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“Constellation” and “Mimesis”: A conceptual analysis of Walter Benjamin’s influence on Theodor W. Adorno

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Abstract

Walter Benjamin's influence on Theodor W. Adorno is often narrativized through the latter's early work, whereby Adorno is seen as Benjamin's "disciple" in the 1930s before transitioning beyond this early phase. I seek to complicate this narrative through an investigation of the terms "constellation" and "mimesis," both of which appear prominently in Benjamin's work before being repurposed by Adorno. The constellation first surfaces in the "Epistemo-Critical Foreword" to *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, where it combines with a host of other key terms to depict Benjamin's early notion of philosophical presentation [*Darstellung*]. In "The Actuality of Philosophy" and "The Idea of Natural History," Adorno repurposes the constellation to outline his own conception of interpretive philosophy. While this appears to support the conventional narrative, it is argued that – once isolated from the structure of terms laid out by Benjamin – Adorno's re-conception of the constellation is unique in that it emphasizes the role of the subject. This suggests Adorno already had misgivings about Benjamin's "anti-subjectivism" as early as 1931. In a similar manner, the term "mimesis" takes prominence in Benjamin's philosophy of language, where he describes a process of semantic transformation that seeks to dislodge meaning from the realm of myth. Despite its potential, this process retains an "ambivalent significance" as during these transformations Benjamin fears that the capacities latent in human language may be squandered. Although *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is often the point where Adorno's independence from Benjamin is marked, the structured opposition between "abstraction" and "mimesis" in the first essay describes a similarly ambivalent process. Because of the dominating tendencies of the abstract knowledge of enlightenment, Adorno and Horkheimer fuse mimesis with Hegel's concept of "determinate negation" in an effort to outline a positive concept of enlightenment. This fusion anticipates *Negative Dialectics*, a text in which Adorno also reintroduces the terminology of the constellation, suggesting that his alleged break with Benjamin is vastly overstated.

Thesis Declaration

This thesis is an original work of my research and contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Signature:



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Abbreviations

ND Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), 362.

AP Theodor W. Adorno, "The Actuality of Philosophy," trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Telos* no. 60 (1984): 111-124.

INH Theodor W. Adorno, "The Idea of Natural History," trans. Susan Buck-Morss, *Telos* no. 31 (1977): 120-133.

ABC Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence: 1928-1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999).

DOS Walter Benjamin, "Doctrine of the Similar," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2: 1931-1934*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W Jennings (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), 694-698.

LAN Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W Jennings (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996), 62-74.

OGT Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2019).

SW (followed by the volume number) *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vols. I-IV, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996-2003).

DE Max Horkheimer, and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002).

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Introduction

Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin first met courtesy of a mutual friend – fellow philosopher Siegfried Kracauer – in Frankfurt in 1923.¹ Adorno, eleven years Benjamin’s junior, remembered being tremendously impressed: “It is scarcely hindsight if I say that from the very first moment I felt that Benjamin was one of the most impressive men I have ever encountered [...] It was as if his philosophy revealed to me what philosophy would have to be if it were to fulfil its promise.”²

Adorno’s first two seminars at the University of Frankfurt in 1931-1932 were devoted to Benjamin’s *Origin of German Tragedy*, a detail that is especially noteworthy given Benjamin’s study was rejected by the very same university for the *Habilitation* qualification only five years earlier.³ It is around this time that Benjamin is alleged to have told his cousin Egon Wissing, with whom he was very close, that “Adorno was my only disciple.”⁴ These quotes from Adorno and Benjamin provide an insight into the high esteem Benjamin held in Adorno’s eyes in the 1920s and early 1930s, and commentators readily acknowledge how this esteem is reflected in the themes and approach of Adorno’s work at this time. Espen Hammer argues that “Benjamin’s influence on Adorno is nowhere more explicit than in his two early essays,”⁵ “The Actuality of Philosophy” (1931) and “The Idea of Natural History (1932), while with respect to Adorno’s first published book, *Kierkegaard: The Construction of the Aesthetic* (1933), Stefan Müller-Doohm contends that “Benjamin’s philosophy of history had acted as godfather to Adorno’s own approach.”⁶

Adorno’s admiration for Benjamin at this stage of his life is recounted in exemplary fashion by Susan Buck-Morss. Buck-Morss argues that Adorno’s philosophical method first took shape following a series of theoretical discussions with Benjamin in 1928,⁷ discussions which were consolidated the following year when the pair met in Königstein.⁸ In Adorno’s eyes, these talks resulted in the formulation of a common philosophical program, whereby the pair would seek to fuse the epistemological theory of Benjamin’s early work with Marxist social categories in order to “liquidate idealism.”⁹ This “common program” was first put into practice in “The Actuality of Philosophy,” Adorno’s 1931 lecture which “outlined a program and a task for philosophy which

¹ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 5-6.

² Stefan Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2005), 122.

³ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁴ Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014), 359.

⁵ Espen Hammer, *Adorno and the Political* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2005), 37.

⁶ Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography*, 130.

⁷ Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 21.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 64-65.

⁹ *Ibid.*, xii-xiii, 53, 75-76.

was to guide his intellectual efforts for the rest of his life.”¹⁰ This indebtedness is further demonstrated through a variety of specific thought formulations, including the critique of progress,¹¹ the concept of mimesis,¹² and most significantly the notion of unintentional truth,¹³ which was central to Adorno’s inaugural lecture. Nevertheless, while Adorno thoroughly internalized Benjamin’s philosophy, Buck-Morss ultimately claims that he did so “in an act of *Aufhebung*, in all three senses (preserving, negating, going beyond) of this Hegelian term.”¹⁴ Where Benjamin “simply posited” his categories, Buck-Morss argues that Adorno “deduce[d] them systematically out of these late forms of idealism,”¹⁵ and where Benjamin presented theology and Marxism side-by-side “in unmediated juxtaposition,” Adorno “extrapolate[d] out of the extremes of theology and Marxism to the point where they could be shown to converge.”¹⁶ Despite this act of “*Aufhebung*,” Buck-Morss concludes that “the origins of ‘negative dialectics’ are to be found in Benjamin’s early works,” such that an analysis of these works “provides a key to Adorno’s philosophy, even in its later, mature form.”¹⁷ Buck-Morss’ account has resulted in two, in some respects contradictory, outcomes. First, the compelling nature of her account has ensured that Benjamin’s formative influence on Adorno’s thinking is difficult to ignore, and because she insists that the themes and approach of Adorno’s thought are consistent across his oeuvre, Buck-Morss is also committed to the claim that Benjamin’s influence is enduring. At the same time, the convincing nature of the account she gives of this early work, coupled with the fact that she argues that Adorno eventually “go[es] beyond” this influence, has had the unintended consequence that Benjamin’s influence on Adorno is often confined to the latter’s early work.

Gillian Rose’s first major work, *The Melancholy Science*, also pays close attention to one of Adorno’s early lectures, in this case “The Idea of Natural History.” While Rose acknowledges the influence not only of Benjamin, but also of György Lukács on Adorno’s early work,¹⁸ she argues that Adorno quickly transitioned beyond these influences, with Benjamin’s primeval history of modernity “represent[ing] to Adorno the most radical failure in the attempt on the part of twentieth-century philosophy to break out of traditional philosophy and to turn to the ‘concrete.’”¹⁹ While Buck-Morss focuses on the continuities between Benjamin and Adorno’s respective work, Rose

¹⁰ Ibid., xii, 23.

¹¹ Ibid., 48.

¹² Ibid., 87-88.

¹³ Ibid., 77-81.

¹⁴ Ibid., 170-171.

¹⁵ Ibid., 64.

¹⁶ Ibid., 141.

¹⁷ Ibid., 64.

¹⁸ Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno* (London: Verso, 2014), x, 49-50, 149.

¹⁹ Ibid., 54.

pays heed to their differences: “[Adorno’s] article on fetishism in music was a response to Benjamin’s article on art and mechanical reproduction, [and] *Minima Moralia* can equally well be read as a response to Benjamin’s *Passagenarbeit*.”²⁰ In once again focusing on Benjamin’s influence over Adorno’s early work, while simultaneously taking into account Adorno’s critical reception of Benjamin’s work after this time, Rose’s portrayal confirms the contradictory emphases attributed above to Buck-Morss. Published a mere 12 months apart, in 1977 and 1978 respectively, these two accounts have henceforth determined Benjamin’s reception in Adorno scholarship to a large extent, laying the groundwork for what I term the “conventional narrative,” in which Adorno is seen as Benjamin’s “disciple” in the early 1930s before transitioning beyond this formative phase.

The conventional narrative is encouraged by the oft-cited intellectual disagreements that the pair aired in their personal correspondence in the mid-late 1930s. While Benjamin’s close friend, Gershom Scholem, has cautioned against reading too much into the dispute,²¹ its canonization with respect to the conventional narrative has been confirmed in recent times by Müller-Doohm’s impressive and meticulous biography of Adorno. Müller-Doohm argues that Adorno and Benjamin’s written communication between 1935 and 1936 “suggest that the younger man was attempting to define himself against the older one, and to discover his own independent position.”²² On this account, the pair’s intellectual debate arises from the fact that while Adorno “wished to distance himself from some of Benjamin’s ideas,” at the same time “he was at pains to measure himself against Benjamin’s intellectual power and so he sought intellectual confrontation.”²³ Distinguishing his account from Buck-Morss’, Müller-Doohm contends that Adorno became increasingly influenced by the circle of theorists associated with the Frankfurt based Institute for Social Research, especially its director, Max Horkheimer.²⁴ Rather than locating the origin of negative dialectics in Benjamin’s early philosophy, Müller-Doohm states that only in the United States, where he was able to “free himself” from Benjamin’s thinking, did Adorno “la[y] the foundations for his unique concept of sociology” and “insert the concept of the non-identical into the very heart of his principal work of philosophy.”²⁵

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Scholem goes so far as to say that “the accusations that have been made against Adorno and his critique are ludicrous.” Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), 216.

²² Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography*, 218.

²³ Ibid., 219.

²⁴ Ibid., 155. Buck-Morss explicitly sets her account against this line of thought: Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 65-69.

²⁵ Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography*, 172.

Before outlining my own position, it is worth taking note of two matters with respect to the conventional narrative. Firstly, I want to point out that the conventional narrative is not all-encompassing with respect to Adorno scholarship. Hammer has convincingly argued for the lasting nature of Benjamin's influence by demonstrating how the early mentor "developed an account of truth that would haunt the rest of Adorno's work," contending that "it is ultimately Benjamin who inspires the construction of [Adorno's] 'critical' or 'negative-dialectical' [analysis]." ²⁶ Even more recently, Alexander Stern has thrown light on the long-term impact of Benjamin's philosophy of language for Adorno's thought, ²⁷ a theme first explored by Rolf Tiedemann. ²⁸ Secondly, I want to make it clear that I do not wish to reject or somehow "disprove" the conventional narrative. Such an attempt would inevitably run aground, given the array of textual and historical support for a position which is, in many respects, very accurate. Instead, I intend to identify and query some of the ways this narrative has shaped the secondary literature on the Benjamin-Adorno relationship. In some cases, Benjamin's influence is confined solely to Adorno's early work, ²⁹ in others it is omitted altogether, ³⁰ while there has also been a tendency – contra Scholem's suggestion – to overemphasize the pair's debate in their correspondence. ³¹

Although I do not seek to disprove the conventional narrative, I do hope to complicate it. While the conventional narrative embraces many aspects of Benjamin and Adorno's respective published

²⁶ Hammer, *Adorno and the Political*, 37, 40.

²⁷ Alexander Stern, "Guilt and Mourning: Adorno's Debt to and Critique of Benjamin," in *A Companion to Adorno*, ed. Peter E. Gordon, Espen Hammer and Max Pensky (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2020): 51-66.

