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# A World with Many Ends: Eschatology and Perspectivism

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**Abstract:** In this article, the relation between crisis, dying, and apocalypse is examined from the vantage point of Franz Rosenzweig's philosophy of revelation. Following Rosenzweig's suggestion that truth—for finite and temporal beings like us—can only be found in time, the article suggests that there exists an intrinsic relation between truth and death. Truth is not only or even primarily logical or mathematical truth according to Rosenzweig. Truth is the reality of our finite lives and implies an eschatological understanding of death as that which gives life unity by eternalising it as that which it forever was in the past. Life, Rosenzweig argues, is polytheistic by entailing manifold perspectives and possibilities, while death is monotheistic by endowing living beings with the unity and completion they lack in life. All death, even the most horrid death, is, if not a completion, at least an end, which gives the living the possibility to judge and verify the meaning of the past once and for all. Yet, if we believe Rosenzweig, the dead are not gone in the past but rather the eternal ground that makes present and future time possible. The dead, by literally being the past, reveal that all time exists after itself, as something that already was, and that the world is nothing but a world with many ends by dying away into the “life outside life” that Rosenzweig called God.

**Keywords:** apocalypse; death; dying; crisis; eternal life; immortality; Rosenzweig; Schelling; temporality



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## 1. Introduction

The German-Jewish soldier and philosopher of religion Franz Rosenzweig insisted that death is a crisis and an apocalypse; a judgment and an unveiling. Through death, the truth about ourselves and the world that we inhabit is revealed; but in what sense can death be understood as an apocalypse and a crisis? Furthermore, what does Rosenzweig's religious thanatology imply in our crisis-ridden world, which seems foreign to the “logic of redemption” that Rosenzweig defended by insisting that death, as the closure of life, gives the world unity (Rosenzweig 2005, p. 256)? I shall answer these questions by arguing that Rosenzweig can help us move beyond the perspectivism of the modern era—the epistemological theory that, from Friedrich Nietzsche to Friedrich Hayek, postulates that knowledge is bound to the finite perspective of the individual—by giving us an eschatological interpretation of death as that which discloses the unity of the world or what he called “the All” (Rosenzweig 2005, p. 9).

Eschatology is the theological doctrine of the critical decisions of a human life that is sealed by death, and death is related to our redemption, or what Rosenzweig enigmatically described as God's own completion: “In the Redemption, that of the world through man and that of man through the world, God gives himself his own Redemption. Man and the world fade out in Redemption, God completes himself. It is only in Redemption that God becomes that which the human spirit, in its temerity, constantly sought everywhere and affirmed everywhere, yet without ever having found it, for this was not yet: the One and the All” (Rosenzweig 2005, p. 256). Death does not only or even primarily end life. It reveals the completion of life and the world that it belongs to, and completion, as we will see, is the redemption of that which was, through the emergence of “the All”.

## 2. Crisis, Dying, Apocalypse

The Greek term κρίσις can be translated as a separating power of distinguishing; a decision; a choice; an election; a dispute; but also as a judgment. Classically, the word “crisis”, interpreted as the judgement of something, has been related to the Christian and Jewish notion of death as an apocalypse of the truth of life. The Greek term ἀποκάλυψις is translated as unveiling or uncovering of something that has been hidden. An apocalypse is a revelation and death, Rosenzweig argues, and reveals what life became in time by ending the movement of life. Those who are living surely dispute the meaning of a life that has ended—was it good or evil, blessed or cursed, hollow or abundant with significance—but death sets a limit to our interpretations by giving it completion. The lives of the dead belong to history and produce the basis for the emergence of “the All”.

What is unveiled in death is what Rosenzweig described as the truth of life, and the reason why truth is veiled during life is because the truth of our existence is not yet consummated. In a sense, not even the destiny of the dead is fully sealed, since their fate is related to us who still are in time. The past, for Rosenzweig, is a beginning. Only when we reach what Rosenzweig described as “the All” can the meaning and truth of life be judged as it is, in and for itself. It is not only that we, as finite, mortal, and temporal creatures, cannot apprehend the totality of the world—which we can define as the totality of everything that is, was and will be in time and space—and must assess reality through our conjectures and surmises. Truth is underway and the meaning of the past is not fully determined, even if every death shapes the world by giving it form. Truth is this unfolding of reality.

“[T]ruth”, Rosenzweig argued in *The Star of Redemption*, written when he served in the infantry during the First World War, is “not, as Scholastics think, recognised in the error; truth attests itself; it is one with all the real; it does not separate in it” (Rosenzweig 2005, p. 406). Truth is reality, and reality is temporal: what is true is real or can become real, and this entails that truth should not first and foremost be interpreted as coherent and logical truths, such as mathematical truths, according to Rosenzweig. Truth is a truth that one believes may be attested, and thus judged, to be real in time, and therefore related to the unfolding of human existence. We believe that a mathematical theorem is true when it is verified as real, as having power over us, and it is in this sense seemingly illusory phenomena—such as life or, for that matter, God—for some can be said to be true even if they, rightly or not, might be understood as simple names denoting concrete but complex biological, political, or social processes.

Does this not imply a reduction of truth to power, all too common in our world of alternative facts and irrational conspiracies? There is certainly a danger of relativism in Rosenzweig’s philosophical system, but what he seeks to understand is why truth is a temporal process of completion that is not finished before the emergence of “the All”. There are partial truths that we can confirm beyond doubt. We know the truth of the Pythagorean theorem for instance, and we know it by proving it in time. However, the truths that Rosenzweig sought—the truth of human existence and the truth of God—are contested as long as the world is unfolding and we lack a cognition of “the All”.

