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Is the Human Being Redeemable? Consolation as an Integral Meaning of Rosenzweig's Understanding of Redemption: A Blumenbergian Reflection *

Hans Martin Dober

Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen
Evangelisch-Theologische Fakultät, Abteilung Praktische Theologie
Tübingen, Germany
hmdober@gmx.de

Abstract

In this essay, I test out Hans Blumenberg's understanding of consolation as a pattern to interpret Rosenzweig's "new thinking." Drawing on Blumenberg's philosophical anthropology, I explore the connection between the concept of redemption as consolation and the image of the human being that it presupposes. I further examine the function of consolation in concepts and non-conceptual images through a comparison of redemptive consolation in the respective thought of Luther and Rosenzweig.

Keywords

Franz Rosenzweig; Hans Blumenberg; Martin Luther; Georg Simmel; consolation; redemption; philosophical anthropology

From the perspective of philosophical anthropology, it is no wonder that man hopes, even yearns for redemption, and hence has produced the *concept* of redemption. Only the human being could have reflected thereby upon his finite nature. Afflicted with illness, pain, sorrows, and weakness he must, to this day, be taught gently that he will have to pass away some day.¹ However, it is not only his finite nature or his contemporaries who can make his life difficult. As Sigmund Freud has already shown, man is fundamentally threatened from the inside: his instincts and impulses are the source of his anxiety, and his conscience is the source of his feelings of guilt.² In all this man is in need of help and consolation—both meanings resonate in the religiously freighted term "redemption" that we find in Rosenzweig.

If we follow one of Hans Blumenberg's primal scenes,³ man has learned the *actio per distans* and evolved this action to the most abstract forms. In so doing, he remains true to his archetype the primate, who, having been expelled from the sheltering virgin forest, suddenly

* I thank Dana Rubinstein for her help with the translation.

¹ Cf. Hans Blumenberg, *Lebenszeit und Weltzeit* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2001), 91.

² Paul Ricoeur, *Die Interpretation: Ein Versuch über Freud* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1993), 191, referring to Sigmund Freud, *Das Ich und das Es*, in *Studienausgabe*, vol. 3: *Psychologie des Unbewussten*, ed. A. Mitscherlich, A. Richards, and J. Strachey (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Taschenbücher, 1982), 322.

³ Cf. Hans Blumenberg, *Beschreibung des Menschen*, ed. M. Sommer (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2014), 575–579, referring to Paul Alsberg, *Das Menschheitsrätsel* (Dresden: Sybillen-Verlag, 1922). For a lucid and informative introduction to the philosophy of Blumenberg, see Rüdiger Zill, *Der absolute Leser: Hans Blumenberg—Eine intellektuelle Biographie* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2020).

got up in an instant of danger, holding a stone in his hand, and hurled this early missile against the wild animal attacking him. This pattern of distancing cannot only help describe technical developments such as space travel or medical laboratories. It also allows us to interpret the symbolizing behavior of the human being from early language, the forms of metaphors, narration, and anecdotes to conceptualization and theories that are supposed to give man orientation in the world, granting him some security and a bit of home, at least in his mind. The elementary anthropological function of these forms, the conceptual as well as the non-conceptual, is to allow the human being to distance himself from what Blumenberg calls the “absolutism of reality.”⁴ Specified functions are as diverse as the possibilities opened up by distancing. But integral to the myriad forms through which the human being aspires to orientation and meaning is the quest for consolation.

We can gain new insights into *The Star of Redemption* by looking through the lens of Blumenberg’s cultural anthropology. The main work of Franz Rosenzweig gives an account of an existentially meaningful orientation he gained after prolonged reflection. The result has found its representation in the geometric symbol of the Star of David as a “non-conceptual” form.⁵ In order to understand it one has to follow the engulfing ways of thought in this book. Initial guidance is given in the “Urzelle,” Rosenzweig’s letter to Rudolf Ehrenberg of November 18, 1917, where he writes: “Only from the middle in the unlimited world arises a limited home in the unlimited world, a bit of ground in between four tentpegs.... Viewed from this perspective, beginning and end are also transformed for the first time ... the ‘beginning’ as creation, the ‘end’ as salvation. Thus revelation is capable of being a *middle* point.”⁶ Revelation means orientation—this is already a reaching out for consolation in an inextricable world.⁷

In the “Urzelle,” theological notions perform the function of orientation. However, they really just fill in the dimensions of meaning that the non-conceptual forms of metaphors, narratives, and anecdotes had opened up and that play an elementary, central role in Rosenzweig’s “narrative philosophy”⁸ and his dealing with biblical texts. One of those texts, Exodus 3:1–14, links the need for orientation with the name of God. Clearly enough, this name *ehye asher ehye* (I will be there as I am) bears the meaning of the consolation that

⁴ Hans Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2014), 9–39.