²⁸ Rolf Tiedemann, "Concept, Image, Name: On Adorno's Utopia of Knowledge," in *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaart (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1997): 123-145.

²⁹ Take, for example, Deborah Cook's chapter on "Influences and Impact," which very briefly mentions Benjamin in the "Introduction," but does not consider him in the section on "Influences," which is instead dedicated to Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Freud. Deborah Cook, "Influences and Impact," in *Theodor W. Adorno: Key Concepts*, ed. Deborah Cook (New York: Routledge, 2014): 21-37.

³⁰ Under the subheading "Constellations" in her chapter "Adorno and Logic," Alison Stone makes no reference whatsoever of the term's Benjaminian genesis. Instead, she dives headfirst into an analysis of Adorno's indebtedness to Hegel. Alison Stone, "Adorno and Logic" in *Theodor W. Adorno: Key Concepts*, ed. Deborah Cook (New York: Routledge, 2014): 57-60. In a separate paper, Stone again discusses Adorno's notion of the constellation as a response to Hegel's dialectics, however she interprets this response solely in terms of Hegel and Kant. Alison Stone, "Adorno, Hegel, and Dialectic," in *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, vol. 22 no. 6 (2014): 1135-1136. Likewise, Benjamin fails to rate a mention in Brian O'Connor's 2004 book *Adorno's Negative Dialectic*, although he corrects this oversight in his 2013 text *Adorno*. Brian O'Connor, *Adorno's Negative Dialectic: Philosophy and the Possibility of Critical Rationality* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004); Brian O'Connor, *Adorno* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).

³¹ One recent example is Owen Hulatt's 2016 book *Adorno's Theory of Philosophical and Aesthetic Truth*, which makes several pointed references to Benjamin without directly referencing any of his writing. Just one of the many "failings" Hulatt attributes to Benjamin are "the bullish orthodox Marxist assertions one repeatedly finds in his work," a practice which "reaches its apotheosis in the *Arcades Project*, where Benjamin appeals to the existence of a collective unconsciousness, itself a manifestation of the latent 'collective revolutionary subject' that is present in each historical epoch." Given the tenor of these criticisms, as well as the fact that neither the *Arcades Project* nor any of Benjamin's other writings make an appearance in his bibliography, one might conclude that Hulatt has internalized the criticisms Adorno aired in his correspondences with Benjamin, only to recapitulate them in an exaggerated form. Owen Hulatt, *Adorno's Theory of Philosophical and Aesthetic Truth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 60.

work, it is mainly driven by their unique personal friendship, as evidenced by the import ascribed to the pair's correspondence. Conversely, while my account takes in historically relevant material, it is driven by an interpretation of Benjamin and Adorno's key texts. Two concepts are singled out for attention: the "constellation," and "mimesis." The concept of the constellation complicates the narrative as it suggests that, far from being Benjamin's "disciple," Adorno's repurposing of the term in the early essays "The Actuality of Philosophy" and "The Idea of Natural History" anticipates his later concern with Benjamin's "anti-subjectivism." Similarly, the terminology of mimesis complicates the narrative as it suggests that, rather than "breaking" with Benjamin after their dispute, Adorno relies on Benjamin's philosophy of language in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* for he and Horkheimer to outline a positive concept of enlightenment. Further, the way he uses this term in this text anticipates his mature critique of Hegel, a critique which is consummated in *Negative Dialectics*. Thus, underneath the more specific claims that I make in the thesis lies another, more general claim, one that guides the method of conceptual analysis: I claim that concepts, as historically articulated ideas, tell their own story.

Chapter 1 examines Benjamin's early notion of presentation [*Darstellung*] in the "Epistemo-Critical Foreword" to *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*. Three terms are singled out for their pronounced explanatory weight: The "mosaic," the "constellation" and the "monad." Each of these terms emphasize different methodological facets: the mosaic de-emphasizes the role of the subject, instead stressing the material phenomena that make up the presentation; its direct counterpart, the constellation, declares that ideas exist in a separate realm to phenomena from which they meaningfully relate their elements, emphasizing the transcendental component at the expense of the empirical; finally, as the culmination of Benjamin's description of the idea, the monad brings together the two opposed terms that precede it. In combination, these three terms present a philosophical method intent on overcoming the division between empiricism and idealism, whereby the philosopher exercises the empirical observation of the scientist, coupled with the presentational skill of the artist.

Benjamin's philosophical presentation [*Darstellung*] exerts a significant influence on Adorno, as demonstrated by his repurposing of the terminology of the constellation in the early essays "The Actuality of Philosophy" and "The Idea of Natural History." Chapter 2 analyses Adorno's use of the constellation in these early essays in light of the analysis of the previous chapter, noting that the term's context within Benjamin's philosophical methodology has not often been accounted for and, as a consequence, the significance of Adorno's singling out of the constellation from amongst a host of other related Benjaminian terms has often been skirted over. Once isolated from the structure

described in Chapter 1, I argue that Adorno's re-conception of the constellation emphasizes the role of the subject in interpreting social reality. In this respect, Adorno's reformulation of the constellation anticipates the pair's correspondence in which he criticizes Benjamin's alleged lack of theoretical interpretation, suggesting Adorno had misgivings about Benjamin's "anti-subjectivism" as early as 1931.

Chapter 3 considers Benjamin's early philosophy of language, developed primarily in the 1916 essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," in connection with two short essays written in 1933, "Doctrine of the Similar" and "On the Mimetic Faculty." Building on the interpretive work of Jürgen Habermas, I argue that a common thread runs through the selected texts, as Benjamin describes a process of language transformation that seeks to dislodge meaning from myth, where myth marks a debased human species which is condemned to a merely natural existence. Despite its potentiality, this process is characterized by ambivalence, as these transformations run the risk of squandering the potential inherent in human language and losing access to the emphatic experience beyond merely natural life. With respect to this danger, the bourgeois theory of language is shown to be the critical target of Benjamin's philosophy of language in both his early work and his later essays on mimesis.

Dialectic of Enlightenment is often seen as the point at which Adorno's independence from Benjamin is marked, nevertheless the structured opposition between "abstraction" and "mimesis" in the first essay describes a similarly ambivalent process to the one analyzed in Chapter 3. In Chapter 4, I argue that Adorno and Horkheimer present abstraction and mimesis as two fundamental and necessary aspects of knowledge. In the historically generalized account of enlightenment they present, the mimetic aspect of knowledge is progressively undermined by the abstract one, leading to modern forms of domination in both thought and society. On account of this, Adorno and Horkheimer seek to "prepare a positive concept of enlightenment which liberates it from its entanglement in blind domination."³² While the success of this objective has been disputed in some corners, I defend the authors' claim by explaining that a combination of Benjamin's philosophy of language and Hegel's dialectics – developed via the notions of negative theology and determinate negation – constitutes the positive concept of enlightenment that they claim to have prepared.

The conclusion to Chapter 4 draws together the two halves of the thesis. It describes how Adorno saw in Benjamin's philosophy of language a necessary antidote to the overly abstract nature of

³² *DE*, xviii.

Hegel's dialectical system, just as he saw in Hegel's dialectics, with its affinity for the concept, a remedy against Benjamin's more "object-centric" method. In fusing Benjamin's theory of knowledge with Hegelian dialectics, Adorno set out to achieve exactly what he had implored Benjamin himself to do during the 1930s,³³ and in this respect, Adorno identifies in Hegelian dialectics the "theory" that he believed was so severely lacking in Benjamin's work.³⁴ Only later, in *Negative Dialectics*, would Adorno make the fusion of Hegel's determinate negation with Benjamin's theory of knowledge more explicit.

³³ Examples are littered throughout their correspondences, especially in the two critical letters Adorno wrote to Benjamin discussed in Chapter 2. *ABC*, 66, 104-114, 281-289.

³⁴ See Chapter 2, passages at n190 and n196.

Chapter 1: Mosaic, Constellation, Monad: Walter Benjamin's philosophical methodology in the "Epistemo-Critical Foreword"

Origin of the German Trauerspiel was initially written as Benjamin's attempt at the *Habilitationsschrift*, the post-doctoral qualification required to teach in the German university system. His subject matter was the Baroque *Trauerspiel* or "mourning play," a "comparatively little-read"³⁵ genre that had hitherto been "the object of dispassionate investigation."³⁶ In a preliminary evaluation of the work, Hans Cornelius – the chair of aesthetics and art theory at the University of Frankfurt – opened with the following: "The work of Dr. Benjamin [...] is excessively difficult to read. A lot of words are used whose sense the author does not feel obliged to explain."³⁷ Rather than suffer the embarrassment of a formal rejection, Cornelius suggested that Benjamin withdraw his application. In passing judgment over this "scandalous" chapter of Benjamin's life and career, Eiland and Jennings note that the "Epistemo-Critical Foreword" makes for particularly difficult reading,³⁸ while George Steiner refers to it as an "impenetrable piece of prose."³⁹ Yet as Ilit Ferber explains, despite its inherent difficulty, the foreword is arguably the most crucial part of *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* as a whole, and the methodology it presents informs Benjamin's work for the duration of his career.⁴⁰ The central aim of this chapter is to identify and interpret key terms from this notoriously difficult foreword, which Benjamin presents as the conceptual framework of his philosophical methodology. Once situated in an encompassing framework, three terms are singled out for their pronounced explanatory weight: the mosaic, the constellation, and the monad. It is argued that these three terms inform a philosophical method intent on overcoming the division between empiricism and idealism, whereby an adequate presentation adheres to both the material and transcendental aspects of phenomena. For such a presentation, the philosopher must use both the skills in empirical observation of the scientist, coupled with the presentational skill of the artist. This methodology exerts a significant influence on Adorno, and consequently these key terms are – to a greater or lesser extent – picked up and repurposed in Adorno's work. As each of these terms emphasize different methodological facets, it is suggested that Adorno's repurposing of

³⁵ Howard Eiland, "Translator's Introduction" in *OGT*, xii.

³⁶ George Steiner, "Introduction" in Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998), 15.

³⁷ Dominik Finkelde, "The Presence of the Baroque: Benjamin's *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* in Contemporary Contexts," in *A Companion to the Works of Walter Benjamin*, ed. Rolf J. Goebel (New York: Camden House, 2009), 46.

³⁸ Eiland and Jennings, *A Critical Life*, 233-234.

³⁹ Steiner, "Introduction," 13.

⁴⁰ Ilit Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy: Benjamin's Early Reflections on Theater and Language* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 163, 164.

a specific selection of these ideas involves the endorsement of some but not all aspects of Benjamin's philosophy.

