

SPINOZA, MIRACLES, AND MODERN JUDAISM

Michael A. Rosenthal (Dept. of Philosophy, University of Washington)

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I. INTRODUCTION: SOME EXAMPLES

I want to begin with two examples of miracles and their significance. The first is the theme of a short article, “Das Chanukkah-Wunder,” written by Ignaz Maybaum, which appeared in *Der Morgen* at a particularly difficult time in Jewish history, December 1933. Maybaum reflects on the miracle of the oil and suggests that it has contemporary relevance, not only to the Jews but to all people. The Hanukkah lights are like the Jewish people: just when they seem to be on the verge of extinction, they wondrously continue to burn brightly. The Maccabees, he says, were willing to be martyrs for their faith, and the miracle was that although they were small and relatively powerless, they nonetheless managed to prevail. This event has significance not only for contemporary Jews but for all those who are weak. Despite the supposed natural law that the strong always prevail, it can be possible for the weak to persist. For Maybaum this is a repetition of the *Akedah*. Just as Abraham was expecting to follow the command to slaughter his son, God presented him with a reprieve in the form of a ram. If faith is strong enough, then the world does not have to follow its law-like course and life can be preserved. The Jews must have faith that in their steadfast allegiance to their ways, God will grant them a miraculous exception.

The question remains, however, why we must appeal to God’s intervention to explain the survival of the Jews in the midst of Nazism. And indeed we might emphasize

that with the advantage of hindsight Maybaum's wonder seems remarkably jejeune. In comparison to Buber's musings in 1920 about the wondrous nature of Jewish community, Maybaum's situation does seem existentially graver. But then compare it to Emil Fackenheim's comment after the Holocaust that, in the face of persecution of the Jews and the almost complete indifference of their neighbors to their plight, the true miracle was the few "righteous gentiles" who came to their aid. A more nuanced approach to the question of Jewish survival might consider a variety of factors, some internal to the Jewish community, others related to their external circumstances. It would appear less wondrous but offer more insight.

The second example comes from David Cronenberg's recent movie, *A History of Violence*, in which a small town Indiana family man, Tom, becomes a hero when he comes to the aid of his employees and kills two brutal criminals who are in the process of robbing and terrorizing his restaurant. But this act opens the door to a past in which Tom was another man, Joey, who was himself a violent hit man for the Philadelphia mob. Now his former enemies know where he is, and they come looking for him, unleashing not only a fearsome chain of events in which Tom must protect himself and his family, but also a profound questioning of his identity. Is Tom the same person as Joey? Has he hidden his past merely to escape it or as an act of self-transformation and redemption? In the final scene, after a trip to Philadelphia to confront his own past as Joey, Tom comes back to his family. As he enters the house they are eating dinner with his place empty. Not a word is said, but look and gesture do all the work. His wife has her head bowed, as if in prayer, and Tom takes his seat at the table next to his children. She lifts her head

and looks at him searchingly with wonder. He responds with a look that entreats her for forgiveness and acceptance. The movie ends.

This moment represents, to me at least, another important, and more personal, aspect of the contemporary problem of the miracle. Is the past inescapable destiny or is there the possibility that it can be transformed into something better? Are we fooling ourselves to believe that the world or any part of it can change its course? If it can be transformed, then does it require the intervention of some transcendent power or are immanent causes enough to explain it? Is the wonder at what we are and what we can be a sign of our ignorance and gullibility or a sign of reverence and awe in face of unknown powers?

Since Spinoza's critique at the beginning of the Enlightenment miracles have been a problematic part of modern Jewish belief. The scientist has shown us the power of the fixed laws of nature, whether in the explanation of natural, historical, or psychological phenomena. The Biblical exegete now relies on the doctrines of "higher criticism"—found in detailed textual, linguistic, and comparative anthropological analysis—to make sense of what was previously supposed product of miraculous revelation. The survival of the Jewish people is not an object of wonder but of detailed historical study. The transformation of human nature is a gradual process based on prior experiences and behavior. It seems an even more willful act of ignorance, now more than in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, to believe in the miraculous contravention of nature as an explanation of events.

And yet in the early part of the twentieth century, in the midst of what many at the time believed was the apotheosis of a bankrupt industrial civilization based on the

scientific principles of the Enlightenment—namely, the First World War—many called into question what they now perceived as a dogmatic and naïve faith in the progress of human understanding and civilization. Prominent among these critics was Franz Rosenzweig, who in his *Star of Redemption* and other works attempted to open once again the possibility in the modern age of a miracle and its attendant wonder.

In what follows I shall briefly discuss each side of this debate and ultimately try to relate them back to the examples with which I began. On the one side I shall outline Spinoza's critique of miracles and his analysis of wonder, and the implications of his view for religious belief. On the other side, I shall touch on some of the key points of Rosenzweig's defense of the possibility of experiencing miracles in the modern world. In conclusion I shall suggest that the metaphysics of miracles are really beside the point in the modern debate. It is in fact the disagreement over the role of wonder in human experience that is the decisive issue.

II. SPINOZA'S CRITIQUE

It was Max Weber who famously described the process of modern civilization after the Enlightenment as its "disenchantment" (Weber 1946). Spinoza's critique of religion in general and his analysis of miracles in particular give us a very good understanding of those intellectual processes that helped produce what many perceived as the arid spiritual landscape of the modern world. There are three points that together constitute Spinoza's critique of miracles. The first point is his claim that they are metaphysically impossible. The second is that those who witnessed them are not credible

and were subject to the manipulation of those who may have had ulterior, political motives. The third is the re-description of wonder itself.

Spinoza presents his primary, metaphysical argument against miracles in the sixth chapter of the *Theological-Political Treatise* (TTP).¹ The central idea is that, if God's intellect and will are one and the same, as has been shown in ch. IV and *Ethics* 1p33s2, then "whatever God wills *or* determines involves eternal necessity and truth" (vi.7; III/82). Since nothing is true except through divine decree, then the truth of the laws of nature, which have been decreed by God, must follow necessarily from the nature of God.

Therefore, if anything were to happen in nature which was contrary to its universal laws, it would also be contrary to the divine decree, intellect, and nature. Or if someone were to maintain that God does something contrary to the laws of nature, he would be compelled to maintain at the same time as well that God acts in a way contrary to his own nature. Nothing would be more absurd than that.

(vi.9; III/83)

Spinoza also considers the possibility that the laws of nature do not cover every possible state of affairs and miracles are those events that require God's intervention. But that would also be absurd because it implies either that God's intellect (and hence will) does extend infinitely, which would limit the power of God, or that nature itself has been created "so impotent...that often [God] is compelled to come to its aid anew" (vi.12;

¹ References to Spinoza's work are to the English translations by Edwin Curley. The *Ethics* is found in Spinoza, B. d. (1985). The collected works of Spinoza / edited and translated by Edwin Curley. Princeton, N.J. :, Princeton University Press. The quotes from the TTP are to a draft typescript of Curley's forthcoming translation. The TTP is referred to by chapter and section number followed by reference to volume and page number of the Gebhardt edition of his work, Spinoza, B. (1925). Opera. Heidelberg, Carl Winters Verlag.

III/83). If a “miracle” is defined as “that whose cause cannot be explained according to the principles of the natural light [i.e., reason],” then clearly miracles cannot exist. The only proper understanding of the term, then, must be in relation to man’s inadequate understanding of the natural world and, by extension, of God.

Most men, in Spinoza’s view, never rise to the level of philosophical reflection on the metaphysics of natural law. And even those who do are tainted by the long process of indoctrination and can barely escape its grip. Spinoza addresses not only the status of the putative miraculous event but also the nature of belief in it. He does this indirectly in two distinct ways. The first is the claim that religious knowledge—that is, the claims of prophecy in general—is a species of the imagination and consequently epistemologically inferior to rational knowledge. In contrast to those medieval philosophers, such as Maimonides, who argued that prophecy was both rational and imaginative in nature, Spinoza’s inquiry into the nature of prophecy and the prophets in chapters I and II of the TTP conclude that prophecy is purely an affair of the imagination. And we see this nowhere better than in prophecy’s description of God’s relation to the world as teleological and the idea of a miracle as an exception to the natural order in service of God’s purposes. In the opening sections of TTP, chapter VI, Spinoza gives an account of how the ancient Israelites overcame their polytheistic rivals through imagining an all powerful God who directed things and performed miracles that aided their own (rather than their rivals’) ends.² He continues, “This was so pleasing to men that to this day they

² I think that there is often a great deal of ambiguity in Spinoza’s view about the nature of explanation in Scripture. Sometimes he seems to suggest that the ancient Israelites did think they were explaining the natural world, albeit in error. Other times he claims that these pseudo-explanations were only meant to produce certain political effects and never were intended as real attempts to explain the natural order. One way to resolve this ambiguity is to distinguish between the Bible as it was when it was produced and how we ought to use the Bible now. The authors of the Bible may have been confused about nature and used their explanations to justify the authority of their moral and political prescriptions, but for modern readers

have not ceased to feign miracles, so that they might be believed dearer to God than the rest, and the final cause on account which God has created, and continually directs, all things” (vi.4; III/82). A miracle is merely an imaginative device that attempts to harness our ignorance to the chariot of useful political action. The second way in which Spinoza attempts to undermine the belief in miracles is the historical investigation of Scripture itself. If it can be shown that texts of Scripture were not written by Moses himself, as the tradition claimed, but are rather compiled from many sources—some some contradictory, some obscure, etc.—then the texts are simply not a reliable source of knowledge. As many commentators have argued, one of Spinoza’s main purposes in writing the TTP was to undermine the authority of the texts on which the Church based its political claims. So in this general way he strives to demonstrate that the primary evidence of miracles, the testimonies in Scripture itself, is inadequate to the task.

Spinoza also casts a very dubious eye on the fundamental phenomenological feature of the experience of a miracle—the feeling of wonder. In the bulk of chapter VI he shows that in fact Scripture itself never pretends to present scientific knowledge, that is, it does not explain things through their proximate causes, but rather serves an entirely different purpose:

So there is no doubt but what everything related in Scripture happened naturally, and nevertheless is referred to God, because the purpose of Scripture ... is not to teach things through their natural causes, but only to relate those things which greatly occupy the imagination, and to do this by that Method and style which

who do or ought to know better such confusion takes away from the Bible’s authority. In order to defend the authority of the Bible as a guide to human conduct, the modern reader needs to separate the false explanations of nature from the useful prescriptions for action.

serves best to increase wonder at things, and consequently impress devotion in the hearts of the multitude. (vi.44; III/90)

In contrast to the long tradition going to back to Plato and Aristotle and continuing through Descartes, in which philosophical activity itself begins in wonder,³ Spinoza relegates wonder to the status of an inadequate idea, “the imagination of a singular thing, insofar as it is alone in the mind” (E3p52s). In contrast to those things that we quickly assimilate to others like it, the singular event stops this natural process of association and we tend to dwell on it in a state of wonder. The singular event does not lead to any systematic relation with other things, whether or not the relation is true or false, and so it does not constitute knowledge of any kind and indeed stands in the way of it.

Nonetheless, although wonder does not lead to knowledge, it does have an important role in our affective relations with others. For instance, as he discusses in E3p52s, when the object we wonder at arouses fear in us we are led to consternation. When it is someone’s singular personal qualities that produces wonder, we are led to veneration. And when that veneration is coupled with love it produces devotion, which is essential glue in most

³ Plato stated in the *Theaetetus* (155d) that wonder is the origin of philosophy Plato (1980). The Collected Dialogues of Plato including the Letters. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press., and Aristotle developed this view in the beginning of his *Metaphysics* Aristotle (1941). The Basic Works of Aristotle. New York, Random House.. Descartes, in *Les passions de l’âme*, preserves key aspects of this view in his discussion of wonder (*l’admiration*), which he names as one of the six “primitive passions”Descartes, R. (1989). The Passions of the Soul. Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Co.. “Wonder,” he says in article 70, “is a sudden surprise of the soul which makes it tend to consider attentively those objects which seem to it rare and extraordinary.” Like Aristotle, Descartes thinks that wonder is free of immediate interest and is closely connected to the pursuit of knowledge. Unlike the other passions, which are accompanied by some physiological change, wonder does not “have good or evil as its object, but only knowledge of the thing wondered at” (article 71). The object we wonder at is rare and thus causes us to remember it and seek its cause. But, in good aristotelian fashion, this passion has its excess and its defect. When it is excessive, that is, when it has become a habit to fixate on the rarity of the event, the individual becomes a mere curiosity seeker. When it is defective, the individual lacks the passion for knowledge. In its proper state, wonder “disposes us to the acquisition of knowledge,” and as we acquire knowledge of some object, i.e., explain its causes, then “we should ... try to emancipate ourselves from it as far as possible” (article 76).

political orders.⁴ For Spinoza, then, miracles are essentially devices to produce a state of wonder, whose purpose is not to stimulate us to deepen our knowledge of nature, but rather to lead us into complex emotional relations with others, which can be manipulated politically.

What then are the implications of this systematic critique of miracles for the nature of religious belief? This was precisely the point of some correspondence directed to Spinoza right after the publication of the TTP. In his letter of November 15th, 1675, Henry Oldenburg points to various passages in the TTP that have “proved a stumbling-block to readers,” among which are those that “take away the authority and validity of miracles, which almost all Christians are convinced form the sole basis on which the certainty of Divine Revelation can rest” (Letter 71, 329). Spinoza’s answer is as follows:

Next as to miracles, I am on the contrary convinced that the certainty of divine revelation can be based solely on the wisdom of doctrine, and not on miracles, that is, on ignorance, as I have shown at some length in Chapter 6, ‘On Miracles’. Here I will add only this, that the chief distinction I make between religion and superstition is that the latter is founded on ignorance, the former on wisdom. And this I believe is the reason why Christians are distinguished from other people not by faith, nor charity, nor the other fruits of the Holy Spirit, but solely by an opinion they hold, namely, because, as they all do, they rest their case simply on miracles, that is, on ignorance, which is the source of all wickedness, and thus they turn their faith, true as it may be, into superstition. But I doubt very much

⁴ For a fascinating discussion of the political aspect of the relation of passion and error, see the first section of chapter 7 in James’ *Passion and Action*, especially the discussion of esteem and *grandeur* in Malebranche on page 177ff James, S. (1997). Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.. For more on Spinoza, see my forthcoming paper...

whether rulers will ever allow the application of a remedy for this evil” (Letter 73, 333).

In this passage Spinoza is claiming that miracles are unreliable (because false), and that any religion ought to be based on what can be rightly known, namely the works of faith and charity. He is also suggesting that, although such a religion based not on dogma but on works would be desirable, it is politically impracticable.

In Spinoza’s view, the persistence of the Jewish people has little or nothing to do with miraculous events, but to particular social practices, such as a well-organized theocracy in Biblical times, and then later, the practice of circumcision and ritual separation (see TTP, ch. III). In relation to our other opening example, Spinoza would claim that the possibility of forgiveness must be based, as the title of the movie itself suggests, on knowledge of the *history* of the person, and that the possibility of the transformation depends on concrete circumstances that can be known. The wonder of the situation is, I think Spinoza would say, an artifice of the theatrical *staging* of the event as exemplary in some sense, and usually serves some political exigency. In short, it can be shown that: the concept of a miracle as a contravention of natural law is false; the belief in miracles is a species of the imagination and our partial, inadequate understanding of the world; and that the wonder produced in the face of the singular exception can and ought to be dispelled through knowledge.

III. ROSENZWEIG’S DEFENSE

There are a variety of possible responses to Spinoza’s (and by extension the Enlightenment’s) critique of miracles. The first would be just to ignore it and naively

maintain the tradition's own understanding. However, as many have pointed out, the anti-rational "traditionalistic" view is just as much a response to modernity. It involves a willful attempt to ignore what could potentially undermine it and hence is in an important sense itself a product of the Enlightenment critique. The second would be to dispute the key points, whether metaphysical or epistemological, of the critique. One could argue along with many contemporary philosophers of science that the Enlightenment view of the laws of nature is mistaken. The universe is not constructed like the mechanical clockwork to which it was often compared. And indeed may be that the probabilistic structure of modern science allows for the possibility of a miracle. Likewise one could claim that the beliefs of those who experienced miracles were not epistemologically inferior or unreliable. These are obviously defensible positions and we find elements of the latter in Rosenzweig, which we shall mention below. However, the main thrust of a third kind of response, one which I take to be Rosenzweig's primary position, and hence important to modern Jewish thought, is that it is necessary to *redefine* the idea of miracle in new terms.

The most compelling account of this problem in modern Jewish philosophy is found in the introduction to the second part of Franz Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption* (Rosenzweig 1971). In this section, entitled "On the Possibility of Experiencing Miracles," Rosenzweig also uses a family metaphor to define the issue:

If miracle is really the favorite child of belief, then its father has been neglecting his paternal duties badly, at least for some time. For at least a hundred years the child has been nothing but a source of embarrassment to the nurse which he had ordered for it—for theology. She would have gladly been rid of it if only—well if

only a degree of consideration for the father had not forbidden it during his lifetime. But time solves all problems. The old man cannot live forever. And thereupon the nurse will know what she must do with this poor little worm which can neither live nor die under its own power; she has already made the preparations. (93)

Rosenzweig wants to know what broke up “so thoroughly” this “formerly happy family life.” The answer is, of course, the Enlightenment, or rather, as he relates the story, the three enlightenments. Rosenzweig’s goal in this section, as the title suggests, is to suggest a way in which, given the Enlightenment critique, a man of faith may still legitimately *believe* in the possibility of miracles. It is clear that for Rosenzweig the murderous instinct of the nurse theologian is indeed criminal. If belief is to have progeny, it must be defended from what was supposed to have nourished it. For Rosenzweig the possibility of a miracle is central to modern Jewish life.

There are three steps in Rosenzweig’s attempt to recover the possibility of the miracle in the modern world. The first is a description of the historical reason why philosophy and theology need each other in the modern world. (This is particularly important because he recognizes that there should be some degree of rational justification of the concept.) The second is an analysis of the structure of the concept itself. (And here he will distinguish his view of miracle from at least one crucial aspect of the Enlightenment view.) The third step is to articulate the way in which the concept can be experienced. (This is through language and the experience of wonder.)

After the last stage of the Enlightenment the stage is set for the advent of what Rosenzweig calls “historical theology,” whose purpose, somewhat ironically given its

name, is to “neutralize” the past. Before the Enlightenment belief was based on a past experience, the miraculous event of revelation. But now that this event has been called into question, the justification of belief has to be found in the future, in the very idea of progress itself. Historical theology takes religious belief, which had been conceived as following from an interruption of history, and places it in the logically unfolding process of history itself. Rosenzweig argues that this serves a double purpose: it uses science to liberate belief from the necessity of any independent rational justification: “Historical theology is commissioned to intercept what has transpired, and partly to pigeonhole it, partly to clothe it anew, that is, in essence, to erect a Chinese wall against knowledge” (101). At the same time as theology has cut itself off from its source in historical revelation, philosophy has likewise suffered a crisis of objectivity.⁵ German idealism has collapsed into the multiple perspectives of individual *Weltanschauungen*. There is no longer any unified perspective and only “extreme subjectivity” (106). This is precisely the point, according to Rosenzweig, where theology and philosophy can meet and solve each others’ problems. Theology supplies the miracle of revelation, which leads to the objective unity of creation itself, while philosophy provides the truth of belief in the idea of the verification of a future redemption.

Now the structure of the miracle is formed through the conjunction of theology and philosophy. But it is important to distinguish this idea of a miracle from what the Enlightenment supposed it to be:

The enlightenment, not knowing what, critically, to make of its historical proof, had depressed miracle to the level of magic, conjurational if not cosmic; it

⁵ For more on the problem of objectivity, see Morgan, M. L. (2001). Interim Judaism: Jewish Thought in a Century of Crisis. Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

appeared to be no more than a successful deception. It had thus robbed miracle of its authentic essence, bearing on its forehead the marks of its derivation from belief; it had turned miracle into something heathenish. (108)

In other words, the definition of miracle as a contravention of the laws of nature does not distinguish the authentic sign of revelation from a mere trick.⁶ A miracle is an event of nature made possible through the will of God in creation, but an event that only has meaning as the *sign* of some future event that will complete it. “The miracle of the personal experience of revelation may confirm itself for the will in the certitude of its future verification through redemption” (107). Our examples can help understand this very abstract idea. We don’t know whether the survival of the Jewish people at any moment is miraculous until the future time in which the acts of the Jews have fulfilled its nature and redeemed its past suffering. Likewise, the possibility of moral transformation in any individual—say, to change from a violent to a peaceful person—is a miracle only insofar as it guides that person to a future time in which the transformation has indeed been achieved and that person’s life, including their past acts of violence, has been redeemed.

As a concept, Rosenzweig’s analysis of miracle cannot stand up to pure philosophical scrutiny, because it depends on a set of beliefs—in creation, revelation, and redemption—whose truth can only be known in some future time. Of course Rosenzweig is aware of the problem:

And theology itself conceives of its contents as event, not as content; that is to say, as what is lived, not as life. As a result its preconditions are not conceptual

⁶ On this point see also Gibbs, R. (1992). Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press., especially 82-3.

elements, but rather immanent reality. For this reason the concept of creation supersedes the philosophical concept of truth. (108)

But the very statement of the problem also contains its own solution, namely, the idea that belief is not merely a concept but ultimately action guiding. From the individual point of view it is not just that my beliefs cause me to act but that my beliefs are beliefs that have guided countless other individuals in the past. Indeed the weight of the beliefs is increased through the weight of the countless number of people who have died in their name, acting for the sake of future redemption.⁷ In the *Star of Redemption*, this call to action is made through language. It is part of creation and it suffers the same fate as truth: it came into the world whole, with its own logic, but then splintered into many languages, each with their own unique perspectives. But the very promise of redemption is given in language and that is itself a sign that the future holds the possibility of a truly human language:

For speech is truly mankind's morning gift from the Creator, and yet at the same time it is the common property of all the children of men, in which each has its particular share and, finally, it is the seal of humanity in man. It is entire from the beginning: man became man when he first spoke. And yet to this day there is no language of mankind; that will only come to be at the end. (110)

If language itself is the structure of a miraculous act, then it will also require others for it to have content. "For the word is mere inception until it finds reception in an ear and response in a mouth" (110). It is the community of believers, who speak not just any

⁷ This point and the one that follows were made clear to me from the very illuminating discussion (46 and 50 respectively) in Batnitzky, L. (2000). Idolatry and Representation: The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig Reconsidered. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press.

language, but the language of revelation, who have the possibility of creating a world in which the miracle can be verified.

In his later work, *Understanding the Sick and Healthy*, Rosenzweig put this problematic somewhat differently (Rosenzweig 1999). There he insists that the philosophical view turns into a kind of sickness when it turns a natural question into one of the “highest” or “ultimate” problems (39). Wonder, he says, is hardly a privilege of the philosopher alone. It also belongs to the child and the savage (40). The difference is that the philosopher fixates on the wondrous event and refuses to let it go until it has been conceptualized as a problem. “He insists on a solution immediately—at the very instant of his being overcome—and at the very place wonder struck him. He stands quiet, motionless. He separates his experience of wonder from the continuous stream of life, isolating it” (40). The miracle, then, takes on real meaning as the wonder it produces is dissipated in the action it demands. It is not enough to remain astonished at the mystery of Jewish survival, but rather to act in such a way that will perpetuate the ideal of the Jewish community. It may be astonishing that the wife in Cronenberg’s movie could consider taking her husband back after coming to know what she knows about him as a violent person, but the point of the wonder is that it should impel her to act toward some notion of redemption that we in the audience may also share as a consequence of examining her situation.

IV. CONCLUSION

It may seem at first glance that the implications of the two views for modern Judaism could not be more different. On the one hand, we have the free thinker who uses

science to scrutinize the far-fetched claims of the religious imagination, including the singularity of the Jewish people. On the other hand, there is the former Hegelian who longed in the trenches of WWI for the redemption of meaning in a disenchanted world and found it in Jewish ritual and belief. But in my concluding comments I want to complicate things a bit by suggesting that each view suffers from some difficulties and that they may in fact have some things in common.

One of the primary goals of Rosenzweig's work, and something that he shares with his mentor, Hermann Cohen, is the criticism of immanent modes of thinking—whether Hegelianism or Spinozism—and the defense of the transcendent as the only possible basis of an ethical life. This general goal certainly figures in the discussion of miracles. In an immanent philosophical system the very idea of a miraculous intervention is deeply problematic. However, although Rosenzweig defends the idea of a transcendent God and the importance of creation in his philosophical theology, the concept of a miracle he has outlined is susceptible to an immanent interpretation. We can see if this if we briefly turn to some contemporary interpretations of Rosenzweig's often obscure discussion. Leora Batnitzky interprets the idea of miracle in terms of what she calls the "hermeneutical model," which takes language as the background of all meaning in his system (Batnitzky 2000). The prophetic call to action is part of a tradition that, while it exceeds any individual and remains open to the future contingent, is nonetheless within an intelligible system (50-1). Reiner Wiehl points out that the idea of a miracle is a "boundary concept" between theology and philosophy and refers to Rosenzweig's view that, freedom is "the miracle in the world of appearances" which "directly recalls the basic thought of Kant's critical philosophy, which requires that cognition be limited in

