Steven Kepnes's Proposal: A Pragmatic Reading

Peter Ochs
University of Virginia

Steven Kepnes introduced founding principles of Jewish textual reasoning even before he cofounded the Society for Textual Reasoning (STR) in 1991.[1] He has consistently worked to balance the sometimes competing, but always complementary, inaugural goals of STR. I read Kepnes's proposal as reaffirming these goals, which he now adopts as guidelines for evaluating and reforming a younger generation's contributions to textual reasoning.

The Inaugural Goals of STR: A Sample

The following, selective list displays how I remember the force of the initial goals of textual reasoning. The names are coined to reflect the spirit of my reading of Kepnes today;[2] for each, there is a rabbinic term that I also associate with various complementary terms in various languages:

1. *Teshuvah/ressourcement:*[3] amidst the years of postmodernity/late modernity, to reenlist our[4] professional work and personal reasoning in the founding wisdoms and instructions of what we consider, remember, and imagine, variously, to be the classical rabbinic reception, reading, and performance of Torah.
2. *Derashah/l'kro u'laasot/aggiornamento:* to practice our reception of rabbinic sources pragmatically, which means to receive, read, and interpret them for the sake of repairing ills (social and other) that, we believe, are inadequately identified and addressed through the practices of reparative reasoning otherwise available to us in the contemporary academy and synagogue. (I define the term "reparative reasoning" as naming any process of reasoning –empirical, philosophic, hermeneutical—whose purpose is to repair some ills at the same time that it performs any other function for its readers. In these terms, the purpose of *derashah* is to repair some societal ills in the process of

---

[1] In 1991, we gathered as participants in the "Postmodern Jewish Philosophy Bitnet." By March 2000, we called our gathering The Society for Textual Reasoning. See Steven Kepnes, "Introducing the Journal of Textual Reasoning: Rereading Judaism After Modernity," in *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 1, no. 1 (2002).

[2] The four are based on Kepnes's hermeneutical principles in Steven Kepnes, *The Text as Thou: Martin Buber's Dialogic Hermeneutics and Narrative Theology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992). Strictly for the occasion of this paper, I rename them, somewhat eccentrically, to set the stage for my pragmatic reading of Kepnes.

[3] I have in mind the practices of *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento* that characterized *la nouvelle théologie* leading up to Vatican II.

[4] In this paper, the first person plural refers to those who, in varying ways, initiated Jewish textual reasoning. I intend the "we/our" as a vague reference to the different, sometimes competing but somehow complementary goals and efforts of those who stood and stand side-by-side in our early vision. The pronoun is meant both to gather and delimit a founding practice, but not at all to privilege that practice among other practices of TR.

repairing or at least responding to what Halivni calls "maculations" in the sacred text tradition.)

3. *Limud torah b'tzibbur/chavruta/community of inquiry:* to perform this reparative, rabbinic reading in the company of small communities of inquiry. Members of each of these communities, which we could also call communities of reparative reasoning, display a shared commitment to a common tradition, school, or sub-tradition of Torah and to a concern about certain contemporary social ills, including what we might call "hermeneutical ills." I will use the latter term to refer to a broader Jewish society's conflicts or uncertainties about how rabbinic interpretation should be conducted.

4. *Limud torah* as informed, at once, by academic as well as tradition- or synagogue-based practices of reading and reasoning. The founders of textual reasoning sought to draw simultaneously on academic and traditional resources for text interpretation and reparative social reasoning. They sought to introduce the fruits of their work to both their academic peers and their co-religionists in the broader Jewish community. They anticipated encountering resistance from at least some academic peers (because of TR's use of traditional practices) and some coreligionists (because of TR's employing academic as well as traditional practices). They considered these dual challenges to be signals of the hermeneutical and societal crises they sought to engage.