In recent years, an internal split has opened in Benjamin scholarship regarding the appropriate disciplinary classification of the terminology used in the "Epistemo-Critical Foreword." Until the last decade the dominant view held that key terms in the foreword were instances of metaphor (aligning Benjamin's work with literary and cultural criticism), while more recently scholars have viewed these terms as methodological statements (a result of reading Benjamin primarily as a philosopher). The former view can be traced back at least as far as Pierre Missac, who expressly advises against reading Benjamin's work as a philosophical totality, arguing that one ought "instead to approach Benjamin in an indirect and partial manner, almost through stealth, or even unawares, *en passant*, in accordance with the method by which Benjamin made his best finds as a collector."⁴¹ Missac's reading is informed by the various figures or "types" that reappear throughout Benjamin's work.⁴² The first key type is the collector, with Missac stating that the collector "permits, indeed imposes, a comparison between certain aspects of Benjamin's work."⁴³ In reading Benjamin through the figure of the collector, he argues that key terms provide "a key, a password, a metaphor – whose uses remain to be discovered."⁴⁴ To refer to one prominent example from the "Epistemo-Critical Foreword," Missac insists of the monad that "rather than taking it literally, one should consider his recourse to the monad to be the product of an image, a metaphor."⁴⁵ The second type used to characterize Benjamin's approach is the ragpicker, whereby "the activity of the ragpicker provides a kind of allegory" for Benjamin's penchant for quotation, in which source material "catches his eye, he seizes it, immobilizes it."⁴⁶ Missac states that from his early work on the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* through to his final, unfinished work on the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin cherished the idea of "producing a book composed principally, indeed solely, of quotations," and during the composition of the former "Benjamin was delighted to have more than six hundred quotations at his disposal."⁴⁷ The material that Benjamin pilfers from is likened to a pile of debris:

The debris, in fact, contains something else, and more than raw material or a collection of prefabricated elements. A few or even a number of the fragments have value in themselves and would be worth picking out [...] The discovery

⁴¹ Pierre Missac, *Walter Benjamin's Passages*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1995), 23. Missac's disapproval of the identification of Benjamin's work with philosophy is seen most clearly on pages 19-21.

⁴² Chapter 3, "Homo Scriptor," goes through these "types" in detail – *Ibid.*, 41-81.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 61-62.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 144, 62.

will be the deed of the reader, a truly attentive ragpicker, armed with a lantern whose rays pierce the darkness of the night [...] Rare pearls, sparkling gems, that are not always accorded validity, give the work its value.⁴⁸

From Missac's perspective, Benjamin's unique engagement with the history of philosophy involves the identification and repurposing of those few exceptional ideas that are capable of illustrating or illuminating the topic under discussion. On this account, Benjamin's work does not present a unified philosophical project but is rather an amalgamation of diverse and discontinuous materials that guide the reader via metaphor and imagery. Steiner also reads Benjamin in this way, declaring that "Benjamin was not, in any technical sense, a philosopher."⁴⁹ In Steiner's view, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* ought to be read as a piece of "literary criticism" as opposed to "technical philosophy": "he chose from philosophy those metaphors, dramas of argument and intimations of systematic totality [...] which best served, or rather which most suggestively dignified and complicated his own purpose."⁵⁰

On the other hand, while the view of Benjamin primarily as a philosopher was insisted upon by the two most ardent readers of Benjamin in his lifetime (Adorno and Scholem),⁵¹ it is only in recent years that the terminology of the "Epistemo-Critical Foreword" has been reconsidered as part of a philosophical methodology. Eli Friedlander notes that "for the most part Benjamin's published works would be identified and classified as essays in literary or cultural criticism,"⁵² however he argues that "the reluctance to engage the [philosophical] rigor of Benjamin's thought is evident in the often-encountered tendency to adopt his writings piecemeal," such that "even his best readers sometimes treat his corpus of writing as a vast array of brilliant and idiosyncratic insights."⁵³ Contrasting his approach to these styles of reading, Friedlander argues that "Benjamin's writing is everywhere informed by a philosophical task," and accordingly a fitting interpretation of his work "must strive to explicitly lay out the philosophical armature that [...] holds his writings together."⁵⁴ For Friedlander, Benjamin's relationship to the tradition of philosophy is one in which "he

⁴⁸ Ibid., 170-171. Indeed, Benjamin himself makes this analogy, describing his *Arcades Project* as "the attempt to retain the image of history in the most inconspicuous arrangements of existence, in its detritus, as it were." Quoted in Eiland and Jennings, *A Critical Life*, 502.

⁴⁹ Steiner, "Introduction," 22.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 22-23. Eiland appears to support Steiner's position, referring to *OGT* as "an exemplary work of high-modern prose," comparable to "contemporaneous production by Joyce, Schoenberg, or Picasso." Eiland, "Translator's Introduction," xiv.

⁵¹ As Adorno wrote to Benjamin in 1935: "I regard your work on the 'Arcades' as the centre not merely of your own philosophy, but as the decisive philosophical word which must find utterance today." *ABC*, 84. For Scholem's perspective see Gershom Scholem, "Walter Benjamin and His Angel," in *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, ed. Werner J. Dannhauser (New York: Schocken, 1976), 198.

⁵² Eli Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin: A Philosophical Portrait* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2012), 1.

⁵³ Ibid., 2.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 3, 4.

transforms the sources that he inherits so as to make for an authentic originating moment of philosophy.”⁵⁵ Contra Missac, Benjamin’s wealth of quotations “is not in the service of a rhetoric of fragmentation and incompleteness,”⁵⁶ but rather contributes to a unified philosophical armature. Ferber concurs with Friedlander, declaring that “Benjamin’s oeuvre is more philosophically articulate, and bears deeper, more rigorous philosophical markings, than some would admit.”⁵⁷ Referring specifically to the terminology of the “Epistemo-Critical Foreword,” she states that “the metaphors used have had problematic consequences, because they often draw the discussion into the realm of literary criticism—rather than being understood as part of Benjamin’s rigorous philosophical framework.”⁵⁸ Ferber argues that these “metaphors” ought instead to be interpreted as conceptual schemes, whereby each approaches Benjamin’s philosophy “from its own perspective, every such image or scheme stresses the different traits of the structure of the presentation of truth.”⁵⁹ As will be discussed later on in this chapter, Ferber sees the monad in particular as “the epitome of the structure of the philosophical idea.”⁶⁰ Like Ferber, Paula Schwebel also focuses on the significance of the monad in Benjamin’s work, noting that “references to Leibniz’s monad appear at crucial points in Walter Benjamin’s writings, from his early ‘metaphysical’ work to his late ‘materialist’ theses on history.”⁶¹ Referring to Steiner, Schwebel notes that certain scholars see Benjamin’s “metaphors” as evidence of his “magpie’s relationship to the history of philosophy.” However, Schwebel declares that “this understanding of Benjamin’s monad as a ‘metaphor’ and of Benjamin himself as a ‘lyric thinker’ tells more about the critical failure to respond to the difficulties of his thought than about Benjamin’s work itself.”⁶² She argues that “the persistence and gravity of these references [to the monad] make it important to look deeper into the meaning and sources of the monad in Benjamin’s work.” “Benjamin’s monadology,” she insists, “demands philosophical interpretation.”⁶³

The “Epistemo-Critical Foreword”

Before giving an account of the text proper, it is worth paying attention to the Goethe quote selected as the epigraph. This passage hints at three specific aspects of Benjamin’s philosophical method in

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 225-226.

⁵⁷ Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy*, 8.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 166-67.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Paula L. Schwebel, “Intensive Infinity: Walter Benjamin’s Reception of Leibniz and its Sources” in *MLN* vol. 127, no. 3 (2012), 589.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 591.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 589, 591.

the foreword, a detail which has largely gone unnoticed in the secondary literature.⁶⁴ It begins by declaring that “no whole can be brought together in either knowledge or reflection, seeing that the former lacks internality and the latter externality.”⁶⁵ Here knowledge refers to empirically observable facts that are externally deduced but lack “internality,” while reflection refers to *a priori* logical deductions that are internally consistent yet lack “externality.” This points to the historical divide between empiricism and idealism which Benjamin’s philosophical method hopes to bridge. Secondly, to present “the whole,” Goethe proposes a mode of interpretation that steers a middle course between art and science: “we must necessarily think of science as art if we are to expect from it any sort of wholeness.”⁶⁶ For Benjamin, too, philosophy must adhere to both empirically deduced scientific knowledge and the presentational aspect of art. Finally, according to the selected passage the truth of the whole is revealed through an analysis of the particular: “And it is not in the general, in the boundless, that we should look for this, but, just as art is always wholly present in each individual artwork, so should science always be wholly manifest in each particular matter treated.”⁶⁷ As will be shown in his use of the “monad,” Benjamin likewise maintains that the truth of the general is revealed through an intensive mining of individual phenomena. Each of these three elements will be discussed in detail throughout the remainder of the chapter.

The distinction between knowledge and truth

The first sentence of the “Epistemo-Critical Foreword” reveals its central question; namely, the question of how philosophy is to be presented. Initially the philosopher appears to have two paths available for this presentation, either language or mathematics, given “words, along with mathematical signs, are the only medium of presentation available to scholarship.”⁶⁸ Here Benjamin introduces a central tenet of his philosophy – the distinction between knowledge and truth. As mathematics demonstrates “the elimination of the problem of presentation” for knowledge, Benjamin argues that it thereby “[renounces] the realm of truth intended by languages.”⁶⁹ The question of presentation is thus essential to language’s communication of truth, whereas it is inessential to knowledge claims, which are presented in a mathematical or formal style. This linear method is tied to the fact that knowledge claims are “intentional,” meaning that the cognizing

⁶⁴ This is the case even though other epigraphs selected by Benjamin are given due consideration. See, for example, Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin’s On the Concept of History*, trans. Chris Turner (London; New York: Verso, 2005), 37, 51, 78, 85, 87; Friedlander, *A Philosophical Portrait*, 92, 97-98; and Alison Ross, *Walter Benjamin’s Concept of the Image* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 41n22.

⁶⁵ *OGT*, 1.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

subject takes priority over the object of cognition: “Knowledge is a having. Its object is determined by the very fact that it must be held within consciousness—even if it be transcendental consciousness. To such an object attaches the character of possession. For this possession, presentation is secondary.”⁷⁰ Presentation is secondary as here the object is conditioned by the subject, whose knowledge reifies and seeks to possess it. For Benjamin, “the nineteenth-century concept of system” encapsulates philosophy that prioritises the communication of knowledge rather than the presentation of truth.⁷¹ This concept of system rests on the merging of empiricism with *a priori* knowledge, a merger which Benjamin refers to as “a spider’s web stretched between bodies of knowledge,” which attempts to capture truth as if it came “flying in from outside.”⁷² Ferber argues that – with an implicit nod to the historical period of the Baroque – Benjamin wishes to abandon the division between empiricism and idealism, as he is unwilling either to renounce the notion that truth inheres in the material, or the idea that such truth is transcendental: “The presentation of the idea should, according to Benjamin’s *modus operandi*, at once be committed and directly related to the material it is made of, yet at the same time it should touch on a transcendental essence that can never manifest itself in bare material as such.”⁷³ Friedlander, too, interprets Benjamin’s method in this manner, declaring that “Benjamin is trying to steer a course between idealism, with its overly powerful idea of the system, and the threat of the collapse of his investigation of the concrete into a mere collection of facts.”⁷⁴

While the system of knowledge pursues “unity in concept,” resulting in a method that is “internal to consciousness,” Benjamin states that the philosopher of truth searches for “unity in being,” calling for a form conditioned by the material itself.⁷⁵ As the distinction between knowledge and truth rests on a reversal of the “knowing” subject and the contingent object, Ferber rightly attests that “Benjamin suggests an alternate model [of philosophy] in which the object and the subject’s immersion in it are dominant,”⁷⁶ and it is for this reason that Benjamin declares truth to be “the death of intention.”⁷⁷ In the same way that the nineteenth century concept of system encapsulates the drive for knowledge, the presentation of truth is best represented in the form of the *tractatus*, a term which “contains a reference, however latent, to those objects of theology without which truth

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy*, 164.

⁷⁴ Friedlander, *A Philosophical Portrait*, 61.

⁷⁵ *OGT*, 4-5.

⁷⁶ Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy*, 47.

