



THE REALITY OF IDEALS

OMRI BOEHM

Omri Boehm was born in 1979 in Israel. He started his studies at the Adi Lautman Program for Outstanding Students, also known as the “Yehuda Elkana Program” (Tel Aviv University), and completed his PhD in Philosophy at Yale University. After a postdoc fellowship at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich, he joined the Department of Philosophy at The New School for Social Research in New York, where he is an Associate Professor. His most recent publications include *Kant’s Critique of Spinoza* (Oxford University Press 2014), *Israel – eine Utopie* (Propyläen 2020; *Haifa Republic: A Democratic Future for Israel*, NYRB 2021), *Radikaler Universalismus* (Propyläen 2022; *Radical Universalism*, NYRB 2025), *Der bestirnte Himmel über mir, ein Gespräch über Kant* (Propyläen 2024, with Daniel Kehlmann), and *The Reality of Ideals* (Propyläen 2024; *Die Realität der Ideale*, Propyläen 2024). In 2024 Omri Boehm was awarded the Leipzig Book Award for European Understanding (Leipziger Buchpreis zur Europäischen Verständigung). He regularly writes for *Haaretz*, *Die Zeit*, *The Washington Post*, and *The New York Times*. – Address: Department of Philosophy, The New School for Social Research, 6 East 16th Street R1115A, New York, NY 10003, USA. E-mail: boehmo@newschool.edu.

In March 2025, I met with a group of Israeli and Palestinian scholars and activists – experts in political science, international law, and the Middle East conflict, as well as directors of joint Israeli-Palestinian initiatives – at the Norwegian Nobel Institute in Oslo. We gathered for a conference co-organized with Andreas Føllesdal (my Co-Fellow 2023/2024) on “(Con)Federal Constellations in Israel/Palestine.” Far removed from both the Middle East and Berlin-Grunewald, the meeting served as a vivid reminder of the lasting impact

my five-month stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg (February–July 2024) had on my work – specifically on the (con)federative bi-national framework I first began developing in *Haifa Republic* (2021).

It is a remarkable feature of the Kolleg that, during this difficult period, I came to know both an expert on federalism like Andreas and Palestinian colleagues from previous and upcoming years: Hassan Jabareen (Fellow 2015/2016) and Bashir Bashir (Fellow 2024/2025).

When I planned my stay at the Kolleg, my hope was to spend several quiet months working on “purely” academic materials – whatever that may mean – and less on the kind of political-academic engagement that has shaped much of my recent work. My intended project, which I had long postponed, was a thorough critique of “post-metaphysical thinking”: an attempt to identify the necessary metaphysical assumptions underpinning moral universalism – such as freedom and personhood – and to explore whether, absent a theoretical defense of these assumptions, moral universalism collapses into what I have elsewhere called “fake universalism” or “we-liberalism.” Relatedly, I sought to ask whether a broadly Kantian cosmopolitan project of the sort familiar from Habermas can be sustained without metaphysical commitments. My suspicion is that it cannot – and that, without them, cosmopolitanism and universalism halt at the threshold of historical commitments, which at least partly overlap with our identities. These concerns also motivated my book *Radikaler Universalismus* (2022), and I had hoped to return to its arguments for a more systematic account during my time at the Kolleg.

However, the Juridical Overhaul in Israel the previous summer already put into question my ability to disconnect from political writing. Then came Hamas’s attack on October 7th and the ensuing Israeli campaign in Gaza – events that decisively ended any such hope. I was faced with a choice: retreat into the utopian environment of Wiko, or acknowledge the historical moment and write – not op-eds, but essays with both academic grounding and public reach – trying to begin addressing what we are witnessing.

The result was a series of longer, more systematic public lectures and essays that aimed to go beyond the immediate political surface (urgent though it is) and speak to the deeper questions the moment posed – at least to me, no doubt as an Israeli Jew. While politically relevant, the essays were never *only* political – though some critics thought they weren’t political *enough*. The time, space, and company of leading experts – including some unforgettable conversations – proved invaluable for this kind of work.