How is it possible to balance such goals? I read Kepnes's 1992 book, *The Text as Thou,* as the single most thoroughgoing illustration of how to respond to this question. His lifelong work extends the vision of *The Text as Thou* into an integrative project for repairing ruptures in relations among Jewish academic, societal, and synagogue practices. While Kepnes's last decade of writing and institutional service continues this work, it also signals his growing frustration with the recent direction of textual reasoning scholarship. I read his recent work as reevaluating the practical efficacy of TR when it is identified as a strictly postmodern academic practice and when, therefore, it reinforces rather than ameliorates the distance between academic Jewish scholarship and concrete Jewish communal life, including synagogue life. As I read him, Kepnes fears that the more recent generation of textual reasoners may no longer share his commitment to the central place of rabbinic reparative reasoning in integrating these forms of Jewish life.

From Max Kadushin to Steven Kepnes

"A Program for a Positive Jewish Theology" epitomizes Kepnes's last decade of work. For practitioners of TR who are perhaps respectful but no longer committed to the founding vision of TR, Kepnes's last decade of work may, on first reading, appear to overweight the first three early goals of TR and underweight part of the fourth (the academic). If so, the relation of Kepnes's essay to his community of readers would remind me of the way a younger community of readers interpreted the writings of Max Kadushin z"l during the 1960s-1990s. Addressing this community in the 1980s-1990s, I offered a pragmatic reading of Kadushin's writings on "the rabbinic mind." In this paper, I offer an

analogous pragmatic reading of Kepnes's essay. By way of introduction, here are a few words about my pragmatic reading of Kadushin.[5]

Through five book-length studies, authored between 1932 and 1969,[6] Kadushin introduced his "value conceptual" analysis of "the rabbinic mind," referring to a structured complex of religious values that is exhibited[7] fully and for the most part homogeneously in the rabbis' literary activity between roughly the 2nd century B.C.E. and the 7th century C.E. He reread individual midrashim as "haggadic statements," each of which attributes a set of rabbinic values to some type of worldly behavior or experience. By way of illustration, consider his reading of this midrash in the Mekhilta:

> "And the Lord spoke unto Moses and to Aaron in the land of Egypt Saying" (Exod. 12:1). From this, I might understand that the divine word was addressed to both Moses and Aaron. When, however, it says: "And it came to pass on the day when the Lord spoke unto Moses in the land of Egypt" (Exod. 6:28), it was to Moses alone and not to Aaron. If so, what does Scripture mean to teach by saying here "unto Moses and Aaron?" It merely teaches that just as Moses was perfectly fit (*calul l'*) to receive the divine words, so was Aaron perfectly fit to receive the divine words. And why then did He not speak to Aaron? In order to grant distinction to Moses. (*Mekilta Tractate Pischa* 1)[8]

The textual occasion for the midrash is an apparent contradiction between a *dibbur* offered to both Moses and Aaron in Ex. 12:1 and to only Moses in 6:28. According to Kadushin, the *darshan* resolves this contradiction by inferring that 6:28 must refer to the general principle that, unless otherwise specified, the Lord's speech (*dibbur*) is to Moses; and that 12:l is brought to specify something else: that Aaron was fit (*calul*, "whole," as for a burnt offering) to receive the *dibbur*, but that, in order to give distinction to Moses, he was yet not addressed. Therefore, we have a general notion of fitness for receiving divine words, extended at least to Aaron, and a specific notion of honor, reserved for Moses. The three cases in which Aaron is directly addressed (Lev. 10:8, Numb. 18:1 and 18:8) all concern commandments specifically about Aaron's and his sons' priesthood and, therefore, not specifically pertinent to Moses. As it continues, the midrash identifies who is fit to receive

---

[5] See, for example, Peter Ochs, "There's No God-Talk Unless God Talks: A Study of Max Kadushin as Rabbinic Pragmatist," *Proceedings of the Academy for Jewish Philosophy* (l986); "Max Kadushin as Rabbinic Pragmatist," in *Understanding the Rabbinic Mind: Essays on the Hermeneutic of Max Kadushin*, ed. Peter Ochs (Atlanta: Scholars Press for South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism, 1990) 165-196; and "Rabbinic Semiotics," *The American Journal of Semiotics* 10, nos. 1-2 (1993): 35-66.