⁷⁷ *OGT*, 12.

cannot be thought.”⁷⁸ As truth, unlike knowledge, is conditioned by the object, presentation and method are intertwined:

Method—which, for knowledge, is a way of attaining to the object of possession (even if it is produced in consciousness)— is, for truth, presentation of itself and therefore is given together with it as form. This form is suited not to a connection internal to consciousness, as is the methodology of knowledge, but rather to being.⁷⁹

Benjamin goes on to describe the interrelation between method and presentation in the tractatus: “Presentation is the crux of their method. Method is indirection. Presentation as indirection, as the roundabout way—this, then, is the methodological character of the tractatus.”⁸⁰ This indirect method aims to renounce “the unbroken course of intention” found in logic, mathematics and the natural sciences, in which questions are systematically closed off by means of “positive” knowledge. Such systematic closure has little to do with philosophical truth, as for Benjamin “truth is not an unveiling that destroys the mystery but a revelation that does it justice.”⁸¹ If philosophical questions cannot be immediately “destroyed” by reference to positive facts, philosophical thinking must likewise persevere, such that “thinking constantly begins anew [...] this continual breathing in and out is the form of existence most proper to contemplation.”⁸² The “seamless deductive connectivity of science” is thereby contrasted with the indirect contemplation of the tractatus: “In the case of true contemplation, on the other hand, the rejection of deductive procedures is associated with an ever more wide-ranging, ever more intense reaching back to the phenomena.”⁸³ Philosophy as the revelation of truth requires a presentation which circles the object itself, “oblig[ing] the reader to pause at stations of reflection,” to pursue “various levels of meaning in observing one and the same object.”⁸⁴ As Eiland puts it, “in opposition to established conventions of linear argumentation, Benjamin posits an ‘intermittent rhythm’ for philosophy: thinking’s presentation of itself is continually taking a breath, so to speak, and starting anew with the problematic.”⁸⁵

The mosaic

⁷⁸ Ibid., 2.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 4.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 2.

⁸¹ Ibid., 7.

⁸² Ibid., 3.

⁸³ Ibid., 8, 23.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 3-4

⁸⁵ Eiland, “Translator’s Introduction,” iv.

To cast further light on his mode of presentation, Benjamin employs his first methodological term, paralleling the indirect, discontinuous method of philosophical thinking with the medieval mosaic: “Just as the majesty of mosaics remains intact when they are disassembled into capricious bits, so philosophical observation fears no dissipation of momentum.”⁸⁶ Pensky notes that in the mosaic the activity of the philosopher is likened to the activity of the artist, as “the philosopher sifts and sorts through the field of the fragmentary, pulling out the correct piece, fixing it conceptually in place next to apparently heterogenous fragments, so that, as an ensemble, an idea may be momentarily represented.”⁸⁷ The mosaic is therefore central to Missac’s characterisation of Benjamin via the figures of the ragpicker and the collector,⁸⁸ and indeed, in a letter to Scholem, Benjamin describes his own method in *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* as “the craziest mosaic technique imaginable.”⁸⁹ Consequently, the mosaic emphasises the presentational aspect of philosophy, where the philosopher must follow in the footsteps of the artist. This link between the subjective construction of the mosaic and the presentation of the idea leads Ferber to downplay the mosaic’s methodological import, for while “a mosaic is intentionally fashioned, sometimes according to a pregiven pattern,” by contrast “the meticulous work of conceptual analysis and synthesis is always accompanied by something that is fundamentally revealed, not produced.”⁹⁰ However Friedlander interprets the mosaic differently, stating that “Benjamin’s text is essentially constructed by a juxtaposing of quotations, thus expressing the truth of the matter without relying on the assertive authority of his own point of view.”⁹¹ Rather than focusing on the subjective construction, Friedlander asserts that the mosaic de-emphasizes the role of the subject, instead stressing the material phenomena that make up the presentation. Not only is this interpretation in line with the distinction between knowledge and truth already discussed, but it is also borne out in the text itself, as Benjamin stresses that like mosaics in the sphere of art, the presentation of truth “come[s] together out of the singular and disparate.”⁹² The metaphor of the mosaic is therefore significant in its prioritization of the particular over the general, as the presentation is attributable more to the “capricious bits” that make it up than how they are ultimately assembled:

The value of thought-fragments is all the more decisive the less they are immediately capable of measuring themselves by an underlying conception, and the brilliance of the presentation depends on this value to

⁸⁶ OGT 3.

⁸⁷ Max Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 67.

⁸⁸ Missac, *Walter Benjamin’s Passages*, 62, 144-145.

⁸⁹ Eiland and Jennings, *A Critical Life*, 217.

⁹⁰ Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy*, 179, 183.

⁹¹ Friedlander, *A Philosophical Portrait*, 10.

⁹² OGT, 3.

the same extent that the brilliance of the mosaic depends on the quality of the poured glass.⁹³

In emphasizing that the presentation of truth is constructed out of material content, as well as prioritizing the particular over the general, the mosaic downplays the transcendental component of philosophy, appearing to place Benjamin's method closer to the empiricist than the idealist.⁹⁴

The distinction between concepts and ideas

In the same way that Benjamin contrasts truth and knowledge, he also draws a distinction between the presentational moments of each. He claims that concepts are intentional pieces of information which communicate knowledge, while ideas are intentionless presentations of the truth which are based on the object: "Whereas concepts arise out of the spontaneity of understanding, ideas are given to contemplation. Ideas are something given in advance. Thus the differentiation of truth from the interconnectivity of knowing defines the idea as being."⁹⁵ Benjamin accordingly declares philosophy to be the "presentation of ideas,"⁹⁶ albeit with, notes Susan Buck-Morss, a unique, Kantian twist: "For if Platonic ideas were absolute, transcendental forms whose likeness appeared within the empirical objects as a pale reflection of their own eternal truth, Benjamin constructed the absolute from out of the empirical fragments themselves."⁹⁷ He declares that "the great philosophies present the world in the order of ideas," where the world of ideas is based on the empirical world: "these systems retain their validity as outlines of a world description, such as Plato proposed with his theory of ideas, Leibniz with his monadology, and Hegel with his dialectic."⁹⁸ Despite being conditioned by the object, truth is not solely empirical, as it also transcends its material. Benjamin thereby changes the angle of his presentation, moving from "the most exacting immersion in the details of a material content" to a description of "the realm of ideas."⁹⁹ Immediately after praising the world descriptions of Plato, Leibniz and Hegel, Benjamin declares that, "it is characteristic of all these efforts, in fact, that they still retain their meaning—often, indeed, first begin to unfold the full potential of that meaning—even when they have reference to the world of ideas instead of to the empirical world."¹⁰⁰

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ As Ferber puts it, "the scheme of the mosaic encompasses the totality of truth in a way that is not necessarily opposed to a structure of the disparate particles that make it up." Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy*, 166.

⁹⁵ *OGT*, 5.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 4

⁹⁷ Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 92.

⁹⁸ *OGT*, 7.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 3, 5.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 7.

Steiner explains that the realm of ideas “contains a picture of the world’ *specific to yet wholly transcending* the particulars that have found lodging in it.”¹⁰¹ As this realm transcends the actual, Benjamin declares that “the task of the philosopher is to practice the descriptive exposition of the world of ideas, such that the empirical world enters of itself into the world of ideas and dissolves in it.”¹⁰² The unity of the realm of ideas and the empirical world is what Benjamin means when he says that phenomena are “salvaged” or “saved” by ideas, hence Buck-Morss is precise in registering that “the two things, ‘the redemption of the phenomena and the representation of the ideas,’ were to occur simultaneously.”¹⁰³ However, phenomena do not enter the realm of ideas “in their raw empirical state, mingled as it is with appearance, but in their elements alone.”¹⁰⁴ This means that the concept plays a mediating role between phenomena and the idea, dividing phenomena into their elements so that “divested of their false unity [...] they can participate in the genuine unity of truth.”¹⁰⁵ Pensky notes that concepts “have a destructive and a constructive function,”¹⁰⁶ and Ferber likewise observes that there is a fundamental violence [*Gewalt*] inherent in the phenomena’s transformation at the hands of the concept: “The destruction of phenomena as a precondition to their entry into the sphere of the idea detaches them from their original context of life, making their loss inherent to their presentation in the higher sphere of the idea.”¹⁰⁷ It is for this reason Benjamin declares that “conceptual discrimination is above suspicion of pernicious sophistry only where it has in view the salvaging of phenomena in ideas.”¹⁰⁸ Nonetheless, this form distinguishes itself from the “spider’s web” of systematic philosophy, as rather than squeezing material content into its method, the realm of ideas is itself based on the empirical world. Considering that the artist “devises a diminutive image of the idea-world,” whereas the scientist divides the empirical world up by way of concepts, Benjamin declares that “the philosopher attains the elevated midpoint between scientist and artist.”¹⁰⁹ For Benjamin, the prevailing view of philosophy acknowledges the indispensable role of the scientist, but forgets the importance of the presentation of ideas – the task of the artist: “A prevailing view has the philosopher associated all too closely with the scientist, and often in his lesser instauration. Nowhere among the tasks of the philosopher, it seems, has there ever been a

¹⁰¹ Steiner, “Introduction,” 23 (emphasis added).

¹⁰² *OGT*, 8. The move from “the most exacting immersion in the details of a material content” to “the realm of ideas” is not as well captured in the Osborne translation, which reverses the direction of fit: “it is the task of the philosopher to practise the kind of description of the world of ideas which automatically includes and absorbs the empirical world.” Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998), 32.

¹⁰³ Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 92.

¹⁰⁴ *OGT*, 9.

¹⁰⁵ Again, these two moments occur in tandem as “the phenomena are simultaneously divided out and saved.” *Ibid.* 9, 11.

¹⁰⁶ Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics*, 69.

¹⁰⁷ Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy*, 180-181.

¹⁰⁸ *OGT*, 9.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

place for concern with presentation.”¹¹⁰ In collaboration with the presentational aspect of art, science could “positively further the theory of knowledge,” but in its isolation from art it is “deterred by the overweening ambition to take possession of the truth, as an undivided unity, in an encyclopedic embrace of what is known.”¹¹¹ Science is therefore necessary for the presentation of truth, but isolated from this task it presents mere knowledge, which, as discussed, is a degraded form of truth.

The constellation

To further illuminate the complex relationship between phenomena and ideas, Benjamin employs his second methodological term, that of the “constellation”, declaring that “ideas are to things as constellations to stars.”¹¹² Bearing in mind the mediating role ascribed to concepts, this means first of all that “idea[s] manifest as a configuration of concepts.”¹¹³ It is the task of the concept to delve into the material of phenomena, dividing them into their elements such that “the meaning of phenomena for ideas is exhausted in their conceptual elements.”¹¹⁴ While the mosaic emphasises the presentational aspect of philosophy, aligning the philosopher with the artist, given the scientist divides the empirical world up by way of concepts, the constellation aligns the philosopher with the scientist. By delving into the material, the radically particular or “extreme” elements of the phenomena are illuminated: “The empirical [...] is more deeply penetrated the more distinctly it is seen as an extreme. The concept issues from the extreme.”¹¹⁵ The concept thereby departs from its traditional role of unifying discrete phenomena according to their common traits, and is instead charged with the task of discrimination.¹¹⁶ Benjamin expands on this notion via the subject matter of the *Trauerspiel*, explaining that genres, as ideas, are discovered at the extremities of the material, “by [an investigation] that looks for the exemplary, even though it might be able to recognize this exemplary character only in a scattered fragment.”¹¹⁷ Through his insistence on the epistemological relevance of the extreme elements of phenomena, Benjamin differentiates his notion of the idea from the median or average: “To insist on explaining the general as an average is wrongheaded. The general is the idea.”¹¹⁸ Crucially, this distinguishes Benjamin’s philosophical method from the Hegelian procedure of mediation, and accordingly he describes the constellation as “the formation

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 9.

¹¹² Ibid., 10.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 11.

¹¹⁶ Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy*, 181; Friedlander, *A Philosophical Portrait*, 41.

