

Thinking the Future. Death and Redemption. Heidegger and Rosenzweig

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Abstract: Embedded within the leading issue of the thinking of the future, Heideggerian Death and Rosenzweigian Redemption represent two different reference-points which can shed light on human existence.

More precisely, the way the future is conceived by Heidegger and Rosenzweig lies at the roots of such relevant issues as mortality, otherness and possibility.

Key words: Heidegger, Rosenzweig, Death, Redemption.

Resumen: Enmarcado dentro del tema principal del pensamiento del futuro, la muerte heideggeriana y la redención de Rosenzweig presentan dos formas diferentes de apuntar a aspectos que pueden arrojar luz sobre la existencia humana.

Más en concreto, el modo en que Heidegger y Rosenzweig conciben el futuro se encuentra en las raíces de cuestiones tales como la mortalidad, la otredad y la posibilidad.

Palabras claves: Heidegger, Rosenzweig, muerte, redención

This article compares and analyzes the parallels and disjunctures between the conceptions of the future that emerge from Heidegger's and Rosenzweig's thinking about time. The reference works to this aim are *Being and Time*¹ and *The Star of Redemption*².

The way the future is conceived develops through complex interactions among such themes as *mortality*, *otherness* and *possibility* which are all strictly affected by the way the temporal issue is thought.

The sharp alternative between a vision of death as *last possibility* (*letzte Möglichkeit*), in Heidegger, and as *first factuality* (*erste, elementare Tatsächlichkeit*), in Rosenzweig, represents the first main attainment whose intrinsic meaning reflects the deep difference between the perspectives of the two philosophers (§ 1).

The Heideggerian *Dasein* considers death an extreme possibility just because it is the cessation of every other possibility. Mortality, showing the fade out of every *Potentiality-for-being*, exercises a retroactive effect on existence which brings such aspects as finitude and transitoriness to the fore. But existence seen from Rosenzweig's point of view can however acquire the same features by mean of contact with the sphere of otherness (§ 2).

The profound affinity Heidegger recognizes between the dimensions of future and possibility confirms a subordination of the one of otherness. To connect directly the future to the otherness of redemption – like Rosenzweig does – implies instead the downsizing – but not the annulment – of the range of possibility.

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1 M. Heidegger: *Being and Time*, New York, Harper & Row, 1962.

2 F. Rosenzweig: *The Star of Redemption*, Medison, The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005.

These are two existential positions whose radical contrast can in no case come to an agreement through a conciliatory compromise. Only the opposition dynamics of an *aut-aut* based way of thinking can render an account of it (§ 3).

1. Last possibility or first factuality?

Every form of temporal existence is deeply affected by an impending destiny of mortality. Both Heideggerian *Dasein* and Rosenzweigian *Judesein* regard the end of life as the main focus of existence, but the difference between them consists in the way they relate to death. They represent two opposite attitudes to face human being in time.

a. In *Being and Time* the problem of death is tackled on the base of the difference Heidegger remarks between the *existentiell-ontical* dimension and the *existenciale-ontological* one.

The main trait of existence consists, for Heidegger, in the fact that in each case *Dasein* is already ahead of itself, i.e. in the fact that «in *Dasein* there is always something still outstanding, which, as a potentiality-for-being for *Dasein* itself, has not yet become “actual”»³. But a conception of death as the mere end of existence, from which *Dasein* is kept away by a *lack of being*, would confer on the reaching of death the meaning of *filling of a lack* and this would imply the loss of *Dasein*'s innermost essential feature: *Dasein*'s «Being is annihilated when what is still outstanding in its Being has been liquidated»⁴.

The reaching of death as fulfilment of existence would deprive it of its fundamental incompleteness. The completion of existence would also be its dissolution.

The fundamental flaw in this conception of death consists in considering *Dasein* «something present-at-hand, ahead of which something that is not yet present-at-hand is costantly shoving itself»⁵, in other words, in assuming a merely ontical point of view.

But a radical change in perspective can show that «death is not something not yet present-at-hand, [...]. *Death is something that stands before us – something impending*»⁶. The extreme dimension of death does not represent a simple *not yet present* aiming at a definitive presence. From an *existenciale-ontological* point of view, what develops between *Dasein* and death is rather a combination of mutual relationships characterized by fluidity and possibility more than by rigidity and actuality.

Dasein, as *potentiality-for-being*, is moulded on the ontological manner of *being-ahead-of-itself*, it is motivated by a tendency toward what it not yet is – on one hand. But – on the other hand – the focus of *Dasein*'s striving is also something that it already is in the particular way of *having something to reach*, of *being leaning toward something* – an existential inclination that originates in the ontological manner of being of a tensional *should be*.

