



Volume 0
Number 2 *Old Series: Volume 1, Number 2 (July 1991)*

July 1991

Descriptions by Our Members of Work in Postmodern Jewish Philosophy

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/jtr>



Part of the [Jewish Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

"Descriptions by Our Members of Work in Postmodern Jewish Philosophy." *Journal of Textual Reasoning* Old Series: Volume 1, Number 2 (July 1991): 4-9. <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/jtr/vol0/iss2/2>

This is brought to you for free and open access by W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Textual Reasoning* by an authorized editor of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.

DESCRIPTIONS BY OUR MEMBERS OF WORK IN POSTMODERN JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

ALMUT Sh.BRUCKSTEIN:

* "The Platonic Twist in Maimonides' Ethics: A Revised Reading"

Philosophy according to Maimonides seems aimed at the perplexing ideal of 'knowing everything'; in methodological order it includes such sciences as mathematics, astronomy, cosmology, logic, ethics, and theology. The telos of all speculative knowledge is the cognition of God which Maimonides identifies with the correct interpretation of the prophetic writings.

Nowhere does Maimonides explicitly distinguish ethics and theology as two distinct sciences. The content and character of what it means to 'know God' are therefore left to speculative interpretation. The 19th century German-Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen offers a most original and much disputed Platonic solution to this question: ethical knowledge and knowledge of God are to be identical, i.e. Maimonides' ideal of 'knowing God' is taken as the ideal of knowing ethics. Ethics thus becomes the prime issue in interpreting Maimonides. Cohen's thesis

provides the argumentative philosophical basis for the much repeated modern formula, namely that Jewish philosophy is essentially ethical.

This paper offers a critical investigation of Cohen's thesis on the basis of the following line of argument:

The Platonic-Aristotelian controversy concerning the characteristics of ethics is well known: Aristotle claims ethics is a matter of practical training and habit whereas Plato considers ethical knowledge a science based on the cognition of 'the good.' The Platonic ethical ideal, however, can only be intuitively known and Plato consequently proclaims that ethics cannot be taught [Meno].

Our reading of Maimonides tries to find an argumentative basis for both the Aristotelian and Platonic definition of ethics without tracing Maimonides' thought back to either classic. Maimonides' point of departure is the idea of '*Imitatio Dei*', i.e. the knowledge and emulation of God's attributes of actions. In basing '*Imitatio Dei*' on the prophetic knowledge of thirteen concrete actional attributes [*rachum v'chanun*] Maimonides endorses both the 'Platonic' as well as the 'Aristotelian' aspect of ethics: Knowing the 'goodness' of God— an act of speculative and axiomatic cognition— becomes identical with the emulation of actional attributes— an act that requires practical training and whose habits can be taught [*Hilkhot Deoth*].

By taking Cohen's thesis on Maimonides' ethics seriously, i.e. by understanding '*Imitatio Dei*' both as a speculative as well as an emulative ideal, we find Cohen's own anti-Aristotelian conclusions counterproductive. Reading Maimonides, the moot questions of either/or [practical or theoretical, contemplative or active, Platonic or Aristotelian] give way to a more complementary reading that can admit seemingly mutually exclusive theses to be equally part of Maimonides' thinking.

ROBERT GIBBS:

* "Teaching Levinas as a Jewish Thinker and Rosenzweig as a Post-Modern Philosopher" for the International Center for University Teaching in Jerusalem, July 1991

A quick introduction to my book, *Correlations*, with the following new points: 1) Rosenzweig is a post-modern in his breakwith pure reason, with reason as founding thought, and with the possibility of absolute origins. In place of modern philosophy, New Thinking offers a new orientation of thought—the relation to others as what norms our experience. Rosenzweig turns to speech and social gesture to supplement reason in order to achieve this new orientation. 2) Levinas' Judaism should be seen in the light of Chaim of Volozin. Through a maskil, Levinas retains profound respect for the mitnagdim, and attempts a contemporary French adaptation of the intellectual and ethical rigor of the Volozin yeshiva.

* A Review Essay of *Nine Talmudic Readings and Difficult Freedom for Modern Judaism*. (in progress)

* I am also doing a read-through of much Pragmatism (Peirce, James, Royce and Dewey) to see if there is a way of expressing the radical ethics of Cohen, Rosenzweig, and Levinas in an American idiom.

