

## Review Article

### A CRITIQUE OF BOROWITZ'S POSTMODERN JEWISH THEOLOGY

by Norbert M. Samuelson

*Renewing the Covenant: A Theology for the Postmodern Jew.* By EUGENE B. BOROWITZ. Philadelphia, New York and Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991. 319 pages + xiv. \$24.95

*Abstract.* Borowitz's book is primarily a systematic response by a liberal Jewish theologian to his perceived challenges from rationalism on one hand and postmodernism on the other. It is within this context that Borowitz discusses issues of the relationship between modern science and Judaism. The first part of this essay is a summary of Borowitz's book. Here I locate Borowitz's place in the general discipline of Jewish philosophy and theology. The second part of the paper is a critique of Borowitz's discussion of postmodernism and liberalism. It is in this concluding section that the issues raised by contemporary science for Jewish religious thought are discussed.

*Keywords:* asymptote; atomism and relationalism; autonomy; Eugene B. Borowitz; Martin Buber; calculus; Hermann Cohen; covenantal theology; entities, parts, and collections; *halakhah* and *aggadah*; hopeless hope; human rights and democracy; individual rights; Jewish and singular self; liberalism and traditionalism; modernism and postmodernism; moral relativism; Newtonian physics; quantum mechanics; rationalism and nonrationalism; realism; Reconstructionist, Conservative, and Orthodox Judaism; Bertrand Russell and the *Principia Mathematica*; Steven Schwarzschild; universalism and particularism.

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Many Jews—particularly colleagues in Jewish studies and Jewish-by-birth professors in philosophy—will deny that there can be such a thing as Jewish philosophy (because there is only philosophy). Or,

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[*Zygon*, vol. 28, no. 2 (June 1993).]

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while they may grant that there once was such a phenomenon (in the case of anachronistic philosophers like Maimonides), they would insist that it does not exist anymore. There certainly is some basis for this judgment, given the fact that the publications of some of the most prominent names in general philosophy at least overtly show neither concern with nor influence from Judaism. Paradigmatic examples are Saul A. Kripke's *Naming and Necessity* and Hilary Putnam's *Meaning and the Moral Sciences*. This judgment might also be echoed by some of my colleagues in general (meaning Christian, or more specifically, Protestant) in philosophy of religion who find little of their obsession with epistemology reflected in the concerns of Jewish philosophers (past and present). However, they are wrong. The truth is that Jewish philosophy has never been more active than it is now, and much of the activity is going on in the United States.

The contemporary tradition of Jewish philosophy that is best known in philosophy circles can be found in France, thanks largely to the writings and influence of Emmanuel Levinas. However, to repeat, this tradition can also be found in the United States. Through professional associations such as the American Academy of Religion, the Association of Jewish Studies, and (last but not least) the Academy for Jewish Philosophy, people committed to thinking Jewishly as philosophers and philosophically as Jews have been meeting and sharing ideas and papers for more than a decade. Now some of their activity is beginning to emerge as books in constructive Jewish thought. Among the more important American recent products are David Novak's *Halakhah in a Theological Dimension*, Menachem Kellner's collection of the Jewish writings of Steven Schwarzschild, and Kenneth Seeskin's *Jewish Philosophy in a Secular Age*. It is in this company that I would locate Eugene Borowitz's *Renewing the Covenant*.

Another way to catalogue contemporary Jewish thinkers is as popular or technical, as religious or secular, and as liberal or conservative. In terms of the first dichotomy, Borowitz's writings bridge the ever increasing chasm between works directed at an educated laity (such as Lawrence Kushner's *Honey from the Rock* and *The River of Light*) and those directed at professional scholars in universities (such as Schwarzschild's work).

Borowitz's function as a bridge in this sense is an important feature of his literary work. When Jewish scholars were rabbis, most works on Jewish thought had this characteristic. Today, as more rabbis serve congregations and more scholars are trained in and work for secular universities, few works are like this. The danger of popular works directed at a laity (even an educated one) is superficiality; the

danger of professional academic works is triviality. Bridge builders are in danger of being both superficial and trivial. Borowitz's work is neither. Furthermore, the fact that Borowitz has achieved both popularity (in academic and communal circles) and presents creative ideas with rigorous arguments falsifies the often verified thesis that quality and success are inversely proportionate.