What *Dasein* encounters in its facing forward is death seen as the possibility of extinguishment of every other possibility, but it is exactly at this level that Heideggerian argument reverses and, from the field of mortality, turns back to the one of existence.

3 M. Heidegger: *Being and Time*, op. cit., p. 279.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 280.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*, p. 293-294.

Showing the end of every possibility, death exercises a retroactive influence on existence, by virtue of which possibility strengthens its existential-ontological meaning and turns out to be confirmed in the role of main characteristic feature of existing in time.

The intrinsic leaning forward of *potentiality-for-being* turns to the extreme of death⁷. Death, as a limit, sheds new light on the dimension of possibility, bringing to the fore its importance for existence⁸.

This reciprocity is the background on which death and possibility relate to each other and mutually define their ontological status. Heideggerian conception of death gains in this way a connotation in terms of *last possibility*, the extreme level of the openness of existence.

It is now worth pointing out that such an idea of death rides out the ontical *impasse* considered before. The risk of an ontical degradation is avoided by maintaining the ontological tenor of mortality at a state of possibility and preventing it from changing into a condition of actuality: «Death, as possibility, gives Dasein nothing to be “actualized”, nothing which Dasein, as actual, could itself *be*»⁹.

b. Also *The Star of Redemption* opens with the need to come to terms with the problem of death. Every form of philosophical knowledge is conceived by Rosenzweig as an attempt to escape from death and to elude the atavistic fear by which death is accompanied. But though philosophy rises up against the originary dread of death, every claim of rebellion against human condition is inexorably fated to fall.

«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»¹⁰.

Philosophy *claims* to be able to face up to death, but in fact it is not.

Death, as a triggering motive to make philosophical thought react against human destiny, keeps implicitly affecting existence, thus frustrating every effort to assuage the fear of the poisonous sting and of the pestilential breath.

In the course of its history, philosophy has adopted many different strategies to pursue the goal of a definitive *abolition of death* (*Abschaffung des Todes*). But every attempt, only apparently succeeding in achieving its purpose, turns in fact out to be a failure and thus, a further argument in support of a need for taking seriously into account the *presupposition* (*Voraussetzung*) of mortality. This is a fundamental issue that cannot be got around by philosophical abstractions and that rather emerges as the most pressing, concrete and inescapable one for human existence.

7 «Thus death reveals itself as that *possibility which is one's ownmost, which is non-relational, and which is not to be outstripped*. As such, death is something *distinctively* impending. Its existential possibility is based on the fact that Dasein is essentially disclosed to itself, and disclosed, indeed, as ahead-of-itself» (*Ibid.*, p. 294).

8 «With death, Dasein stands before itself in its ownmost *potentiality-for-Being*. This is a possibility in which the issue is nothing less than Dasein's Being-in-the-world. Its death is the possibility of no-longer-being-able-to-be-there. If Dasein stands before itself as this possibility, it has been *fully* assigned to its ownmost *potentiality-for-Being*» (*Ibid.*).

9 *Ibid.*, p. 307.

10 F. Rosenzweig: *The Star of Redemption*, op. cit., p. 9.

On the one hand, metaphysical-transcendent philosophies cope with the fear of death by way of division: Body and soul, the empirical and the intelligible, are the two dimensions into which the world is divided, according to such a way of thinking. Death concerns only the first one, while the second one is immortal and eternal. After splitting reality into opposites, this philosophical view subordinates one side and empowers the other; in other words, it sets out a discredit action against the domain still concerned by death, so that mortality itself turns out to be debased.

On the other hand, the philosophy of the Absolute achieves a form of immortality in subsuming the mortal finite under the eternal infinity of the idea, i.e., incorporating it under the comprehensive classification of Hegelian system, from which death and mortal individual are excluded *ex definitione*.

«That the fear of death knows nothing of such a separation in body and soul»¹¹ and that the individual can never be suitably described through the general terms of a fully rational approach – «always cruelly belies the compassionate lie of philosophy»¹².

To sum up: «Death is truly not what it seems, not nothing, but a pitiless something that cannot be excluded»¹³. The resistance death shows to intellectualization makes it the main subject matter, the core from which every philosophical reflection should start.

Death can no more be seen as something to be removed rationally; it is an inescapable fact instead, whose nature of *first factuality* must be recognized and faced by philosophy.

c. There are two kinds of differences between an idea of death as the last possibility and a conception of it as the *first factuality*: Ontological differences and structural ones.

Two opposite manners of being characterize *possibility* and *factuality*, while a matter of structural position distinguishes between the attributes of *first* and *last*.

Possibility – Possibility is a dimension of unfolding of existential potentialities, allowed by a low level of ontological density. The *determination deficit*, which possibility shows by comparison with reality, is the *conditio sine qua non* of a rarefied ontological tenor we could define as *open*, because it is free from the constraints of a fixed order.