[6] Four of interest to a general audience are *Organic Thinking: A Study in Rabbinic Thought* (New York: Bloch Publishing Co., 1938), *The Rabbinic Mind* (New York, Bloch Publishing Co., 1952/1972), *Worship and Ethics: A Study in Rabbinic Judaism* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), and *A Conceptual Approach to the Mekilta* (New York: Jonathan David Publishers for The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1969).

[7] Note how Kadushin's method belongs to the post-Kantian practice of transcendental reasoning. At the same time, I would also classify rabbinic interpretation more broadly as a type of transcendental analysis.

[8] *Mekilta De-Rabbi Ishmael*, ed. and trans. Jacob Z. Lauterbach (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983), as included in Kadushin, *A Conceptual Approach to the Mekilta.*

the *dibbur* (*kasher ladib'rot*) and explains how the originally indefinite list of candidates is gradually restricted. For Kadushin,

> *Ha-Dibbur*…connotes the idea of a revelation of God in the form of a locution, and in that sense it represents a phenomenal experience of God. This form of divine revelation was experienced by all the prophets and by them alone; accordingly, Aaron is here regarded as a prophet. Our text tells us that *Dibbur* was experienced by all the prophets when it uses the expression, she-nidbar (5, ll 58 ff.) with regard to the communications of God to the prophets in general. *Dibbur* is a form of *Gilluy Shekinah*, the revelation of God; hence, the concept of *Gilluy Shekinah* may sometimes be employed by the Rabbis to refer to an experience of *Dibbur.…Gilluy Shekinah* and *Dibbur* are value concepts.[9]

Resisting modern efforts to divide realms of fact and value, Kadushin coined the term "value concept" to capture the dual character of these constituents of the rabbinic mind. They are at once epistemological and normative, naming ways of cognizing the world and of guiding behavior in it. Kadushin therefore considered his work an integrative study of the conditions of rabbinic reasoning and the norms of rabbinic life.

For a younger generation of text-historical rabbinic scholars, Kadushin's "rabbinic mind" was a synchronic construction that overlooked the contextual specificities of many different practices of midrashic interpretation, as well as the varying and at times conflicting reception histories of each collection of midrashim and, often, of each version of each redacted text included in those collections. Kadushin would have been equally dissatisfied with his critics. Since I was attracted to different features of both opponents' work, I asked myself if I was misreading either one, or if there was a coherent way to justify my interests in both. This question was on my mind while I was writing a dissertation on Charles Peirce's pragmatism and semiotics. To serve my studies of both Peirce and Kadushin, I experimented with a pragmatic reading of Kadushin's relation to text-historical and philosophic inquiries. To my surprise, I discovered that Kadushin's account of haggadic statements could be clearly diagrammed in the terms of Peirce's semiotics and that Kadushin's relation to the broader Jewish world of scholarship could be coherently described in pragmatic terms that bracketed both the text-historians' and Kadushin's accounts of what they were doing. After completing a couple of essays on what I called Kadushin's rabbinic pragmatism, I was doubly surprised to learn, from the wonderful Johanan Muffs z"l, that Kadushin was actually a careful reader of Peirce. Muffs described walking Kadushin home from the Jewish Theological Seminary down Broadway. As they walked, Kadushin would on occasion read aloud from Peirce's writings (probably volume 5 of the *Collected Papers*). I knew that Kadushin rarely cited his actual sources (such as Mordecai Kaplan), but this was a whopper. I felt encouraged to enter into an imagined dialogue between Peirce and Kadushin, examining patterns of rabbinic interpretation as diagrammed through triadic logics, including pragmatic semiotics.

---

[9] Kadushin, *A Conceptual Approach to the Mekilta,* 36-37.

In terms of Peirce's semiotics, I argued that Kadushin diagrammed each discrete performance of rabbinic midrash as a three-part relation among a scriptural base text as sign vehicle, a *darshan*'s societal and hermeneutical setting as interpretant (interpretive context for reading the sign), and a concluding haggadic statement as performative object/meaning of the sign on this occasion of reading. In Peirce's terms, Kadushin read the discrete midrash as a genuine symbol: not a static sign, but a context specific display of the semiotic process of transmitting Torah as polyvalent instructions or recommendations for someone to act in some way in some setting.[10] In terms of rabbinic scholarship, the midrash extends the reception history of a biblical pericope and a chain of subsequent readings.