Borowitz is an integral part of the community of scholars who do constructive religious thinking. In this role he is an active participant in groups like the American Theological Society and the Academy for Jewish Philosophy. Although his colleagues are not at the forefront of his arguments in this book, he knows their work, and their concerns are easily detectable beneath the surface of his words. At the same time, in terms of a popular audience, Borowitz is a professor at a seminary that trains American Reform rabbis, most of whom enter a career of service to Reform synagogues, and his writing reflects his involvement with these students. As such, this book should be required reading for anyone interested in the best of Reform Jewish thinking at the close of the twentieth century.

*Renewing the Covenant* brings together in a more cohesive whole the main theses that Borowitz has advocated in his earlier books. He argues vigorously as a religious liberal against all forms of Jewish secularism and religious orthodoxy. More positively, he sides with the central tradition of contemporary Jewish liberals in personal and political ethics and with modern religious thinkers who could call themselves biblical and/or covenantal theologians. The primary example of this category is Martin Buber. However, the category also includes Franz Rozenzweig, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Milton Steinberg, and Michael Wyschogrod.

Borowitz's conclusions emerge from a dialogue with many of the most important religious thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Explicitly, he discusses Kant, Hegel, Whitehead, Hermann Cohen, Leo Baeck, Mordecai Kaplan, and Nachman Krochmal (all of whom Borowitz labels as rationalists); Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, and Abraham Joshua Heschel (all of whom he calls nonrationalists). Similarly, Borowitz dialogues with many of his Jewish contemporaries. He discusses Henry Slonimsky and Alvin Reines (in the Reform movement); David Hartman, Michael Wyschogrod, and Yeshayahu Leibowitz (in the Orthodox movement); Neil Gillman and Elliot Dorff (in the Conservative movement); William E. Kaufman and Harold M. Schulweis (in the Reconstructionist movement); Arthur E. Green and Lawrence Kushner (as voices of contemporary Jewish mysticism); and Emil L. Fackenheim, Irving Greenberg, and Richard L. Rubenstein (as

voices of Holocaust theology). However, the most important partner in Borowitz's dialogue is Steven Schwarzschild. His presence is constantly felt throughout the book. The only explicit reference to Schwarzschild's thought is on page 65 where he is identified as a disciple of Hermann Cohen. However, in the introduction (xii), Borowitz acknowledges the Schwarzschild influence. In my judgment, Borowitz's argument with rationalism, a major theme of this book (which appears to be an argument with Hermann Cohen and others), is really an argument with Steven Schwarzschild.

Franz Rosenzweig argued in *The Star of Redemption* that thinking ought to be negative rather than positive. What he meant in part was that affirmation arises out of negating negations. In this sense, Schwarzschild is the single most important philosophical source for Borowitz's theology; viz., his nonrationalism, which is at the foundation of his constructive thought, emerges from his (loving) arguments against Schwarzschild's vigorous affirmation of Cohen's rationalism. Also present throughout the work but not directly discussed is feminist Jewish theology. In this case the most important implicit voices are those of Judith Plaskow and Ellen Umansky.

#### BOROWITZ'S THEOLOGY

Borowitz describes this book as a project in covenantal theology that seeks to clarify non-Orthodox Jewish faith. He further characterizes it as being written in a postmodern mood in a postmodern period. The problem he addresses is how to make sense out of being more religious than secular and more Jewish than universal-human, while affirming the seemingly conflicting right to individual moral self-determination. The mood of his work is associated with what he learned from the late work of Ludwig Wittgenstein on the logic of language and how that understanding affected his philosophical understanding of *aggadah* and *halakhah*. In general, what he learned from both Wittgenstein and Jewish (i.e., classic rabbinic) texts was that in Jewish thought, praxis has primacy over doxis. The context of his conclusions is consciously located at the end of a process that begins in the premodern (biblical, Hellenistic, and Sassanid) thought of the Jewish people and continues through the disillusionment of modern Jewish thought with Western European secular culture and ethics in the post-World War II United States.