¹¹⁷ *OGT*, 23.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 11.

of the nexus in which the uniquely occurring extreme stands with its like.”¹¹⁹ Given the extreme elements of phenomena are brought to light by conceptual discrimination, the figure of the constellation overlaps with the mosaic as “truth content can be grasped only through the most exacting immersion in the details of a material content.”¹²⁰ Indeed, Ferber emphasises the similarity between these two conceptual figures, as “both engage with the problem of the connection between meaning and dispersion,” such that “both metaphors maintain the same principle—an arrangement of dispersed fragments of meaning becomes the expression of the idea.”¹²¹ However, Benjamin explains that phenomena are not “incorporated” or “contained” in ideas, consequently “the idea belongs to a realm fundamentally different from the realm of that which it grasps,” meaning that “truth subsists not as an intention or meaning that would find its determination through the empirical world.”¹²² In the same way that stars from another realm are placed in a meaningful relationship in the form of a constellation, phenomena are placed in a meaningful relationship in the form of an idea, such that “the singular ‘finds salvation’, i.e. realizes its potential of full meaning [...] in the representative manifold [...] of ‘Ideas.’”¹²³ Given it is the task of the concept to delve into the material of phenomena, phenomena “determine the scope and content of the concepts that encompass them.”¹²⁴ On the other hand, as the “objective interpretation” of phenomena, the relation of ideas to phenomena “is the reverse of this, insofar as the idea [...] first determines the way these elements belong to one another.”¹²⁵ This difference between concepts and ideas in their relationships to phenomena is further illuminated: “Between the relation of the particular to the idea and its relation to the concept there is no analogy: here it falls under the concept and remains what it was—particularity; there it stands in the idea and becomes what it was not—totality. That is its Platonic ‘salvation.’”¹²⁶ This means that, apart from dividing phenomena into their elements, concepts can only group phenomena together according to what they have in common, whereas in ideas it is “the extremes that attain to synthesis.”¹²⁷ By relating the extreme elements of phenomena in such a way as to create a new layer of meaning, “what is singular about them is saved.”¹²⁸ Benjamin renders this point even more explicit in the fragment “Language and Logic”, written in 1920-21:

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 3.

¹²¹ Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy*, 178-179.

¹²² *OGT*, 10, 12.

¹²³ Steiner, “Introduction,” 23.

¹²⁴ *OGT*, 10.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 26.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 19.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 24.

The relation between concepts – and this relation governs the sphere of knowledge – is one of subsumption. The lower concepts are contained in the higher ones – that is to say, in one sense or another what is known loses its autonomy for the sake of what it is known as. In the sphere of essences, the higher does not devour the lower. Instead, it rules over it.¹²⁹

Buck-Morss notes that unlike the abstract system wherein “the particular entered into the concept and disappeared,” in the presentation of truth “the particulars, although conceptually mediated, reemerged in the idea.”¹³⁰ By declaring that ideas exist in a separate realm to phenomena, from which they meaningfully relate their elements to “salvage” or “save” the material, the metaphor of the constellation emphasises the transcendental component of ideas at the expense of the empirical. The constellation therefore arrives on the scene as the counterpart of the mosaic, now placing Benjamin’s methodology closer to the idealist than the empiricist.

Essence and origin

If ideas exist in a separate realm to the phenomenal world, “the question arises as to what their givenness consists in.”¹³¹ Given ideas are intentionless presentations of truth, Benjamin rejects the idealist conclusion whereby “the structure of the idea-world is to be unavoidably left to a much-vaunted intellectual intuition”: “the being of ideas simply cannot be conceived as the object of an intuition.”¹³² At the same time, while ideas relate phenomenal elements to one another, unlike concepts they are not determined by the empirical, thus Benjamin declares that “truth subsists not as an intention or meaning that would find its determination through the empirical world but rather as the power that first stamps the essence of that world.”¹³³ Harking back to his 1916 essay “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” truth is paralleled with the word of God, and ideas – as the presentation of truth – are aligned with the Adamic name: “The being—distant from all phenomenality—in which alone this power inheres is that of the name. It is this being that determines the givenness of ideas.”¹³⁴ While ideas present the essence of phenomena in words, concepts are aligned with the bourgeois conception of language, as they communicate via the sign: “the same word that possesses its essential being as idea is reduced to a lower power in the concept, to which the sign would of course correspond.”¹³⁵ The 1916 essay and the related theory of language will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3. That ideas present the essence of phenomena

¹²⁹ Walter Benjamin, “Language and Logic,” in *SW I*, 272-273.

¹³⁰ Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 92.

¹³¹ *OGT*, 11.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 11-12.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

leads Benjamin to make a fresh claim regarding the realm of ideas, as he declares that “[ideas] stand, as mere words can never do, in perfect isolation, each for itself.”¹³⁶ Like suns from distinct solar systems that do not meet, Benjamin declares that “ideas constitute an irreducible multiplicity”¹³⁷:

Ideas profess the law that all essentialities exist in complete independence and inviolability, not just from phenomena but above all from one another. Just as the harmony of the spheres depends on the orbiting of stars that never touch [...] Each idea is a sun and comports with its own kind, as suns comport with one another.¹³⁸

The realm of ideas is therefore discontinuous and finite, and each idea is both self-contained and in harmony with all others in the realm. Furthermore, the link with Adamic name-giving occurs as the philosopher’s presentation of the world of ideas “starts anew with each idea as an original.”¹³⁹

Consequently, Benjamin declares origin to be “the core of the theory of ideas,”¹⁴⁰ however he is careful to stipulate that origin “has nothing in common with genesis,” rather it refers to “what originates in the becoming and passing away.”¹⁴¹ Origin thus involves a “dual insight”: “On one hand, it demands to be recognized as restoration, restitution, and on the other hand—and precisely on account of this—as something incomplete and unclosed.”¹⁴² A presentation of this dual insight reveals the phenomenon “complete in the totality of its history,” encompassing both its “fore- and after-history” to reveal “the becoming of phenomena in their being.”¹⁴³ The “natural-historical” category of origin is distinguished from “history proper” as it reveals the essence of phenomena: “the presence of the natural-historical fore- and after-history—as opposed to history proper—is virtual. It is no longer pragmatically real but, as natural history, is to be read off the state of completion and rest, the state of essentiality.”¹⁴⁴ The notions of origin and essence are therefore intricately intertwined, whereby – in contradistinction to “the naked, manifest existence of the factual” – the discovery of an object’s origin “is capable of bringing the genuine to light.”¹⁴⁵

¹³⁶ Ibid. 14.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 21.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 14.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 21.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 24.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 25, 27. Steiner observes that the word *Ursprung* has resonance as “it signifies not only ‘source,’ ‘fount,’ ‘origin,’ but also that primal leap (Sprung) into being which at once reveals and determines the unfolding structure, the central dynamics of form in an organic or spiritual phenomenon.” Steiner, “Introduction,” 15-16.

¹⁴⁴ *OGT*, 27.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 24, 26.

The monad

To further clarify his idiosyncratic notion of origin, Benjamin employs his third methodological term, stating three times in the one passage that “the idea is a monad.”¹⁴⁶ The terminology is borrowed – in another nod to the Baroque period – from the seventeenth century philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. For Leibniz, the phenomenal universe is constructed out of compounds of an indivisible, simple substance called the monad. Leibniz states that monads are “windowless,” meaning “nothing can enter or exit their confines, and all their activity is necessarily internal and spontaneous.”¹⁴⁷ Given we are – according to Leibniz – living in the most perfect of all possible universes, monads require an internal principle to aptly play their part in the immaculate whole. An inquiry into this internal principle would reveal an individual monad’s fore- and after-history: “The idea is a monad: the representation of phenomena rests preestablished in it.”¹⁴⁸ Secondly, as monads are windowless, their internal principle must act in harmony with the internal principle of all other monads: “The unique harmonic accord between the monads is based on the fact that there are no external relations whatsoever, neither between the monad and the world nor between itself and other substances.”¹⁴⁹ Discrete particulars are thereby harmonized rather than united in their system.¹⁵⁰ Ideas, too, exist in complete isolation and in perfect harmony; in Benjamin’s words, “truth is the sonorous comportment of [ideas].”¹⁵¹ Because monads must act in accordance with their own given role, as well as in harmony with all others, each monad contains not only its own fore- and after-history, but each also contains the world within its confinement. This is the third sense in which the idea is likened to the monad, as “each idea contains the image of the world.”¹⁵²

Despite the underdeveloped explanation of this metaphor,¹⁵³ Ferber argues that the monad is “the epitome of the structure of the philosophical idea,” and “the only conceptual scheme that Benjamin completely and wholly conceives of *as* the idea.”¹⁵⁴ For Ferber, the significance of the monad comes from the fact that monads are both isolated and self-absorbed, while also acting in harmony with the world in its totality.¹⁵⁵ Schwebel also treats the monad as the most significant concept of

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 27.

¹⁴⁷ Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy*, 170.

¹⁴⁸ *OGT*, 27.

¹⁴⁹ Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy*, 184.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 183.

¹⁵¹ *OGT*, 14.

¹⁵² Ibid., 27.

¹⁵³ Ferber describes it as “chary”, while Schwebel notes that Benjamin invokes it “with little argumentation.” Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy*, 167; Schwebel, “Intensive Infinity,” 589.

¹⁵⁴ Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy*, 166-167. In support of this contention, Ferber cites a letter from Benjamin to Florence Christian Rang in 1923 in which he declares that Leibniz’s monad “comprise[s] the summa of a theory of ideas.”

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 170.

the foreword, contending that Benjamin was informed by two particular sources on Leibniz – Hermann Cohen and Heinz Heimsoeth. On Heimsoeth’s theological interpretation the infinite is ontologically prior to the finite, and hence produces it. In creating humankind in its own image, nature’s creator blesses finite nature with an infinite soul, hence Heimsoeth reads the reconciliation of the infinite and the finite in the monad as “the microcosm of the Absolute within finite creation.”¹⁵⁶ This infinite soul then endows humankind with the capacity to receive revelation. On the other hand, according to Cohen’s natural-scientific interpretation, extended reality is not made up of “spiritualized” objects, rather it is the result of an infinitesimal degree of activity. Form is thus generated from intensive functions, and infinite laws take priority over merely finite substances: “rather than pointing to the metaphysical priority of the infinitely powerful God over his creature, he shows the logical priority of rational principles over posited facts.”¹⁵⁷ Despite their radical discontinuities in orientation and motive, “both [Cohen and Heimsoeth] read Leibniz as having innovated the reconciliation of the infinite and the finite within the monad,”¹⁵⁸ and this also informs Benjamin’s appropriation. Schwebel argues that “Benjamin reads the infinitesimal calculus as the mathematical expression of the secularization of history,” whereby the flat line from creation to redemption is replaced by worldly existence as a self-enclosed totality.¹⁵⁹ This replacement of the successive timeline of theology for the intensive temporality of the secularized world is reflected in the *Trauerspiel*, in which “cut off from transcendence, the finite understanding could only plumb the depths of the profane world for a dim reflection of divine illumination [...] succession is supplanted by *intensification*; plot is absorbed in the microscopic analysis of details.”¹⁶⁰ Schwebel concludes:

[Benjamin’s] monadology is a meditation on the status of the Absolute within secular modernity [...] Rendered homeless by the loss of the medieval *ordo*, metaphysics acquires the rapacious character of an infinite method. This method is brought to bear on the smallest, most peripheral traces of experience, with no guarantee of their ultimate grounding in God.¹⁶¹

For both Ferber and Schwebel the monad provides a structure whereby finite, individual phenomena are left to express infinite, universal ideas. Regarding the origin of phenomena, Benjamin declares

¹⁵⁶ Schwebel, “Intensive Infinity,” 592.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 600.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 592.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 601-603.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 603-604.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 609-610.

that “the deepening of historical perspective in such investigations, whether into the past or into the future, in principle knows no bounds.”¹⁶²

While Ferber and Schwebel maintain that the use of the monad is the culmination of Benjamin’s description of the idea, I contend that the consummation of the idea in this form can only be understood in combination with the terminology of the mosaic and the constellation. According to my interpretation, then, the methodological import ascribed to the monad relies on the theoretical work performed by its counterposed predecessors. In describing the idea as a monad, Benjamin declares that “the real world could well be a task, in the sense that what matters is to penetrate so deeply into everything real that an objective interpretation of the world would therein disclose itself.”¹⁶³ This aligns his conception of the monad with the empirically inclined mosaic, which holds that “truth content can be grasped only through the most exacting immersion in the details of a material content.”¹⁶⁴ In aligning the monad with the empirical, this intensive focus on the material details of phenomena may be considered, in Schwebel’s terms, the finite side of the monad. However, the monad also emphasises the transcendental aspect of philosophy, as finite phenomena are made to express infinite ideas. As Benjamin explains, “the construction of the idea, as stamped by totality in contrast to its own inalienable isolation, is monadological.”¹⁶⁵ This focus on the transcendental is the infinite side of the monad, and it may be understood as aligned with the concept of the constellation as the philosopher’s presentation salvages (finite) material by entering it into the (infinite) realm of ideas. The monad is therefore developed from the concepts of the mosaic and the constellation, and in combination they present a philosophical presentation which pays heed to both the material and transcendental attributes of phenomena.