In terms of Peirce's pragmatism, I argued that Kadushin's value-conceptual readings of midrash did not belong to a practice of text-historical scholarship. His readings belonged, instead, to a practice for which neither Kadushin nor the younger generation of scholars had an appropriate name. I sought to coin some new names for it, such as "rabbinic semiotics," "rabbinic pragmatism," or "after-modern Jewish philosophy," adding the term "textual reasoning" when a group of us began to perform something like this. However named, this is a pragmatic or reparative practice of rabbinic reading. The practice draws on text-historical scholarship, but its purposes are not academic alone. The rabbinic pragmatist rereads a biblical or commentarial text as a potential resource for addressing matters of urgent concern in the contemporary Jewish society. In Kadushin's case, I argued that, in effect, he reread rabbinic midrash as a resource for refreshing his Jewish society's relations to the epistemological categories and normative force of rabbinic Judaism. He acquired familiarity with the classic midrashic literature by way of text-historical and traditional studies, but he engaged this literature dialogically, in service to his contemporary project of reparative reasoning.

Rabbinic pragmatists and text-historical scholars adopt different standards of practice: in semiotic terms, they examine different types of relation among midrashic signifiers, their interpretive contexts, their performative force, or their meanings within the reception histories of rabbinic Judaism. They could work in complementary ways, or they could keep their distances. Except for environments in which their standards of practice explicitly overlap, I do not find warrants for mutual criticism.

---

[10] In his "Proposal for a Positive Jewish Theology," Kepnes reads some of Peirce's notions slightly differently than I do. One example is Peirce's term "Thirdness." I would apply the term only to Peirce's phenomenology, as naming human experiences of "relationality" as distinguished from experiences of direct force or interruption (Secondness) and qualitative possibility (Firstness). It is indeed in his phenomenology of Thirdness that Peirce often introduces the non-binary and relational character of "representations." He tends, in his middle and later work, to apply the term "semeiotic" to a three-stage logic of representations or signs, applied both to human and extra-human sign processes. Diagramming the relation of a sign to its object, for example, Peirce sometimes adopts the term "icon" to characterize a sign's referring only to qualities or to the quality of its object, applying the term "index" to a sign's referring only to force or the force of its object, and applying the term "symbol" to a sign's referring to the legislative character of the most "complete" category of sign. Other terms refer to the relation of a sign to its "interpretant," or the condition (context or rule) with respect to which a sign refers in a given way to a given object.

Reading Kepnes Pragmatically

I reach the same conclusion concerning Kepnes's relation to a younger generation of textual reasoners. Those devoted or no longer devoted to the founding goals of TR could nonetheless work in complementary ways within a broader community of TR, or they could keep their distances. Except for environments in which their standards of TR practice explicitly overlap, however, I do not find warrants for mutual criticism. To provide warrants for these conclusions, I shall (a) review Kepnes's *Text as Thou* as a prototype of the early textual reasoners' standards of inquiry; (b) identify the irritants that may have stimulated Kepnes's last decade of theological writing and pastoral work; (c) offer a pragmatic rereading of Kepnes's "Program for a Positive Jewish Theology" as a reparative response to these in irritants.

The Text as Thou

The significance of Kepnes's work for TR is illustrated in his analysis of the Scholem-Buber controversy.[11] As he reports, Scholem castigated Buber for misrepresenting history: "Buber combines facts and quotations to suit his purpose, namely to present Hasidism as a spiritual phenomenon and not as a historical one." Buber's response was that "there are two different ways in which a great tradition of religious faith can be rescued from a rubble of time and brought back to time. The first [Scholem's] is by means of historical scholarship that seeks to be as comprehensive and exact as possible…, [taking the] former tradition as an object of knowledge….[T]he other [Buber's own]…is to recapture a sense of the power that once gave it the capacity to take hold of and vitalize the life of diverse classes of people." Judaic scholars have tended to redescribe these two different ways as the mutually exclusive ways of objective scholarship, on the one hand, and of extra-scholarly "response" or "theology," on the other hand. According to Kepnes, Buber's distinction replays not merely the dichotomous distinction, but rather the dialectical distinction between "understanding" (*verstehen*) and "explanation" (*erklären*) as developed in the "German *verstehen* hermeneutical school." Buber's sense of the complementarity of these two methods of interpretation is now best articulated in the work of Paul Ricoeur. Kepnes argues that, for Ricoeur, the two methods become distinct only when the course of human conversation is interrupted by some misunderstanding: "then free conversation is stopped and the partner is asked for explanations, reasons….After this is done the free and creative dialogue can continue. Thus, in conversation, explanation assists understanding.… [In Ricoeur's terms,] 'explanation *develops* understanding' and understanding precedes… and thus *envelops* explanation.'"[12] Analogously, in the Buber-Scholem debate, "we could say that the methodology of each alone is insufficient for an adequate interpretation of

---

[11] To illustrate Kepnes's early vision of how to conduct TR, I begin by paraphrasing and extending a few portions of Peter Ochs, "Review of *The Text as Thou: Martin Buber's Dialogical Hermeneutics and Narrative Theology*, by Steven Kepnes," *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, 86 nos. 3-4 (Jan-Apr 1996), 480-482.

[12] Kepnes, *The Text as Thou,* 37.

Hasidism….[By itself,] Scholem's historical approach lacks the resources to make Hasidism truly come alive for modern readers…[while] Buber's interpretation would have benefited from a more extensive exploration of the historical-critical issues."[13] Kepnes's mediating work thus embodies Buber's hermeneutical methods at the same time that it rereads them from outside of the Continental traditions of hermeneutics from which they arose.

Kepnes describes Buber's biblical studies as the most successful expression of his mature hermeneutics, fulfilling Ricoeur's vision of integrating historical-critical and hermeneutical approaches to the text. Buber also pays more complete attention to the linguistic dimension of the interpretive process. Guided by his reading of Bakhtin, Kepnes constructs a Buberian theory of dialogic hermeneutics. We hear now from the older Buber who, reflecting on the successful hermeneutic of his biblical studies, offers a more general theory of language and interpretation—in Kepnes's terms, a satisfactorily postromantic theory. We also hear from Kepnes who, in conversation with an array of contemporary dialogic hermeneuts, offers us a four-stage procedure for reading a text:

> We can summarize our Buberian general hermeneutic method with four steps. *The first step* calls for treating the text as a Thou and with the passive attitude of receptive waiting. This quickly moves the reader to a more active give-and-take dialogue.[14] The interpreter moves into *the second stage* of interpretation when the otherness of the text brings to consciousness the interpreter's own individual and cultural presuppositions and the interpreter wins a distance on these presuppositions which allows him or her to see the world of the text more clearly.[15] *The third stage* of interpretation begins when the interpreter exercises critical distance and employs methods of explanation to analyze the structure and rhetoric of the text. *The fourth stage* is gained as the interpreter reflects on the author, who serves as a reminder to reconnect the text to life. The application of the message of the text to the interpreter's life entails sharing the interpretation of the message with a community of inquiry which will challenge and refine the interpretation through a common dialogue.[16]

---

[13] Ibid., 37-39.

[14]. Kepnes writes, "For a musician confronting a new work, this would simply mean coming to the score with as few pre-conceptions as possible" (Ibid., 78); "Buber did demand that the interpreter as 'I' stand his or her ground before the text as 'Thou.' One could say that demanding that the presuppositions of one's culture and tradition be given a positive role in hermeneutic activity is tantamount to the I demanding it be appreciated in its fullness in its dialogue with the text" (Ibid., 29).

[15] Kepnes's work describes and exhibits the reparative character of Buber's I-Thou hermeneutic: how Buber directs the process of interpretation away from the meaning of a text to the questions posed by it, to enacting a relation with it—in brief, to engaging in dialogue. Here, reparative dialogue attends to new evidences of suffering in the voice of the other, where the "other" may signify ecosystems, networks of relation and not merely one individual human being. Kepnes's reading offers a strong alternative to the dialogic closure that Levinas's scholars sometimes attribute to Buber's hermeneutic.

[16] Ibid., 78.

Each of these four correspond to the four goals of STR as I listed them above:

1. "Treating the text as a Thou and with the passive attitude of receptive waiting," corresponding to what I named *teshuvah/ressourcement*: to return to each text of Torah, both scriptural and rabbinic, as Thou.
2. "The otherness of the text brings to consciousness the interpreter's own individual and cultural presuppositions," corresponding to *derashah/l'kroh u'laasot/ aggiornamento:* to receive each text as mediating a dialogue between its author's voice and our voice as interpreters.
3. *"The interpreter exercises critical distance and employs methods of explanation,"* corresponding to *limud torah b'tzibbur/chavruta/community of inquiry:* corresponding to where Kepnes extends the role of reader to that of a community of reparative readers who address the hermeneutical and societal ills that both separate them from the author's voice and, at the same time, enable them to re-engage that voice.
4. *"The application of the message of the text to the interpreter's life entails sharing the interpretation of the message with a community of inquiry which will challenge and refine the interpretation through a common dialogue,"* corresponding to *limud torah* as informed, at once, by academic as well as tradition- or synagogue-based practices of reading and reasoning.

Kepnes's Pragmatism

In his writings after the *Text as Thou,* Kepnes extends the pragmatic/reparative force of his hermeneutical method. Consider, for example, his studies of holiness. In *The Future of Jewish Theology*,[17] he "sought to ground Jewish theology in textual, interpretive, and liturgical practices [which] provide us with the vessels through which God's holiness flows into the world."[18] In a review of the book, Ben-Pazi describes the detailed

> attention Kepnes gives to the possibilities opened up by Jewish law and ritual in order to articulate holiness as a function of the everyday and the unholy. These include the acts of sanctification that take place in the home around consuming food and shared meals, or the acts of sanctification in time through the holiness of the Sabbath or of the festivals. In my opinion, the pinnacle of the process described by Kepnes is the application of the realm of the sacred to aspects of ethics, or, as Kepnes describes it, the distinction between "the ethics of holiness" and "the holiness of ethics." The second part of the book points out new possibilities for Jewish theology that

---

[17] Steven Kepnes, *The Future of Jewish Theology* (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2013).

[18] *Future of Jewish Theology*, 250.

emerge from an understanding of holiness that extends to the life of the everyday.[19]

Kepnes's recent concerns are prompted, in part, by next-generation critics who object to his presuming to attribute some direction of everyday behavior or experience to "God." My response is that such critics presume to attribute linguistic monovalence to claims about God, holiness, and such. I argue elsewhere that this kind of postmodern criticism continues modern tendencies to level the uses of language—as if we may presume that natural language discourse always refers, indexically, to a single world rather than to any number of worlds and that non-overt reference must be metaphoric (another, inexplicit way of referring to our relations to this one world) rather than triadically symbolic in, for example, Peirce's terms. Such modern/postmodern presumptions remind me of colonialist efforts to suppress non-Western ontologies and epistemologies under the banner of certain "universal" rules of rationality that include a logic of non-contradiction and excluded middle. While the postmodern critic is most likely a critic of Western colonialism, intentional criticism may, as in this case, unintentionally presuppose and deliver vestiges of earlier, oppressive rationalisms.[20]

For Kadushin and for Kepnes, "God," along with a host of associated biblical and rabbinic Hebrew/Aramaic nouns, should not be read according to the conventional semantic rules that their academic critics appear to deploy. In his "Proposal," Kepnes appears to respond, in part, to postmodern critics who assume that he would read "God" and these other nouns according to the same semantic rules he would adopt for reading common nouns, like "dog" and "school bus." To distinguish rules for reading classes of common nouns vs. theologoumena, Kadushin introduced an analytic distinction between what he called "cognitive concepts" (deployed in conventional communication about everyday matters of fact) and "value concepts" (deployed in unconventional communication about matters of Torah). Different rules of reading apply to the two classes; errant readers confuse classes or assimilate one to the other. I believe Kepnes reads his postmodern critics as erring in this way: as if he intended to refer to

---

[19] Hanoch Ben Pazi, "Review of Steven Kepnes, *The Future of Jewish Theology," Modern Theology* 30, no. 4 (October 2014): 628-631.