As Borowitz understands Jewish intellectual history, the central issue for Jewish thought revolved around the apparent incompatibility between affirming the modern world's commitment to freedom and secularism, and traditional Judaism's authoritarianism

and spirituality. More specifically, the general cultural faith in moral autonomy and universalism appears to contradict the historical Jewish acceptance of the authority of Jewish law (*halakhah*). In other words, for Borowitz the central issue of Jewish religious thought is how to reconcile the Jewish particularism of tradition and *halakhah* with the modernist, universal, ethical, humanist values of democracy and individual autonomy.

Borowitz notes three main strategies for maintaining both sets of values. (1) Hermann Cohen, and (2) Mordecai Kaplan offered rigorous defenses of Judaism based on a total commitment to rationalism. In the former case, this rationalism was rooted in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant; in the latter, in early twentieth-century social science, notably sociology. Finally, (3) Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig changed the theological paradigm from ideas (like Cohen's "God" and Kaplan's "peoplehood") to a view of the whole person. This personalist paradigm is the cornerstone of Borowitz's own postmodern Jewish theology. It enables him to move beyond grounding modernism's moral values in secular humanism to a specific form of spiritualism (viz., covenant theology) in which the source of the ethical becomes the world of God.

Other strategies that are considered but that are less important for Borowitz include those of the Holocaust theologians (notably Richard Rubenstein, Emil Fackenheim, and Irving Greenberg). Against Rubenstein's affirmation of the death of God, Borowitz develops his argument that our modern disillusionment with traditional Jewish values (viz., with God's existence, providence, and moral absolutism) is a consequence of general secularist humanism rather than a consequence of the specific tragic events of the Holocaust. Fackenheim's theological argument for the Holocaust's radical uniqueness is rejected for parallel reasons. Borowitz is unwilling to give anything as morally negative as the Holocaust a central role in redefining postmodern Judaism. Furthermore, against Irving Greenberg's attempt to ground ethics in Jewish ethnicity, Borowitz argues that ethnicity is again declining (hence, this would not be an effective strategy even if it were theoretically viable) and, even if it were not declining, it is not in itself sufficiently rich theoretically to do the job Greenberg wants it to do. Finally, the current moral conflicts that arise in connection with Israeli policy on the emancipation of the Palestinians and in connection with Orthodox policy on women's rights exemplify for Borowitz the inadequacy of the currently popular return to Orthodoxy. Despite the inadequacies of modernism, democracy and individual autonomy must remain Jewish values.

In a single phrase, what Borowitz calls postmodern is disillusionment with the values of modernism. More specifically, modernism is associated with placing ultimate moral value in the ability of the philosophy and science of the secular university to provide criteria for truth and in the power of the political democracy of the secular state to bring about good. Postmodernism has arisen because the individual quality of life has and is corroding in political democracies while modern philosophies and science lead to moral relativism. In sum, the authority of revelation and rabbinic tradition in the premodern Jewish world gave way to the authority of universal human reason in the modern world. Now, in the postmodern world, we are left without authority. None of the contemporary candidates for faith is satisfactory—neither science, nor mysticism, nor ethnic nationalism, nor any contemporary form of Orthodoxy (be it Jewish, Christian, Muslim or Asian).

Borowitz identifies one form of postmodern Jewish Orthodoxy that also maintains modernism's affirmation of universal ethics; viz, that of Abraham Joshua Heschel. What is attractive about Heschel's thought to Borowitz is that he moves beyond secularism to a renewed religious view of the world. His objections to Heschel's Orthodoxy are vocalized in terms of feminist Jewish objections to Orthodox gender discrimination. However, these objections are only examples intended to illustrate his major objection to Heschel; viz., that Heschel's Orthodoxy is incoherent with continuing to affirm, as Borowitz does, the value of autonomy.