The first text, “Ethical Monotheism Today,” grew out of a keynote I gave at the opening of Munich’s Literature Festival. It reflects on the Jewish-German tradition of Ethical

Monotheism, beginning with Hermann Cohen and reverberating through figures like Cassirer, Buber, and Benjamin – a tradition that saw monotheism not as the discovery of a single God, but of a single humanity. Interrupted by the Second World War – many of its representatives fled to Palestine – it briefly resurfaced in the bi-nationalist traditions formed just before and after Israel’s establishment. I argue that Ethical Monotheism, and its roots in neo-Kantianism, remain relevant far beyond the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It holds philosophical possibilities that have been overlooked – by Kant scholars, the Frankfurt School, and post-colonial critiques alike. My aim was to ask what remains of this tradition today – not merely as a subject of historical inquiry, but as a living philosophical possibility.

The second essay, “Friendship as the Schema of Human Dignity,” was originally written as my acceptance speech for the Leipzig Book Award for European Understanding (awarded to *Radikaler Universalismus* in 2024). Engaging with Hannah Arendt’s well-known acceptance speech for the Lessing Prize – where she contrasts Lessing’s ideal of friendship with Kant’s categorical ethics as a pillar of Enlightenment in “dark times” – I explore the role of friendship in Kant’s thought. Often considered “cold” or “abstract,” Kantian universalism in fact grounds the ideal of dignity in a duty to friendship, conceived not as a private sentiment but as a public virtue of Enlightenment. For Arendt, a dark time is one in which public discourse undermines rather than sustains reason. A dark time, for Kant, would mean one in which “thinking for oneself” is in question, because it is only possible in the public sphere. I was trying to suggest that here lies the crucial role of friendship in his thinking: friends allow us, amid a dark time, to think with others – whom we trust, “opening” ourselves to them – thereby enabling thinking in dark times. Departing from this interpretation, I tried to reflect on the tragic ideal of German-Jewish friendship and, no less significantly, on Israeli-Palestinian friendship today. (In a later exchange with Peter Schäfer [Wiko Fellow 2007/2008], the connection between friendship and universalism became even clearer, see especially “Mit Gott auch wohl gerechtet,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, October 2, 2024.)

The third essay, “Europe and Its Victims: Beyond the Myth of National Sovereignty,” was written for the third “Rede an Europa” event of the IWM Vienna and Wiener Festwochen. In it, I argue that while Europe has largely responded to its imperial and colonial past by questioning national sovereignty – broadening citizenship beyond national identity – it has taken the opposite approach with its victims. In relation to the Holocaust and to colonialism, Europe has often accepted national sovereignty and ethnic conceptions of

citizenship as vehicles of liberation. These nationalist frameworks are now colliding in Israel/Palestine – and Europe’s failure to address them coherently undermines its own internal legal-political solutions to its past.

These three talks were collected in a short book, published in both German and English, *The Reality of Ideals* (2024). Taking a cue from Ernst Cassirer, I wrote in the preface that these texts “represent my best efforts to take some first steps” in sustaining an attitude in which ideals can be meaningfully distinguished from “political myth.” It is a “humble contribution to a not-so-humble state of mind: the one that insists that speaking for utopian ideals is not advocating placeless moralistic politics for the day after; one that recognizes ideals as valid principles rather than comfortable noble lies; one that takes seriously that peace is truly distinct from domination, and that human dignity – not national sovereignty – is truly inviolable.” I added, however, that while the essays aim to uphold this frame of mind, “none of them amounts to a theoretical defense of the reality of ideals – something I hope to do on a future occasion.”

Only after writing that line did I realize it may be the most mature expression of what I had initially hoped to do during my brief stay at Wiko, though I hadn’t yet found the right terms for it, or even understood things that way. A critique of post-metaphysical thinking and a defense of the reality of ideals are two sides of the same coin: one stated negatively, the other positively. I now look forward to taking up this project more fully, with an emphasis on the positive aspects, perhaps in the course of another Wiko stay...