¹⁶² *OGT*, 27.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

Chapter 2: Interpretation via constellation: Benjamin's influence on Adorno's early work

Upon becoming a professor at the University of Frankfurt in 1931, Adorno's first two seminars were devoted to Benjamin's *Origin of German Trauerspiel*. Further, Adorno's two early essays, "The Actuality of Philosophy" and "The Idea of Natural History", are both, as Espen Hammer asserts, evidence of Benjamin's "explicit" early influence on Adorno.¹⁶⁶ Hammer explains that, like Benjamin's "Epistemo-Critical Foreword," Adorno's central concern in these essays is to develop a philosophical presentation [*Darstellung*] "that can free thinking from its traditional dependence on conceptual continuity and generality," leading to Hammer's contention that, while György Lukács provides Adorno with the basic terms of his social analysis, it is ultimately Benjamin "who inspires the construction of his 'critical' or 'negative-dialectical' response to this analysis."¹⁶⁷ Hammer interprets these early essays as Adorno's attempt to adapt Benjamin's method to a Marxist framework, whereby "it was the moment of interpretation — the construction of ideas as constellations — that became the central object of focus."¹⁶⁸ In many respects Hammer's account follows in the footsteps of Susan Buck-Morss, and indeed he notes that she was "the first commentator in the English-speaking world to establish beyond doubt the decisive influence Benjamin's work had on the early Adorno."¹⁶⁹ Buck-Morss argues that Adorno's philosophical method first took shape following a series of theoretical discussions with Benjamin in 1928,¹⁷⁰ discussions which were consolidated the following year when the pair met in Königstein.¹⁷¹ According to Adorno's account, these latter talks resulted in the formulation of a common philosophical program, whereby the pair would seek to fuse the epistemological theory of Benjamin's early work with Marxist social categories to "liquidate idealism."¹⁷² This "common" program was first put into practice in "The Actuality of Philosophy," Adorno's 1931 lecture which "outlined a program and a task for philosophy which was to guide his intellectual efforts for the rest of his life."¹⁷³ Thus, to "demonstrat[e] the extent of Adorno's indebtedness to Benjamin," Buck-Morss aims to show "the consistency of Adorno's theory over time."¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁶ Hammer, *Adorno and the Political*, 37.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 40

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 182n10.

¹⁷⁰ Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 21.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 64-65.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, xii-xiii, 53, 64, 75-76.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, xii, 23.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 69, 113.

Gillian Rose also pays close attention to one of Adorno's early lectures, in this case "The Idea of Natural History." Like Hammer, Rose acknowledges the influence not only of Benjamin, but also of Lukács on Adorno's early work.¹⁷⁵ Nevertheless, Rose argues that Adorno quickly moved beyond these influences, with Benjamin's primeval history of modernity "represent[ing] to Adorno the most radical failure in the attempt on the part of twentieth-century philosophy to break out of traditional philosophy and to turn to the 'concrete.'"¹⁷⁶ In Rose's later work, she focuses on Adorno's relation to Hegel, defending the (now widely held) position that "Adorno reduces speculative to dialectical thinking, replacing recollections of the whole by judged oppositions."¹⁷⁷ Herein lies her emphatic assessment, whereby Adorno's theory forever remains "suspended": "that is, he repeats the antinomy and will not comprehend it."¹⁷⁸ In his attempt to reconfigure the dialectic, Rose argues that Adorno's own approach capitulates into a mere "morality of method" which ultimately forfeits the most radical aspect of Hegel's thought – its speculative essence.¹⁷⁹ She concludes that in his attempt to juggle both Benjamin and Hegel, these two incompatible thinkers ultimately cancel one another out:

[Adorno] construed the pre-Marxist writings, especially *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, in a tendentious quasi-Hegelian way [...] Benjamin was never a Hegelian [...] On the other hand, the most apparently 'Hegelian' aspects of Adorno's materialism [...] were always too imbued with Benjamin's ideas to make sense from a Hegelian perspective.¹⁸⁰

Building on Rose's account, in recent years a considerable portion of Adorno scholarship has been dedicated to the influence of Hegel.¹⁸¹ This scholarship takes Hegel to be the chief influence with respect to Adorno's "mature" thought, and in such scholarship it is implied that Benjamin's impact

¹⁷⁵ Rose, *The Melancholy Science*, x, 49-50, 149.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁷⁷ Gillian Rose, *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1993), 54. A similar view is presented by Finlayson, who refers to Adorno's tendency to problematize the third "positive" or "speculative" moment of Hegel's dialectic as "austere negativism." For Finlayson, as for Rose, this method does not work. J. G. Finlayson, "Hegel, Adorno and the Origins of Immanent Criticism," in *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* vol. 22, no. 6 (2014): 1161-1162.

¹⁷⁸ Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology* (London: Humanities Press, 1981), 34; Rose, *Judaism and Modernity*, 54.

¹⁷⁹ Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 36. Despite the divergences of their respective approaches, Buck-Morss comes to a similar conclusion: "The real issue is whether Adorno's attempt at a revolution within philosophy, modeled self-consciously after Schönberg, in fact succumbed to the same fate, whether his principle of antisystem itself became a system [...] Adorno ensured perhaps too successfully that reason did not become 'instrumental.' For instrumental reason preserved a moment of 'use value' which negative dialectics had to abandon [...] When the principle of twelve-tone technique became 'total,' the dynamics of the new music was 'brought to a standstill.' But when the method of negative dialectics became total, philosophy threatened to come to a standstill as well, and the New Left of the 1960s not unjustly criticized Adorno for taking Critical Theory into a dead end." Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 189-190.

¹⁸⁰ Rose, *The Melancholy Science*, 47.

¹⁸¹ A selection of these accounts will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 4.

is confined to Adorno's early work. I seek to challenge the conventional narrative by shedding light on the similarities and differences between Benjamin's account of philosophy developed in Chapter 1, and the vision of philosophy that emerges from Adorno's early work. While this vision follows Benjamin in many respects, it is complicated by Adorno's incipient association with the Institute for Social Research and its newly appointed director, Max Horkheimer. While it is often noted that Benjamin's influence kept Adorno at a distance from Horkheimer and the Institute,¹⁸² less commonly detailed are the aspects in which the Institute's explicitly Marxist sociological research methods drew Adorno away from the account of truth set forth by Benjamin in the "Epistemo-Critical Foreword." Ultimately, Adorno's re-conception of the constellation reveals his own distinctive method of philosophy as interpretation, albeit this vision is still heavily indebted to Benjamin.

Adorno's reception of the mosaic, the constellation, and the monad

In Chapter 1 it was argued that key terms from the "Epistemo-Critical Foreword" are presented as ciphers of Benjamin's philosophical methodology. Three terms were singled out for their pronounced explanatory weight: the mosaic, the constellation, and the monad. As each of these terms depicts a specific and indispensable aspect of Benjamin's overall methodology, the ramifications of Adorno's differing treatment of these three terms warrants discussion.

The monad

While the monad is referenced far more sparingly and far less evocatively in Adorno's work than it is in Benjamin's, he still uses the term approvingly, and indeed he concludes "The Actuality of Philosophy" by paying homage to Benjamin's notion, in which the truth of the general is revealed through an intensive mining of individual phenomena: "For the mind is indeed not capable of producing or grasping the totality of the real, but it may be possible to penetrate the detail, to explode in miniature the mass of merely existing reality."¹⁸³ Hammer contends that the prioritization of particular over the general is one of the key principles that Adorno adopts from Benjamin's work,¹⁸⁴ and whenever Adorno makes reference to the monad it is with this structure in mind. In *Minima Moralia* he refers to the individual in modern society as a monad where "by tracing the absolutely particular interests of each individual, the nature of the collective in a false

¹⁸² Susan Buck-Morss, "Introduction to Adorno's 'The Actuality of Philosophy,'" *Telos* no. 31 (1977), 113; Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography*, 136-137; Hammer, *Adorno and the Political*, 40.

¹⁸³ *AP*, 131. Compare with Chapter 1, quote at n163.

¹⁸⁴ Hammer, *Adorno and the Political*, 40.

society can be most accurately studied.”¹⁸⁵ By the same token, in the introduction to *Negative Dialectics* he maintains that philosophy itself involves “the unwarranted expectation that each individual and particular puzzle it solves will be like Leibniz’s monad, the ever-elusive entirety in itself.”¹⁸⁶

The mosaic

In contrast to the constellation and the monad, the mosaic does not appear at all in Adorno’s oeuvre, and its omission is by no means accidental. The previous chapter argued that the mosaic emphasizes the material phenomena that make up the presentation of truth, a technique most apparent in Benjamin’s penchant for quotation.¹⁸⁷ It must be noted that while Benjamin eventually moves away from the *esoteric* mosaic construction exemplified in *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*,¹⁸⁸ the continuities between it and his mature commitment to *exoteric* construction remain.¹⁸⁹ Put simply, whether in esoteric or exoteric form, the mosaic constructive technique downplays the role of the subject, instead stressing that the presentation of truth is based on the object. Two sources help to shed light on Adorno’s hostility towards this mosaic technique: his personal correspondence with Benjamin, and his response to the *Arcades Project* manuscripts after Benjamin’s death. Following a meeting between Friedrich Pollock and Benjamin in 1935, the Institute for Social Research agreed to temporarily double Benjamin’s monthly financial stipend, and in exchange requested that he produce a comprehensive exposé of his *Arcades Project*. Written in May 1935, this exposé bore the title “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century.” Upon reading the transcript, Adorno responded with a searching and detailed analysis, in which he refers to Benjamin’s technique in the work as undialectical and lacking theoretical interpretation.¹⁹⁰ Although Benjamin defended aspects of his exposé, his response to Adorno’s “substantial and marvellous letter” was gracious, and he conceded that “all of your reflections, or almost all of them, go precisely to the productive heart of the issue.”¹⁹¹ Eiland and Jennings emphasize the success of Adorno’s critique regarding Benjamin’s mosaic technique:

Adorno’s letter propelled Benjamin into a rearticulation of the theoretical armature of the arcades project. The Hornberg letter and Benjamin’s positive

¹⁸⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 45. This theme is expanded upon in the aphorism titled “Monad.” *Ibid.*, 148-150.