[20] See, for example, Peter Ochs, "Beyond Two-Valued Logics: A Jewish Philosopher's Comments on Recent Trends in Christian Philosophy," in *Christian Philosophy? Conceptions, Continuations, and Challenges,* ed. J. Aaron Simmons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 260-285. I argue:

> Quantum logic offers the most serious challenge to modern Western civilization's preoccupation with single models, norms, and directives for rationality itself and thus for each class of behaviors designated as appropriate to disciplined rational inquiry, from natural science to philosophy to the social sciences to text-historical science to ethics. Unlike postmodern criticism, the quantum alternative to modern, two-valued models is additive rather than substitutionary. For this reason, it would not lend itself to the intellectually reactionary movements that have insulated some recent academic disciplines from challenges to the hegemony of two-valued positivisms. Multivalued and probabilistic forms of reasoning fulfill the fundamental modern requisites for disciplined science, including experimental science. They challenge only the modern academy's tendency to overgeneralize these requisites as if they defined rationality per se, meriting, for example, Wittgenstein's critique of "foundationalism," Peirce's critique of "intuitionism," Dewey's critique of misdirected "quests for certainty," Gödel's critique of presumptions of "completeness," and so on. (274)

God, *hashem*, *kedushah* as referring to semantic objects in the manner of terms like "theater," "critics," "meaning." Like Kadushin, however, his published responses to such critics may, at times, present theological claims (in Kadushin's terms, value conceptual statements) in the propositional form readers may associate with conventional claims about everyday realities. I read his theological claims pragmatically, in order to read them in a fashion most consistent with his overall goals and commitments. I learned this kind of reading from Charles Peirce, who reread his own prior writings pragmatically, in order to remove them from conventional, propositional constructions that might tempt him, as well as his readers, to forget the reparative context in which he almost always wrote.

The goal of pragmatic reading is to ask to what might the author *possibly* have been responding when writing this text, out of what context of work and what types of presupposition, for what apparent purpose, and for whom. The goal is not to reply with a set of constative claims that would constitute new postmodern/modern assertions about what *did in fact* stimulate the author's writing. It is to engage us in a near-future activity of, for example, rereading the original text as if it displayed a reparative effort but incompletely. The effort might have lacked several things—for example, explicit reference to its irritants/stimulants, or greater awareness of the actual community of inquiry that shared overlapping presuppositions with the authorial voice, or more conscious attention to the worldly behavior that might provide a practicable, testable, and reparative response, or self-critical reflection on the assumptions and goals that join author and stimulus. (Pragmatic reflection is performed only within some community or tradition of inquiry.) A pragmatic reading should check for telltale errors in the text/author's reparative effort. One typical error is to have sought to correct some irritant by replacing it altogether with something new and identifying the new with what appears to be the irritant's logical contradictory. Peirce accused himself of such an error, of having sought to correct errant aspects of Cartesian intuitionism by replacing it altogether with its logical contradictory, a species of logicism. He introduced his pragmatism as a more appropriate method of repair. In this case, he re-categorized Descartes's intuitionist rationalism as an incomplete effort to repair certain tendencies in scholastic epistemology. His reparative effort was no longer to replace this rationalism altogether, but to rejoin it to the tradition of inquiry that includes both scholastic and Cartesian epistemologies: refining the logic of inquiry that serves both and testing its capacity to guide projects, at once, in experimental science and in philosophic theology.

Challenging the Text as Thou?