The constructive side of Borowitz's theology consists in a reconstruction of Martin Buber's theology from a postmodernist perspective. While Borowitz finds much of value in a great deal of modern Jewish thought, no one else occupies as favorable a position in Borowitz's judgment as does Buber. In a sense, Borowitz's constructive theology is Martin Buber's theology reconstructed to include a more adequate sense of Jewish community.

With respect to postmodernism, Borowitz affirms the primacy of experience over reason, and proposes to ground ethics in relations rather than in individual autonomy. This seems to be what Borowitz means by claiming to favour nonrationalism. It is not a rejection of the value of reason as such. Rather, it is an assertion that the sources of rational thought are not in reason in itself but in experience. In these terms, it would have been more appropriate for Borowitz to claim that he is a radical empiricist (in the tradition, at least in this respect, of thinkers like William James), rather than a nonrationalist, for what he calls rationalism is largely limited to the thought of those

philosophers (often misnamed Idealists) who followed in the footsteps of Hegel.

In addition, Borowitz's postmodernism affirms what he calls moral realism over human optimism, by which he means that human beings cannot on their own bring about the redemption of the world, because while they do good, they tend more to do evil. Borowitz's Buberian theology is modified as both biblical and covenantal. It is biblical theology because it affirms a God who is personal rather than impersonal, and transcendent as well as immanent. The theology is covenantal because the revelation and Torah of this personal transcendent deity are to be understood on a covenantal model of divine and human interaction. In other words, Torah (whose content is the road map to redemption) is neither the gift of God nor the invention of humanity; rather, it is the product of their interaction.

#### A CRITIQUE OF BOROWITZ'S THEOLOGY

I want to focus the analytic part of this essay on two of Borowitz's central concepts. First, on his understanding of what reason is, since that understanding is fundamental to his embrace of postmodernism; second, on his concept of the self, since that is central to his continued affirmation of a concept of individual rights, which in turn is fundamental to his embrace of liberalism.

*Concerning Postmodernism: A Jewish Understanding of Reason.* What Borowitz means by postmodernism is disillusionment with modernism, and the most important characteristic of his modernism is what he calls rationalism. His understanding of rationalism comes from reading the works of, but (more importantly in my judgment) also from years of conversation with, his friend Steven Schwarzschild. Schwarzschild's understanding of reason is based on his own reading of Jewish and philosophical texts under the influence of his intellectual master, Hermann Cohen.

Borowitz's ultimate dependence on the Jewish philosophy of Cohen for the critical concept that he is rejecting (rationalism) is part of the problem with his particular commitment to postmodernism. Cohen's understanding of Judaism as a religion of reason has much to recommend itself. First, it is foundational for what has been the dominant tradition of Jewish philosophy and theology in the twentieth century. The Jewish thinkers Borowitz deals with in his book are the most important ones of this century, and all of their thought (with one exception, Mordecai Kaplan) goes back to the influence

of the writings and teaching of Cohen. Second, it is a rich tradition that has not as yet been given a fair hearing in either Jewish or Christian circles. Most of modern philosophy, both on the continent and in Great Britain, has been a dialogue with modern science. Scientific theory, in turn, has rested to a very large extent on modern developments in mathematics. Yet few modern philosophers have fully appreciated the radical way mathematics has changed scientific thinking.

The most obvious example of an attempt to root philosophical method in mathematics was Bertrand Russell's *Principia Mathematica*. However, the model for this work was simple, static algebra as it applies to arithmetic, whereas the mathematics of modern science, from Newton on, is based on the significantly more complex, dynamic nature of calculus. No other philosopher was Cohen's equal in taking seriously the consequences of the dependence of scientific "laws" on calculus. Two possible exceptions to this judgment are Alfred North Whitehead and Charles S. Peirce. Cohen's work had a profound effect on those Jewish thinkers who followed him, notably Franz Rosenzweig, but to this day it has had little influence on anyone else.