¹⁸⁶ *ND*, 14.

¹⁸⁷ See Chapter 1, passage at n46.

¹⁸⁸ Jürgen Habermas, “Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism: The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin,” *New German Critique*, no. 17 (1979), 31, 46-47.

¹⁸⁹ Missac, *Walter Benjamin’s Passages*, 144-145; Friedlander, *A Philosophical Portrait*, 9-10.

¹⁹⁰ *ABC*, 105, 107, 113.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 116-117.

response mark the end of the stage of Surrealist-inspired social psychology and the inception of a more resolutely sociological accounting of objects.¹⁹²

Nevertheless, the dispute regarding Benjamin's mosaic technique came to a head in 1938. For some years Benjamin had been engaged in a study of the French poet Charles Baudelaire, and he suggested to Horkheimer that a section of the study – titled “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire” – might be suitable for publication in the Institute's *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. Benjamin wrote to Adorno to convey the sense of pride he felt at finishing the piece under incredibly trying circumstances: “I have been under enormous stress during the last few weeks through the collision of historical events and editorial deadlines [...] I felt I was racing against the war, and, despite choking anxiety, I nonetheless experienced a great sense of triumph when I finally wrapped up the ‘flaneur.’”¹⁹³ Adorno's response to this text, which took more than a month to arrive, has been described as “extremely severe,”¹⁹⁴ and Eiland and Jennings contend that it was “probably the most crushing rejection of [Benjamin's] career.”¹⁹⁵ Adorno asserts that Benjamin's lack of theoretical interpretation has “done violence” to his own theory, and in a particularly scathing passage he argues that the refusal to theoretically elaborate on his motifs “tends to switch into the wide-eyed presentation of mere facts”:

If one wanted to put it rather drastically, one could say that your study is located at the crossroads of magic and positivism. This spot is bewitched. Only theory could break this spell - your own resolute and salutarily speculative theory. It is simply the claim of this theory that I bring against you here.¹⁹⁶

From his position in New York where he was now a fully-fledged member of the Institute, Adorno announced that the journal would not be publishing the essay in its original form. Benjamin's response to Adorno was typically measured, however he took exception to Adorno's characterisation of his work as the “wide-eyed presentation of mere facts” and defended his mosaic construction:

My most personal production-interests are at stake here; I will not deny that they sometimes try to do violence to the project's original interests. An antagonism between them does exist, but I have no wish to escape it even in dreams. Resolving it is the central problem of this work, and it is a problem of construction. I believe that the bold flights of speculation which are required

¹⁹² Eiland and Jennings, *A Critical Life*, 494-495.

¹⁹³ *ABC*, 277-278.

¹⁹⁴ Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography*, 258.

¹⁹⁵ Eiland and Jennings, *A Critical Life*, 622. This is especially notable given the rejection of his *Habilitation* thesis.

¹⁹⁶ *ABC*, 283, 284.

cannot possibly succeed unless – instead of donning the waxen wings of the esoteric – they make construction their sole power-source.¹⁹⁷

This episode was to receive its denouement after World War II when Pierre Missac contacted Adorno to inform him that Benjamin's *Arcades Project* manuscripts had survived. While initially overjoyed, Adorno's reply included a cautionary note: "Everything depends on whether the material in your possession consists in large part of theoretical formulations and sketches, or whether it mostly contains excerpted citations that may have had theoretical significance for Benjamin, yet which would, even for me, remain *uninterpretable*."¹⁹⁸ Three years later, after finally working through the manuscripts, Adorno wrote to Scholem to deliver his verdict on Benjamin's mosaic technique: "The most difficult aspect is the *extraordinary inattention to theoretically formulated ideas as opposed to the enormous store of excerpts*."¹⁹⁹ Regarding Adorno's characterisation of Benjamin's mosaic technique as lacking theoretical interpretation, Gillian Rose argues that Adorno's essays after Benjamin's death reveal that "he was well aware that Benjamin's work was highly theoretical, and in the earlier period he was in effect prevailing on Benjamin to change his theory."²⁰⁰

The constellation

While the terminology of the monad appears sporadically in Adorno's work, and the mosaic is rejected altogether, the constellation is invoked at pivotal junctures across his entire corpus, from the early essays discussed in this chapter through to *Negative Dialectics*. Indeed, in the Hornberg letter of 1935, Adorno even cites the constellation in opposition to Benjamin's mosaic technique.²⁰¹ While the secondary literature has acknowledged Adorno's debt to Benjamin regarding this term, its context within Benjamin's philosophical methodology has rarely been accounted for. As a result, the repercussions of Adorno's singling out the constellation amongst a host of other key Benjaminian terms have not been treated. This chapter seeks to rectify this gap in the literature by relating Adorno's use of the constellation in two of his earliest essays, "The Actuality of Philosophy" and "The Idea of Natural History," to the term's Benjaminian background. In the

¹⁹⁷ On Adorno's characterisation of his technique as the "wide-eyed presentation of mere facts," Benjamin counters that "the critique of the attitude of the philologist is an old concern, and in its innermost core identical to the critique of myth. It provokes, in each case, the application of philological techniques. To use the language of elective affinities: it aims to open up the material content, from which the truth content can then be plucked off historically like petals. I can understand that this aspect of the work did not catch your attention." *Ibid.*, 291-292.

¹⁹⁸ Richard Wolin, *The Frankfurt School Revisited: And Other Essays on Politics and Society* (New York, London: Routledge, 2006), 22 (his emphasis).

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 23 (his emphasis).

²⁰⁰ Rose, *The Melancholy Science*, 53.

²⁰¹ *ABC*, 110.

previous chapter it was argued that the constellation is one of a number of key terms that make up Benjamin's philosophical methodology. Further, the terminology of the constellation is counterbalanced by the notion of the mosaic. Once isolated from this structure, it's argued that Adorno's re-conception of the constellation emphasizes the role of the subject in interpreting social reality. This philosophical interpretation is aided by the concepts of sociology, and – in line with the Marxist dialectic of theory and praxis – it reveals a fragmented social world which can only be reawakened by political praxis.

“The Actuality of Philosophy”

Soon after the appointment of Horkheimer as the director of the Institute in 1930, Adorno qualified as a lecturer in philosophy in February of 1931.²⁰² “The Actuality of Philosophy” was delivered on May 7, 1931, as Adorno's inaugural lecture to the faculty. In comparing “The Actuality of Philosophy” with Horkheimer's own inaugural address which was delivered a few months earlier, Stefan Müller-Doohm comments that “the audiences of the two lectures, which must have consisted largely of the same people [...] must have noted with some astonishment that, if anything, Adorno was sceptical about Horkheimer's programme of a philosophy-led conception of social research.”²⁰³ Buck-Morss agrees, contending that in 1931 Adorno was “clearly more excited by the literary criticism of Walter Benjamin than by the empirical social research projects of the Frankfurt Institute.”²⁰⁴ As a result,

the origins of ‘negative dialectics’ are therefore to be found in Benjamin's early works and the intellectual dialogue between him and Adorno, which began in 1929 when they formulated a common program at Königstein, and which bore fruit in Adorno's writings in the early thirties.²⁰⁵

Both Rolf Tiedemann and Peter Gordon concur with this account. Tiedemann writes that Adorno's early essays “anticipate something like a companion piece to *Negative Dialectics*,”²⁰⁶ while Gordon states that

The inaugural lecture is striking in its anticipation of themes that would preoccupy Adorno throughout his philosophical career. The appeal to that which is particular and irreducible to thought already points toward the emphasis on the

²⁰² Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography*, 136.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁴ Buck-Morss, “Introduction to *AP*,” 113.

²⁰⁵ Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 64.

²⁰⁶ Rolf Tiedemann, “Editorische Nachbemerkung,” in Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1973), 383. Quoted in Buck-Morss, “Introduction to *AP*,” 119n32.

“non-identical” and the turn to the object as points of critical leverage for what Adorno would later call “negative dialectics.”²⁰⁷

Adorno begins the lecture by announcing that, because present reality “suppresses every claim to reason,” contemporary philosophy “must first reject the illusion that earlier philosophical enterprises began with: that the power of thought is sufficient to grasp the totality of the real.”²⁰⁸ He immediately sets his philosophical program in opposition to German idealism, particularly Hegel: “The *autonome ratio* – this was the thesis of every idealistic system – was supposed to be capable of developing the concept of reality, and in fact all reality, from out of itself. This thesis has disintegrated.”²⁰⁹ He declares that “the history of philosophy itself bears witness”²¹⁰ to this decay, a notion that Buck-Morss refers to as Adorno’s “logic of disintegration,” which entails “an almost Hegelian faith in the immanent logic of philosophy, in its historical development as the unfolding of truth.”²¹¹ According to this theory, philosophy’s own inherent, historically developed logic would lead it to break out of bourgeois idealism and into revolutionary materialism. Adorno applies his “logic of disintegration” to the major philosophical movements of the time, firm in the belief that “only out of the historical entanglement of questions and answers does the question of philosophy’s actuality emerge precisely.”²¹² This negative appraisal of contemporary philosophical movements leads Adorno to question “whether philosophy is itself at all actual”:

whether, after the failure of the last great efforts, there exists an adequacy between the philosophic questions and the possibility of their being answered at all; whether the authentic results of the recent history of these problems is the essential unanswerability of the cardinal philosophic questions.²¹³

Müller-Doohm notes that in this respect, Adorno and Horkheimer’s inaugural addresses are quite similar: “in his extensive *tour d’horizon* of contemporary philosophy he agrees with Horkheimer’s critique of the chaotic specialization in the different disciplines and thinks of it as part of the crisis of modern scholarship that has to be overcome.”²¹⁴ Nevertheless, as Max Pensky has observed, the logic of disintegration takes the historical divide between empiricism and idealism as its battleground:

²⁰⁷ Peter E. Gordon, “Adorno: A Biographical Sketch”, in *A Companion to Adorno*, ed. Peter E. Gordon, Espen Hammer and Max Pensky (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2020), 5.

²⁰⁸ *AP*, 120.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 120-121.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 120.

²¹¹ Buck-Morss, “Introduction to *AP*,” 114-115.

²¹² *AP*, 124.

²¹³ *Ibid.*

²¹⁴ Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography*, 136.

[Adorno] perceived the situation of contemporary philosophy to coalesce around two equally unsatisfactory options. On one side, the tradition of philosophical idealism had clearly failed to provide a general and unified theory of the real [...] [And on the other side] logical positivism's goal [was] to disburden philosophy of its traditional self-understanding and vocabulary – and thereby to dissolve its 'grand and total' projects into the special projects of disparate scientific disciplines.²¹⁵

In answering the question of philosophy's actuality, Adorno distances himself from Horkheimer's program, choosing instead to follow in Benjamin's footsteps by attempting to steer a path between the abstractions of idealism and the empiricism of the social sciences:

Unlike Horkheimer, Adorno did not regard the new discipline of the social sciences as a phoenix arising from the ashes [...] Whereas the idealist constructs of philosophy hovered above the real world, sociology runs the risk of distilling its concepts from the given realities in a concretistic fashion, and this results in a merely descriptive 'doubling' of the given.²¹⁶

Towards the end of the essay Adorno makes it clear that he sees his own philosophical method as mediating between empirical sociology and idealism, declaring that the goal of interpretive philosophy is "to construct keys, before which reality springs open." While philosophical idealism "chose categories too large; so they did not even come close to fitting the keyhole," sociology "chooses them too small; the key indeed goes in, but the door doesn't open."²¹⁷

In laying out his own program for contemporary philosophy, Adorno aligns himself with Benjamin's philosophical method as it is set out in the "Epistemo-Critical Foreword" to *Original of the German Trauerspiel*. Echoing its opening pages, the 27-year old Adorno confidently declares the attempts of mathematics, logic and the natural sciences to "liquidate philosophy": "The sciences, particularly the logical and mathematical sciences, have set about the liquidation of philosophy with an earnestness which hardly ever existed before."²¹⁸ He argues that this has lead philosophy to split into two "torn halves"²¹⁹ – 1) philosophy as science, whereby "philosophy

²¹⁵ Max Pensky, "Editor's Introduction" in *The Actuality of Adorno*, ed. Max Pensky (New York: State University of New York, 1997), 2-3.

