

# LEVINAS, ROSENZWEIG, AND THE PHENOMENOLOGIES OF HUSSERL AND HEIDEGGER

Richard A. Cohen

There is a moment of exceptional humility in *Totality and Infinity*. In the preface, Emmanuel Levinas acknowledges a profound indebtedness to a book published forty years earlier, Franz Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption*. He writes:

We were impressed by the opposition to the idea of totality in Franz Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption*, a work too often present in this book to be cited.<sup>1</sup>

One can hardly imagine higher praise or the admission of greater debt.

The magnitude of indebtedness is even more striking when viewed in the light of a letter unknown to Levinas, a letter by Rosenzweig to his mother, dated the 5th of October 1921. He writes:

I understand I was put in a [rabbi's] sermon yesterday and my book referred to as "the sublime book of a new thinker who lives in our midst." But it won't be really good until they use me in sermons without quoting me, and best of all, without even knowing that it is me that they are using.<sup>2</sup>

Franz's words to his mother are fulfilled by Levinas' words to his readers.

We might therefore begin to understand the place of *The Star* in *Totality and Infinity* by interpreting these private words of Rosenzweig in a public Levinasian way. "Really good" words, we would say, are not scholastic exercises, not recitations, but words freely used "without quoting," the speech or *saying* of a thinker whose living presence is always "new," always beyond what happens to be *said*, subject-matter, contents, or themes. The new would not just be the novelty resulting from an author's craft or artistry, but the freshness of he "who lives in our midst," he who faces us *face to face*. "Best," to continue this reading, would be words used "without even knowing," words used without the shadows cast by reflection, without the echoes of mental life, without the distances of its caution, reserve, and irony. Genuine words would be those disrupting knowledge from outside its grasp, words that escape the superior and synoptic gaze of comprehension, words that make greater *demands* on knowing than knowing knows or demands of itself. Interpreted in this fashion, Rosenzweig's *Star* would be the "sublime" book, the overflow, which serves as both mount and "sermon"

PHILOSOPHY TODAY

165

of *Totality and Infinity*. And it is certainly such a book.

Yet Levinas' thankful words force us to do more than discover the place, however cleverly detected, of *The Star* in the general economy of *Totality and Infinity*. Levinas forces us to do more because directly after acknowledging the incalculable debt *Totality and Infinity* owes to *The Star*, he acknowledges an even greater debt to Edmund Husserl's phenomenological method. The very next sentence reads:

But the presentation and the development of the notions employed owe everything [*doivent tout*] to the phenomenological method.

*Owe everything!* It cannot be accidental that right after acknowledging an immeasurable—or unmeasurable—indebtedness to Rosenzweig's *Star*, Levinas acknowledges an even greater indebtedness to Husserl's phenomenological method.

What is at stake here? Why *these* acknowledgements? Why, to take up the title of a talk that Levinas gave on Rosenzweig in 1959 (one year before the publication of *Totality and Infinity*—again the same conjunction), why this “timidity and audacity”?<sup>3</sup> How timid, after all, to be in such debt, to owe so much to these giants of early twentieth century thought. And all the same, how audacious to admit to such a debt, to proceed on one's own in the face of two such thinkers. Why, more to the point, this unmistakable link between *The Star* and phenomenology?

To have an even preliminary feel for the weight of these two sentences within *Totality and Infinity*, we must be reminded that Levinas' preface is in no way a polite litany of acknowledgements. Neither, though it is tacked onto the front of an already com-

pleted book, is it a preliminary map or guide to the text that follows it. Nor, for that matter, is the preface a preemptive criticism, spoken from the laboriously achieved and superior vantage point of the book's conclusion, as if Levinas were surveying his text and reader alike like the adult who looks knowingly upon the child at the start of its education.

In the last sentence of the preface Levinas reveals its purpose: “attempting to restate without ceremony what has already been ill understood in the inevitable ceremonial in which the said delights,” the said being the body of *Totality and Infinity*. It is inevitably ill understood, and, so it seems, quickly ill understood, so quickly that the very preface to *Totality and Infinity* is already a corrective for *Totality and Infinity*. Of course, the preface too, though it valiantly attempts to forestall the inevitable misunderstanding of the text, will with equal inevitability be itself misunderstood. To counter these inevitable misunderstandings without affirming some impossibly absolute word, a “magical” word, Levinas links end and beginning. By joining the beginning to the end he sets up a circular and therefore unending reading of the text, a reading resembling nothing so much as the annual reading of the Torah in the Jewish liturgical year. Each time the text is ill understood, inevitably, quickly, yet each time something more is understood, something deeper.