order to make room for the possibility of belief” (Wiehl 1988).⁸ Unlike Kant Rosenzweig would maintain that the source of the moral law is heteronomous, but like Kant he would claim that the ground of its possibility is ineffable. Finally, in a fascinating essay, Eric Santner focuses on the temporal dimension of Rosenzweig’s argument to show how the miracle should be understood as the possibility of acting in opposition to a dominant social ideology (Santner 2005). “Miracles happen,” he writes, “when we find ourselves able to suspend a pattern” that makes others guilty for our own participation, whether passive or active, in wrongdoing (89-90). Language is the repository of these points of social stress and the unleashing of these latent “semiotic energies” found in the psyche of the individual is the modern, materialistic meaning of a miracle. What seems common to each of these interpretations is the importance of contingency and the possibility that the agent be capable of acting freely (and yet in accordance with the moral law) in the face of apparently adverse circumstances. Moreover, with the possible exception of Wiehl, they insist on the intelligibility of the miraculous event within some horizon of earthly meaning. To put it more simply: to escape embarrassment the miracle has been redefined as a special kind of immanent event.

The obverse side of this point is that Spinoza’s insistence on a fully immanent explanation of all things is, at least from the human point of view, a fantasy rather than a reality. True, in his system, God’s infinite intellect knows all things, but from the point of view of the finite mode, such as a human mind, such knowledge must be posited as a regulative ideal for our incomplete and often bumbling attempts at scientific explanation,

⁸ The reference on page 66 of Wiehl’s essay is to *The Star of Redemption*, page 67. See also “Atheistic Theology” (60) in Rosenzweig, F. (2000). Philosophical and Theological Writings. Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing.

rather than as something that can actually be attained. Each adequate idea does raise our power to explain and to act in the world, but the process is unending and incomplete. Because of the gap between what we hope to know and what we actually do, we develop a host of concepts—such as “contingent” and “possible”—that help us manage our ignorance. In chapter IV of the TTP, Spinoza even suggests that we must think of ourselves as free, even though we may not be:

I have also said that these latter laws depend on a decision of men because we ought to define and explain things through their proximate causes. That universal consideration concerning fate and the connection of causes cannot help us to form and order our thoughts concerning particular things. Moreover, we are completely ignorant of the very order and connection of things, i.e., of how things are really ordered and connected. So for practical purposes it is better, indeed necessary, to consider things as possible. (iv.4; III/57)

To be sure, Rosenzweig would not see this view as his own. In chapter two of *Understanding the Sick and Healthy*, he mocks the “*Als ob*” philosophy of Hans Vaihinger, which claims that we must act “as if” God were real, even though he is not, and “as if” we are actually free, even though we are not.⁹ This act of psychic distancing oneself from life is a symptom of the philosophical sickness he is trying to diagnose. But it is clear that Spinoza recognizes that the individual in the midst of life must conceive him or herself and act accordingly without full knowledge. Although the acquisition of knowledge constantly changes how we conceive of ourselves and the world, because the process is always incomplete, there is a sense in which the wonder produced by unknown, singular events is ineliminable. The question is whether or not we want to

⁹ See the third section of Nahum Glatzer’s introduction to the book for more on this theme.

assign this wonder to a lack of our understanding or to the intervention of a transcendent being.

For both Spinoza and Rosenzweig it would be wrong to fixate on the wonder of any a singular event—such as the persistence of the Jewish people in the face of persecution or the act of forgiveness in a relationship—and turn it into a philosophical problem. The difference is whether the sense of wonder itself can lead to an outcome that helps us flourish. For Spinoza it remains an obstacle to knowledge and hence to our striving to persevere. In the long term it will produce more sadness than joy. For Rosenzweig wonder remains a stimulus to ethical engagement with others and is something that is essential if we are to re-enchant modern life.

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