As I suggest earlier, Kepnes's last decade of writing signals his frustrations with a younger generation's apparent resistance to receiving each rabbinic and scriptural text as Thou. I suggest that we read this apparent resistance as the irritant that stimulates Kepnes's current pragmatic/reparative reasoning. If the irritant was once academic modernism, it is now a new generation's temptation to revisit that modernism. If so, we might indeed reread Kepnes's "Proposal for a Positive Theology" the way I have reread Kadushin's *The Rabbinic Mind*. According to my pragmatic rereading, Kadushin's account of midrash should not be received as an alternative historical-critical reading, but as an early prototype of what we call textual reasoning. Drawing on his text-historical rabbinic scholarship, Kadushin discovered a way to

reread midrash performatively, as a resource for contemporary Jewish reparative reasoning. Comparably, I suggest that Kepnes's "Proposal" should not be read as a true-or-false propositional claim about rabbinic doctrine, but as a reparative rereading of TR for a recent generation of Jewish scholars. Without challenging their commitment to historical-critical scholarship, he cautions them not to adopt their methods of scholarship as substitutes for their normative commitments. He asks them, in other words, to respect the epistemological humility that accompanies critical scholarship: if they seek to assert the value-neutrality of historical-critical methods, then they would not seek to extend these methods into the realm of their own norms and ideals. But what of these norms and ideals? What relation does their scholarship have to the performance of their everyday values and commitments? What guides their lives at home? What guides their relations to parents, children, friends? To the Jewish community? To other communities? If their scholarly methods are value neutral, does that not leave open the question of how their professional scholarship relates to the values they hold? Or if their scholarly methods are themselves expressions of new values—perhaps post-rabbinic or post-religious, perhaps postmodern—then how do they justify such a lapse in value neutrality? In Kepnes's early vision of TR, scriptural and rabbinic sources were resources for reparative reasoning, not for the assertion of ahistorical dogmas. What complaint could a new generation have about this kind of reparative and thus critical *ressourcement*? If their complaint is about *ressourcement* in general, then what do they adopt as substitutes? If the complaint is about the usefulness of certain, specific texts, terms, or practices *as* resources for repair, then what sources and practices of repair do they recommend instead, and on the basis of what warrants?

Within Kepnes's "Proposal," I read several passages as written in the propositional form of modern discourse; of particular interest are those that promote rabbinic theologoumena. To read these as propositional signs[21] of corresponding, semantic objects would be to read them against the grain of the reparative effort that marks Kepnes's lifelong inquiry in TR as reparative reasoning, as illustrated in *The Text as Thou* and as continuing in his past decade of critical writing. I therefore reread them pragmatically. I read them, first, as indexical signs of errors he perceives in more recent postmodern/modern efforts to reclothe Jewish philosophy and TR in the habits of certain intellectual binaries: those of fact vs. value, objective vs. subjective inquiry, theory vs. practice, and—most distressing to Kepnes—of academic vs. religious inquiry and of this-worldly vs. theological discourse. Kepnes appears most distressed by efforts to delegitimize Jewish philosophic and theological use of rabbinic theologoumena, as if references to "God" were illegitimate if they were not naturalized or humanized and as if the humanist/naturalist effort were self-legitimating and were legitimately separated from Torah.

I read Kepnes's propositions, secondly, as iconizing signs of that in which he retains hope: the this-worldly human capacity to care for others, to repair what may be broken, to seek correction, to pray, to speak and write about God (and holiness and Torah) without deferring to any pole of these binaries, to receive Torah, and to engage in the human and

---

[21] "Dicent Symbols," in Peirce's vocabulary.

natural sciences.   I read the propositions, thirdly, as sign vehicles of what Peirce calls "genuine symbols": of triadic relations among signs, objects, and interpretants of texts and practices of Torah—in other terms, as sign vehicles of dynamic processes of transmitting wisdom, learning, and instruction through generations. In Kepnes's reading, the transmission is not reiterative but reparative, not restating but responding in unpredictable ways to unpredictable change, not without blemish but continuing with blemish and brokenness and through darkness.

   I trust that TR and Jewish philosophy have room for postmodern/modern programs of inquiry and for Kepnes's alternatives. The programs could operate as complements, or they could maintain their distance. But I do not see warrants within such programs for wholesale/decontextualized critique of the other programs.