The human world comprises different worlds, and exists as a plurality of distinct forms of life based on divergent notions of truth that seek verification. Truth must be verified as real in order to be legitimate, and that which cannot be verified as real cannot be said to be true, since it is not common for all. Consequently, reality is what has power to affect us in time and space, and truth is such a worldly and causal power because it is identical with reality: “Truth does not prove reality, but reality upholds truth. The essence of the world is this upholding... of truth” (Rosenzweig 2005, p. 21). But do not lies and illusions also have power over us? They certainly often do. However, if we know them to be lies, they cannot be verified as real. Lies and illusions are rather the strange power of the unreal, which affects us and forms our human world into a domain of divergent and often contesting perspectives. This is the world that lacks what Rosenzweig described as completion, since it is not “the All”. It is shattered by perspectives that have not been

verified as real and that belong to a world that has not been bound together by the unity that Rosenzweig thought that death gave the world.

The concept of verification, *Bewährung*, is a key concept in *The Star of Redemption*, where it is used as a synonym for eschatology, and in order to prove the temporality of reality itself: “Truth in this way ceases to be what ‘is’ true, and becomes that which, as true—wants to be verified [*bewährt*]. The concept of the verification of the truth becomes the basic concept of this new theory of knowledge” (Rosenzweig 1999a, p. 98).

Martin Kavka has pointed out that Rosenzweig was not alone in professing a kind of verificationism among “the major Jewish philosophers of the Weimar period” (Kavka 2012, p. 167). Together with Martin Buber and others, Rosenzweig sought an experimental theory of truth, and Kavka emphasises that *Bewährung*, which can also be translated as testing or affording, has a forensic and juridical meaning. Only that which can be judged as real can be said to be true. *Bewährung* is a crisis in the sense of a judgement, and what primarily is judged—according to Rosenzweig—is human life. We judge ourselves by our way of living, but what does that mean? It implies that what we do is inscribed in the becoming of the world as what we do once for all, and which therefore can be judged as being good, or for that matter bad or even evil, and this judgement entails a “messianic theory of knowledge, which evaluates truths according to the price for its verification and to the bond that they establish among human beings” (Rosenzweig 1999a, p. 99). These bonds might certainly be established around lies or illusions, but if they verify a connection of goodness or humaneness—which for Rosenzweig entails a form of truth, namely, the truth of justice—they often do that to the cost of sacrifice in this world that is ruled by conflicts, injustices and tyranny.

This verificationism of human relations has, at least from the outset, not much in common with the logical positivists’ insistence that only empirically verifiable statements are cognitively meaningful. However, like the positivists, Rosenzweig defended an experimental theory of truth that sought to attest the reality of truth through its consequences in the world and, for Rosenzweig, the ultimate verification for life is death. Death verifies the meaning of our life by closing it from the openness of the future. With death, life is sealed. By dying away, life becomes what it was in time.

The positivists’ verification thesis was a harsh rejection of metaphysics and theology, whereas for Rosenzweig these modes of thought can be verified empirically as a form of life. For, as we have seen, truth for Rosenzweig is not necessarily “those least important truths, of the type ‘two times two is four,’ on which people easily can agree... the path leads over the truths that have cost man something, on towards those that he cannot verify except with the sacrifice of his life” (Rosenzweig 1999a, pp. 98–99). Martyrdom binds truth to death, since the death of the martyr verifies what he or she lived for. Once again Rosenzweig’s theory of verification is dangerously near relativism, and David Baumgardt has criticised this understanding of truth for confusing truth with the feeling of what one thinks is truth (Baumgardt 1977, p. 410). The martyr’s beliefs may be false or illusory, even if she is ready to give witness to what she thinks is truth at the point of dying. However, for Rosenzweig, every death, even the most horrific, or for that matter banal, death, is a martyrdom that gives witness to the state of the world.

### 3. The Struggle for Existence

As a soldier, Rosenzweig conceptualised life as a struggle for existence, a work against death: “Animals and plants, and every ‘organism’ in the wider secondary sense, are not mere products and mere results of forces, but once there, a something that seeks to affirm itself in its own form against all forces” (Rosenzweig 2005, p. 239). This view of life as something that seeks to affirm its own existence leads to an almost Darwinian idea of life as a struggle for survival, and it prompted Rosenzweig to argue that everything “that seek[s] to affirm itself in its own form against all forces” can be said to be alive: “Not only living essences exist, but also institutions, societies, feelings, things, works—everything, really everything can be alive. But what does this being-alive mean, then, as opposed to mere

existence?... Life offers resistance; it resists, that is to say, death" (Rosenzweig 2005, p. 239). Life involves a struggle against death and, consequently, a struggle for survival, and this struggle is also a struggle against the completion of life that can reveal "the All". Life as we know it is tied to a perspective that cannot know "the All".

The biologist Rudolf Ehrenberg, whose *Theoretische Biologie* Rosenzweig saw as part of the reconfiguration of philosophy that he defended in *The Star of Redemption*, insisted in 1923 that "[d]eath is the catastrophic ending of a process, be it great or small and it does not matter if it is at the same time a new beginning or not, it is the discontinuity, the leap in the sequence of events" (Ehrenberg 1923, p. 6). However, death is also what makes life possible. It constitutes the possibility of all life, since life is inherently finite: "Not: no life without death. But: without death no life" (Ehrenberg 1923, p. 6). Life is something that necessarily ends and ends catastrophically, and life—as Rosenzweig would say — is what resists this end. It resists the completion of life that also is its condition of possibility.

