**The Postmodern Reader’s Body: Research Proposal**

*Barak Ben-Moshe*

My proposed research is concerned with three interdisciplinary, discoursal channels: (1) The body as a wellspring: fusing and structuring the postmodern reader’s body; (2) Implementing pioneering hermeneutic approaches, with an emphasis on their connections to, and implications for, Jewish education; (3) The semantics of possible worlds, and their educational potential as a theory for the meaning of religious language.[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. **Physical Epistemology and Ontology**
   1. **The Reader’s Body as a Wellspring**

The research described below attempts to understand the reader’s corporeal body as a wellspring, a site for an epistemological and ontological process that takes place while reading and interpreting a text. I suggest seeing the body as a tool that, on the epistemological level, creates knowledge and truth for the subject, while on the ontological level, transforms the subject into an interpretative being. To the best of my knowledge, there is a lack of thorough and comprehensive research on these subjects. Hermeneutic theories, including new theories that expand the place of the reader to include epistemological and ontological contexts, have yet to devote significant attention to the physicality of reader and author, as the loci that bring about the knowledge-related processes of signification, assimilation, and production of the self. Based on pioneering philosophical studies, particularly Shaun Gallagher’s work on the Embodied Mind, I set out from the assumption that cognitive processes such as memory, thought, understanding, and imagination are inherently and neurologically connected to motor-sensory centers in the human brain. From this empirical point of departure, holistic thought about the body begins to take shape, in a manner that undermines the Cartesian cogito that separates between consciousness and the body. This holistic way of thinking gives a position of primacy to the body as an expansion and expression of consciousness, making the body constitutive of interpretative consciousness. This point of view, negating the separation between the mental and the physical, begs for a paradigm shift in our general understanding of human experience.

Such a manner of thinking undermines several assumptions often supposedly taken for granted as a legacy bequeathed to western thought by its greatest philosophers, from Plato, through Descartes and Kant, to Frege and Chomsky (to name only a few.) Following Gallagher and others, and based on a study of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of consciousness, I seek to embark on an intellectual voyage of discovery which will lead to the creation of a hermeneutic model attentive to the centrality of the living body in human experience. At this point the research expands beyond questions relating to textual understanding and exegesis, to achieve insight into man’s being in the world. My guiding question is this: While reading a text, what are the reader-interpreter’s somatic reactions, and how do these reactions come together to form a comprehensive event relating to the text being read?

The theoretical corpus for the research suggested here extends across a vast intellectual landscape, including cognitive studies, epistemology, hermeneutics, and semantics; for this reason, the expected research results are equally broad, and include many fields. As an educator, I intend to utilize the insights of this comprehensive research process in the classroom, and to establish a number of new outlines, both pedagogical and relating to educational planning. Midway within the fellowship period – during the first or second year – I plan to publish a volume of five articles dealing with the principle aspects of the subject. During the second half of the fellowship – years four and five – I plan to complete the composition of a comprehensive monograph that will include and integrate the various aspects mentioned above.

* 1. **“Minor Dances”**

Remaining within the physical context, but adopting another method, I will seek to explore what might be called, to borrow Deleuze and Guattari’s famous term “minor literature,” the “minor bodily practices” that develop in contemporary public and private space, and to ask what is implicit in their particular characteristics. Present-day Israel is a multi-cultural society, a dizzy confusion of identities and conflicting constructions of reality; I will conduct a series of observations and studies of different Israeli spaces devoted to dance and physical practices, including both spontaneous expressions as well as planned initiatives.

This discoursal channel will be divided into synchronic and diachronic research. The synchronic research will seek to describe the unique characteristics of minor and abnormal forms of motion, such as Tai-Chi lessons for ultra-Orthodox Jews, and to point to the cultural meanings, and the implicit ways in which they undermine social representation and reproduction systems in a given society. The diachronic research will seek to trace changes in the representations of the body and implicit physical perceptions by comparing different periods in the cultures making up contemporary Israeli society.

As part of this, I intend to use my experience as a group moderator and a choreographer in dance groups for ultra-Orthodox Jews, based on the canonical Jewish texts, as a case study through which to examine whether we can now speak of a “new physicality,” and what the beginnings of such a physicality might be. One of the interesting topics in this context is the manner in which the body loses its natural, daily language, and begins to “stutter,” in effect becoming a stranger to itself, as well as the healing processes which may later ensue, through which the body returns to itself.