JACOB MESKIN:

* "Re-membling the Body: Embodiment and Jewish Existence in the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas"

This paper was given at the 1990 meeting of the AAR, in a section devoted to post-modern Jewish philosophy. The paper engages Levinas' thinking about the body, focusing on accounts of the body offered in *Totality and Infinity* and in *Otherwise than Being*. Levinas' thinking about the body, I argue, is intimately connected to his thinking about Jewish existence, for the body, like Jewish existence, brings a certain asymmetry into being. My body, by itself, makes me just the individuated being I am — and so my individuation is not primarily a social or historical matter for Levinas. Similarly, Levinas reads the existence of the Jew, by itself, as introducing a certain kind of differentiation into the world. A consequence of my attempt to connect Levinas' view of the body with his view of

Jewish existence is that Levinas would seem to be left with a socially and historically attenuated view of Jewish life. And this, I argue, turns out to be the case in many of Levinas' explicitly Jewish writings. I explore this consequence toward the end of the paper, offering some suggestions as to how we might retain Levinas' incisive analyses of the body while, at the same time, integrating social and historical considerations into Levinas' unique phenomenological (or anti-phenomenological) position.

* "From Post-Modern Political Thinking to Jewish Philosophy: The Post-Modern Analysis of Images and the Jewish Critique of Idolatry"

This is an experimental paper, to be given at a Williams College Faculty Research Seminar in the Fall of 1991. The paper attempts to sketch out something like a "post-modern Jewish" response to the recent call for a post-modern way of thinking about politics. After rehearsing the debate between liberal and deconstructive political perspectives, I attempt to develop a model that might incorporate the strengths of both of these perspectives. I work toward this model in the following way. First of all, I present a particular body of post-modern political reflection, namely the critique of images and their pervasive political power advocated by Jean Baudrillard. I then go on to contrast the work of Baudrillard with the critique of idolatry offered in Jewish philosophy, concentrating, in particular, on arguments drawn from Moses Mendelssohn, and to a lesser degree, on arguments drawn from Emmanuel Levinas. The way in which these Jewish thinkers identify the dangers of idolatry and suggest remedies, offers a fruitful contrast with the work of Baudrillard. Most importantly, the Jewish philosophical approach to idolatry suggests ways to sketch out a model for political identity and activity. This model provides us with many of the advantages of post-modern analysis, but it does not relinquish possibilities for developing both communal ideals and ethical criticism. And this model also suggests valuable micro-institutions and rituals which may help to preserve these very communal ideals and ethical criticism.

PETER OCHS:

* *Postcritical Scriptural Interpretation* (edited collection, New York, Ramsey: Paulist Press, forthcoming, 1992).

I'm now finishing up work on this collection of essays by six Jewish and six Christian text scholars and theologians whose writings display the emergent hermeneutical orientation I call "postcritical inquiry." The contributors are, in order of appearance, the late Hans Frei, ("Literal Reading of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition"), George Lindbeck ("Toward a Postliberal Theology"), Steven Fraade ("The Turn to Commentary in Classical Judaism: the Case of Sifre"), David Weiss Halivni ("Plain Sense and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis"), Michael Fishbane ("The Sense of Not Reading, As It Were"), Moshe Greenberg ("Scriptural Citations in Maimonides' MISHNEH TORAH"), David Burrell ("Maimonides, Aquinas and Ghazali on Naming God"), Jose Faur ("Sanchez' Critique of Authoritas: Converso Skepticism and the Emergence of Radical Hermeneutics"), John E. Smith ("Piety and its Fruits in the Philosophy of Jonathan Edwards"), Paul Van Buren ("How Is It That We Hear? An Interpretation of Acts 2:8-13), Stanley Hauerwas ("Developing Hopeful Virtues: A Meditation on Romans 5:1-5), Martin Buber ("Toward a New German Translation of the Scriptures") translated into English by Alan Swensen, edited and with commentary by Steven Kepnes.

In my introductory essay and comments, I characterize postcritical inquiry as "a tendency to give ecclesial and rabbinic traditions of interpretation both the benefit of the doubt and the benefit of doubt: the former, by assuming that there are dimensions of Scriptural meaning which are disclosed only by way of the hermeneutical practices of believing communities and believing traditions of Jews and Christians; the latter, by assuming, in the spirit of post-Spinozistic criticism, that these dimensions are clarified through the disciplined practice of philological, historical and textual/rhetorical criticism." I suggest that philosophy serves postcritical inquiry by displaying the family of hermeneutical rules that informs it and by re-evaluating individual inquiries on the basis of

these rules. I identify these rules in terms of the modified version of Charles Peirce's semiotics I had previously used to identify Max Kadushin's postcritical hermeneutic.

Among the defining features of postcritical inquiry are: 1) a critique of the tendency of modernist Scriptural hermeneutics to devolve into a dialectic of objectivist (propositional) and subjectivist (emotivist) reductions; 2) the search for a paradigm of mediating, non-dichotomizing hermeneutics within the practices of traditional rabbinic or ecclesial exegesis; 3) the readoption of that paradigm within the context of modern, critical inquiry. I suggest that this paradigm draws a tripartite distinction among the plain-sense of a text as symbol, the various referential senses of the text as its range of possible meanings, and the various contexts of interpretation with respect to which the text displays its meanings. "Modernist" exegesis tends to reduce these contexts to one, effectively distinguishing only text and reference, or text and response (adopted in place of reference).