

## BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTICES

YIFTACH FEHIGE

*University of Toronto*

**Hilary Putnam. *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life: Rosenzweig, Buber, Lévinas, Wittgenstein*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008.**

Hilary Putnam is one of the most important living analytic philosophers. The fact that he has now authored a book on Jewish philosophy as a guide to life is rather astonishing – disregarding some minor previous attempts to justify his religious attitude towards the world. The reason for the astonishment is that Putnam has been a strict adherent of a broad naturalistic worldview throughout his career. In addition, it is exceptional for him to adhere to a view in such a strict way, as he has come under attack from some colleagues for changing his mind too often. On many occasions Putnam has sharply criticized a view he himself earlier advanced. For instance, Putnam may have been the first to make a case for the thesis that the computer is the right model for the mind. Later on he became the sharpest critic of this understanding of the mind. He himself considers his many revisions of his own views as a vivid reflection of the fundamental philosophical attitude which is to put the search for truth higher than personal vanity. The commitment to this attitude may explain why Putnam is able to hold out a deep existential inconsistency between his naturalistic worldview and his religious practice in the Jewish tradition: “I am still a religious person, and I am still a naturalistic philosopher” (p. 5).

The value of Putnam’s monograph lies not so much in what he has to say about the  $3\frac{1}{4}$  Jewish philosophers Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Emmanuel Levinas, and Ludwig Wittgenstein – “we count Wittgenstein as  $\frac{1}{4}$ ” (p. 6). Rather, the book has great merit because of what it reveals about Putnam’s own struggle with religion: “what did I make philosophically of the religious activities that I had undertaken to be part of me? The question has no final answer, because it is one I am still struggling with, and will very likely struggle with as long as I am alive” (p. 3).

The introduction is an autobiographical note. Putnam tells the story of his awakening to Jewish religious practice. The aforementioned struggle with the reconcilability of religion and naturalism functions as the explanation for the origin of the book. The book is qualified by Putnam himself as a focused introduction to the 3¼ big Jewish thinkers of the 20th century. The focus is on demonstrating how someone can read these thinkers with benefit, how those who are “religious but [...] unwilling to see that [religious] attachment as requiring us to turn our backs on modernity can find spiritual inspiration in their different ways” (p. 7).

Chapter One opens with reflections on Wittgenstein in order to introduce the idea that religion is not a theory, or a system of beliefs. Hence religion cannot be the result of a conceptual confusion or an instance of pre-scientific thinking. Religion, therefore, cannot be criticized or defended by appeals to scientific facts. This reading of Wittgenstein has already been promoted by Putnam in previous writings. The overall idea behind this understanding of religion is that religion is not based on metaphysics. Religion is based on metaphysics if the constituting beliefs are justified by appeal to metaphysical reasoning. Putnam has a strong anti-metaphysical stance and emphasizes on every occasion that metaphysics is nonsense. One of the fundamental problems for Putnam scholars is, however, that it remains more or less unclear what exactly Putnam means by metaphysics. Instead of providing a clear-cut definition of metaphysics he prefers a method of criticizing certain philosophical views he considers metaphysical. This method also guides his interpretation of Rosenzweig in Chapter One. Rosenzweig is presented as a sharp critic of the idea of disconnecting religion from the religious life in order to give religion a solid philosophical foundation – either in the way of German idealism or essentialism. Chapter One is very abstract and leaves the reader wondering what the actual arguments are for rejecting the temptation to justify religion metaphysically. One reason for the puzzlement is that, according to Putnam, one cannot argue for the absurdity of metaphysics; the absurdity is rather something that Rosenzweig “tries to make us feel by ironic redescription” (p. 19). In this sense Rosenzweig “means to suggest that a proper relation to God” does not depend “on a theory, on an intellectual conception of what God ‘really’ is, or a grasp of the ‘essence’ of God” (p. 26). Consequently Rosenzweig is not against philosophy of religion but against a certain kind of philosophy

of religion. The appropriate philosophy of religion is “an existential philosophy that Rosenzweig calls simply ‘the new thinking’” (p. 30). Putnam proceeds by characterizing this new thinking and concludes by objecting to Rosenzweig’s intolerance towards other religions as it is articulated in *The Star of Redemption* but not in later writings of Rosenzweig.

Chapter Two focuses on Rosenzweig’s theology. And dealing with Rosenzweig’s theology puts Putnam’s reading of Rosenzweig under pressure. For the question immediately arises how anyone can do theology without any metaphysical ingredient? Isn’t the main idea of theology to grasp what God is like as a supersensible non-mathematical entity? For most of the first half of the second chapter Putnam introduces central ideas of Rosenzweig’s theology until he reaches again the idea in Rosenzweig that Christianity and Judaism somehow are superior to other religions. Putnam objects to Rosenzweig’s contempt for any religion other than Christianity and Judaism, a contempt that is fortunately “not a contempt for the religious life of the followers of those religions, or a claim for the superiority of the religious life of the individual Jew or Christian” (p. 53). It is just a contempt for the underlying metaphysics of these other religions. Therefore, this contempt does not pose any challenge for Putnam’s attempt to incorporate Rosenzweig into his own anti-metaphysical philosophy of religion.