**1.3 A Homeless Body**

I intend to conduct integrative research on the postmodern reader from a corporeal perspective. In this framework I will examine which physicality is established within the confines of the subject’s decentralized space. In what way does the body absorb the digital “dialect” and the information revolution? I will seek to characterize the physical presence and being created within such a space by asking what physicality takes place in a space of information, devoid of weight and location? How does the body undermine and destabilize the virtual constructions of reality established by digital media, and what are their repercussions on the representation of the body and its perception? Based on these questions concerning subjective representation and perception, I will examine the relevant ethical strata. Following the work of the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, who examined ethics and morality in a fluid, postmodern era, I will seek to explore the interpersonal sphere from the perspective of the inter-corporal relations between subjects. The research methodology will incorporate an analysis of observations of people moving in different cultural spaces, alongside an analysis of the implicit corporeal dimension underwriting virtual communication. Articles I will write in these fields will be directed to journals dealing with cultural studies, Jewish education in Israel and abroad, and the philosophy of the body.

1. **Hermeneutics and Jewish Educational Research**
   1. **Introducing Hermeneutics into Jewish Educational Research**

Extant research in Jewish education has paid scant attention to the challenges and insights of philosophical hermeneutics, whose prominent theorists include Martin Buber, Hans Georg Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur. Despite their stated position of theoretical openness, studies in the field of Jewish educational research all too often remain constrained by this research community’s traditional patterns of thought. One of the central contributions my doctoral dissertation sought to make was to introduce Jewish educators to the attentive readings to which hermeneutical interpretative theories have subjected the text, the reader, and the acts of reading and interpretation. There is an intellectual gap between the insights of hermeneutic scholars and philosophers dealing with questions of language and meaning, and the manner in which these contents have been imported into Jewish educational research, resulting only in a partial and incomplete incorporation of hermeneutic insights into research on Jewish education. I argue that hidden patterns and conceptual fixations prevent Jewish educational discourse from shedding some of its dogmas. A planned article will directly address the sources responsible for this fixation, in the context of learning and teaching religious language in light of hermeneutic and philosophical developments. In follow-up articles I will seek to reconceptualize both the problematic focal points in Jewish education and the possible lines of future work that can be undertaken in light of prominent 20th and 21st century hermeneutic theories.

In my doctoral work I developed a complex, yet flexible, conceptual and methodological framework meant to serve me as a point of departure for my future research. Alongside four or five articles I will write based on chapters from my dissertation, I also intend to study other thinkers who were not included in my previous work – among them Stanley Fish, Emmanuel Levinas, Michel Foucault, and Roland Barthes – and to bring to light their possible contribution to understanding the position of the text, the reader, and the opportunities of forging connections between them. Such a study turns both towards Jewish educational research, and the concrete subjects with which it deals, and but also towards a wider intercultural, intellectual community that deals with any and all forms of religious education, and is consciously searching for the spiritual, transcendental, and moral dimension while paying attention to words, both as they are written and as they are read.

* 1. **The Uncanny**

In another study, I will seek to re-approach the psychoanalytic concept of the Uncanny (Das Unheimliche) as developed by Freud. This term is often repeated in various discourses in the humanities, and, in a somewhat less developed manner, in educational research, but to the best of my knowledge, it has yet to be dealt with by contemporary Jewish educational research. I argue that this multifaceted concept, which has gone through a number of shifts and metamorphoses over the last century, can shed light on the experience of estrangement afflicting the modern, and postmodern, subject of education, as well as on the curiosity of people from different social backgrounds towards learning in general, and the study of sacred texts in particular. The religious language reverberating through these ancient texts calls forth a tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar, in which the near and the safe clash with the distant and the threatening, and may pave the way for this concept to the heart of the discourse on Jewish educational research.

**3. The Semantics of Possible Worlds**

To date, hardly any work has been done on the connection between the theory of fiction, and particularly the semantics of possible worlds, and aspects of learning and teaching in religious and secular education. Although the semantics of possible worlds belongs more to musings of formalist logicians in analytic philosophy, part of this field – particularly works by pathbreaking philosophers such as Thomas Kuhn, Hilary Putnam, and Umberto Eco – has led to the creation of rich conceptual possibilities that may provide a solution to the situation of cultural-epistemological estrangement and incommensurability that modern readers experience when faced with ancient texts, or religious or cultural rituals. This research demands adopting an interdisciplinary perspective, and courageously – at times controversially – facing up to questions of biblical translation.

I consider the Martin Buber Postdoctoral Fellowship to be the most productive space for my future research. The Fellowship’s emphasis on a rich academic community, generating a fruitful and ever replenishing intellectual discourse between colleagues from different backgrounds and fields of scholarship, constitutes for me the ideal conditions for development as a young scholar, and will help bring my research to fruition while imparting it a multifaceted nature.

1. In addition to these subjects, which will form the mainstay of my research, I intend to devote part of my time to editing my doctoral dissertation for publication (which will be done during the first year) and writing four or five new articles that will continue the work I began in my dissertation (during the first and second year). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)