Borowitz locates Jewish philosophy within a tradition rooted in Cohen's argument that philosophical thinking should be based on scientific thinking (which in turn is an instantiation of the kind of dynamic reason that the formalism of calculus makes possible, in contrast to a tradition such as the one that followed from Russell's mathematical philosophy, where the model for philosophic thinking remains as static as it was at the time the Spinoza wrote his *Ethics*). This is one way of distinguishing Jewish philosophy from Christian philosophy. In a word, Jewish philosophy projects an understanding of the universe where to know consists not in grasping things, but in discerning purposeful processes towards infinitely remote limits. These limits are, in some significant sense, ethical ideals. Hence, another way that "Jewish thinking" has differed from modern Christian thought is that Jewish thought rejects the radical separation between the theoretical and the practical (or, science and ethics), that so typifies contemporary non-Jewish philosophical reason.

The second virtue of Cohen's philosophy points to its problem for Borowitz's critique of rationalism. Cohen's rationalism is not the only kind of reason. In fact, it is not even characteristic of most of contemporary Western philosophy. Hence, at best, Borowitz's argument against rationalism is only an argument against one possibility. It is not an argument against rationalism as such.

Let me raise but one example of this last point, one that, in my



judgment, is central to Borowitz's argument. He asserts that neither philosophy nor science is able to provide us with an absolute standard by which to decide either what is true or what is good. Hence, reason fails to save us from absolute relativism. Now, I suppose there are some people, both in the past and in the present (some of whom might even be or have been sophisticated, e.g., Spinoza) who thought that they could or did have such an absolute standard. But most do not. Furthermore, it does not really matter. The general belief of most so-called rationalists is that what is logically demonstrated is more likely to be true than what is not, and, even though there is no way to be certain about truth, that situation is good enough. For example, I assume that the more I know about stocks and the stock market, the more likely it is that I will choose a good stock. I also know that in any particular case my most reasonable reflections may lead to a bad choice, and someone else, in total ignorance of the market, *may* make a better choice. There is no certainty, because in reality nothing that matters is certain. In other words, the nonabsolute character of my decision making reflects reality—viz., to the extent there is chance in the universe, there is no absolute knowledge, and there is always an element of chance in every actual, specific state of affairs.

Hence, the uncertainty of any concrete application of rational thinking is in itself no argument against reliance upon reason. Rational thinking can tell us about probabilities; rarely can it tell us about absolutes, and this judgment itself is a dictate of reason. Now, if there were some other way of thinking that could give us absolutes, or at least give us conclusions that are more likely to be true in the concrete (e.g., if Alice's wonderland were reality), then we would reasonably choose not to be reasonable. But there is sufficient uniformity in the natural and the human world that no such choice is called for. In other words, the critical claim of rationalism is not that it can provide us with absolutes. Rather, it is that nothing can provide us with absolutes, and, given our available options, nothing is more likely to lead us to correct judgments (in science or in ethics) than reasoning.

Nor is it in fact correct that either Cohen or Schwarzschild claimed that reason can give us absolutes in the sense that Borowitz says that rationalism claims that it can. What Borowitz seems to miss (as do many other so-called Jewish postmodernists) is the force of understanding reason on the model of the asymptote. An asymptote is the limit towards which the succeeding values of a function endlessly approach but never realize.

A fairly simple example would be the function  $(x/(x + 10))$ . No

matter what actual number we substitute for the variable  $x$ , the value of the function will always be less than 1. (E.g., if  $x = 10$ , then the value of the function is  $1/2$ ; if  $x$  is 20, then the value is  $2/3$ , etc.) However, the higher the value of  $x$  becomes, the closer the value of the function comes to being 1. In this case, the asymptote, i.e., the limit of the function, is 1. As Cohen applied this kind of example to rational thinking about reality, limits were interpreted to be ideals, and ideals were seen to be the object of ethical thinking. Now, in what sense such an "ideal" can be called "ethical" is an important question. In fact, it ought to be the main question for those Jewish philosophers (whether or not they are Jewish) who follow the Cohen tradition in thinking that ethics is primary (at least critical) to scientific thinking.

