very lives in the present.

While a reconsideration of Rosenzweig's thought is highly relevant in regard to the generic question of the present's relation to the past—a question of great importance for those interested in the modern statuses of religious tradition, reason, science, and historical study—a reconsideration of Rosenzweig's thought also has much to offer to the internal questions of how to understand the Jewish tradition in the modern world. Rosenzweig's thought has a deep affinity with a group of contemporary thinkers whom Peter Ochs has called "post-critical," meaning an approach to a religious tradition that takes seriously the internal interpretive dynamics of a tradition while nonetheless taking into account a critical-historical and scientific approach to texts.¹⁶ Rosenzweig's question about the *possibility* of religious authority in the modern world is a philosophical question that recognizes the *philosophical* limits imposed by the complex textuality and historicity of the Jewish tradition and people.¹⁷ A reconsideration of Rosenzweig's thought is vital to understanding the contemporary problems of Jewish thought and its modern history. Rosenzweig saw more clearly than his contemporaries the modern pitfalls of a wholly rationalist and apologetic approach to Judaism's relation to philosophy. He argued that such an approach had grave practical implications in terms of the Jewish tradition's place in the modern world, and he mapped out a solution that attempted to restore the integrity of what we might call a Jewish language game without denying the historical reality of Jewish modernity.¹⁸ Rosenzweig attempts to *philosophically* take seriously, in Clifford Geertz's now famous formulation, a "thick description" of Jewish life and practice. In Geertz's words, a thick description is "first, description of details as part of 'interworked systems of construable signs . . . within which they can be intelligibly . . . described.' Second, it is description from the actor's, participant's, or language-user's point of view, yet without mimicry or confusion of identity on the part of the interpreter."¹⁹

Rosenzweig's *philosophical* commitment to take seriously the tradition and language game of the Jewish people is highly significant in relation to Halbertal and Margalit's second modern discourse on idolatry,

what they call “extension.” As they note, this form of argument has been particularly popular among twentieth-century Protestant theologians. It is an argument with which Rosenzweig’s understanding of idolatry does *not* have much affinity. As Halbertal and Margalit argue, the discourse of idolatry as extension is an extreme version of iconoclasm. Old idols must not be replaced with new ones. All gods and all ideals are suspect: “The category of idolatry is extended to include any competing opposite, even what was supposedly conceived of as the right God himself. . . . Any candidate for opposing the idol is by definition an erection of a new idol.”²⁰ Halbertal and Margalit suggest that Wittgenstein’s statement—“All that philosophy can do is to destroy idols. And that means not making any new ones—say out of the ‘absence of idols’”—epitomizes the extension of idolatry in philosophical terms.²¹ According to Wittgenstein, philosophy’s task is to recognize that our only real knowledge is negative. We can tear down the idols of false knowledge, but we can never erect true knowledge.²²

In Christian theological terms, Paul Tillich epitomizes the discourse of idolatry as extension: “Idolatry is the elevation of a preliminary concern to ultimacy. Something essentially conditional is taken as unconditional, something essentially partial is boosted to universality, and something essentially finite is given infinite significance (the best example of contemporary idolatry is religious nationalism).”²³ Tillich’s notion of idolatry is not confined to the epistemological realm, as is Wittgenstein’s. For Tillich, devotion to an unworthy cause is idolatry. Tillich’s example of modern idolatry is nationalism. The state is taken for a supreme value while in truth the state is only a relative value. What is finite is taken as infinite.

Though Rosenzweig is a critic of nationalism, and of Jewish nationalism in particular, and though he does in fact call Hegel’s conception of the state an “idol,” his understanding of nationalism as a form of idolatry is quite different from Tillich’s.²⁴ Halbertal and Margalit rightly point out that the modern discourse of idolatry as extension ultimately cannot maintain any concept of an absolute: “What will stand in opposition to idolatry will not be any sense of absolute but the freedom from absolutes and the denial of ultimates.”²⁵ It is not a human freedom from absolutes that Rosenzweig seeks to preserve in his view of idolatry, but rather God’s freedom. Rosenzweig rejects modern nationalism and Jewish nationalism in particular because God is an absolute, and not because humans should be free from devotion to absolutes. For Rosenzweig, the Jewish people can never belong to any land because they belong to God.

But the difference between Rosenzweig’s view of idolatry and the form of modern discourse that Halbertal and Margalit call “extension” goes deeper. Rosenzweig’s approach to idolatry is not a matter of defining principles or rules that do and do not constitute idolatry. Though Rosen-

zweig argues that God's, and not human, freedom is absolute, and though he argues that the Jewish people belong to God and not to any land, these propositions are not independently or acontextually true, but only obtain their veracity through the lived community of the Jewish people. From the perspective of Rosenzweig's thought, extreme iconoclasm ultimately takes the critical edge off the concept of idolatry. It is too easy simply to say that something finite should not be given infinite significance. If idolatry could be avoided with such clear and succinct formulations, idolatry would not be the problem that it is. Idolatry is an ever-pervasive problem because it cannot ever be entirely eradicated. Life within a community in dialogue with God always runs the risk of idolatry.

Rosenzweig is not the only one who would find "extension" arguments about idolatry problematic from a theological perspective.²⁶ Reconsidering Rosenzweig's philosophy in connection with his arguments about idolatry allows us to appreciate the ways in which Rosenzweig's early twentieth century Jewish thought anticipates important aspects of late twentieth century Protestant thought. The conclusion of this book compares Rosenzweig's thought to the contemporary American Lutheran theologian George Lindbeck. This comparison between Rosenzweig and Lindbeck should aid us in thinking about the implications of at least two issues of great urgency to Rosenzweig himself and to current debates in religious studies today. These are the issues of, first, the possibility and nature of Jewish philosophy, and second, the possibility and nature of interreligious dialogue. Looking at Rosenzweig's affinity with aspects of late twentieth century Protestant thought allows us to further reconsider Rosenzweig's relation to Christianity. As I argue in Part 3, the significance of Rosenzweig's claims about Christianity is not, as most proponents of Jewish-Christian dialogue in Rosenzweig's name have maintained, that Judaism and Christianity are mutually affirming. There is rather an insurmountable tension between Judaism and Christianity not because they are so different but because they share so much. Judaism and Christianity have overlapping language games, and Rosenzweig argues that this tension is profoundly significant for understanding modern antisemitism.

Rosenzweig's argument for what we would call today a "thick description" of the Jewish tradition is an argument also for the incommensurability (though not the relativity) of religious traditions. Rosenzweig's conception of idolatry is thus simultaneously a criticism of the modern category "religion" for two interrelated reasons. First, "religion" is problematic for Rosenzweig because it implies a generic experience or structure that denies the very particularity that gives religious traditions their meaning. The second reason for Rosenzweig's disdain for "religion"—a

disdain that is not only rarely noted but even denied by most of Rosenzweig's interpreters—brings us to what may be his surprising affinity with Halbertal and Margalit's third modern discourse on idolatry, what they call "inversion." Inversion is a form of argument in which many of the traditional oppositions between pagans and nonpagans are maintained but in which the valuation of the opposition is inverted. Best known for this kind of argument is Nietzsche, who often saw himself as the great inverter of values.²⁷ Agreeing with the monotheist that the pagan values animal instinct, naturalism, and self-deification, Nietzsche rejects the transcendent God of self-denial and opts for what he and the monotheist agree is the pagan's affirmation of self and life.²⁸ In a less extreme form, David Hume agrees with the monotheistic definition of monotheism as belief in one unified God. It is, however, for this reason that he prefers polytheism, which he argues is in fact superior to monotheism because it is pluralistic and thereby inherently tolerant.²⁹

Rosenzweig's ambivalent attitude toward paganism is as significant as his ambivalent attitude toward Christianity. He argues not only that paganism is true but that paganism is a necessary prerequisite for any dialogical relation, including revelation. For Rosenzweig, both the ancient Greek pagan and the modern neo-pagan, exemplified by Goethe, rightly recognize human finitude and limitation. Rosenzweig's argument about paganism is an inverted one in that he argues that even at his most isolated, idolatrous moment, the pagan is far superior to what he calls the fanatic, whose conceptual scheme is intrinsically *religious*. For Rosenzweig, the fanatic is marked by a religiosity that demands immediate gratification and seeks absolute control. Indeed, the nonreligious pagan is closer to revelation than the religious fanatic, as Rosenzweig comments in one of his last diary entries: "Revelation has only this function: to make the world unreligious again."³⁰ Rosenzweig suggests that the combination of a potentially lethal idolatrous Christian zeal and the reality of modern nations converge to create modern nationalism, the political form of fanatical religiosity. Because he is not religious, the pagan remains open to revelation in a way that the fanatic does not. Rosenzweig's distinctly modern understanding of idolatry and its relation to "religion" is thus a distinctly modern criticism of the confluence between modern political and theological fanaticism.

Halbertal and Margalit conclude their study on idolatry stating that "it is a mistake to articulate an account of what is the essential content of idolatry" because the concept itself is so "diverse and problematic."³¹ The truth of their statement is made clear even by our very brief survey of modern discourses on idolatry and Rosenzweig's conceptual relation to them. Nonetheless, Halbertal and Margalit do offer us these broad parameters. First, "the ban on idolatry is an attempt to dictate exclusively,

to map the unique territory of the one God.”³² Second, “God and idolatry are codependent conceptually and in the lives of the faithful.”³³ These general statements about idolatry offer us a point of departure for reconsidering Rosenzweig’s thought. Rosenzweig’s arguments about idolatry are intimately connected to his views of Judaism’s significance in the modern world. For Rosenzweig, the teachings of Judaism as lived by the Jewish people represent for the world the proper relation to the proper God.