The reader is left somewhat puzzled. For it is as plain as day that Rosenzweig’s contempt results from a metaphysical discourse on revelation and redemption. Something is missing that would relate Chapter One and Two, reconciling the anti-metaphysical reading of Rosenzweig in the first chapter with the reconstruction of Rosenzweig’s central theological ideas on revelation and redemption in the second. These central theological ideas are presented as follows: “To sum up: the whole purpose of human life is revelation, and the whole content of revelation is love. The love between the Lover and the Beloved culminates in ‘matrimony’, that is, redemption. And redemption has a personal aspect – it is something experienced by each religious person; a communal aspect – it is something exemplified and modeled by the Jewish religious community as a whole; and it has an eschatological dimension, but it is not only eschatological because its future occurrence is something that is ‘present’ to the individual Jew now” (p. 54).

It is clear that Putnam cannot agree with this theology insofar as the central divine command of loving your neighbor implies any ontological

commitments with regard to God. According to Putnam's anti-metaphysical philosophy of religion, God is a human construct, and in endorsing this constructivism Putnam himself, therefore, is an atheist theologian, to use one of Rosenzweig's expressions (p. 103). Putnam defends Judaism only as a form of life but rejects Jewish theology as support for any beliefs which might be considered constitutive for Judaism. Putnam's God is a human construct that emerges from a certain way of living a life and this form of life might just happen to be shaped by a tradition which is considered Jewish. Of course the Jewishness of this tradition comprises certain beliefs about God. However, Putnam's conviction that God is a human construct is not supposed to mean that the notion of God as it functions in a certain religious life is without any cognitive value. Religion is about God, who is a human construct that we make in response to demands that we do not create. Thus it is not up to us whether our responses are adequate or inadequate (see pp. 6, 46, 93). A Jewish identity, therefore, cannot be anything but living a life in a way shaped by a certain tradition of responding to the demands of reality. Jewish identity does not consist in the affirmation of certain beliefs originating due to divine intervention in the natural course of the world. In a nutshell, in Putnam's philosophy of religion, religion is stripped of its vertical, i.e. transcendental or supernatural dimension.

Putnam's minimalist defense of religion is certainly not sufficient for religions that take their identity from revelation and understand revelation as the most outstanding instance of divine intervention in the natural course of history. That is not to say that the attempted justification of the rationality of a religious life fails. It is just that this defense is indifferent to Jewish identity as an essential identity of a religious life. On this view, the Jewish identity of a certain religious life is just a cultural coincidence. It is a kind of club membership by birth or choice without any significant cognitive superiority to any other form of religious life. Religious life is defined by a response to certain demands that we do not create, and the response can be judged objectively. Unfortunately, Putnam does not name those demands in particular.

Chapter Three aims at a correction of well entrenched misunderstandings of the Buber of *I and Thou*. Putnam addresses two misunderstandings: (1) I-You relations are always good and I-It relations are always bad; (2) the theology in Buber's *I and Thou* matters for the appropriate understanding

of Buber's philosophy of interpersonality. And of course, besides the correction of these widely entrenched misunderstandings, Putnam recruits Buber to his opposition to metaphysics. "For Buber, one comes to God by entering into relationship with God, and an I-You relation is never a relationship of knowledge" (p. 66) but can result in "the transformation of life in the world, life in the It-world" (p. 64). This reading of Buber is not convincing. For, this reading requires us to concede that Buber thinks of God as a person, which is clearly a metaphysical statement. The question Putnam should have addressed here is whether or not this instance of knowledge is of a kind that threatens an overall naturalistic framework by broadening the notion of knowledge. What does it mean to know that the cell cluster with a human face in front of me is a person, a You?

The last chapter defends the thesis that one cannot understand Levinas if one does not realize two facts: "(1) that Levinas is drawing on Jewish sources and themes, and (2) (paradoxically, since Levinas is an Orthodox Jew), Levinas is universalizing Judaism" (p. 84). This is no news. Nor is Putnam's criticism valid, when he states that Levinas goes too far in pushing the asymmetry of interpersonal relations, in favor of the other, to the point where the preservation of the alterity of the other demands almost a self-annihilation: "But the 'asymmetry' of the ethical relation need not be carried as far as Levinas carries it. [...] It is [...] because Levinas thinks of ethics as the whole of 'the true life' that he does so. But to be only ethical, even if one be ethical to the point of martyrdom, is to live a one-sided life" (pp. 97-98). Still, the chapter surprises us in that Putnam relates Levinas and Buber on many different occasions.

In his career Putnam has already posed many sharp-sighted challenges and puzzles in many different philosophical disciplines. With this monograph he has just added another one. Surprisingly enough, this time in philosophy of religion. The puzzle is the following: Undeniably, for very good reasons metaphysics has had a bad reputation in philosophy since the beginning of the 20th century – religion likewise. On the other hand, among philosophers, metaphysics has had a comeback in the second half of the 20th century – unlike religion. Why then endorse a non-metaphysical Jewish philosophy of religion?