On this model, the functions express the sensual reality of our everyday lives as events or states-of-affairs; the variables and terms in those functions are the objects in our sensual world that are constructed out of (and dependent upon) those functions; and the asymptotes represent the moral ideals that make intelligible (i.e., rational) the events themselves. In other words, reality is to be interpreted as a series of endless movements towards ends. It is the ends, not the movements themselves, that are the objects of reason, and the kind of reason to be employed here is ethical (viz., expressions of what ought to be rather than what is). This is what Cohen meant when he said that reality is a moral construct, and it is what Schwarzschild meant when he argued that practical judgments are to be ruled by moral ideals that are to be understood always in terms of "hopeless hope."

In more practical terms, the Cohen/Schwarzschild understanding of the life of reason as a life lived in hopeless hope (i.e., acting on a hope to succeed in full knowledge that we will not) makes a great deal of sense out of much of what we do as humans that matters to us. A trivial example is playing (or following) competitive sports. No matter how many teams are involved and no matter how many games they win, in the end there is only one winner. Hence, the dominant experience in sports is losing. In a sense, one of the values of sports is that it teaches us, in a fairly trivial (and therefore safe) setting, how to live with failure. Whether we are players or spectators, we live (i.e., we become involved) to win; i.e., we hope to win. But if we lose, which we most often do, then and only then can we say, it doesn't really matter. There is always the hope for tomorrow, even though we know that on most tomorrows we will lose again.

The clearest example outside of actual life that I can give is the old video game of "Space Invaders." The goal is to stay alive by

shooting down the space ships. As you succeed, the invaders travel faster and their bombs have a shorter distance to fall. In mathematical terms, the asymptote that expresses their speed is infinity, and the asymptote that expresses their distance is zero. Hence, death (i.e., losing the game) is unavoidable. To win is to delay losing.

A different example of the rational usefulness of hopeless hope is medicine. Ultimately the goal of all physicians who are worthy of calling themselves physicians is to save the lives of their patients, even though they know (if they are rational) that they will fail, for everyone, sooner or later, dies. The same analysis applies to most important pursuits in life—financial planning, learning, friendship, etc., i.e., everything that most of us would think constitutes the pursuit of happiness. To win is not to win per se; it is to delay losing.

Now none of this kind of thinking is the result of existentialism or postmodernism or any other kind of “nonrationalism” (in Borowitz’s terms). Rather, it is a vision that was originally set forth by Jewish philosophy’s greatest rationalist—Hermann Cohen.

*Concerning Liberalism: A Scientific Understanding of the Self.* What Borowitz means by liberalism is non-Orthodoxy, and the most important characteristic of his Orthodoxy is that it affirms the authority of the leadership of a religious community over the conscience of its individual members. In classic terms, what Reform and Orthodox Judaism have in common, in opposition to Conservative and Reconstructionist interpretations of Judaism, is a conviction that Torah (in Borowitz’s sense of covenant—viz., as what defines the relationship between God and the people Israel) is to be expressed in terms of moral obligations, and those obligations define Judaism. This is the sense in which I would agree with Borowitz’s judgment that in Judaism, praxis is prior to doxis. It does not mean that for Judaism good action is more important than true belief.

The issue between Orthodox and Reform Judaism has to do with what those obligations are. In the case of Orthodoxy, the obligations are determined by the legitimate authorities of the community as a polity, i.e., the rabbinate. In the case of Reform, the obligations are determined by each individual member of the community. From a Reform (i.e., a Jewish liberal) perspective, the tradition’s preservation of God’s interface with the people Israel confronts every Jew with a demand to both believe and to act, but ultimately it is the inescapable obligation of the individual him or herself to decide in good faith what is really true and what is really good.

In general, everyone ought to believe in truth and do good. What these are is the word of God. That word confronts every Jew through

rabbinic tradition. So far, there is no theological argument between Reform and Orthodoxy. The issue between them arises only at the point at which we ask, who makes this decision. The answer is not God. That only pushes the question back one step. For both Reform and Orthodoxy, what is true and good is the word of God. In these terms, the question is, who decides what that word is. For Orthodoxy, the answer is the community through its legitimate authorities. For Reform, the answer is each and every individual. Consequently, in Orthodoxy, rabbis use their knowledge of Jewish tradition to legislate, while Reform rabbis use their knowledge to recommend.