The preface continues, reanimates, emphasizes, the philosophical claim, life, truth, spirit—there are no magic words—which animate(s) *Totality and Infinity*, however inevitable and quick the loss of whatever it is that drives this text, that is in it but not of it—like Rosenzweig's *Star*? I use these particular verbs and nouns deliberately because on Levinasian “ground” one must be wary of characterizing the achievement

## PHILOSOPHY TODAY

or accomplishment of *Totality and Infinity* in such traditional terms as “themes,” “contents,” “grounds,” “essences,” “theories,” and the like. One must be wary, even and especially in view of the unavoidable peculiarity of speaking of contents, themes, and grounds which are neither contents, themes, or grounds, nor the negation of contents, themes, or grounds. It is precisely *this* distance from traditional philosophical positions—and the word “wariness,” like all words, is not quite right either, thank goodness—is what is already on display in the structural relation of the preface to the rest of *Totality and Infinity*. If we take Levinas at his word, is it not strange, at the least, for a preface *to come before what it continues*? How can what has not yet begun be continued? Can there be a beginning prior to the origin? If being has an origin, as philosophy has always maintained (regardless of whether philosophy can or cannot discover that origin), then what is the sense of “is” when one says that “there *is* a beginning prior to the origin”? Such a beginning would already be a challenge to the firstness of first philosophy, would already be a challenge to the “is” that attempts to discover its origin, of itself, by itself, courageously, invoking all of history and nature if that is what it takes to be free of outside help. Perhaps this peculiar structure is the first signal or the first shot of the revolution which is the true *work*—the accomplishment, the achievement—of Levinas’ text: a pacific but fundamental inversion of philosophical discourse, an inversion of the order of justification and being. Is this not the sign or trace of the peculiar way that the “really good,” to return to Rosenzweig’s letter, enters philosophy? Is it not also and already a clue regarding the strange presence of Rosenzweig’s *Star* in Levinas’ *Totality and Infinity*? Surely if one were, in

philosophy, *to continue what has not yet originated*, “its” presence would be overwhelming at the same time that it could not be quoted.

Stepping back from the pursuit of these lines of inquiry, these intrigues, however fascinating or fruitful they may prove, let us for the moment just say that the glimpses they yield succeed in showing that Levinas’ acknowledgements of indebtedness to both Rosenzweig and Husserl, far from being merely private or professional discharges of obligation, are in fact essential ingredients of Levinas’ philosophy.

To lend further credence to this unassuming claim, and to gain a further but still preliminary insight into its significance, that is to say, insight into the relation between Rosenzweig’s *Star* and Husserl’s phenomenological method, we have to look at the specific context of these two sentences. We have to be reminded that the acknowledgement of indebtedness to Rosenzweig begins two paragraphs otherwise devoted entirely to phenomenology and that it follows a paragraph devoted entirely to phenomenology. The very first appearance of the word “phenomenology” in *Totality and Infinity* occurs in the paragraph directly preceding the appearance of Rosenzweig’s name. Levinas’ acknowledgement of indebtedness to Rosenzweig’s *Star* is, in a word, sandwiched between two prolonged discussions of phenomenological method. There is not just a conjunction of two acknowledgements linked by their hyperbole, but, as if to answer doubters, the gist of these acknowledgements is immediately fulfilled: *The Star* vanishes and phenomenology looms large. *The Star* is but an island in a sea of phenomenology. Or, to change metaphors, *Totality and Infinity* is like “those figures of Silenus in statuaries’ shops,” with a pure but hidden center en-

cased by philosophy's familiar image of scientific method.

Yet another paradox appears. In the paragraph preceding Rosenzweig's name, Levinas lashes out against one of the most fundamental tenets of the whole of phenomenology, namely, the idea that consciousness is always intentional consciousness. In a moment Levinas will claim that his text "owes everything" to the phenomenological method. Just now the method appears fundamentally flawed. Against the idea that consciousness is adequate to its objects, Levinas defends the existence and status of a more fundamental non-adequation, a "relation" to the idea of infinity. Later in *Totality and Infinity* he will call this relation an "unrelating relation."<sup>4</sup> And later still, in his second major book (where, still true to the earlier work, Rosenzweig and *The Star* do not appear at all), he will characterize it as "otherwise than being or beyond essence." It is a relation already at work in a preface that comes both before and after a text.

The criticism of phenomenology occurs in the paragraph preceding the mention of Rosenzweig. It reads, with minor deletions, as follows:

Consciousness then does not consist in equating being with representation, in tending to the full light in which this adequation is to be sought, but rather in overflowing this play of lights—this phenomenology—and in accomplishing *events* whose ultimate signification (contrary to the Heideggerian conception) does not lie in *disclosing* . . . . The welcoming of the face and the work of justice—which condition the birth of truth itself are not interpretable in terms of disclo-

sure. Phenomenology is a method for philosophy, but phenomenology—the comprehension effected through a bringing to light—does not constitute the ultimate event of being itself.<sup>5</sup>

Only after this harsh indictment of phenomenology, as if this indictment opened the space, does Levinas acknowledge his debt to Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption*. The peculiarity or paradox thus increases: it is not only having acknowledged an inordinate debt to Rosenzweig's *Star* but also having attacked phenomenology at its roots, that Levinas acknowledges his massive debt to phenomenological method. Then, after this acknowledgement Levinas proceeds to a prolonged and relatively positive discussion of phenomenology, though at this point the reader hardly knows whether the appearance of this discussion is more or less paradoxical, given all that has preceded it.

Rather than say that Levinas's acknowledgement of Rosenzweig is sandwiched between two separate discussions of phenomenological method, it is more accurate to say that Levinas' acknowledgement of Rosenzweig *interrupts* one extended discussion of phenomenology. I use the term "interruption" deliberately here, not only to remind us of the dynamics of the living face to face conversation which is so important to both Rosenzweig and Levinas, not only to remind us of the sense in which Levinas takes skepticism to be a refutable but irrepressible interruption of philosophy<sup>6</sup> in a struggle which occurs at the level of knowledge, but also and most importantly in the sense that knowledge itself is permanently ruptured not by *what* comes from another dimension, but by the *otherness* of another dimension, by the difference between that

other dimension's slant onto knowledge, its *absolute* "opposition" if you will, and the slant of knowledge itself with its many but always relative oppositions. Again, here "is" the peculiar presence of the "really good," a good which is not real but is *really*, is not ontological but emphatic.

Again let us take a step back from *these* heady developments to return to a more prosaic sense, to the obvious fact that the Rosenzweig sentence interrupts many sentences having to do with phenomenology. Furthermore, it interrupts all the sentences of *Totality and Infinity*. Rosenzweig's name and the name of his book appear in only this one sentence, one out of thousands. The contributions of Husserl and Heidegger, on the other hand, are discussed explicitly or implicitly on nearly every page of *Totality and Infinity*, as one would expect from an author whose worldwide scholarly reputation came initially from several excellent expositions of the phenomenologies of Husserl and Heidegger.

One sentence—is it possible that contrary to everything thus far indicated above, including Levinas' own claim, this means that Rosenzweig is *not* important? We only raise this objection, if it merits even this label, in order to make a final preliminary point. A Jew—Levinas is certainly Jewish—or the Jewish people—*The Star* is certainly a book for the Jew and for the Jewish people—or a Christian, or anyone else, for that matter, who stands in proximity to the humanism and monotheism of the Western religions of revelation, cannot be so jaded as to the impressed only by large numbers, as if *one*—the one above and each and every one below—were not the most impressive of all numbers, or as if *two* and *three* did not already set in motion innumerable infinities.

Levinas is meticulously true to his few words about Rosenzweig's *Star*. We never

hear of Rosenzweig or *The Star* again! But for one sentence they are "invisible to history," to use an expression dear to both Levinas and Rosenzweig; they are *almost* lost in the "inevitable ceremonial in which the said delights." It is *almost as if* nothing had been said.<sup>7</sup> Can one imagine a finer distinction, a more refined discretion, a greater dignity and trust, to be thus mentioned once and once only!

In view of these two peculiarities, (1) the eminent but brief appearance of Rosenzweig—like a shooting star—within an extended discussion of phenomenology, and (2) the allegation of *The Star's* exorbitant presence in absentia in *Totality and Infinity*, we are prompted to ask two questions. First, what connection is there for Levinas between Rosenzweig's *Star* and the phenomenologies of Husserl and Heidegger? Second, what is the deeper meaning of Rosenzweig's excessive presence and absence in *Totality and Infinity*? How can a thought be *too often* present? When quantity becomes quality, when excess becomes invisibility, are we not already in the presence of the idea of infinity? Though I will start with the question of the relation between the *Star* and phenomenology, it will become apparent that the two questions and their answers are inseparable.

In the main, the discussion before the Rosenzweig sentence is, as we have seen, critical of phenomenology and the discussion afterwards, as we have yet to see, is laudatory.

Returning to the discussion beforehand, to the criticism of phenomenology quoted above, where phenomenology's central methodological and structural notion of intentionality, the adequation of consciousness to its objects, is challenged in the name of the idea of infinity, one can see the logic whereby Levinas concludes his discussion

with glowing praise for Rosenzweig's *Star*, more specifically for its "opposition to the idea of totality." Levinas' logic would be as follows: the primordial "events whose ultimate signification" exceed phenomenology are "the welcoming of the face and the work of justice." These two events, as events,<sup>8</sup> are precisely the central message of Rosenzweig's *Star*, its revelatory love of the neighbor and its redemptive call to save the world, a revelation and a redemption whose imperative force enable the *Star* to oppose the idea of totality.

Just as Rosenzweig strives to break up the classical philosophical equation of thinking and being, especially as found in the Hegelian dialectic, that is to say, in the dynamic identity (whether open or closed) of identity and difference, Levinas opposes phenomenology's fundamental idea of intentionality, the idea of a thoroughgoing correlation of consciousness and its objects. By defining consciousness as intentional from top to bottom, from the most transcendent to the most immanent significations, as intentional even in its own self-constitution, phenomenology sees no exit from the circuit of noema and noesis. The mercy and justice which Rosenzweig's *Star* sets up against the conceptual totalizing of "philosophy from Parmenides to Hegel," also inspire Levinas in his opposition to the noetic-noematic totality of phenomenology. The inspiration of the concluding words of *The Star* is intended not merely as another philosophical discourse, nor merely as another philosophical intuition, but rather as a *call* from above. Rosenzweig has chosen his words deliberately, borrowing from the Bible, in order to *stir* his readers, not merely to persuade but to exhort them "to do justice and to love mercy," and "to walk humbly with thy God."<sup>9</sup>

When concluding his text with these

words, Rosenzweig explicitly warns his readers that love and justice are not to be taken as "goals," that is to say, as ideas in the Kantian sense. "To love mercy" is to aid the nearest one, the neighbor, and this—rather than the six hundred and thirteen commandments given on Mount Sinai—is the content or event of revelation. "To do justice" is to save the world, to complete it in and through history, to actively engage in hastening the Kingdom of God. "The Kingdom of God," Rosenzweig writes, "prevails in the world by being prevalent in the world;"<sup>10</sup> neither revelation nor redemption are "goals," for they are "wholly today, and thus wholly eternal as life and the way."<sup>11</sup> They are the inwardly burning fire of Judaism, its life, and the outwardly spreading rays of Christianity, its way. Rosenzweig intends the imperatives of love and justice to be taken—here interpreting Levinas' criticism of phenomenology as a commentary on Rosenzweig—as precisely those "events whose ultimate signification (contrary to the Heideggerian conception) does not lie in *disclosing*." Loving mercy and doing justice, whether in their Jewish or Christian modalities, are the events—"beyond the book"—which exceed the phenomenology which is today's philosophical version of the German idealism criticized by Rosenzweig.

This answer draws Rosenzweig into Levinas' criticism of phenomenology. By orienting their thought in ethics and social justice rather than grounding it in disclosure, by remaining true to the concrete persons and demands of social life rather than to the constitutive requirements of the "life of the mind," Levinas and Rosenzweig together oppose the idea of totality—whether the sophisticated and complex totalities found in the modern German idealisms of Fichte and Hegel or those found in the con-

## PHILOSOPHY TODAY

temporary German idealisms of Husserl and Heidegger. Levinas and Rosenzweig oppose totality in fundamentally the same way.

Beyond this side of the Rosenzweig-Husserl relation which *Totality and Infinity* sets up and maintains, we must also account for the so seemingly paradoxical conjunction of the *Star* and Levinas' positive appraisal of phenomenology. Having insisted prior to the Rosenzweig sentence that "phenomenology—the comprehension effected through a bringing to light—does not constitute the ultimate event of being itself," and having insisted that "the welcoming of the face and the work of justice—which condition the birth of truth itself—are not interpretable in terms of disclosure," we must ask how it is that after mentioning Rosenzweig Levinas can assert that "the presentation and development of the notions employed [in *Totality and Infinity*] owe everything to the phenomenological method"?

If Husserl and Heidegger are wrong about the status of intentional analysis then why does Levinas use it as his method? Why, furthermore, does Levinas go out of his way to highlight his use of the phenomenological method in proximity to his praise of Rosenzweig's *Star*? Certainly the textual contiguity, the shared excess, and the several speculations begun above, suggest an important link between Levinas' two positive appraisals.

At this juncture it is time to note Rosenzweig's own neglect of phenomenology. *The Star*, after all, was published more than two decades after the publication of Husserl's *Logical Investigations* (1899-1901), decades which saw this new phenomenology widely discussed in German philosophical circles. *The Star* was, in addition, written right after the publication of Husserl's *Ideas I* (1913). During

Rosenzweig's formative and creative years, then, Husserl was recognized in German speaking circles as Germany's leading philosopher. Nonetheless, despite the chronological, geographical, and professional proximity, Rosenzweig neither uses nor criticizes phenomenological method. He doesn't even mention it. While it is true that shortly after the publication of Heidegger's celebrated *Being and Time* in 1927, Rosenzweig, though quite ill, and though totally ignored by Heidegger, does devote a few pages to it, to what he generously took to be its proximity to *The Star*, he never discusses or so much as mentions Husserl. Phenomenology is neither present nor present in absentia in Rosenzweig's work—it is totally absent. This silence, however, speaks, though with quite a different message than Heidegger's silence.

Despite Rosenzweig's silence, we have nonetheless seen how Levinas could bring *The Star* to bear on a criticism of phenomenology, by opposing ethics and justice to the residual philosophical idealism of phenomenology. Now, in contrast, we are asking how Levinas can praise the *Star* in nearly the same breath with which he praises phenomenological method.

The answer lies in grasping exactly what Levinas praises in phenomenology. Putting aside his role as loyal expositor, when Levinas creatively appropriates phenomenology for his own purposes, he is no longer interested in the chimera of a pure phenomenological method. Though Levinas always prefers phenomenology in its Husserlian form, his own philosophical purpose is not to defend that form against other alternative versions of phenomenology. In a word, one must distinguish what Levinas finds wrong and what he finds right about phenomenology. One must discover the Levinasian phenomenology.

#### LEVINAS AND ROSENZWEIG

In the discussion that *concludes* with Rosenzweig, Levinas focuses on the revelatory aspect of phenomenology, phenomenology as “the comprehension effected through a bringing to light,” what he labels “the Heideggerian conception.” This aspect, luminous phenomenology, intuitional, evidential phenomenology, is what Levinas criticizes for not being able to reach, for covering up *in the brilliance of its light* what is truly primordial, i.e., “the welcome of the face and the work of justice.” Disclosure, though essential to phenomenology, as Heidegger saw even more deeply than Husserl, is inadequate to the “phenomena”—properly speaking, the “enigma”<sup>12</sup>—that interest Levinas: the events of ethics and justice. And these events, to repeat, are precisely what Levinas has so gratefully learned from Rosenzweig’s *Star*.

In the discussion that *commences* with Rosenzweig, however, Levinas’ focus is on two different aspects of phenomenology: its concreteness and its break-up of representation. Directly after saying that “the notions employed [in *Totality and Infinity*] owe everything to the phenomenological method,” Levinas tells his readers what, in his eyes, this method is. He writes:

Intentional analysis is the search for the concrete. Notions held under the direct gaze of the thought that defines them are nevertheless, unbeknown to this naive thought, revealed to the implanted in horizons unsuspected by this thought; these horizons endow them with a meaning—such is the essential teaching of Husserl. What does it matter if in the Husserlian phenomenology taken literally these unsuspected horizons are in their turn interpreted

as thoughts aiming at objects! What counts is the idea of the overflowing of objectifying thought by a forgotten experience from which it lives. The break-up of the formal structure of thought (the noema of a noesis) into events which this structure dissimulates, but which sustain it and restore its concrete significance, constitutes a *deduction*—necessary and yet non-analytical.<sup>13</sup>

The focus now is on the non-formal, the “concrete,” sources of the formal structures of thought, and on the way these “events,” as Levinas (and Rosenzweig) calls them, break up and sustain the formal structures of thought.

To maintain this shift in focus and evaluation, Levinas makes an important distinction. He contrasts “Husserlian phenomenology taken literally,” which he opposes in intellectual fellowship with Rosenzweig, and “the essential teaching of Husserl,” to which he is indebted even more so than to Rosenzweig for the “presentation and development of the notions employed” in *Totality and Infinity*.

Concreteness and the break-up of formal thought are two related aspects of the phenomenology Levinas utilizes. It is by means of a heightened attention to the concrete sources of formal thought—the “essential teaching of Husserl”—that Levinas finds the all important double edged *event*, an event both violent and nurturing. First—starting with objective thought—there is a destructive side to the concrete: “the overflowing of objectifying thought,” “the break-up of the formal structure of thought.” This movement reinforces Levinas’ alliance with Rosenzweig, reinforces their mutual “opposition to the idea of totality.” Second—starting now with what *truly* comes



first—there is a positive side to the concrete: the recognition that that which overflows and breaks-up formal objectifying thought is at the same time that “from which it lives,” what “sustain[s] and restore[s] its concrete significance,” what “endow[s]” it with meaning. For “Husserlian phenomenology taken literally,” in contrast, the radicality of its destructive work is undone by a reconstruction of the same formal objectifying thought at a deeper constitutive level. Like a Medusa’s head, formal thought returns with a vengeance, reconstituting itself at a deeper level of consciousness, closer to the very activity of consciousness. Now even if one were to take exception to this line of thought, and argue that “Husserlian phenomenology taken literally” is innocent, that it does not reestablish the primacy of formal objectifying thought, it would still be the case that by all accounts it reestablishes—according to its unshakable tenet—the primacy of intentional thought, the primacy of “thoughts aiming at objects.” Levinas contests not only the formal objectifying character of absolute consciousness, he also contests the fundamentally intentional character of consciousness. But, audaciously, to effect this contestation, to “prove” it, he will enlist the evidence of phenomenology itself! Phenomenology, the latest and strongest form of philosophy as a science, destroys itself. Thus Levinas’ contestation of phenomenology, and through phenomenology his contestation of philosophy, take the strong form of critique rather than the weak form of criticism. Phenomenology is permitted to show its glory, its science, and at the same time it is, through this same success, permitted to display its breakdown, its wounds. As such it is invaluable.

It is instructive, at this juncture, to note that the manner in which Levinas makes the

distinction between the essential and the literal in Husserl, between what one can learn and what one must guard against, reproduces his earlier 1930 reading of Husserl<sup>14</sup> in *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology*.<sup>15</sup> Though the primary intent of this early work was to provide the French intellectual world with a faithful exposition of Husserl’s theory of intuition, Levinas does manage here and there, already in 1930, to take a critical distance. The grounds upon which he is able to take this distance are essentially the same as those found forty years later in *Totality and Infinity*. That is to say, Levinas’ criticism of phenomenology in 1930 and in 1961 is that Husserl founds representational thought on representational thought, that for Husserl consciousness is always and ultimately representational consciousness, a predicative synthesis. But what is instructive for our current discussion is to see that in contrast to 1961, where, enlisting Rosenzweig, Levinas criticizes Husserl in the name of ethics and justice, in 1930, in the *Intuition* book, Levinas criticizes Husserl under the influence of Heidegger, that is to say, in the name of being. Beneath representation he sees not more representation but presence to being, i.e., an ontological thinking.

To be sure, Levinas was not a Heideggerian in 1930. Though profoundly influenced then and now by the power of Heidegger’s thought, influenced so far as to insist that all philosophy must “go through”<sup>16</sup> Heideggerian thought, Levinas has never been a Heideggerian. One side result of our investigation into Levinas’ linkage and appropriation of *The Star* and phenomenology, as we shall see in a moment, will be to clarify Levinas’ ambivalence toward Heidegger, for this ambivalence hinges on the significance of phenomenology. In 1930, in any event, Levinas’ work evidences an ambiva-

LEVINAS AND ROSENZWEIG

lence toward both Husserl and Heidegger. In his *Intuition* book, Levinas attributes to Husserl a theory of consciousness grounded in representation and a theory of consciousness grounded in presence to being.<sup>17</sup> In so doing, Levinas avoids mentioning Heidegger while crediting Husserl with being a Heideggerian! For those who know better, it is clear that Levinas is praising and blaming both thinkers at the same time.

The 1930 distinction between a representational and an ontological foundation for consciousness does not, however, and not just because of its ambivalence, reproduce the 1961 distinction between a literal and an essential reading of Husserl's phenomenology. Or at best it half reproduces it. In both instances Husserl's phenomenological method is credited with breaking up the formal level of representation. Furthermore, in both instances Husserl is understood to have grounded representation on more representation, and to be found lacking for so doing. So much for sameness. The difference between the 1930 account and the 1961 account is far more striking, and with regard to the question of Rosenzweig's role, it is far more illuminating. Levinas was from the first dissatisfied with the foundations of Husserlian phenomenology. To assuage this dissatisfaction in 1930, Levinas was, albeit hesitantly or in a veiled manner, tempted by the Heideggerian turn toward being, by Heidegger's reading of phenomenology as fundamental ontology. Levinas had at that time just recently read Heidegger's brilliant ontological and hermeneutical appropriation of phenomenology in paragraph seven of *Being and Time*.<sup>18</sup> Levinas was actually in Freiburg during the 1928/29 school year, attending the private philosophical discussions led by Husserl, who had officially retired from the University the year before, but also attend-

ing the celebrated seminars of Heidegger, who was the new and still rising star of German philosophy. What, then, convinces Levinas to turn away from Heidegger in his turn away from Husserl?

Before answering, this matter of Levinas' relation to Husserl and Heidegger requires a still more nuanced treatment. In both *Totality and Infinity* and the *Intuition* book, Levinas understands ontological thinking as an alternative and profounder *ground* for representational thinking. In both cases he sees that not more representations but the truth of being, truth as the disclosure of being, as Heidegger understood it, underlies representational thought. But despite this genuine and unbroken appreciation for Heideggerian ontology, there is still a wide gap separating his assessment of Heidegger and phenomenology in 1930 and his assessment of Heidegger and phenomenology in 1961. In 1930 Levinas opposes Husserlian representation with Heideggerian ontology. In 1961 he opposes both Husserlian phenomenology, i.e., representationally grounded phenomenology, and Heideggerian phenomenology, i.e., ontologically grounded phenomenology. In the name of "the welcoming of the face and the work of justice" Levinas now opposes Husserlian representation and Heideggerian disclosure, even though he takes Heidegger to be essentially correct, against Husserl, that ontological disclosure *is* the foundation of representation.

It is precisely the encounter with Rosenzweig's *Star* that enables Levinas to make his more subtle and fundamental criticism of phenomenology. It turns out that Levinas' dissatisfaction with Husserlian phenomenology stems from two sources, one more profound than the other. It is not until he encounters Rosenzweig's *Star*, because it is the more profound alternative,

#### PHILOSOPHY TODAY

the Levinas an fully assuage this dissatisfaction. *Heidegger's ontology permits Levinas to see beneath the representational character of Husserl's phenomenology, but the ethics and justice of Rosenzweig's 'Star' permit him to see through the ontological character of Heidegger's regrounding of phenomenology.* Heidegger frees Levinas from Husserl and at the same time deepens his appreciation for phenomenology, but Rosenzweig frees Levinas from phenomenology by deepening his appreciation for ethics and justice.

Thus in the discussion of phenomenology in the preface to *Totality and Infinity* which commences with praise for Rosenzweig's *Star*, the opposition between what is essential and therefore still acceptable in phenomenology, and what is literal and therefore unacceptable in phenomenology, will place both Husserl and Heidegger on the side of the literal. Now the literal means not just founding representation in more representation, à la Husserl, nor the founding of representation in ontological thinking, à la Heidegger, but the very idea or form of *Grund* (or its partner, *Abgrund*) as such, i.e., the standard of *adequation*, the thinking of thinking as sustained by adequation. It is this difference between Levinas' earlier and his later assessment of phenomenology that is the meaning of Levinas' acknowledgement of Rosenzweig's *Star* in close proximity to the phenomenological method. It is comforting to note, by way of biographical support for this thesis, that Levinas first read the *Star* in 1935.<sup>19</sup>

Under the influence of Rosenzweig's *Star*, Levinas will now oppose not just the formality and objectification of representation, an opposition also proposed by Heidegger, but the notion of *adequation* as such, whether of the intentional-consciousness sort proposed by Husserl, the correla-

tion of noema to noesis, or of the existential-ontological sort proposed by Heidegger, the correlation of Dasein to *Sein*. But what is important to realize, in grasping the connection between Levinas' debt to Rosenzweig's *Star* and his positive evaluation of phenomenology, is that Levinas finds within phenomenology itself the resources for its own undoing.

In *his* reading of phenomenology—against both Husserl and Heidegger—Levinas finds not only the recognition of a movement of thought which breaks up correlation as such, whether formal or existential, but the recognition that this break up comes from an irrecuperably non-adequate relation—an ethical relation—whose significance is prior to the significations established through intentional correlation. Underneath the structure of founded and founding which dominates both Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology, Levinas, along with Rosenzweig, asserts the primacy of *metaphysics*, the unquenched and unquenchable thirst for alterity, the always inadequate desire for the inordinate.

We can see now, then, that when Levinas writes that the “notions employed” in *Totality and Infinity* “owe everything to the phenomenological method,” he means that the notions employed in *Totality and Infinity* are indebted to phenomenology for three interrelated movements or dimensions: (1) the turn to the concrete, (2) the break-up of the formal structures of representation, and (3) the recognition that the formal structures of representation “live from” and are “endowed” with significance by horizons unsuspected by intentional thought. Levinas calls the combined movement of all three of these components the “phenomenological deduction.”

What phenomenological deduction reveals is the truth of metaphysics, meta-

physical truth: the priority of goodness and justice. It is as if the phenomenological deduction forced philosophy, per impossible, one step beyond its maximum capacities, as in a quantum leap, or the abutment of one topological dimension by another of a different order. Ethics and justice would no longer provide “principles” or “grounds” for philosophy, nor, certainly, would they be subsumed by philosophy, nor, worse, would they be excluded from philosophy altogether. Rather, philosophy, thought through to the end, to the end of its end, troubled by Husserl’s phenomenological reduction, would acknowledge itself as a *mode* of ethics and justice. “Husserlian phenomenology,” Levinas writes in the concluding sentence of the two paragraph discussion of phenomenology which follows the acknowledgement of Rosenzweig’s *Star*, “has made possible this passage from ethics to metaphysical exteriority.”<sup>20</sup>

Having attained some insight into the metaphysical dimension which both undermines and nurtures philosophy, we are now in a position (or “non-position,” Levinas would say) to appreciate the extraordinary absence and presence of *The Star*, its presence in absentia, in *Totality and Infinity*, to appreciate both why this absence is necessary and how it relates specifically to phenomenology. There are two sides to the absence of *The Star* in *Totality and Infinity*, and both of them, of necessity, have their parallels in *The Star*’s relation to itself and in *Totality and Infinity*’s relation to itself.

First, to say that *The Star* is present in *Totality and Infinity* only by being absent, that *The Star* “is” extraordinarily absent, that it is otherwise than being, is another way of saying that phenomenology—to which *Totality and Infinity* owes everything—is precisely what permits glimpsing the true sources of thought, sources which

lie outside of phenomenology and outside of thought altogether. Rosenzweig shows Levinas the way free from phenomenology just as Schelling showed Rosenzweig the way free from idealism. It is not a simple curiosity that in *The Star* and elsewhere, Rosenzweig reveals a hyperbolic modesty and audacity—the same modesty and audacity as Levinas—in giving credit to Friedrich von Schelling for having shown the way out of idealist philosophy. Had Schelling only completed his project of a positive philosophy, begun in *The Ages of the World* (1820), then *The Star* “would not have been worthy of anyone’s attention except the Jews,” or so Rosenzweig writes in 1921 in a letter to his converted relative Hans Ehrenberg.<sup>21</sup> What he means is that the philosophical possibility of *The Star*’s basic message comes from Schelling, from Schelling’s argument against 19th century German idealism that thought through to the end, idealism can itself be made to glimpse its own true sources outside of idealism. Levinas is clearly making the same claim with regard to phenomenology. Both idealism and phenomenology can be made to see—without the necessity that makes for their own sight, the sight that can be blinded by its own light—or made to *suffer*, one should perhaps say, the *weight* of metaphysics, the superlative of the divine, which “appears” in the face of the other person and “unfolds” in the struggle for justice. Phenomenology, so Levinas claims by invoking the “opposition to totality” found in Rosenzweig’s *Star*, reveals its own shortcomings, its own inadequacy.

Second, just as idealism was for Rosenzweig not just any philosophy, randomly selected for criticism, but the essence of philosophy, philosophy itself, for Levinas it is phenomenology that is now philosophy’s most rigorous form. Rosen-

## PHILOSOPHY TODAY

zweig could not do his work and then be done with it once and for all. Neither can Levinas. Just as idealism was yesterday's misunderstanding of metaphysics, phenomenology is today's misunderstanding of metaphysics (and increasingly phenomenology too is becoming yesterday's understanding of metaphysics). We must understand that it is not just the text of *Totality and Infinity* that is inevitably ill understood and immediately calls for a preface. Neither, more broadly, is it just phenomenology or idealism that are the always inevitably ill-understood. These are not the only but merely the latest philosophical ceremonies in which goodness delights in expressing and losing itself. Philosophy itself, or, even more broadly, the world itself, expresses and loses the metaphysical, the meta-physical. To reanimate the very same inspiration that animates *The Star*, then, Levinas must grapple with phenomenology rather than with 19th century Germany idealism.

The necessary undoing of philosophy

(which is itself philosophy—the unsaying of the saying that has become said) is historical in the sense that philosophy, like the world of which it is a part, takes on different historical forms, forms which both complete and at the same time disfigure the metaphysical. But at the same time the undoing of philosophy is ahistorical insofar as it is the very same metaphysical claim—always absent, always overwhelmingly present, better than being, otherwise than being—that undoes each and every philosophical form, each and every “ceremony,” each and every provisional stopping place that takes itself too seriously, that is to say, that takes the genuine claims of humanity too lightly. The undoing of philosophy is as eternal and as temporal as philosophy itself. “Thinking,” Levinas has written, “has never been more difficult.” Thinking, we can add, has always been most difficult. Perhaps, let us add as a final suggestion, the name “wisdom” is how philosophy itself acknowledged this difficulty of thinking which transcends thought itself.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 28.
2. Cited in *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), p. 104.
3. Levinas' talk was given in September, 1959, i.e., before the publication of *Totality and Infinity*. It was published in *La Conscience Juive*, ed. by Amado Lévy-Valensi and Jean Halperin (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963), pp. 121-137, along with a record of the discussion which followed, pp. 137-149. It has appeared in English as “Franz Rosenzweig,” trans. Richard A. Cohen, *Midstream* 29, No. 9 (November 1983): 33-40.
4. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 295.
5. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 27-28.
6. See the section on “Skepticism and Reason” in Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), pp. 165-171. Also see the analysis of

this section given by Jan de Greef in “Skepticism and Reason,” in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986), pp. 159-179.

7. Levinas begins his 1957 article, “Phenomenon and Enigma,” with the following quotation from Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*: “In short, we still do not know if, when someone rings the doorbell, there is someone there or not...” Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), p. 61. In a footnote to the same article Levinas acknowledges another intellectual debt, this time to Vladimir Jankélévitch, especially his *Philosophie première. Introduction à une philosophie du 'prèsque'* (Paris: PUF, 1954). “Our own project,” Levinas writes, “owes a great deal to his work.” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, p. 63.
8. See Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William W. Hallo (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), p. 108.
9. Rosenzweig, *The Star*, p. 424.
10. Rosenzweig, *The Star*, p. 239.

#### LEVINAS AND ROSENZWEIG

11. Rosenzweig, *The Star*, p. 424.
12. See Levinas, "Phenomenon and Enigma," in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, pp. 61-73.
13. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 28.
14. In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas refers to his 1959 article "The Ruin of Representation," which will be published in English translation in a collection of his writings on Husserl, *Discovering Existence in Husserl*, to be published by the Indiana University Press.
15. Emmanuel Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, trans. Andre Orianne (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).
16. Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), p. 42.
17. Levinas himself admits to having given a Heideggerian reading to Husserl in the *Intuition* book, cf. *Ethics and Infinity*, p. 39.
18. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), pp. 49-63. Although for our purposes what I have said is sufficient, it should be noted that for Heidegger the relation between phenomenology and ontology is more complex than indicated. Towards the end of paragraph 7 he writes: "Ontology and phenomenology are not two distinct philosophical disciplines among others. These terms characterize philosophy itself with regard to its object and its way of treating that object. Philosophy is universal phenomenological ontology, and takes its departure from the hermeneutic of Dasein. . . ." In a complete treatment of this question, then, care would have to be taken to distinguish between philosophy, phenomenology, ontology, and hermeneutics. It is also of interest to note, with regard to what has been said about Levinas' relation to Rosenzweig and phenomenology, that toward the end of section 7 Heidegger acknowledges his indebtedness to Husserl, and at the same time take a critical distance from his mentor. Heidegger's criticism is effected in the same way as Levinas later effects his, i.e. by means of a discrimination between what is essential to phenomenology and what is not essential. "The following investigation," Heidegger writes, "would not have been possible if the ground had not been prepared by Edmund Husserl, with whose *Logische Untersuchungen* phenomenology first emerged. . . . What is essential in it does not lie in its *actuality* as a philosophical 'movement.' Higher than actuality stands *possibility*. We understand phenomenology only by seizing upon it as a possibility."
19. See François Poirie, *Emmanuel Levinas: Qui êtes-vous?* (Lyon: La Manufacture, 1987), p. 121. Not knowing of this book, I asked Levinas in October, 1987, when he has first read Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption*. His answer was the same: 1935.
20. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 29.
21. Quoted by Ernest Akiva Simon in "Reflections of a Disciple," in *The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig*, ed. by Paul Mendès-Flohr (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1988), pp. 205-206. A close examination of *The Star's* relation to the whole of Schelling can be found in Else-Rahel Freund, *Franz Rosenzweig's Philosophy of Existence*, trans. Stephen L. Weinstein and Robert Israel (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1979).

**Shawnee State University, Portsmouth, Ohio 45662**

PHILOSOPHY TODAY