As will be argued throughout this book, Rosenzweig’s thought has its deepest affinity with the trend in German-Jewish thought called “ethical monotheism.” Wendell Dietrich defines ethical monotheism as “a religious concentration and intensity that focuses singular attention on God in contrast to all creaturely reality.” At the same time, the ethical monotheist maintains “an inclusive interest in culture and society and insist[s] that ethical monotheistic faith energizes the construction of culture.”³⁴ A view of idolatry is both explicit and implicit in the ethical monotheistic defense of Judaism’s place in the modern world. As Halbertal and Margalit remark, “The very identity of the monotheists depends on the negation of idolatry.”³⁵ Arguments about Judaism’s contribution to world culture through its adherence to pure monotheism and hence the ban on idolatry dominated much of German-Jewish thought, from Moses Mendelssohn onward. Rosenzweig appropriates and transforms the framework of German-Jewish ethical monotheism to offer his views of the proper worship of the proper God as they relate to modern conceptions of art, language, ethics, and national identity.

I have chosen to call Rosenzweig an “ethical monotheist” in an attempt to do justice simultaneously to Rosenzweig’s own context and to our own. “Ethical monotheism” remains, however, a self-consciously chosen rubric whose purpose is neither to provide a comprehensive account of Rosenzweig’s intellectual and historical context nor, alternatively, to advocate or advance a particular theological position. My aim, instead, is to reconsider philosophically and historically Rosenzweig’s thought in terms of its own context and our own. In keeping with his own understanding of how traditions work, Rosenzweig’s inheritance of the German-Jewish ethical monotheistic tradition is not merely passive but active. Although Rosenzweig criticizes the German-Jewish ethical monotheistic tradition’s view of rationality, as well as its arguments about the confluence between Judaism and modern philosophy, Rosenzweig nonetheless has his deepest affinity with this tradition of thought. He transforms this tradition, and especially Hermann Cohen’s ethical monotheism, and reorients it in directions that anticipate and challenge contemporary trends in religious studies, ethics, philosophy, anthropology, theology, and biblical studies.

In attempting to accomplish the twofold task of doing justice to Rosenzweig's context and our own, I will make and defend the following claims throughout this study:

- Rosenzweig argues that the problem of idolatry does not stem from how we think about God but from how we worship God. This argument leads to four interrelated arguments:
- First, Rosenzweig appropriates the ethically monotheistic conception of Israel as witness to the nations. However, in the context of an argument that emphasizes worship rather than philosophically correct ideas, Rosenzweig privileges the carnal nature of Jewish election over "Jewish ideas." In connection with his arguments about Jewish witnessing, Rosenzweig reinterprets the problem of representation to be the problem of existing as representative (*vertreten*) as opposed to presenting or representing an idea (*vorstellen*).
- Second, idolatry as improper worship is for Rosenzweig fundamentally a hermeneutical problem. Rosenzweig develops his view of Jewish witness into a general hermeneutic theory that is meant to offer the modern person an orientation in the modern world after the crisis of meaning brought on by what Rosenzweig calls the historical enlightenment.
- Third, Rosenzweig's emphasis on idolatry as improper worship means that images are not intrinsically idolatrous. The second commandment's ban on graven images is not an all-out ban on visual representation. Rosenzweig argues that images are both potentially redemptive and idolatrous.
- Fourth, since idolatry is a matter of worship and not thought, the possibility of idolatry for Rosenzweig cannot be dismissed merely by thinking about God properly. Rather, idolatry is always a possibility, especially for those who know the true God. Adherence to the ban on idolatry, then, means that one must always risk idolatry. I suggest at the end of this study that this point is critical for thinking about Rosenzweig today in the context of the State of Israel as well as the possibility of the future of monotheism in the Diaspora.

The first two of these points are developed in Part 1, "Ethics and Monotheism." Part 2, "Art and Language," develops the third point in the contexts of Rosenzweig's theories of art and translation. Part 3, "Religion and Politics," develops the fourth point in the contexts of Rosenzweig's views of Judaism, Christianity, and the theological and political significance of antisemitism. The final chapter of the book considers the theological and political significance of Rosenzweig's views of monotheism in turn-of-the-millennium America.

To begin to consider the question of idolatry as a modern possibility, we must start with a question as old as Jewish thought itself. How should we understand the Bible's depiction of God in human terms? Would this not seem to be the definition of idolatry? How can Rosenzweig claim that idolatry is a critical concept, and indeed a modern, critical concept, if the Jewish tradition itself describes God in such a seemingly irrational manner? It is to these questions that we turn in chapter 1.