The great merit of Ehrenberg's *Theoretische Biologie* was that it "subsumes the doctrine of organic nature for the first time under the law of the real, irreversible time" (Rosenzweig 1999a, p. 88). For Rosenzweig, this temporalisation of organic nature implied a critique of the reduction of death to nothingness; an understanding of death that according to him was dominant in Western philosophy and many religious traditions. Rosenzweig affirmed the temporality of our existence, and famously commenced *The Star of Redemption* with the sentence: "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" (Rosenzweig 2005, p. 9). What Rosenzweig called the "cognition of the All" was the hope of an ordered and systematic understanding of reality as a totality. It was the discovery of the truth of the world as it is in and for itself. This cognition is an orientation beyond the finite perspective of the individual and even beyond life itself. Only an existence that has moved beyond the basic principle of life, the struggle for survival, can understand the world as it is in and for itself and thus reach a "cognition of the All". However, this new form of life is not the life of an individual *Übermensch*. It is the emergence of what Rosenzweig described as a Supra-world or *Überwelt*—delineated in the third part of *The Star of Redemption*—and which for him implied the collective task of a reformed Christianity and Judaism to renew the world and give it a "sabbatical completion" (Rosenzweig 2005, p. 443).

The discovery of the true systematic character of philosophy, the orientation of human cognition into a system of knowledge ultimately grasping the totality of existence, was a discovery of German idealism according to Rosenzweig (Pollock 2009). However, the system could only be revealed, as we have seen, through the "sabbatical completion of the world" which for Rosenzweig implied a political task to construct an empire beyond nations and states (Rosenzweig 2005, p. 443). Furthermore, it necessitated an existential grounding in the mortal life of the individual. Every person knows intuitively that death is not a nothing but something profoundly real. This was something that Immanuel Kant, with his insistence on the transcendental limits of experience, and F. W. J. Schelling, with his philosophy of revelation, rather than J. G. Fichte and G. W. F. Hegel, had come close to understanding. It was, however, the perspectivism of Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche that liberated German philosophy from its idealistic totalisation (Rosenzweig 2005, p. 15). The problem was that Schopenhauer and Nietzsche did not understand the possibility of anchoring "the cognition of the All" in the finite life of the individual, and such an undertaking, which Rosenzweig took upon himself, necessitated a way beyond Schopenhauer and Nietzsche's perspectivism, as well as a critique of classical philosophy. The system must become existential, even biological, but it must also reshape our life, governed as it is by the struggle for survival, in relation to "the sabbatical completion of the world" that Rosenzweig related to both death and redemption.

Modern philosophy was part of "the whole venerable brotherhood of philosophers from Ionia to Jena"—that is from the inception of Greek philosophy with Thales in Ionia (modern Turkey) to G. W. F. Hegel in Jena, Germany—since in Thales's thesis, "[a]ll is

water”, a systematic structure of the world has been uncovered (Rosenzweig 2005, p. 189). However, Rosenzweig insisted, this all is contested by death. The mortal individual does not see unity but a reality that looks fragmented. Death undoes every “cognition of the All”. Life seems unable to move beyond its struggle for survival, and humans appear destined to understand truth partially, as something that can never become totalised as a system. We are, as long as we are only living, or rather only surviving, unable to achieve a “cognition of the All”. Living in a world where life tends to be reduced to a struggle for survival entails that we are destined to live in an unredeemed world; a world that lacks the completion that Rosenzweig found in death, and even more in what he would describe as God’s existence beyond both life and death.

#### 4. Learning How to Die

Historically, the task of philosophy was not only the explanation of the rationality of the world, but the attempt to teach us how to die. It was only through the overcoming of the fear of death, the destroyer of every system, that the systematic meaning of the world could be unveiled. The Platonists, for instance, affirmed the widespread belief of the pagan world that the soul is, as Rosenzweig wrote, “the natural something that already by its nature is incapable of dying... The soul, it is asserted, cannot die; but since it is interwoven into nature, the inability to die becomes an inexhaustible capacity for transformation; the soul does not die, but it migrates through bodies” (Rosenzweig 2005, p. 88). Furthermore, for Plato, this immortality gave us a glimpse of the world of forms, and subsequently of truth as it is in and for itself. Epicurus, on the other hand, argued that we should acquaint ourselves with death, the most awful of evils, and learn that death is nothing to us when we are alive, and nothing to us when we are dead, since then we are not alive. By doing so we could also understand what the cosmos is, a sort of play of forces where nothing ever arises out of the nonexistent. This instruction to see death as nothing, whether it is based on Epicurean or Platonist ideals, was according to Rosenzweig the “compassionate lie of philosophy” (Rosenzweig 2005, p. 10). Compassionate by trying to ease the pain of mortality, yet still a lie that cannot successfully teach us how to die—since we know that death is not nothing, but a something—or, for that matter, give us a “cognition of the All”. It cannot do so, Rosenzweig argues, falsely or not, because classical philosophy refuses to base itself in the reality of the material and temporal existence that the soldier experiences in the trenches.

The ancient understanding of philosophy as a means to differentiate oneself from the material world was still alive during Rosenzweig’s lifetime, and it was this disembodied form of philosophy that he distanced himself from. His teacher in Freiburg, Heinrich Rickert, argued in a Platonic manner that “[o]nly when a human has *separated* himself from his atheoretical interests of ‘life’ and ‘existence’, and only tries to think theoretically about himself and his environment, does he reach the *independence* which he needs to get to see everything which there is in the world, that is the world-totality” (Rickert 1934, p. 7). Rickert’s insistence on philosophy as a theoretical life liberated from ordinary, concrete existence is perhaps most evident in *Die Philosophie des Lebens* (Rickert 1920). In this critique of *Lebensphilosophie*, he claimed that “since every man who is concerned with philosophy is not only a living being, but also a thinking being” (Rickert 1920, p. 59) the philosopher must separate himself from life in order to grasp what Rosenzweig called “the All”.

Rickert asked rhetorically “if... living beings only could live and experience... According to the modern philosophy of life, it sometimes looks like that. The bare life [bloßes Leben] seems to it a blessedness of life” (Rickert 1920, p. 59). *Lebensphilosophie* reduced human life to the non-contemplative existence that Socrates depicted with scorn, and which Rickert urged his students to leave behind in order to become true philosophers capable of systematising the world as a totality.

At the *Balkanfront*, with dying comrades and enemies around him, Rosenzweig attacked the philosophy that Rickert represented, and wrote that it “abandons the body to the power of the abyss” by privileging the soul over the mortal coil (Rosenzweig 2005,

p. 9). Furthermore, he continued, “the fear of death knows nothing of such a separation in body and soul” (Rosenzweig 2005, p. 9). The soldier dying in war who “yells I, I, I and wants to hear nothing about a deflection of the fear onto a mere ‘body’—matters little to philosophy” (Rosenzweig 2005, p. 10). Socrates’s death proved that “the ultimate conclusion” for philosophy is that “death would be—nothing. However, this is not an ultimate conclusion, but a first beginning, and death is truly not what it seems, not nothing, but a pitiless something that cannot be excluded” (Rosenzweig 2005, p. 10). It is a death of a specific person, and therefore a death of a part of the world.

Against the philosophers, Rosenzweig decried that one should neither cast aside the fear of death, nor exorcise what he called the fear of the earthly. One should “stay” in the fear of death for the “fear of the earthly should be removed... only with the earthly itself” (Rosenzweig 2005, p. 10). The soldier waiting for the next battle in the trenches, with the image of war and death on his retina, and the aging or sick person with the hope of living on with her loved ones, know that death is not nothing. Their anxiety shows us that death is always the death of someone. It is the death of a creature; the death of a living being; the death of a human being and a bodily creature. It is a death that can be said to disprove a central tenet of ancient philosophy.

The danger with philosophy in its classical form is that it disconnects the human from the reality of death. It suppresses too easily the longing and even struggle for survival that defines life. Even worse, this form of philosophy may become so abstract that it separates itself from the concrete existence of the human who does not only die, but also lives and nourishes himself as a psychophysical creature with biological, cultural, and economical needs. By denying death as the annihilation of an individual who, Rosenzweig writes, “wants to live”, philosophy falsifies what our concrete life can teach us about existence and, consequently, what we can know of “the All” (Rosenzweig 2005, p. 9). Even more, when philosophy urges us to flee the sting of death and view death as nothing, it refuses the commonsensical basis of all philosophical ideas: the bare life that seeks survival. It is in this sense that philosophy easily becomes a flight from the common sense, *von dem gesunden Menschenverstand*, that the reality of death implies according to Rosenzweig. Yet, as we have seen, Rosenzweig also argues that life as we know it must be transformed if we want to grasp “the All”. Life must become something other than survival.

## 5. The Common Sense of Death

Death is always the death of what Rickert called a bare or mere life—*bloßes Leben*—it is a death of a specific individual, and it is in the death of such a particular life, and more specifically in our struggle for survival, that a true philosophy must commence; commence, yet not end. A life that is unable to transcend this struggle, a life that is mere life, cannot understand how dying attests truth and will never be able to teach us how to die. Thus, for all his criticism of classical philosophy, Rosenzweig was still close to the idea that we need to teach ourselves how to die.

Rosenzweig argued that his so-called “new thinking knows, just like the age-old [thinking] of common sense, that it cannot know independently of time—which was the highest claim to glory that philosophy up to now assumed for itself” (Rosenzweig 1999a, p. 83). Rickert is one of many who claimed that a philosophy stuck in time will never be able to develop a *Weltanschauung*, a conception of the world in its totality. It will only be a *Zeitanschauung*, a mere understanding of time, which all true philosophy must transcend (Rickert 1920, p. 14). Rosenzweig insisted against this tradition that the world is temporal, and the task of philosophy is to examine how the temporality of our reality reveals a coming unity and a systematic knowledge of “the All” through death, and therefore through the completion of the truth of the world in time.

The temporality of existence is a providential sign that “the world is becoming. The world is not yet complete. Laughter and tears are still in it. And the tears are not yet wiped away on all faces” (Rosenzweig 2005, p. 235). Laughter and tears are the movements of life and reveal that life, as such, is not yet finished or completed. Con-

sequently, true knowledge of “the All” must include the “state of becoming, of incompleteness” (Rosenzweig 2005, p. 235) as a common feature of every part of the world, and, Rosenzweig insisted, “[w]e ourselves along with our world concepts belong to the world” (Rosenzweig 1998c, p. 95). When we grasp our finitude as a constitutive part of the world, we become aware of the disjointed state of the world itself.

The sense of our own mortality is ontologised by Rosenzweig as a sense of the limitations common to the world itself. Death reveals for the living that they will one day belong to the past. Common sense as the common sense of our finitude shatters every endeavor to grasp “the All”, since our mortality reveals the world as a manifold and multiverse. This is the truth of perspectivism that perhaps has found its most intelligent defenders in Kant and Nietzsche, but which has formed a great deal of Western thought. We understand the world from our singular perspective in space and time, and therefore as something spatiotemporal. The world is the vast spacetime continuum that constitutes the universe as we perceive it, and this continuum exists in the form of change and movement. In fact, the world can only be completed through the unfolding of time; in other words, there is for Rosenzweig a messianic goal in “the All” that is built through life’s completion in death. This is what the common sense of time implies: time completes the world by moving it towards its end, and thereby sealing and limiting the possibility of its interpretation. A world that dies away in time is a world that becomes complete. Thus, analogically, just as the world is given completion in its end, life is open for a multitude of interpretations by lacking the closeness that only death can bestow upon it. Death is the crisis of interpretation, implying the end of life, and it reveals what life was by making it self-identical with what it turned out to be in time, and therefore in the spacetime continuum that Rosenzweig called the world. Yet, at the same time, our mortality encloses us in our finite perspective and makes of the world manifold perspectives. The reason why death limits perspectivism, making it possible for the living to say: this is what his or her life was, is, from Rosenzweig’s perspective, because there will come a time when “the All” is revealed in its unity through a vision that is “beyond cognition and experience” (Rosenzweig 2005, p. 414). Rosenzweig’s cognition of “the All” is in the end a profoundly eschatological vision of the unfolding of reality that every death points to by forming the world to what it is in time.

Rosenzweig’s turn to common sense is, as Cass Fisher has argued, “so preposterous that scholars have largely ignored this interpretive clue to the work” (Fisher 2016, p. 344). *The Star of Redemption* is, Rosenzweig wrote with ironic understatement, “really not intended for the everyday use of every member of the family” (Rosenzweig 1999a, p. 69). At the same time, he identified his philosophy with common sense, and claimed that it was a book for everyone, since everyone can understand the commonality of death for all life, and for him that common sense of our mortality can imply a way out of our finite and singular perspective on the world.

Rosenzweig’s posthumous volume *Das Büchlein vom gesunden und kranken Menschenverstand* translated as *Understanding the Sick and the Healthy* — clearly reveals that he defended what he thought was a sound common sense (Rosenzweig 1992, 1999b). Rosenzweig even claimed that his philosophy was a transformation of common sense into a method of scientific thinking. Common sense, *gesunder Menschenverstand*, accepts the limitations of life by knowing that everything will end and, in this end, achieve a certain unity. This is why death restricts the perspectivism of life: it gives the past a unity that the world of the living necessarily lacks; but how can this imply a belief in the possibility of a perspective “beyond cognition and experience”?

## 6. Beyond Perspectivism

It is from the perspective of radical finitude that Rosenzweig can declare that death is “the law of unity” in life and write: “one day the law of unity is suspended over. . . life. . . Knowledge is knowledge of one’s own unity. Precisely: the will toward—one’s own death. For only death makes life a unity. As long as the human is still living, the multiplicity of idols remains in him. Indeed, he would not be living if these idols lost their power. He

would hasten toward death” (Rosenzweig 1998b, p. 41). Only a being that no longer is in the present has unity and can be understood as being completed and identical with what it was. However, the living can only conceptualise that which was as part of life, and therefore view it as something that lacks the unity that death has given it. For even if death gives unity and thereby limits interpretation—we know when Rosenzweig died, for instance, and what articles and books he wrote during his life—different persons can interpret the meaning of these facts in radically different ways. The world is manifold for the living, and therefore a world of divergent perspectives.

However, death brings the multiplicity of life, what Rosenzweig beautifully called “the paganism of creation”, to an end. This “paganism of creation” is the manifold worldviews and perspectives that human existence expresses to the point that Rosenzweig writes: “Culture in itself is polytheistic” (Rosenzweig 1998b, p. 42). Not even a monotheistic civilisation can end this polytheism of worldviews—as long as it is living, it constantly produces heresies and new perspectives—and Rosenzweig’s goal with his philosophy of revelation was not to refute “the paganism of creation” but to reveal its truth as the manifold of the world itself. The world is a plurality of worlds; but to stay here, in “the paganism of creation”, and therefore in life itself, is to be unable to grasp the unity of these divergent worlds and perspectives and refuse to be engulfed in the end of interpretation that death implies.

Rosenzweig sought to move thought “beyond cognition and experience” by arguing that death reveals for us, in life, that we can live for something greater than the struggle for survival and see something that is not fully determined by our own finite and mortal experience. We can teach ourselves how to die, and thereby find “the law of unity” of life that makes us hope for something beyond the confines of life and the multitude of perspectives that it implies. This unity is “the sabbatical completion of the world” that Rosenzweig hoped for, and which form him implied the political task to transform human life to the point that it, even before death, could be something other than a struggle for survival (Björk 2022). To see “beyond cognition and experience” is to find the eschatological and deeply political vision of “the All” that Rosenzweig thought implied the need to build a world beyond the nations and the states that differentiate humanity. There was, for him, a necessary relation between cognition and being, vision and existence, and theory and praxis. The *Überwelt* that he hoped for was a world that had found its unity in the common sense of death. It was, he argued, a world beyond states and nations, and even beyond the two drastically reformed forces—Judaism and Christianity—which he thought could renew the world to a supra-world (Pollock 2004).

Not unlike his teacher Rickert, Rosenzweig stressed that *The Star of Redemption* was driven “by the task of overcoming the danger of understanding the new thinking, perhaps, in a sense, or rather the nonsense, of irrational tendencies such as the ‘philosophy of life’” (Rosenzweig 1999a, p. 94). For, “everyone clever enough to have steered clear of the jaws of the idealistic Charybdis seems nowadays to be drawn into the dark whirlpool of this Scylla” (Rosenzweig 1999a, p. 94). The “Scylla” is to view life as the ultimate horizon for thought, when thinking in fact seeks to move beyond everything that absolutises creaturely or biological existence. At least we human beings can understand more and other things than life and living, and therefore, Rosenzweig thought, wrest ourselves free from an experience and cognition bound to our own finite and individual experience. This is why he could argue that there exists a vision beyond the perspectivism of our differentiated world that arises through our understanding of what is common to all life, namely, death. Thus, even if Rosenzweig’s “new thinking” commences with the yearning for survival that characterises life, it aims to transcend finite life and the struggle that determines it. It seeks to leave the perspective of finite and temporal existence behind and reach what Rosenzweig enigmatically called “a life beyond life” (Rosenzweig 2005, p. 446). However, this “life beyond life” that philosophy and religion have sought can only be reached by an acknowledgment that what unites us humans, and even more, all living creatures, is the commonality of death, and therefore our mutual struggle for survival. The empire that he



sought was therefore a domain that should care for both the living and the dead. But what does “a life beyond life” imply, and what consequences has this essentially theological perspective today?

### 7. Life beyond Life

Peter Gordon has rightly emphasised that Rosenzweig’s philosophy remains within the bounds of finite life (Gordon 2005, pp. 86–91). Rosenzweig’s hermeneutics of life confirms that “we are creatures (*Geschöpfe*), precisely insofar as we do not possess the truth as a whole. And as creatures, we remain ‘within the boundaries of mortality’” (Gordon 2005, p. 176). If we were granted more than our portion of the truth, this would require that we surpassed the boundaries of our finite life, Gordon argues. Still, according to Rosenzweig, this is what death implies for the creature. Death casts the creature out of the boundaries of its finitude into the domain of the past, which exists as the world that forever is what it once was, and this world is common to all. By being in the past, or rather by becoming part of the past, creaturely life is no longer temporal. It is eternal, and therefore exists outside the boundaries of our mortality.

According to Gordon, *The Star of Redemption* “should not be read as a progressive argument, but rather as a hermeneutic investigation” (Gordon 2005, p. 177). Even if I agree with Gordon that Rosenzweig writes from the perspective of creaturely life, it is still the case that all finite life progresses towards death, simply because every creature is a mortal and temporal being. There is an evolution in *The Star of the Redemption* towards a perspective on the life of the creature from the vantage point of unity given by death. The aim of Rosenzweig’s philosophy is to describe how death is an apocalypse by revealing “a life beyond life”, namely, the life of the past, which according to Rosenzweig is not exactly dead, but rather eternalised as what it forever was (Rosenzweig 2005, p. 446).

Death completes being, since “only death makes life a unity” (Rosenzweig 1998b, p. 41). However, death gives not only unity. It also endows us with eternity, for when “a form of the world dies it is... made eternal” (Rosenzweig 1998b, p. 55). What has been is forever what it was. It now exists once and for all. “[E]ach individual event”, Rosenzweig writes, “is a rigidifying, a non plus ultra. In this sense, one can say that nature at every moment rigidifies to ‘eternal being’” (“being is eternal”), that it is full of death. (Law of entropy!)” (Rosenzweig 1998a, p. 102). The second law of thermodynamics gives time an irreversible direction evolving from the past into the future, and was in Rosenzweig’s time interpreted as an accumulation of the entropic disorder of the cosmos to the point of the destruction of the universe in its totality. This process was seen as a threat to the idea of immortality and resurrection, since it posited the end of everything. But it is through death that being is given eternity, according to Rosenzweig. Death moves us into the immortal, and everything that was is endowed with this eternity and helps to build “the All”. By being past life, life enters the domain of eternity, and can be said to be the accumulated ground of both present and future life. The past, Rosenzweig wagers, is not annulled in nothingness but eternalised as that which was. It is the ground of being and it is in this respect our world is a world of many ends. The world is nothing but the death of former life and the movement of that which is into that which was. It is in this sense death, and even more the arrow of time, give the world form.

Every death is part of the past that is the condition of possibility of the world, and more specifically life, as such. For, Rosenzweig writes, the “being of the world is its being-already-there [*Schon-da-sein*]... [W]e now see the characteristic of Creation in general when we understand existence [*Dasein*] as being-there [*Da-sein*], already-being-there [*Schon-da-sein*], no longer as a simple universal being, but as being which gathers all the singular in itself” (Rosenzweig 2005, p. 143).<sup>1</sup> If the being of the world is its being-already-there, then everything that exists after itself, and since the past is eternal being, then the land of the dead is the kingdom of eternity. It is the past that makes being a being-already-there. There is no nothingness. There is only the eternal, which from the perspective of the finite

creature is the world of that which was, which upholds the present and even moves us towards our own end.

The past is not only the condition of possibility for existence. It is the condition of possibility for knowledge itself. The world of the preceding, as the ground of being, comes before thought and knowledge, and makes truth and therefore reality possible. This is why it is only when the mathematical theorem has been formulated in time, and therefore belongs to the past, that we can verify and judge its validity. Rosenzweig writes explicitly that “all concepts that attempt to embrace reality universally try to adopt the form of the past [*die Form der Vergangenheit*]... the concept of ‘cause,’ of ‘origin,’ of ‘presupposition,’ of ‘a priori’: each time, the world is projected into the past in order to be knowable” (Rosenzweig 2005, p. 143). The temporality of the world embeds all objects and creatures—be they animate or inanimate, organic or inorganic, historical or natural, concrete or conceptual—in the form of the preceding, which makes knowledge and truth possible. Knowledge is always a form of history: it searches for a cause, an origin, or a presupposition of what is real. Truth, as we have seen, presupposes reality, and knowledge is a knowledge of the causes, origins, and presuppositions of reality, and subsequently of the eternal being of the past.

At the same time, the past is not possible without a future, and even if Rosenzweig to an extent privileges the past as the eternal being that makes present and future existence possible, it is still the future that explains the past in his system. The past is only past as a beginning. It is in this sense that his philosophy is profoundly messianic, and why his interpretation of death as the apocalypse and crisis of the truth of life unfolds to a cosmological eschatology. The future end of the world completes everything by making it part of the eternity of the past, since only when something is completed can it be judged and understood for what it was or even was meant to be, and thereby it can become part of the growing accumulation of “the All”. The unity of the world of the dead reveals the commonality of all finite life, and discloses how the world of the dead is the presupposition of the domain of the living. For even the living, by being alive in time, belong to the world of the past, which is the eternal being of everything that was. Even when we exist in the present, something of ourselves belongs to the past, since we would not be here, in this now, if our past was not already dead and eternalised as that which was.

Life and death are enmeshed in each other. We can only live by dying away into the world that was. It is not only the world in its totality that is already *Schon-da-sein*. Everything that is in the present, and therefore everything in the world, exists after itself. Life is always an afterlife; a life after itself; a life eternalised as the time that was. Life judges itself by dying in time: it encloses and embeds the living into the strange “life beyond life” disclosing that the truth of our existence is our immortality and eternity. Time shows for us, and possibly for everyone, what we are becoming, by dying into the past, and therefore what we could have been if we had lived other lives. It is this feeling that life could have been otherwise that points to what Rosenzweig called “the logic of redemption”, and which for him also implies that we in a sense can liberate the past and be liberated from what was. If we understand that we all are temporal and mortal creatures whose acts in time become eternal, then we can learn to see beyond our interests and perspectives and find “the All” that we have in common, not only as that which is but also as that which was, will and even more could be. We have to take Rosenzweig’s suggestion that the past is eternal seriously and remember that eternity for Rosenzweig is God; a living God who seeks his own redemption through the acts that save the world by giving it a sabbatical completion. The past is eternalised as what it was, but the past is also a beginning, and a beginning changes not only the future, but determines that which was.

## 8. Conclusions: The World’s Sabbath

Rosenzweig’s philosophy of revelation is not only a philosophy of time but a theology of redemption. It is a cosmic eschatology indicating how our world is a world of many ends; a world that is ending in every death, and therefore, as strange as it might seem,

given eternal existence through these deaths that both judge and reveal the state of our existence. This theory of the past as eternal being is part of an eschatological clarification of how the dead can be said to partake in the eternity that Rosenzweig equated with the eternal life of God. It is in God that all interpretations and perspectives end, by lifting us, as Rosenzweig enigmatically writes, “beyond cognition and experience” (Rosenzweig 2005, p. 414).

The arrow of time that entropy signifies is the eternalisation of the world in the past through the completion that the future gives life, since above everything temporal “stands a promise of the end, a thought of completion... The eternal cycle of the world-law is ruptured by the promise of the *happiness* of peace (Nirvana, death)” (Rosenzweig 1998b, p. 55). Life, for Rosenzweig, was a life of war, of sickness with malaria at the *Balkanfront*, and a painful death in 1929 from the muscular degenerative disease Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS). It was a life that had accepted the common sense of death, and for him this acceptance was what Christianity and Judaism can teach us. Therefore, he could quote Paul’s words in the *First Letter to the Corinthians* that “death is swallowed by the victory” of the resurrection, and write that “[p]aganism never really reaches beyond death because it never realises that ‘death is swallowed by victory’, because it knows no life that *affirms* death and *therefore* is beyond it” (Rosenzweig 1984, p. 95). The Abrahamic God, Rosenzweig insists, gives us a capacity to view life and even the divine itself as something else than simply living: “For the gods of antiquity are also living, and not only He whom today we call the living one. They are even, if you will, much more alive. For they are nothing but alive. They are immortal. Death lies beneath them” (Rosenzweig 2005, p. 41). What he schematically defined as paganism, and more specifically what he called “the paganism of creation” denotes the biocentric forces that affirm life, and nothing but life. Yet life—at least human life—is not only living by existing after itself, and therefore being an afterlife touched by death. It is a life in relation to the dead, and even to the divine, which transcends the binary difference between life and death that only falsely constitutes our existence:

God is not life, God is light. He is the Lord of life, but he is as little alive as he is dead; and to state one or the other about him, as the ancient man states, that “he lives,” and as the modern man states, that he “is dead,” betrays equal pagan partiality. Only that neither–nor of dead and alive, only that fine point where life and death touch and melt into one does not forbid the typical terminology. God neither lives nor is dead, but he gives life to what is dead, he—loves. He is the God of the living as of the dead, just because he himself is neither living nor dead; we experience his existence immediately only in the fact that he loves us, and awakens our dead Self into the beloved soul that loves in return. (Rosenzweig 2005, p. 403)

Just as we the living, by dying into the past through our eternalisation as that which was, already are dead, God is “neither living nor dead”. God is the light that makes remembrance of the dead possible. From a secular perspective, we know that light is the material presence of the past in the now, and by being creatures that know more than life, we can live for something more than mere survival, and thereby contribute to the task of God’s own redemption from the forces that try to turn us humans into nothing but workers struggling for survival. But we, humans or whatever we are, are not only living. We are nearer the “neither–nor of dead and alive” that is God’s “life outside life” than we think, and this is what can make us love, rather than solely struggle for survival. Thereby we can live beyond the logic of work and survival that has shaped our world into a domain of states and nations that lacks the unity that Rosenzweig sought. For love, from this perspective, is the selfless love that can even move us to sacrifice. Yet this love implies another struggle, a struggle between death and life where we the living must take the side of the dead in order to be bestowed with the being beyond life and death that is God’s love, and which Rosenzweig described as the happiness that comes with the completion of life.

By understanding death as the promise of happiness that is bestowed on the living when life reaches its completion, Rosenzweig identifies an antagonism between the eternal being of the past, which he comes close to identifying with the unity of God, and the polytheism of the living during the course of history: “against the unity of God there is the multiplicity of the—idols. *Fight* is here between unity and multiplicity. Of this the *philosophy* of unity knows nothing... For only death makes life a unity” (Rosenzweig 1998b, p. 55). If life is polytheistic by being manifold, even manifold perspectives, then death is monotheistic by promising unity and a redemption beyond all forms of interpretation. This evolution towards a monotheistic unity outside the confines of life is expressed in a yearning that every living, and perhaps even every dead, part of the cosmos, is moved by: “The longing of the world is called happiness. The longing of the human is called completion” (Rosenzweig 1998b, p. 56). Life desires rest from the struggle for survival that defines it, and rest is what happiness ultimately is for Rosenzweig, who fought all his life for a carefree existence. He struggled for a life unbothered by surviving to the point that it even transcended the finite joy of life, which is always a life of laughter and tears.

At the same time, Rosenzweig urges us to stay in the earthly. The “life beyond life” is “nothing different than what I was permitted to perceive already in the centre of life”, since life already belongs to the world of the dead that is eternalised as the *Schonda-Sein* of the world (Rosenzweig 2005, p. 446). The “last”—“the life beyond life”—is the “nearest”, something already given to us in the divine commandment to love our neighbour (Rosenzweig 2005, p. 447). Neighbourly love, Rosenzweig argues, compels us to understand that we can move both beyond and behind the present by hoping for the future and remembering the past. Our love transcends time and relativises the difference between the living and the dead by being eternal and therefore deeply intertwined with the world of the dead.

Elliot Wolfson has noted this thanatological dimension of Rosenzweig’s thinking by stating that the leitmotif of *The Star of the Redemption* is that “[d]eath is only the beginning, the way that leads unto life” (Wolfson 1997, p. 43). Death, Wolfson writes, comparing Rosenzweig to Martin Heidegger, is not in any sense an appropriation of one’s own *Sein-zum-Tode*, but “the recognition of one’s essential relatedness to the eternal life that is other than oneself” (Wolfson 1997, p. 43). This emphasis that eternal life is *other than oneself* is of crucial importance, since eternal life is the eternalised life of that which was. It is the life that moves beyond the dichotomy of being alive and being dead by being the past, which is always present as that which was. This does not imply that we should view Rosenzweig as a mystic against his will. But the knowledge of “the All” that he sought is only possible for someone who “affirms death and therefore is beyond it.” It is only possible in the renewed supra-world, where we humans can live for something more than mere survival.

It is the unity of death, in other words, Rosenzweig’s insistence that death is not a nothing but rather the cessation of concrete and temporal life, that moves his thinking out of the domain of life into the completion that death implies for all life. Rosenzweig thought that death was not only the positive ending of what we can call a fully lived life. Death is also the completion of a life that never had the possibility to live fully. The truth of such an unfulfilled life is that it can be judged as something unjust, as something that can be lamented. It is in this way that death is an apocalypse and therefore revelation of the truth of life. All death, even the most horrific death, is a completion that gives the living the possibility to judge and verify the meaning of the past once and for all. Death gives us, if we listen to Rosenzweig, the basis for a theology of redemption that can help us judge the sense of life beyond human interpretation, and even force us to understand that the dead are living and the living already dead. It is in this way that Rosenzweig calls us to understand that we humans are not only living, struggling, or even experiencing. We are images of the “neither–nor of dead and alive” that is God, and we can redeem the world by living sabbatical lives; lives that are dead for the world of nation, work, and the harsh struggle for survival.

Our death determines the state of the world and discloses why it is a world of not only one but many ends; a world that judges itself by dying into the eternal, as something that still has not taught us that it, the world, can be common to “All”. If the world is reshaped by those endless acts of redemption God needs for his own completion—our daily and often feeble attempts to live according to another law than the struggle for survival—then we can begin to experience “the All” and understand what it means that the past is eternal: it is the unity for everything that was, is and will be. Through such a cognition the world would be redeemed, and we would reach what Rosenzweig called an eternal life, where everyone is beyond both death and life, since such a perspective would only be possible through the emergence of “the All”. But until then, while we still live and struggle as mortal beings and the world entails manifold perspectives, the task is to overcome the logic of survival with “the logic of redemption” and reshape the world so that we can live more and more as sabbatical animals, rather than as creatures destined to struggle for survival.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The original German is: ‘Dies Sein der Welt ist ihr Schon-da-sein... Was wir als die Gestalt erkannten, in der die Welt sich als Kreatur offenbart, das erkennen wir nun, wo wir das Dasein als Da-sein, Schon-da-sein, nicht mehr bloß als allgemeines, aber alles einzelne in sich führendes Sein fassen, als das entscheidende Merkmal der Schöpfung überhaupt.’ Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung*, 146. Galli’s translation is, as we see here, not strong, and does not translate the subordinate clause *in der die Welt sich als Kreatur offenbart*, but her translation stresses, on the other hand, that the world is a creature, something created, and that revelation reveals the creatureliness of the world.

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