At the core of this dispute are radically different philosophical judgments about the ontological relationship between individuals and communities. In general, it is always possible to distinguish between collections, entities, and parts. Entities are the constituents of the universe. Collections are ways of grouping entities, and precisely because they are merely “ways” of thinking, they have no ontological status. Consequently, it makes no sense to speak of collections as having rights. Conversely, parts are real, but they also have no rights. Whereas an entity as such can be said to be entitled to exist (i.e., it need not do or be anything to justify its existence), the real existence of parts depends on their value or usefulness to their wholes.

How the experienced world is to be parsed out in terms of these three categories is not self-evident. For example, particles form communities called atoms, which form communities called molecules, which form communities called physical objects, which (in the case of human beings) form communities called societies, which (together with other collections of physical objects) form communities called worlds, which together form communities called galaxies, which together form a community called the universe. Which of these should be called entities is an arbitrary judgment. If particles are entities, then all else are collections. The consequence of this kind of view (implicit in Newtonian science) is that there is no logical reason why human beings should have rights, since, in reality, they do not exist (because they are nothing more than a certain configuration of particles). Conversely, if the universe is the only entity, then everything else is a part, whose right to exist depends solely on its value for the whole. At both extremes any notion of an autonomous individual human being is unjustifiable. Hence, while this decision is arbitrary, it is anything but trivial. For example, if human beings are mere configurations of particles, then what right do “useless” individuals (such as the unemployed, the sick, the homeless, etc.)

have, even to exist? The same question could be asked if human beings are only parts of a larger whole. Whether or not to save a human being (from a political perspective) would be decided in precisely the same way that we would decide whether or not to perform surgery on a diseased body part!

In general, the modern notion of the moral and political autonomy of the individual is rooted in a mode of thinking that may be labeled “atomism.” It is the model for picturing the universe that was presupposed in the above summary of the interrelationship between parts, entities, and collections. In this view, ultimately what exists are things (viz., “atoms”) which join together with other things to form relations, and what is fundamental in reality is the existence of the things, not their relations. Consider, for example, the statement, “John threw the ball.” The atomist model presupposes that what exists are John and the ball (the objects), and the activity of throwing, which relates John and the ball, is secondary. Ultimately the verb only expresses something about what the nouns name; it is the nouns that say something about existence. Atomism with respect to physics involves particles; with respect to politics and ethics, it involves individual human beings.

Note that before the modern period, Jewish thinking never was atomistic. Rather, it was what may be labeled “relationalism.” It is this insight, which Borowitz acknowledges that he learned from Buber, that is the ontological foundation of his covenant theology. Using the above example, it is a way of picturing the universe that presupposes that what exists are relations which may be analyzed into things (viz., terms) in relationship. In other words, things are to be understood as *relata*—not as independent entities, but as terms of relations. Hence, in the case of the sentence, “John threw the ball,” what exists is a given dynamic state of affairs where the objects *John* and *the ball* are defined relative to each other by the action verb. In this sense, Jewish thought has always been relational and never atomistic. For example, in biblical theology “entities” are nations, which are defined by the covenant relationship between peoples and their deity, while in medieval Jewish philosophy the sole entity is the universe, defined by the covenantal relationship between Creator and creatures. Consequently, in terms of political ethics, Jewish thought has always (i.e., until the modern period) functioned with a notion of a community founded in some sense on covenant, without any notion of individual rights of the sort that (for example) Jefferson expressed in his Declaration of Independence.

This change in philosophic model is the ground on which Borowitz is able to build a notion of a “Jewish self” to replace the classic liberal

atomistic notion of what Borowitz calls the “singular self.” In my judgment, it is Borowitz’s move from atomism to relationism with reference to the self that properly entitles him to call his thought postmodern. In this sense, he is more postmodern than many others in contemporary religious studies who call themselves postmodern. Here, *postmodern* means moving to a new model for thinking beyond the one that has dominated European thought since the rise of the secular nation-state. In nineteenth-century terms, it means thinking in patterns consciously in opposition to the patterns of Newtonian science.