Factuality – Possibility and factuality are diametrically opposed. Distinguished by the features of *Being-in-itself* (das «an-sich»), factuality shows the peculiar traits of the datum: compactness, density, closure.

In Rosenzweig's thought factuality is something coming up unexpectedly, something that hits the self and, so to speak, *happens* to it. Consequently, death is rightfully considered a factuality or, to be more precise, a presupposition (*Voraussetzung*), because its presence to the consciousness, as something inexplicable, escapes every instance of logical-rational control.

First – The structural position of death in the *Star*, however, counterbalances its closure. The fact that it is denoted in terms of *first*, i.e. situated at the beginning, makes it the starting point for further developments of thought, during which its initial unfathomable nature of presupposition is involved in a progressive opening.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹³ *Ibid.*

Last – To conceive death as the last edge of existence – as in Heidegger – means to assign to it the function of acting as a boundary. On the one side, death opens the dimension of possibility, but at the same time it closes for good every existential chance on the other side, i.e. on its *beyond*.

The conclusive position of death – in Heidegger’s conception as *last possibility* –, enables it to act as a reference point for human existence. But an analogous role could not be played by mortality seen as *first factuality* – in Rosenzweig. The task of orienting existence, in this case, must be assumed by something else, namely by the contact with the dimension of *otherness*.

2. Ways of finitude

The subject matter of existential orientation recalls the one of finitude. If finite being is thought to be a movement from an origin to an end, there is a tight implication between the becoming of existence and the direction in which it is oriented.

a. By virtue of the ontological manner of *being-ahead-of-itself*, *Dasein* is always engrossed in an exploration of its existential possibilities, until it forebodes death as the limit of its *potentiality-for-Being*. Once the boundary of mortality is perceived in a sort of prefiguration, a radical change redefines existence as finite, i.e. *limited by death*.

«In Being-toward-death, *Dasein* comports itself *toward itself* as a distinctive potentiality-for-Being»¹⁴. It is an introspective circular movement: «Existence and its understanding of being must move within a circle because it is always ahead, «in advance» (*vorweg*) of itself and in this way only also returning to itself»¹⁵. In an autonomous self-reference, the existential experience of time gains its authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit*) through isolation (*Vereinzelung*) and self-retreat, but it is a way still bound to subjectivity, after all.

This is the main aspect for which Heidegger’s *Being and Time* comes under criticism: The fact that existential finitude is approached with a *forma mentis* still deeply rooted in the field of subjectivity. As a result of it, Heidegger’s analysis misses the chance to leave behind the perspective of subject for good and to break down the «existential solipsism»¹⁶ of *Dasein*¹⁷.

b. «The difference between the old and the new [...] thinking, [lies] in the fact that the latter needs another person, and takes time seriously – actually, these two things are identical»¹⁸.

14 M. Heidegger: *Being and Time*, op. cit., p. 296.

15 K. Löwith: «M. Heidegger and F. Rosenzweig or Temporality and Eternity», *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 3,1, 1942, pp. 53-77, p. 60.

16 W. Schmied-Kowarzik: *Rosenzweig im Gespräch mit Ehrenberg, Cohen und Buber*, München, Alber, 2006, p. 215.

17 Mario Ruggenini writes to this end: «*Dasein* is not exposed to an experience of finitude that can call it into question, but it assumes subjectivistically the burden of its constitutive limit [...]. Here is the failure of *Being and Time* – in having missed the experience of otherness» (M. Ruggenini: *I fenomeni e le parole*, Genova, Marietti, 1992, p. 95, *my translation*).

18 F. Rosenzweig: «The New Thinking», in: N. N. Glatzer and P. Mendes-Flohr (eds.): *Franz Rosenzweig. His Life and Thought*, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1998, pp. 190-208, p. 200.

Rosenzweig puts at the core of his *new thinking* the relationship between time and otherness. The need for another person – especially meant as an interlocutor, in a linguistic context – and a time taken seriously into account are, in this perspective, *the same thing*. But the direct connection between temporality and linguistic otherness rides out the theoretical difficulties presented by the introverted attitude of Heidegger's *Dasein*.

In Heidegger the problem consists in the fact that there is no way to open *Dasein* to otherness as long as it is conceived in terms of an isolated, individual subject. But in Rosenzweig, temporality and otherness are mutually related *from the outset* and it is the individual subject, instead, that takes shape through an interaction of the two dimensions.

The dialogical atmosphere temporality is immersed into implies a sort of double bind: Time is always conceived as *time of the other*, i.e. essentially open to otherness, while language is the way through which time expresses itself: What is temporally experienced is also linguistically manifested¹⁹.

Every temporal dimension of the *Star* corresponds to a peculiar linguistic form, which, as such, is also bearer of values of otherness: The past suits the narrative character of a *storytelling philosophy* (*erzählende Philosophie*), formulated by Rosenzweig under the influence of Schelling. The present offers a temporal context to the development of a dialogical exchange between *I* and *You*, while future is connected with the linguistic structure of promise.

Every aspect of human existence is conceived, in this view, as resulting from a specific way of interaction among temporal and linguistic dimensions.

c. Naturally the divergencies between Heidegger and Rosenzweig so far considered involve also the structural features of their ideas of time.

The finitude of Heidegger's *Dasein* is consistent with a *one-dimensional* vision of time, according to which existence is led by an ongoing process through which everything endlessly comes to be and pass away – it is what has been called *time-only-time*²⁰, with regard to its linear course.

From a Rosenzweigian point of view, temporality cannot be thoroughly described by the linear flowing of becoming. Time can never be only time, but it expands itself, a *parte ante* and a *parte post*, to a *beyond*, bringing in that way to light a fundamental bidimensionality: *Everlasting past of creation* and *eternal future of redemption* represent the limits within which the *flowing present of revelation* can develop. What emerges is a conformation of time shaped on two different dimensions. On the one hand, the flowing time orchestrates the movement of existence, while, on the other hand, the eternal dimension, along with the chronological one, is always hidden but proximate, because for every second of time there could be an interruption of temporal course and a gap in it, through which redemption and eternity may be reached.

The isolation of *Dasein* represents the starting point from which argumentative passages lead to a *one-dimensional* idea of time. The dialogical openness to otherness, on the contrary, is the theoretical base for the development of a *bidimensional* conception of temporality²¹.

19 See H. M. Dober: *Die Zeit ernst nehmen. Studien zu Franz Rosenzweigs «Der Stern der Erlösung»*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 1990, p. 115.

20 M. Cacciari: *Icone della legge*, Milano, Adelphi, 2002, p. 84.

21 See B. Fortis: «Il tempo dell'esilio. Rosenzweig tra metafisica e nichilismo», *Estetica*, 2, 2007, pp. 77-94.

3. Death and Redemption

«[This] is peculiar in death certainty – *that it is possible at any moment*. Along with the certainty of death goes the *indefiniteness* of its “when”»²².

«[The redeemed world] is not provided in advance, but is something that is only coming. [It] means that its growth is no doubt necessary, but that the rhythm of this growth is not definite»²³.

The definitions of death and of redemption, in these two passages, agree on a common tendency toward the future, but the certainty about the fact that, Heideggerian death and Rosenzweigian redemption, respectively, will come is counterbalanced by the uncertainty about the particular moment of the future in which the two events will take place.

In *Being and Time* death shows the main traits of a pure possibility, which must exclude every trace or reality that could vitiate its purity²⁴.

Rosenzweig’s conception of redemption is different, instead. No passive waiting is possible toward it. Redemption is an end to which human beings could relate living in trepidation and hope and taking charge of the patient work it calls for. But then, the relationship human beings can establish with redemption confers concreteness and poignancy of a real dimension to it, consequently weakening its character of possibility²⁵.

Heidegger never read *The Star of Redemption*, but he would probably regard the reality of redemption, the attraction it can develop, and its becoming a goal thanks to its ontological consistency as an unsolved trace of a way of thinking still embedded in an ontical context and thus still based upon the manner of being of *presence-at-hand*.

Rosenzweig, for his part, would see Heideggerian pure possibility as unsubstantial. Only the reality of redemption or, to be more precise, its promise of reality can induce human beings to take seriously into account the tendency toward a future goal to reach.

By way of conclusion, what emerges as a result of this comparison is an opposition between two utterly irreconcilable positions.

Heidegger’s concept of pure possibility without reality, deprived of the consistency of a concrete goal, risks losing itself in a lack of direction, whereas the real concreteness of a goal, in Rosenzweig, assures of course a sense of direction, but it does it at the cost of the purity of possibility.

Finally, there is no way to find a solution: These two conceptions are two opposite *existential decisions*, which only the inner contrast of an *aut-aut* logic can express.

22 M. Heidegger: *Being and Time*, op. cit., p. 302.

23 F. Rosenzweig: *The Star of Redemption*, op. cit., pp. 239-241.

24 «The closest closeness which one may have in Being towards death as a possibility, is as far as possible from anything actual» (M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, op. cit., pp. 306-307).

25 «[...] factuality springs up for the world of Redemption; this factuality corresponds absolutely to the reality» (F. Rosenzweig: *The Star of Redemption*, op. cit., p. 253).

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