⁵ For an explication of the term “non-conceptual form,” see Hans Blumenberg, *Theorie der Unbegrifflichkeit* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2007).

⁶ Franz Rosenzweig, “‘Urzelle’ des Stern der Erlösung: Brief an R. Ehrenberg vom 18.11.1917,” in *Der Mensch und sein Werk: Gesammelte Schriften III. Zweistromland* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1984), 133; translation from Franz Rosenzweig, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, trans. Paul W. Franks and Michael L. Morgan (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), 63.

⁷ How much more can this be verified by the revelatory event in which the name breaks into “the chaos of the unnamed.” Blumenberg in fact takes up this formulation in his *Work on Myth*—one of the rare examples of Blumenberg quoting Rosenzweig. Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos*, 249. For the other example, see n. 10 below.

⁸ Rosenzweig, “Das neue Denken,” *Zweistromland*, 148; translation by Franks and Morgan, “The New Thinking,” *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 121.

arises in the nearness of God. This name is not “sound and smoke but word and fire,” an object of belief that is founded in trust while this trust grows and prospers in a dialogical encounter.⁹

Blumenberg gives us a framework for interpreting the “non-conceptual” forms in Rosenzweig. Following his *Work on Myth* presupposes, for anthropological reasons, that man cannot do without these forms. From this perspective, any attempt to “demythologize” myth or the Bible with its narratives seems to be no more than the inflated illusion of a consciousness that is all too aware of its own enlightenment. At the same time myth—and here I use the term in the sense of narration—requires a critical understanding of its contents in light of reason being aware of its own limits. In this sense, it is possible to speak of a critique of the non-conceptual in Blumenberg and—*mutatis mutandis*—also in Rosenzweig. This critique has to explore the limits of the functions of orientation, the search for meaning and consolation lying in the form and content of mythological and biblical narrations.¹⁰

In the following I will test Blumenberg’s understanding of consolation as a pattern to interpret Rosenzweig’s “new thinking.” Second, deepening this anthropological perspective, I will explore the connection between the concept of redemption and the image of man on which it is founded. Through a comparison of Luther and Rosenzweig, I will examine the function of consolation in these concepts and images. In conclusion, I will return to the question of how redemption can be related to consolation.

1

According to Blumenberg, man is in need of consolation and capable of receiving consolation, but, sadly, sometimes remains inconsolable.¹¹ In his *Description of Man*, a note by the late Georg Simmel plays a key role. Simmel writes:

The notion of consolation has a broader, deeper meaning than we usually understand. Man is a being in search of consolation. And consolation is something different from help—the animal is also in search of help, but consolation is the strange, extraordinary experience which lets the suffering stay, but which cancels the suffering

⁹ Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Mensch und sein Werk: Gesammelte Schriften II. Der Stern der Erlösung* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976), 209. “Trust” is the “big word” which at the end of the *Star* leads out of the book into life (ibid., 472).

¹⁰ This distinction seems to stand behind the other quotation of Rosenzweig in Blumenberg’s *Work on Myth*. In a letter to Gertrud Oppenheim, Rosenzweig points to the “difference between myth and the Bible ... : the former deals with the *affaires*, the latter with the *ways* of God.” Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos*, 273, referring to the letter of May 30, 1917. Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Mensch und sein Werk: Gesammelte Schriften I. Briefe und Tagebücher. Band I: 1900–1918*, ed. Rachel Rosenzweig, Edith Rosenzweig-Scheinmann, and Bernhard Casper (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), 412–413.