It should be pointed out that Borowitz is not the only contemporary Jewish thinker to propose a covenantal approach to rethinking liberal Judaism. Of particular note in this respect is the work of Daniel J. Elazar and his associates. Elazar has published more than thirty-one books in areas related to Jewish political theory through the work of his Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs and Center for Jewish Community Studies. Of particular importance in this context are *The Jewish Polity: Jewish Political Organization from Biblical Times to the Present* (written together with Stuart Cohen), *Federalism as Grand Design: Political Philosophers and the Federal Principle*, and *Authority, Power and Leadership in the Jewish Polity*. What Borowitz approaches in terms of Jewish theology, Elazar approaches in terms of Jewish political theory. Conscious of the very same kinds of problems with “modernism” of which Borowitz speaks, Elazar has devoted much of his creativity to exploring how a covenantal model of political theory can be used to replace modern theories based on notions of human rights to preserve the values but exclude the vices of contemporary Western secular society. In the cases of both Borowitz and Elazar, the primary sources for their covenantal enterprise are the texts of the Hebrew Scriptures and the inspiration of Martin Buber’s theology.

The values of Borowitz’s Buberian enterprise are self-evident in everything that is spiritually and politically wrong with our modern world from a Jewish perspective. First, covenant theology allows us to reread the traditional texts of Judaism in a way that is more faithful to the texts themselves, be they biblical or rabbinic. Second, it enables us to make sense out of our faith experience that the Jewish people are no mere mental construct, and that the survival of the Jewish people is something of inherent moral value.

Although it is less obvious, it is also important to note that this enterprise provides us with a more rational way to understand the universe than does the old liberal atomism. Here, by “rational” what I mean is a world- and life-view that is more coherent with contemporary logic and science. This is not the place to discuss this point

in any detail. However, let me allude to the kind of considerations I have in mind. First, in terms of formal logic, Aristotle's model for logical thinking (which is the model that Rosenzweig had in mind when he formulated logical, scientific thought in terms of the equations,  $A$  is  $A$ ,  $A$  is  $B$ ,  $B$  is  $A$ , and  $B$  is  $B$  in the first part of *The Star of Redemption*) has given way to the model of Russell's *Principia Mathematica*. Briefly, Aristotle's formalism interpreted narrative sentences of the form "Allen is a boy" into propositions about particulars ("Allen") and universals ("boy"), where the universal was thought to be a kind of thing that somehow inheres in the particular thing. Conversely, in Russell's formalism, "boy" expresses an external relationship to a particular relatum ("Allen").

Second, in terms of physics, whereas the laws of Newtonian-based dynamics were expected to apply to individual entities that have specific, determinate locations at specific, determinate times, quantum mechanics ultimately only makes sense (in realistic terms) when it is applied to collections of particles. When it is applied to individuals (e.g., a photon), the scientific formalisms generate paradoxes (e.g., Schrödinger's cat). Whereas Newtonian science professed the ideal that it could make determinate causal statements about every individual thing in the universe, quantum mechanics professes as its ideal probabilistic statements about sets of things. Within this new mathematical formalism of scientific thinking (i.e., within this new model for rationalism), collections have status more than particulars, and truth is about probability more than necessity. Consequently, Borowitz's moral and political covenantalism is no less rational than is his epistemology.

Let me conclude by saying another word about postmodernism. The term is used in many ways. With respect to epistemology, it is often used in the way that Borowitz used it in *Renewing the Covenant*, viz., to express some sort of nonrationalism. However, the term is also used in a temporal sense to express thinking that moves beyond the modes of thought introduced in the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In these two senses we can say that Borowitz's theology is both modern and postmodern. In terms of epistemology, he believes that he is postmodern, but he really is modern. In other words, his rejection of modernist reason is really most reasonable. In terms of time, his theology truly is postmodern; i.e., it is one of the few statements of Jewish theology in our decade that is coherent with the major breakthroughs that have occurred in our century in both mathematical logic and scientific theory.

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The author's signature was inadvertently omitted from the response to J. Wesley Robbins (Vol. 27, no. 4, December 1992, pp. 455-56). The review should have been signed "J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, James I. McCord Professor of Theology and Science at Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey."