Philosophy and Jewish Thought
A Comparative Path
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Abstract: Through the analysis of some of the main categories of Greek philosophy and Jewish thought, this essay highlights a general, decisive antithesis between them, i.e. the theoretical opposition between a Greek conceptual-deductive method and a Jewish storytelling attitude. The attention paid by contemporary philosophy to narrative issues can thus be seen as bearing witness to philosophy’s need to reshape its speculative processes, and at the same time as proving the topicality of Jewish thought as a viable way to delineate new thinking perspectives.

There is always a sort of reluctance among contemporary scholars to connect the adjective “Jewish” with the noun “philosophy.” By philosophy tout court a well-established tradition is meant which emerged in ancient Greece and was based upon distinctive traits and ways of thinking; but of a presumed “Jewish philosophy” it may even be asked whether such a thing is possible at all. This open question is also the reason why I will adopt a cautious approach to the problem and assume the word “philosophy” to denote but a partial dimension of Western thought, while I will use the term “Jewish thought” to designate the complementary, completing dimension.

This essay concerns some aspects of the relationship between these two main cultural traditions of Western thought and puts forward the hypothesis that the inadequacy of the fixing and abstracting attitude of philosophy towards reality, life and history as developing processes can lead to regard some distinctive Jewish ways of thinking as theoretical alternatives for a better rendering of the becoming of real life and historical reality.

Overall, then, a storytelling method can represent the Jewish alternative to the rigid conceptual reflection peculiar to philosophy.

1. Philosophy and “Uni-Totality”

The common denominator of every philosophical conception can be found in a constitutive tendency to go beyond the sphere of empirical determinate-
ness and thus to carry thought to the higher level of universality. This universality was not conceived from the outset as something intelligible, but rather as something sensible: water, air, and fire represent the first philosophical answers to the question pertaining to the universal principle of reality, which, in this context, is still seen in terms of matter with regard to both the origin and the continuous nature of all things. Despite their material character, these elements nonetheless already reveal a purely philosophical feature in a sort of “call to unity and universality” which reduces the multiplicity of real determinations to a unique principle.

What philosophy has always pursued through the course of its history is thus a unifying factor that is able to gather around itself the totality of the elements composing reality. This aim affects philosophy so essentially that the basic principle sought by every philosophical conception might properly be called “Uni-Totality.”

The highest accomplishment of philosophy thus conceived is German idealism in its Hegelian form. This complex philosophical system, established by Hegel as a point of convergence between reason and reality, finds its most poignant expression in the famous sentence: “What is rational is real; and what is real is rational.”¹ The chiastic structure of the quote underlines the double bind between reason and reality: on the one hand, reality is not abandoned to an irregular, inconclusive movement, but it develops according to a logical-rational pattern. On the other hand, reason is not an abstract realm without any contact with real concreteness, rather it is the very structure underlying and leading the development of reality. However, in order to achieve such a full identification between thought and being, the abstract and the concrete, reason and reality, Hegel is forced to resort to surreptitious thinking strategies, whose inner nature, if brought to the fore, threatens to put the very foundation of the Hegelian system into question. These strategies can be summarized by the keywords reduction, coercion, intemporality and monologue of thought.

Reduction: What lies at the roots of the “Uni-Totality” philosophy is an inquiry method based upon a systematic search for the essence of things. The preferred means to this end is then the application of a “what-is-question” (Was-ist-Frage) to each aspect of reality.² But, once posed, this kind of question unfolds a sort of displacing movement by which reflection is forced to find the real essence of what is questioned in something different from it. According to this conception, then, every element of reality is not allowed to be just what it is, but must “actually” be something else – that is to say, the hidden

² The reference to the central question of Socratic dialogues – “τί εστι” – is clear.
essence of a thing must be located in something different from the thing itself. So, everything touched by the “what-is-question” turns out to be involved in a process leading it back to a dimension in which its real nature lies, i.e. to the unique basic principle, repository of the essence of reality.

With regard to the history of philosophy, each epoch has conceived its own foundation, recognizing it in the cosmos (ancient philosophy), in God (medieval philosophy), in the “I” (modern philosophy) and making it the reference point for reality to be aligned to. However, apart from the specific element each time assumed as the ultimate source, what is noticeable as a constant feature of philosophy through the development of its history is a reduction dynamics deeply affecting every approach to reality.

More specifically, Hegelian idealism, as the most mature expression of the reduction-based philosophy, presents a conception in which everything is interrelated within an universal dimension, each finite determination of reality is seen as a moment of a process culminating in the so called “Absolute Spirit.” However, the Absolute Spirit is not to be understood as a transcendent entity leading reality from above or from outside. Despite being a result, it is not separated from what has led to it, rather it is able to both abolish and conserve (aufheben) at the same time every previous transitory moment of its development. Spirit is not only the principle of reality: it is the whole of reality itself as a process involving every particular aspect of it, in such a way that everything showing a worldly, material, phenomenal nature – at a superficial level – “actually” (eigentlich) turns out to have a spiritual character – at a deeper, more authentic level. But, once again, the specific means through which the real essence of things is pursued beyond their deceptive surface is what has been called the what-is-question, i.e. the question about what a thing “actually” is, in contrast to what it simply appears to be.

Franz Rosenzweig, one of the most passionate opponents of this way of questioning, pinpoints its fallacy as follows: “This is what philosophy asks when it asks about essence. [Everything] must ‘actually’ be something quite different. [...] But in this what-is-question, applied to ‘everything,’ lies the entire error of the answer. An is-sentence must, if it is worth the bother of saying it, say something new after the ‘is,’ something that was not there before.”

By way of summary, through a theoretical strategy based upon reduction, philosophy raises itself to the absolute point of view offered by a full adhesion to a fundamental principle. From this perspective then, a grasp of reality can be ensured that is so secure that, once the truth dimension lying in the prin-

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inciple has been reached, no aspect of reality may remain unexplained. But the price to pay for such an all-encompassing knowledge is precisely the irreducibility of reality as a living multiplicity of elements, which by no means can be adequately rendered by a single element – even if elevated to the rank of ultimate source. Lastly, what gets lost through reduction is “worldly plenitude” and vitality, in short: multiplicity and free becoming of reality, which barely tolerate the artificial constraints of “Uni-Totality.”

Coercion: Furthermore, by virtue of what has been said above, a consequence of the reduction process is to be found in the notion of coercion – which, as can be easily seen, is closely connected with the artificial constraints mentioned before.

As Robert Musil said: “Philosophers are violent and aggressive persons who, having no army at their disposal, bring the world into subjection to themselves by means of locking it up in a system.” Well, it is doubtful whether the reason why philosophy – the systematic one, at least – is prone to violence could be ascribed to the lack of an army, but, apart from Musil’s irony, what is worth emphasizing, is the violent and aggressive nature of philosophical reflection towards the world, whose overflowing vitality must be strictly disciplined before being allowed access to the sphere of thinking – i.e. before being properly thought. But imposing rational discipline on free vitality amounts to betraying the world’s intimate nature. The rational image of the world obtained in this way has by now been irreparably detached from the concrete world. Reality’s richness is bent to philosophy’s need for rational order. Pluri-dimensionality of authentic being is converted into one-dimensionality of artificial thought by leveling out each unevenness that could pose a threat to the ideal of a perfect conformity between reality and philosophy. The vitality of “real reality,” with its roughness and imperfection, is thus sacrificed for the sake of abstract purity in “thought reality” – which obviously can be nothing more than a pale shadow of the “real” one, this having been stiffened by the loss of what were its most distinctive features: multiplicity and becoming, which the system, being unable to handle them rationally, must neglect.

Intemporality: Temporality is the dimension peculiar to worldly becoming and philosophy’s abstracting attitude towards the world cannot help spreading also to the specific dimension it is immersed in. According to the philosophical tradition, time is usually thought to be concerned with characterizing but the lower levels of reality, i.e. the ones compromised with the process

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of becoming, through which things continuously come to be and pass away. Philosophy has always perceived a sort of “impurity” related to this temporal process, which hence certainly cannot be seen as the bearer of the essential truth of being. “Essence wants to know nothing of time.” The innermost nature of things is rather to be searched for at a higher level settled beyond temporal becoming, in a domain in which truth and essence can remain uncorrupted through and above the flow of time – and the capability to gain access to the eternal dimension of this domain by thinking regardless of time “was the highest claim to glory that philosophy up to now assumed for itself.”

Moreover, as a result of the detachment from time and becoming, the philosophical way of thinking – and thus the truth it can achieve – gains one of its most characteristic properties: the absolute simultaneity of every logical passage it can develop. Everything in the sphere of thinking occurs at the same time, that is to say, outside of time. In this conception, then, residual traces of succession and progression dynamics in thinking are just considered signs of the imperfection of the human condition as it is thrown into time, whereas pure “thinking is timeless and wants to be timeless. With one stroke it wants to make a thousand connections,” without any chronological orientation, “the last, the goal, is for it the first.”

Monologue of thought: Becoming and multiplicity are therefore the main features of reality, from whose concreteness philosophy has always tried to abstract, pursuing an ideal of purity of thought. So, if philosophy’s claim to intemporality can be considered an argument against temporal becoming, equally an internal monologue of thought thinking itself – like the one conceived by Hegel in terms of the absolute principle – implies the elevation of the notion of unity over that of multiplicity – with consequent discredit to the latter. In fact, it is not that philosophical reflection totally neglects multiplicity, rather this is confined to a subordinate role, being subsumed in a context in which theoretical primacy is always granted to the notion of unity.

The centrality of the concept of unity and the consequent subordination of that of multiplicity also debase the value of the category of otherness, since it finds its conditio sine qua non just in the many different elements multiplicity consists of. Otherness and multiplicity, then, being closely connected, are

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6 Rosenzweig, “The New Thinking,” p. 82.
7 Ibid., p. 83.
8 Ibid., p. 86.
9 Ibid.
10 Consider to this end Beniamino Fortis, “Thinking the Future. Death and Redemption. Heidegger and Rosenzweig,” Δάμων. Revista Internacional del Filosofía, supp. 3 (2010), pp. 249–256, where the comparison between Heidegger and Rosenzweig on the issue of otherness can be seen as a particular case of the more general relationship between philosophy and Jewish thought.
both embedded as *sub-dimensions* into a wider, unity-based *dimension*, in such a manner that the foundation for a monological way of thinking turns out to be already laid in this conception. Irrespective of otherness, the monologue of thought develops in a closed, self-referring way: “The thinker plainly knows his thoughts in advance; that he ‘expresses’ them is only a concession to the defectiveness, as he calls it, of our means of communication.”

In the final analysis, the monological dynamics of thought, as the essence of reality, comes to set itself as its only object. Thus it finds in itself, and in itself alone, the means to extend a rational control over reality and hence to predict every development in it. But, the aspect of reality that in this way remains unaccounted for is exactly the unpredictability typical to an authentic happening, i.e. the uncertainty relative to the turning up of an authentic otherness.

Each of the abovementioned items – reduction, coercion, intemporality and monologue of thought – was subjected to harsh criticism by thinkers belonging to the Jewish tradition, whose theoretical kernels can be identified in *irreducible multiplicity* and in the so called “letting thought” (*lassendes Denken*), in a high consideration of *time* and in the need for *otherness*.

2. Seeing vs. Hearing

Before dealing with the issue of how Jewish thought can represent a theoretical alternative to philosophy “from Ionia to Jena,” it should be noted that the sharp difference between the two traditions is rooted in the primacy accorded by each of them to different senses in the forming of knowledge.

“If Hellas is called ‘the eye of the world,’ Israel can be said to be ‘the ear of the world,’” said Jakob Taubes.

The typological differences between sight and hearing determine those between the two thinking modes they give origin to, so that the distinctive

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12 The term “letting thought” (*lassendes Denken*) has been introduced in the philosophical debate by Klaus Hemmerle, “Das Heilige und das Denken. Zur philosophischen Phänomenologie des Heiligen,” in B. Casper, K. Hemmerle and P. Hünermann (eds.), *Besinnung auf das Heilige*, Freiburg-Basel-Wien: Herder, 1966, pp. 9–79, p. 22. The expression hints at a thinking attitude which *does not force* reality to be what rational categories dictate to it, but rather *lets* reality just be what it spontaneously is. In this sense “letting thought” can be seen as the contrary of “forcing thought” – whose theoretical basis is the notion of coercion.
traits highlighted for philosophy turn out to have a deeper source in the fact that the development of Greek thought has been characterized by the elevation of the eye over the ear as the preferred sensory organ, and consequently also by the assumption of sight’s specific features as paradigms for the delineation of knowledge.

On the contrary, Jewish thought has always been deeply affected by the Old Testamentary prohibition of images. Such a restriction has certainly induced Jewish culture to develop in a basically aniconic direction, which also favored the rise of a hearing-based way of thinking, a mode that is molded around a conception of knowledge meant in terms of “listening to the word of God shared through revelation.”

At a first rough glance, it can be said that seeing is a spatial sense whereas hearing is a temporal one. It may seem banal, but this first opposition represents the basis from which the two faculties diverge until they form completely different ways of thinking.

To adopt a spatial perspective – like the one of seeing – means to have perception of being as a complex of standing, fixed elements. Once seen, these are caught in the rigid structure of a two-dimensional representation, whose external form is defined by the unity of the look which outlines it, while its inner form, i.e. the arrangement of its inner parts, is determined by a strict, ossifying order among them. What we are dealing with is, to be more precise, a sort of “snapshot” of reality, in which a tendency to reduction is already noticeable in the unity of the look molding the external form, whereas the coercive attitude of philosophy is prefigured by the ossifying order upon which the inner form is based.

The prominent role of hearing in the Jewish tradition reflects its specific way of thinking. In contrast to what can be said about seeing, a floating dimension, in which each acoustic phenomenon cannot be fixed in a stable image, acts as a background to the perception of hearing, for the simple motive that everything heard just goes by. But this impossibility of fixing its own objects leads a hearing-based thinking to adopt a more flexible approach to reality, according to which the notions of unity and reduction are perceived as conceptual constraints, which distort the rendering of reality. Not to be able to impose a rigid order on reality and to conceive it as a sort of transient stream, by nature irreducible to unity, are exactly the circumstances in which reduction and coercion can be rejected in favor of their counter-notions: the irreducibility of a full unfolding of reality and the freedom relative to the abovementioned “letting thought.”

16 It is a prohibition against the creation of every form of image, considered, as such, as linked with idolatry: “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” (Ex. 20: 4).
Another of the main (contradictory) conceptual couples through which seeing and hearing mark a significant break with one another, is the one represented by closure and diffusion. The ontological background at the roots of seeing is based upon object ontology, i.e. upon such characteristics as cohesion, rigid determination, closure and compactness. “Seeing fixes things in their place. It is the objectifying sense par excellence. With seeing, the world coagulates to objects. Every look has something of the look of Medusa.”

The ontology of hearing, by contrast, does not lend itself to be treated through an objective setting: it has a diffuse, ethereal status, which cannot be reduced to objective rigidity. Objects of visual perception are kept at a distance, thus building up an unbridgeable gap between she who sees and what is seen. But auditory phenomena constitute continuity with those who perceive them. Hearing is a connecting sense, because it supposes a sort of “ontological fluidity,” in which both the hearer and that which is heard, are immersed – and thus connected. “The perceptions of the ear are diffuse, [...] the ear can hardly determine its perceptions.” The verb “to determine” pertains here to the act of classifying, of imposing a structure on phenomenal matter by drawing conceptual lines in it.

The centrality of the notion of “object” for the sense of seeing also reveals its isolating attitude. Etymologically the object, ob-jectum, is that which is placed in front of something – and thus separated from it. On the contrary, the difficulty in focusing on auditory data and the impossibility of objectifying them confer hearing the status of authentic relational sense. These features confirm in hearing’s ontological profile, namely, the constitutive lack of that which would make isolation even possible.

To perceive something visually requires a certain detachment from it. To perceive something acoustically means, instead, to be involved in a stream of mutually permeating sensory stimuli. The “seen world” is a group of well-determined entities separated from one another by ontological boundaries. The “heard world” is an all-embracing dimension whose fundamental fluidity makes phenomena flow smoothly into one another, without any possibility of fixing them permanently.

To sum up, recalling the connection between the sensory level and the intellectual one, the fixing and isolating attitude of seeing represents perfectly the intemporality and monological thought peculiar to philosophy, whereas fluidity and tendency to relation reveal a deep connection between hear-

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ing and Jewish thought as based upon time and otherness. This original difference, finally, prepares the ground for the development of what might be called “the way of the concept” – on the part of philosophy – and “the way of the storytelling” – on the part of Jewish thought.

3. Concept vs. Storytelling – or, in other words, “Old Thinking” vs. “New Thinking” – or, in still other words, Philosophy vs. Jewish thought

“[T]he difference between the old and new, logical and grammatical thinking, [...] lie[s] [...] in the need of an other and, what is the same thing, in the thinking of time seriously.”

The novelty of the “new thinking” consists, then, not only in bringing to the fore what the “old thinking” rejected on principle – i.e. a “serious” consideration of time and otherness –, but also in conceiving them as originally joined to one another: time and need of an other – mainly meant as interlocutor, in a linguistic dimension – are explicitly declared to be the same thing. They are so tightly interwoven that the three divisions of time – past, present and future – can unfold only through the specific linguistic modes peculiar to each of them. Vice versa, different linguistic forms, as different ways of meeting otherness, make sense only if embedded within a temporal dimension. Time is always conceived as time of the other, i.e. essentially open to otherness, and speech is the way through which time acquires its authenticity. On the one hand, speech needs time, “[it] is bound to time, nourished by time, and it neither can nor wants to abandon this ground of nourishment.” But on the other hand, it is also time that needs speech, because the spoken word, filling empty time, is exactly what confers meaning on it and makes it “became entirely real.”

One of the main ways time and speech converge and lend meaning to one another is the act of storytelling, in which the past time of history and the narrative speech become mutually defining, insofar as narration needs to be developed according to a temporal rhythm and time needs to be narrated to get its ontological authenticity.

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20 According to Rosenzweig, the past suits the narrative character of a storytelling philosophy (erzählende Philosophie) that has been developed under the influence of Schelling’s Ages of the World. The present is the temporal context for the development of a dialogical exchange. The future is connected with the linguistic structure of a promise.
23 Ibid., p. 82.
Rosenzweig writes in this context: “What does it mean to tell a story? He who narrates does not want to say how it ‘actually’ was, but how it really took place. [...] The narrator never wants to show that it actually was entirely different – it is precisely a sign of the poor historian, who is obsessed with concepts.”

The difference between what “actually” is – as artificial intellectualism – and what “simply” is – as common-sense wisdom recurs, then, once again. In this vision, the narrator is concerned with showing how historical events freely unwind, without distorting them to suit whatsoever conceptual scheme. He does not claim to explain – i.e. to grasp rationally – the course of history by virtue of a conceptual dynamics, drawn from an abstract domain that truly has nothing to do with the concreteness of real events. Rather, he relates faithfully their authentic succession. Storytelling, as a specific narrator’s act, can thus fully meet the requirements of the “new thinking” – and naturally also those of the “letting thought,” which, after all, represents just a different aspect of the same way of thinking, thanks to its capability to adapt to its own object and to let it be what it spontaneously is inclined to be. Going along with historical development, storytelling acts as a neutral means towards it: to tell a story means, in this case, to respect the nature of what is told. A narrative form, namely, does not interfere with the historical content it refers to, but expresses it in such a way that the intimate nature of what is expressed remains preserved and unaltered through the expression process – which is much more than what could be said, if this process were to be developed through concepts. With its “letting” attitude, then, storytelling simply “gives history the floor” – so to speak –, so that historical events can be free to show themselves as they unaffectedly are.

What Rosenzweig says about the poor historian obsessed by concepts, than, could rightly be extended to the philosopher of history. Philosophy of history – along with many other “philosophies of something different from philosophy” (e.g. of art, of education, of science etc.) – is one of those branches of knowledge about which it can be reasonably doubted whether they are more philosophy or more the specific object this philosophy is aimed at. The expression “either philosophy or history” – which summarizes the internal conflict of philosophy of history – hints at the fact that a philosophical approach to a particular sector or aspect of reality tends to put itself just before the subject matter it should account for: once touched by philosophy, history, which should freely follow the concrete unfolding of the events, turns out to be instead bound to the rules imposed by an abstract concept.

24 Ibid., pp. 81-82.
25 “The new [thinking] does nothing other than turn the ‘method’ of common sense into the method of scientific thinking” (Ibid., p. 83).
Philosophy of history forces historical events into conceptual categories. In this conception, a key to the interpretation of historical reality, obtained solely on the basis of a deductive process, is afterwards applied to real events. But it is an overbearing act to impose an abstract order on concrete reality – or, to be more explicit, to claim history to be what philosophy wants it to be. In fact, philosophy cannot lead historical reality without missing something essential of “the giving of the event,” and thus, the only way thought can remain fully true to history is to follow its lead in the course of its happening, and again, in order to do this without any distortion, thought must assume a storytelling attitude.

To sum up, then, the relationship between history and thought can assume two different configurations: either history is bent to thought, or thought comes to assume a temporal, historical character. But it must be observed that, in the two parts of the previous sentence, it is not the same kind of thought at issue. To be more precise, the first occurrence of the word “thought” means a conceptual, philosophical reflection, to which history is subordinate, while the second occurrence means a kind of thought permeated by history and endowed with temporal features that confer a storytelling nature to it. In the first case, thought claims to lead history, in the second, it lets itself be led by history.

4. Conclusion

Philosophy’s project to understand history through concepts fails. History has too much to lose from a conceptualized image of its course, there is too much that such an image cannot render – first of all: the unpredictability of the event.

The awareness of having depleted its speculative potential, to have reached its limits, and the need to reshape its relation to history, lead philosophy to search for new motifs in a cultural tradition which, like the Jewish one, has always conceived the relationship between historical events and their reflection in an utterly different way, based on storytelling.

It is also particularly meaningful that some of the most recent works in this field have by now assumed a prescriptive form, whose purpose seems to consist in drawing philosophy closer to Jewish thought: “It is not that time should be read in the light of the concept; rather, the concept should be plunged into time, into history, and, possibly, it should be regained in history, as history, as lived reality, as the word that narrates (tells, describes, heralds...) life.”

A radical change in perspective is then needed. But the reversal of the relationships at stake should also modify the nature, not only the position,

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of what it concerns. The dynamics required is not only a displacement of elements that, after the rearrangement, maintain their nature unaltered, but it should also produce a radical change in the character of what is displaced. Thought should not only change its position towards history, but also undergo an ontological transformation that leads it from having a *conceptual* attitude to adopting a *storytelling* one. That is to say that the thought that thinks history should become less philosophical and more Jewish.

Finally, a good way of concluding this essay can perhaps be by quoting Elie Wiesel’s words, which, though expressed in relation to the *Shoah*, can nonetheless assume a more general meaning in light of what has been said so far:

> Let us tell tales – all the rest can wait, all the rest must wait.
> Let us tell tales – that is our primary obligation.
> Commentaries will have to come later, lest they replace or becloud what they mean to reveal.27

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