¹¹ Blumenberg, *Beschreibung des Menschen*, 623–655. Cf. Benjamin Dober, *Ethik des Trostes: Hans Blumenbergs Kritik des Unbegrifflichen* (Weilerswist: Velbrück, 2019), 78 n. 144. To be inconsolable is a boundary value pointing to an “absolute form” of disaster. Blumenberg, *Beschreibung des Menschen*, 627.

from suffering. Consolation does not concern the evil itself but its reflection in the deepest instance of the soul. On the whole there is no help for man. Therefore he has developed the wonderful category of consolation which doesn't come only from words that people speak for this purpose. Man draws consolation from hundreds of circumstances.¹²

The need for consolation here becomes a pattern of interpretation for different cultural forms man has created during the process of development, including the “symbolic forms” in language that gained a special relevance for Rosenzweig. However, not every one of these forms fulfils its purpose equally well. The history of “non-conceptual” forms gives us quite a number of examples of intended means of consolation that have brought forth new desolation instead. Narratives can manipulate reality in the interest of action. Storytellers don't always take the truth very literally. Metaphors play with their variety of meaning as long as the intended comparison has succeeded. They also can deceive and abuse language. Parables maintain their ambiguity until the punch line is reached. That's why there is a need for an *ethics of consolation*¹³ consisting of a critique of the means of consolation and of their use, as well as a delineation of categories of good consolation. Having gone through their critical purification, these forms can contribute consolation. They exceed the inescapable rigidity that reality can appear to be. They open doors through which the light of freedom can shine. In the play of ambiguity and explicitness, things must not stay the way they are.

Rosenzweig was well aware of man's need for consolation and of the need to make a distinction between good and less good—yes, even bad forms of it. The *Star* begins with the well-known words: “All knowledge of the All begins in death, in the fear of death.” Here we seize hold of the way in which man, facing the fact that he will have to die someday, is in need of consolation. And if Rosenzweig continues, “Philosophy has the audacity to cast off the fear of the earthly, to remove from death its poisonous sting, from Hades his pestilential breath,”¹⁴ he calls into question the consolation of a philosophy that attempted to subsume the individual in the All “from Parmenides to Hegel,”¹⁵ a philosophy that tried to transform particular representations into universal concepts in order to recognize the Whole as the sole true, real thing. Moreover, Rosenzweig queries a philosophy that “denies these earthly fears” and “abandons the body to the abyss, while the free soul soars above.”¹⁶ With Nietzsche, he impeaches that Platonism that elevated the upper world of the True, Beautiful, and Good and devalued the lower world of clay, body, and mortality. According to Rosenzweig, a philosophy that does not stay true to the earth can offer only bad consolation.

¹² Blumenberg, *Beschreibung des Menschen*, 625, quoting Georg Simmel, *Fragmente und Aufsätze aus dem Nachlass* (Munich: Drei Masken Verlag, 1923), 17.

¹³ I borrow this term from Benjamin Dober, whose book on Blumenberg (see n. 11) has been helpful for me.

¹⁴ Rosenzweig, *Stern*, 3; translation by Barbara E. Galli, *The Star of Redemption* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 9 (henceforth *Star*).

¹⁵ Rosenzweig, *Stern*, 15; *Star*, 20.

¹⁶ Rosenzweig, *Stern*, 3; *Star*, 9.

In what, then, does the good consolation he gives an account of in the *Star of Redemption* consist? This consolation returns to the non-conceptual forms of the biblical tradition interpreted by Judaism and Christianity, lying in the stories of the creation of the world (Gen 1) and the revelation of God (Exod 3), in the parables of the dialogue between God and man, specifically for his love of his people (as in the Song of Songs), and in the commandments of the Torah, summed up in the double commandment to love God and one's neighbor. It is a consolation that the second Isaiah, quoted several times in the *Star*, gave to the people of Israel during its exile: "Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God" (Isa 40:1). Psalm 73:1 answers this speech thus: "Israel still has God for consolation."¹⁷

Rosenzweig did not succumb to the modern temptation to take leave from traditional religions that all, more or less, have their roots in myth. However, he integrated a dogmatical adjustment of tradition in mythical forms using the theological terms of creation, revelation, and redemption. But he did not inherit the tendency of these notions to update a moment of myth with its claim of totality. He does not give his account of human experience without conceptual work; but he abstains from the totalistic claim of Hegelian philosophy. Even if turned right-side up by Karl Marx, this philosophy of the Whole has not been immune to remythologizations. Looking back at the history of real existing socialism, it appears clearly enough that the new man has only repeated the problems of the old, problems that had already existed since Greek antiquity—to put it in Walter Benjamin's words, the problem of bleak "fate as a guilt-context of the living."¹⁸ In this iteration the context of fate was now conceived as and legitimized through ideology carried out by an authoritarian apparatus of the state. For individual man it became difficult to make heard the "unspeakable remainder," or what Rosenzweig calls in his critique of the philosophy of the All "individuum ineffabile triumphans" (the ineffable individual triumphant).¹⁹

The *Star* unleashes its luminosity by confronting the world of revelation with the preworld of myth, working on the non-conceptual forms that had originated already in the world of myth. Inquiring after better and worse forms of consolation, this book contradicts a whole range of new modern mythicizations, including that of Richard Wagner. Rosenzweig understands revelation as the *revelation of love* that enables the mute, introvert self to become a speaking soul, living in relation to others without melting into them. In a letter to Gritli Rosenstock of June 1, 1919, he writes that in the opera *Tristan and Isolde*, the difference set by the relational "little word And" is denied.²⁰ Love, understood with Rosenzweig, finds its realization in dialogue and not in an *unio mystica*. Through the experience of being related in difference, however, man is in the position to contribute to the task of redemption against all tendencies for reification or alienation from oneself and from others. This can take place in a process of learning in the midst of everyday encounters, as per Rosenzweig's wonderful

¹⁷ Rosenzweig, *Stern*, 279; *Star*, 269.

¹⁸ Walter Benjamin, "Schicksal und Charakter," *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2.1 (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1991), 175.

¹⁹ Rosenzweig, "Urzelle," *Zweistromland*, 127; Franks and Morgan, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 54.

²⁰ Rosenzweig, *Die "Gritli"-Briefe: Briefe an Margrit Rosenstock-Huessy*, ed. Inken Rühle and Reinhold Mayer (Tübingen: Bilam, 2002), 358.

declaration that redemption, at its core, is nothing “other than that the I learns to say You to the He.”²¹

Being called into a process of learning to be responsible, the soul that is loved overcomes mythical thinking and feeling. Thoughts of the “I” are interrupted by what the other says. The “I” listens to his words and tries to answer to them. To understand redemption this way means liberation from introversion and isolation, emancipation to a dialogical existence in private life as well as in the public sphere and in scholarly discourse. Redemption, understood through Rosenzweig, means a living resonance with others, with the world. In this resonance lies better consolation than in the concept of a mythical hero staying speechless and dumb in a closed world.

This extension and improvement find confirmation if we look at the relationship of Judaism and Christianity in the *Star*, being aware of the history of their encounters from early Christian times up to Rosenzweig’s intensive, informed, and sincere correspondence with Eugen Rosenstock. On the one hand, redemption is the crystallization point of what both have in common. Quoting Job 19:25, Rosenzweig writes that in Christianity, the soul “knows that her redeemer liveth no less certainly than she knows this in the eternal people.”²² Jews and Christians share this experience and before God they are both “workers at the same task.”²³ On the other hand, the distinction between good and less good consolation also affects his description of Christianity. It is along the line of this distinction that he writes to Rosenstock in October 1916, “we don’t participate in the world-overtaking fiction of Christian dogma.”²⁴ Connected to the Nietzschean critique of Platonism, this argument returns, slightly transformed in the pattern of relationship to Judaism, in part 3 of the *Star*. The practical cooperation of Jews and Christians is founded in the asymmetrical moment that Judaism is not only the phenomenon of origin but as such also bears the task of pointing to the dangers Christianity has disposed itself to during history: to spiritualize God, to pantheize the world, and to apotheosize man.²⁵

It is a relationship of nearness in difference. Both Jews and Christians find orientation and consolation in the concept of redemption. However, the distinction between good and less good consolation granted by these conceptions remains on the agenda for discussion. This is also the case with regard to the understanding of man.

2

What do we know of man? According to Rosenzweig—at first—we know nothing. Here, he agrees with Luther, who in his *Disputatio de homine* (1536) has juxtaposed this lack of original knowledge with the Aristotelian view of man as an *animal rationale*.²⁶ In the

²¹ Rosenzweig, *Stern*, 305; *Star*, 292.

²² Rosenzweig, *Stern*, 417; *Star*, 397; cf. “That he is the redeemer is the last we experience ourselves; we know that he lives and that our eyes will see him.” *Stern*, 426; *Star*, 305.

²³ Rosenzweig, *Stern*, 462; *Star*, 438.

²⁴ Rosenzweig, *Briefe und Tagebücher I*, 252.

²⁵ Cf. Rosenzweig, *Stern*, 447; *Star*, 425.

²⁶ Rosenzweig was acquainted with the writings of Luther. See my “Rosenzweig und Luther. Bibelübersetzung als Beitrag zum ‘Gespräch der Menschheit,’” *Proceedings of the*

elaborated philosophical anthropology of Blumenberg, this lack of original knowledge finds confirmation: “How man has begun nobody will ever ‘see’ or ‘know,’” despite all excavations, all discoveries of caves with their paintings and their materials, and the corresponding evaluations.²⁷ To borrow from Cassirer’s *Essay on Man*, both Rosenzweig and Luther take “the crisis in man’s knowledge of himself” seriously,²⁸ but they do this under different conditions of plausibility. For both, however, our lack of original knowledge is not an end but the beginning of a new knowledge arising from the perspective whereby we perceive man “in the source itself which is God.”²⁹ “With God is the source of life, and in His light we see light”: Rosenzweig also returns to this insight of Psalm 36 when he speaks of man in need of redemption. In the moment when “we bless the Lord both now and forever” (Ps 115:18), the light will be seen “of which it is said: In your light we behold the light.”³⁰ With Reiner Wiehl we can say that Rosenzweig’s three-dimensional notion of experience integrates God beyond the duality of man and world, subject and object.³¹ This, for Rosenzweig and for Luther, is a precondition for redemption. If, despite today’s crisis of faith, we want to persist in our belief in man and to be able to hope for him, we have to believe in his creation by God, in his election to responsibility and his dignity to become a coworker in the task of redemption.³²

For Rosenzweig, as for Luther, the understanding of man emerging out of the critical lack of knowledge in the beginning is a knowledge of faith. Luther speaks of this in contradiction to a philosophical tradition that views man as being good on the basis of his “natural forces.”³³ Rosenzweig opposes the idealistic theories of self-consciousness that made the “I” into “the most self-evident knowledge.”³⁴ The new knowledge of faith, however, has a different character in Luther and Rosenzweig. This difference, within the symbolic form of religion, shapes the role both authors have assigned to the concept of redemption.

International Rosenzweig Gesellschaft,

<http://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/rosenzweig/author/index>.

²⁷ Hans Blumenberg, *Höhlenausgänge* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2016), 22.

²⁸ Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 1–22.

²⁹ Martin Luther, “Disputation über den Menschen,” in *Ausgewählte Schriften*, ed. Gerhard Ebeling and Karin Bornkamm, vol. 2 (Frankfurt a.M.: Insel, 1995), 295.

³⁰ Rosenzweig, *Stern*, 282; *Star*, 271.

³¹ Reiner Wiehl, “Experience in Rosenzweig’s New Thinking,” in *The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1988), 42–68.

³² Rosenzweig verifies this in the chapter on redemption, citing Ps 115:16: “The heavens are the heavens of the Lord, but the earth he has given to the children of men.” *Stern*, 281; *Star*, 270–271.

³³ Luther, *Disputation*, 296. Hermann Cohen agrees, writing that Rousseau had “given the illusory picture of a natural benevolence being innate and indestructible.” Hermann Cohen, *Werke*, vol. 7: *Erkenntnis des reinen Willens* (Hildesheim: Olms, 2008), 301.

³⁴ Rosenzweig, *Stern*, 67; *Star*, 71.

For Luther too, “man is a creature of God, consisting of flesh and a living soul, built from the beginning in the image of God without sin with the purpose to procreate descendants and to rule over the created things and never to pass away.”³⁵ However, Luther continues, “after Adam’s fall,” man “is subjugated under the might of the devil, namely sin and death—both are evils not to be overcome by the strength of man,—[they are] eternal malignancies.”³⁶ And here the Christian concept of redemption shines through, beginning with the typology of Adam and Christ in Paul (Rom 5:12–21): just as all men have sinned in Adam, so all men can be redeemed in Christ.

Luther does not continue the Augustinian interpretation of sin as a desire or longing (*concupiscentia*) that could lead someone down the wrong path. Interpreting sexuality as something from which man would have to be redeemed has, to this day, brought about new needs for redeemability.³⁷ Luther follows the Augustinian tradition, though, insofar as he extolls “the power of reason . . . as the highest power of man.”³⁸ And in a way the meaning of sin has been exaggerated up to Protestant Christianity, with the consequence that the “evil instinct” (*yezer hora*) served as an occasion for a fundamental pessimism about man *post lapsum*. Walter Benjamin dealt with this pessimism in his *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Hermann Cohen in his late work *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*. The exaggeration of sin has found its popular expression in a verse of the evangelic songbook—the Protestant *Siddur*, so to speak. Johann Sebastian Bach devised an organ setting for this song, which sums up the Lutheran doctrine of justification.³⁹ The stanza reads: “In Adam’s fall is all depraved: / Man’s nature and his wisdom. / When we are born, within our veins / is flowing deadly venom, / and it is sure there is no cure / but Christ, who brought salvation. / For Satan’s lie led Eve to die—/ all men received damnation.”⁴⁰ To see things this way seems to be a historical phenomenon. This song has been excluded from the revised Protestant songbook, probably because this theology of sin is supposed to be too difficult for a contemporaneous consciousness. The drawback of this restraint, however, seems to be a loss

³⁵ Luther, *Disputation*, 295.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 296.

³⁷ The motion picture *The White Ribbon* (*Das weiße Band*, 2009), directed by Michael Haneke, which takes place in a parsonage at the beginning of the twentieth century, has shown this in exemplary fashion.

³⁸ “According to Augustine all philosophy prior to the appearance of Christ was liable to one fundamental error, and was infected with one and the same heresy. The power of reason was extolled as the highest power of man. But what man could never know until he was enlightened with a special divine revelation is that reason itself is one of the most questionable and ambiguous things in the world.” Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, 9.

³⁹ “Durch Adams Fall ist ganz verderbt,” *Orgelbüchlein*, BWV 637; note also the settings by D. Buxtehude and G. Ph. Telemann.

⁴⁰ Cited according to the 1974 edition of the Protestant hymnal, no. 243 (composed by Lazarus Spengler, 1524). Translation: G. Zeisler 1936; M. DeGarmeaux 1973; rev. Alexandra Glynn 2009, <http://www.bach-cantatas.com/Texts/Chorale045-Eng11.htm> (accessed December 28, 2018).

of the ability to speak about sin, to give it a name; such is the case, for example, with respect to the stirring of hate that has increased in many places in the world.

Wolfhart Pannenberg, author of *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, has described sin in its multiple forms, namely as “egomania,” as “trespass against oneself,” and as “malice.”⁴¹ It is reasonable to find in the evil instinct the root of many human problems. With Immanuel Kant we can speak of a tendency to evil in human nature. However, to interpret the *peccatum originale* as a dogma of inherited sin is a legacy of myth.⁴²

It is essential for Christianity to relate the belief in Christ as the redeemer to the human condition after the fall. Thus, man, after the loss of paradise, is in search of the meaning of his life—and this is a search in which knowledge of faith can help him. Luther has encapsulated this knowledge in the formula “simul iustus et peccator” (at once justified and a sinner), which means that although man has experienced the love of God, he is not immune against failure. I understand this formula as a mode of thoughtfulness that can also be found in Cohen and Rosenzweig: they interpret the biblical tradition in a helpful way also for Christianity.

Both correlate the experience of sin with reconciliation. Both agree in the conviction that the created soul—created with the potential to do what is good (cf. Gen 4:7c)—can be constantly renewed. This can take place in the “work of repentance” and in the prayer for forgiveness, as in Psalm 51. Indeed the consciousness of sin first arises in the religious relation between man and God: “Against you only have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight” (v. 6).⁴³ According to Rosenzweig, the experience of revelation opens up the possibility for a new beginning. The light of God is man’s soul,⁴⁴ which can experience “an ever renewed birth” in revelation. In his understanding, the overcoming of sin consists only in the beloved soul’s realization in the moment of revelation that it has been without love in the past. The silent self was closed in upon itself. In such an “incurvatio in seipso,” to put it in Luther’s terms, it knew nothing other than its own concerns. It did not yet have the experience of a genuine encounter with the other. By virtue of the event of revelation, however, the beloved soul is now able to resist all tendencies to see in the other just a thing, an object, a “he”—whether the other is a member of a social class or of another positive religion, or of a “we” that can be viewed from the outside as a “you” (*ein “Ihr”*), i.e., “you others.” Rosenzweig’s concept of redemption is built on the experience of revelation. It bears

⁴¹ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropologie in theologischer Perspektive* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983), 77–150.

⁴² Cf. Hermann Cohen, *Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums*, 2nd ed. (Wiesbaden: Fourier, 1978), 501, 527.

⁴³ In this vein, Cohen writes, “Religion ... generates the individual in the soul of man and in their sin; however, it brings redemption in the recognition of human weakness.” Cohen, *Ethik des reinen Willens*, 366.

⁴⁴ Rosenzweig, *Stern*, 123; *Star*, 121. God also redeems the relation of man and world. “For God the We and the You are—They.... In his They the We and the You sink back in one brilliant light.” *Stern*, 265; *Star*, 255–256. Also, “the night is light for him” (quoting Ps 139:12).

the accent of reconciliation between God and man as well as between man and the other. We can find good consolation in this.

3

The previous considerations have shown that Rosenzweig's concept of redemption is correlated with his understanding of consolation. This can be seen not only on the philological level, when he quotes biblical texts, but also in his use of non-conceptual forms with their anthropological function of consolation and in his critical question whether this function is fulfilled in a better or worse way. In a pictorial comparison of God with a king sitting enthroned above the hymns of Israel, the topic of God's presence, implied already in Exodus 3, comes to fruition in Psalm 22:4.⁴⁵ And at the end of Rosenzweig's main work, the symbol of the Star of David is superimposed with the metaphor of the face, not with the face of God into which nobody can look but with the light of his "face" (Ps 89:16): "The Star of Redemption has turned into a face looking at me and from which I look. Not God but his truth has become a mirror for me."⁴⁶ In this metaphorical play of meaning, Rosenzweig correlates the dimension of human dialogue with the relation to God in which man "walks humbly," remembering "what is good" (Mic 6:8).

Consolation is an integral meaning of Rosenzweig's understanding of redemption, but there remains a tension between both terms that is created by the surplus value of consolation over help, as Simmel put it. The category of consolation still holds, although there is no more help. However, a problem may arise if this surplus value in an anthropological sense is played off against the meaning of rescue from all need that redemption carries in accordance with the biblical understanding. Heinrich Heine is not the only one who has made this point, differentiating between "bodily happiness" (*körperlichem Glück*) and "spiritual comfort" (*geistlichem Trost*). It was part of the Marxist critique of Christianity that the church has concentrated its efforts on salvation but not on rescue from real misery. It is an open question whether this accusation applies. After all, diaconal engagement has been and is part of church life. And looking at the sources of Christianity in the Lord's Prayer, the plea *for daily bread* precedes the *plea for forgiveness from guilt* and *for redemption from evil*. Indeed, there is a profound factual connection between these three pleas grounded in the recognition that man is a unity of body and soul, with a mind inseparable from his physical condition. Furthermore, man has to live with himself—a task that cannot be done without failing here and there; he has to make mistakes and use the freedom to decide between different options without really knowing the consequences.

If we go one step beyond Rosenzweig into Benjamin's late theses *On the Notion of History*, the distinction between happiness and consolation is inherent to the concept of redemption. On the one hand, "in the idea of happiness there vibrates inalienably the idea of

⁴⁵ Rosenzweig, *Stern*, 340, 424; *Star*, 325–326, 404. Cf. Ps 139:8–9, quoted in Rosenzweig, *Stern*, 68, 191; *Star*, 72, 185. Moreover, with the quotation of Ps 95:7 the *Star* implicitly records one of the great metaphors of consolation, which compares God with a good shepherd. Rosenzweig, *Stern*, 198; *Star*, 192.

⁴⁶ Rosenzweig, *Stern*, 471; *Star*, 446–447.

redemption”⁴⁷; on the other hand, there is consolation in the task of remembrance, which is not prevented by the “storm” of progress, “to pause, to wake up the dead and to put together what has been shattered.”⁴⁸ In the critique of a hopeless progress, both Benjamin and Rosenzweig agree. And just as Benjamin was concerned about the insistent attention to the small, the devotion to the insignificant, and the capture of the fast scurrying “picture of the past,”⁴⁹ so too for Rosenzweig: with his writings and in his life he took up the challenge to redeem the unredeemed.

However, if you want to determine the *memoria* more precisely, there is an anthropological consolation in it, insofar as the man who remembers (to recall Blumenberg) “can rise up against the threatening indifference of universal time.”⁵⁰ As he remembers others, they, in turn, build for him “a world in which to be remembered is the only way to remain.”⁵¹ In this sense, “reverence for the dead, for their estate, their form of living is the earliest piece of culture that we know of.”⁵² In this anthropological framework of interpretation, we can take up the wonderful saying of the Baal Shem Tov, that *remembrance is the secret of redemption*. *Memoria* and thoughtfulness make up an account of good forms of consolation in opposition to the less good or even the bad ones (like nationalistic or social ideologies, totalitarian forms of government, or authoritarian regimes).⁵³

In today’s world, perhaps the last horizon of the question of the redeemability of man is a culturally mediated humanity that is able to move about the different symbolic forms in order to experience the “process of a ripening subjectivity”⁵⁴ in community with others. This is also a meaning of the metaphor of the human face used by Rosenzweig, correlating the process of ripening to a dialogical existence. Understood this way, the concept of “redemption” has to be translated from the big eschatological contexts into the small living worlds, in which *memoria* and *thoughtfulness* have to prove themselves, as in the symbolic forms of the liturgical year in Judaism and Christianity that Rosenzweig has described masterfully. Music, as well, belongs to these forms, and it is not necessary to supercharge it in its meaning and to turn it into a substitute for religion as the Romantics did. Last, but not least, humor as a good form of consolation⁵⁵ is included, which can lead to a “redeeming laughter,” as Peter L. Berger has put it. Let me close with a little story I found in his wonderful book.

⁴⁷ Benjamin, “Über den Begriff der Geschichte,” *Gesammelte Schriften* 1.2, 693, Thesis II. Cf. *Theological-political Fragment*: “The order of the profane should be erected on the idea of happiness,” for which “free mankind” is searching without being certain of finding it. The search has to go through “misfortune in the sense of suffering.” Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* 2.1, 203–204.

⁴⁸ Benjamin, “Über den Begriff der Geschichte,” *Gesammelte Schriften* 1.2, 697, Thesis IX.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 695, Thesis V.

⁵⁰ Blumenberg, *Lebenszeit und Weltzeit*, 301. Cf. B. Dober, *Ethik des Trostes*, 286.

⁵¹ Blumenberg, *Lebenszeit und Weltzeit*, 309.

⁵² Blumenberg, *Beschreibung des Menschen*, 188–189. Cf. B. Dober, *Ethik des Trostes*, 287.

⁵³ Cf. B. Dober, *Ethik des Trostes*, 263–295.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 284, quoting Blumenberg, *Lebenszeit und Weltzeit*, 306.

⁵⁵ Cf. B. Dober, *Ethik des Trostes*, 229–263.

In the old days, somewhere in Eastern Europe, a traveler arrived in a shtetl in the middle of winter. There, outside the synagogue, an old man sat on a bench, shivering in the cold. “What are you doing here?” asked the traveler. “I’m waiting for the coming of Messiah.” “That is indeed a very important job,” said the traveler. “I suppose that the community pays you a good salary?” “No, not at all,” said the old man. “They don’t pay me anything. They just let me sit on this bench. Once in a while someone comes out and gives me a little food.” “That must be very hard for you,” said the traveler. “But even if they don’t pay you anything, surely they must honor you for undertaking this important task?” “No, not at all,” said the old man. “They all think that I’m crazy.” “I don’t understand this,” said the traveler. “They don’t pay you. They don’t respect you. You sit out here in the cold, shivering, hungry. What kind of a job is this?” The old man replied: “It’s steady work.”⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Peter L. Berger, *Erlösendes Lachen: Das Komische in der menschlichen Erfahrung*, trans. Joachim Kalka (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1998), xx–xxi.