²¹⁶ Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography*, 136.

²¹⁷ *AP*, 130.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 124. Compare with Chapter 1, passages at n69, n81.

²¹⁹ In a letter to Benjamin in 1936, Adorno uses this pithy expression to describe the divide between high art and industrially produced consumer art: "Both are torn halves of an integral freedom, to which, however, they do not add up." *ABC*, 130. J. M. Bernstein points out the relevance of this passage to Adorno's work more generally: J. M. Bernstein, "Introduction" in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (Taylor and Francis, 2005), 2.

becomes solely an occasion for ordering and controlling the separate sciences”; and 2) philosophy as art, “whose lack of binding force before truth is excelled only by its unfamiliarity with art and its own aesthetic inferiority.”²²⁰ Both notions of philosophy, of course, fall short of the method Benjamin sets out in the “Epistemo-Critical Foreword,” where the philosopher attains “the elevated midpoint between scientist and artist.”²²¹ In paying heed to both the historical divide between empiricism and idealism and the role of philosophy between art and science, Adorno takes his lead from Benjamin’s philosophical methodology discussed in Chapter 1.

In response to these “torn halves,” Adorno outlines his program of philosophy as interpretation, which he explicates via two formulations redolent of Benjamin: the constellation and the riddle. In the previous chapter it was argued that Benjamin favours ideas, which are intentional presentations of truth, to concepts, defined as intentional pieces of information which communicate knowledge. By the same token, Adorno introduces the terminology of the constellation to describe the task of philosophy as the interpretation of intentionless reality. According to Buck-Morss, in comparing the intentional unfavourably to the intentionless, both Adorno and Benjamin are involved in a “critical reversal” of Husserlian phenomenology’s “doctrine of intentionality,” which attempts to demonstrate that truth is not object-dependent.²²² For both Adorno and Benjamin, truth is conditioned by the object. In addition to this, what most clearly attracts Adorno to the constellation is that it “manifest[s] as a configuration of concepts.”²²³ In Benjamin’s philosophical methodology, the terminology of the constellation acts as a counterweight to the mosaic, as while the latter emphasizes that the presentation of truth is constructed out of material content, the former stresses the role of the subject, which must relate phenomenal elements to one another via the concept. The full implication of Adorno’s methodological decision to isolate the constellation from the mosaic can now be understood. While both Adorno and Benjamin agree that truth is conditioned by the object, in this early essay Adorno stresses that this truth must also be interpreted by the subject. According to his program, the constellation of concepts is what enables the philosopher to interpret reality:

Philosophy has to bring its elements, which it receives from the sciences, into changing constellations, or, to say it with less astrological and scientifically more current expression, into changing trial combinations, until they fall into a figure which can be read as an answer, while at the same time the question disappears.²²⁴

²²⁰ *AP*, 125.

²²¹ *OGT*, 8.

²²² Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 77.

²²³ *OGT*, 10.

²²⁴ *AP*, 127.

While both agree that truth is conditioned by the object, in comparison with Benjamin's more object-centric method, Adorno's re-conception of the constellation emphasizes the subjective moment of interpretation crucial to the presentation of truth.²²⁵ In this respect, Adorno's reformulation of the constellation anticipates the pair's correspondence in which he criticizes Benjamin's alleged lack of theoretical interpretation.²²⁶ In that correspondence, Adorno insists that the theory that is missing is Benjamin's own, however given the divergence on the role of the subject in their respective accounts, one can only conclude that Adorno was in effect imputing his own theory onto Benjamin.²²⁷ Adorno's fondness for the concept leads him to explicitly reject the notion of a "realm of ideas," distancing his constellation from the metaphysical, "quasi-religious" context that Benjamin describes in the "Epistemo-Critical Foreword."²²⁸ Pensky duly notes that Adorno's constellations differ from Benjamin's in that

solutions are to be regarded as directions toward a political practice that would seek to dissolve the puzzle-like character of the real, rather than merely solving it. Firmly refusing any crypto-theological speculations in which the truth-content generated from acts of construction is referred to some substantiality beyond the phenomenal, Adorno insists that critical construction is linked with praxis.²²⁹

This is the sense in which Hammer and Buck-Morss refer to Adorno fusing Benjamin's early epistemological work with Marxist social categories.²³⁰ Adorno develops his method of philosophy as interpretation further through the analogy of riddle solving:

the function of riddle-solving is to light up the riddle-*Gestalt* like lightning and to negate it, not to persist behind the riddle and imitate it. Authentic philosophic interpretation does not meet up with a fixed meaning which already lies behind the question, but lights it up suddenly and momentarily, and consumes it at the same time.²³¹

²²⁵ In the philosophical portrait he paints of Benjamin after his death, Adorno refers to this method as Benjamin's "anti-subjectivism." Theodor W. Adorno, "A Portrait of Walter Benjamin," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1993), 239.

²²⁶ *ABC*, 105, 107, 113, 283, 284. Pensky makes a very similar point, arguing that in *AP* "Adorno expressed in encoded form an anxiety concerning Benjamin's method." Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics*, 228.

²²⁷ Habermas comes to the same conclusion: "Adorno never perceptibly hesitated to attribute to Benjamin precisely the *ideologiekritische* intention which his own work followed – and erred in doing so." Habermas, "Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism," 51-52.

²²⁸ *AP*, 126, 127.

²²⁹ Max Pensky, "Natural History: the Life and Afterlife of a Concept in Adorno," *Critical Horizons* 5, no. 1 (2004), 234.

²³⁰ Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, xiii; Hammer, *Adorno and the Political*, 40.

²³¹ *AP*, 127.

First, this is greatly reminiscent of a passage from the “Epistemo-Critical Foreword” in which Benjamin discusses how truth unites empirical reality with the transcendental realm of ideas: “such content does not come to light in an unveiling so much as manifest itself in a process that can be described figuratively as the flaming up of the veil as it enters the circle of ideas – a conflagration of the work in which its form reaches the acme of its radiance.”²³² Further, in a fragment from 1920-21, Benjamin uses the same metaphor of riddles and their solution.²³³ The key difference is, however, that for Benjamin in 1920-21, the riddle “can be redeemed only through the word [...] The question they pose can be solved only in words that break in with their entire immediacy and are all the more potent in helping the concealed intent of the riddle to arrive at its redemption.”²³⁴ As is the case with his reformulation of the constellation, Adorno offers an answer that is more materialist in content by linking this method directly with Marxism: “Interpretation of the intentionless through a juxtaposition of the analytically isolated elements and illumination of the real by the power of such interpretation is the program of every authentically materialist knowledge.”²³⁵ Adorno cites Lukacs’ problem of the thing-in-itself and the commodity structure to give an example of philosophy as riddle-solving, whereby “the singular and dispersed elements of the question are brought into various groupings long enough for them to close together in a figure out of which the solution springs forth, while the question disappears.”²³⁶ Because the solving of the riddle results in the disappearance of the riddle itself, “the riddle’s answer [is] not the ‘meaning’ of the riddle in the sense that both could exist at the same time,” rather “the answer stands in strict antithesis to the riddle, needs to be constructed out of the riddle’s elements, and destroys the riddle, which is not meaningful, but meaningless, as soon as the answer is decisively given to it.”²³⁷ According to Adorno, this type of “riddle-solving” is exactly what Marxism seeks to achieve: “out of the construction of a configuration of reality the demand for its real change always follows promptly. The change-causing gesture of the riddle process [...] provides the image of resolutions to which materialist praxis alone has access.”²³⁸ He therefore concludes that the “solving of the riddle” requires a dialectic of theory and praxis:

When Marx reproached the philosophers, saying that they had only variously interpreted the world, and contraposed to them that the point was to change it,

²³² *OGT*, 7.

²³³ Walter Benjamin, “Riddle and Mystery” in *SW I*, 267-268. I am not aware of any published scholarship drawing attention to the similarity of Adorno’s metaphor in this essay and Benjamin’s obscure fragment from 1920-21.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 268.

²³⁵ *AP*, 127.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 129.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

then the sentence receives its legitimacy not only out of political praxis, but also out of philosophic theory [...] the annihilation of the question compels praxis.²³⁹

Adorno's departure from Benjamin in this respect requires more context. While the secondary literature is eager to acknowledge the way in which Benjamin's epistemology distanced Adorno from the Frankfurt Institute,²⁴⁰ it often fails to acknowledge the reverse side of the equation – that is, the respect in which Adorno attempted to graft Benjamin's philosophical method onto the sociological research method of the Frankfurt Institute. As is the case overall, Buck-Morss has largely led the secondary literature in this respect. While she makes mention of the fact that both Horkheimer and Adorno turned towards Marxism in the late 1920s,²⁴¹ her main line of argument asserts that Adorno was more influenced by Benjamin than by the members of the Institute, including Horkheimer.²⁴² This leads Buck-Morss to play down the ways in which Adorno's affiliation with Horkheimer's Institute distanced him from the account of truth developed in the "Epistemo-Critical Foreword." Indeed, although Buck-Morss refers to the pair's "common program"²⁴³ to fuse Marxist social categories with Benjamin's early philosophy, in truth this program is attributable chiefly to Adorno, and it placed him in between Benjamin on one side and the Frankfurt Institute on the other. On Horkheimer's conversion to Marxism, she observes that it led him to "turn toward the social sciences,"²⁴⁴ and this tendency is discernible in Adorno's re-conception of the constellation. As mentioned, Adorno is attracted to the constellation due to its conceptual configuration. However, while Benjamin describes the role of the concept as dividing phenomena into their elements, Adorno declares that philosophy receives these elements "from the sciences,"²⁴⁵ specifically with the social sciences in mind: "[Philosophy] will have to take its specific scientific material preponderantly from sociology and, as the interpretive grouping process demands, crystalize [sic] out the small, unintentional elements which are nonetheless still bound to philosophic material."²⁴⁶ Whilst Horkheimer is first and foremost a sociologist, nowhere in Benjamin's methodology is it suggested that the elements which make up the presentation of truth are to be sought in sociological concepts. Adorno's re-conception of the constellation therefore emphasizes the role of the subject in interpreting social reality, an interpretation which is aided by the concepts of sociology. This method is fused with Marxism via the dialectic of theory and praxis, as the interpretation of the philosopher seeks to engender social change.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Buck-Morss, "Introduction to *AP*," 113; Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography*, 136-137; Hammer, *Adorno and the Political*, 40.

²⁴¹ Buck-Morss, "Introduction to *AP*," 113.

²⁴² Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 65-66.

²⁴³ Ibid., 64.

²⁴⁴ Buck-Morss, "Introduction to *AP*," 113.

²⁴⁵ *AP*, 127.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 130.

“The Idea of Natural History”

Given the debt that Adorno’s lecture owed to *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* – as well as the fact that throughout the lecture this debt remained unacknowledged – Benjamin wrote to Adorno to take exception to what Eiland and Jennings have labelled the “knowing appropriation of Benjamin’s work.”²⁴⁷ After quoting the section describing the task of philosophy as the interpretation of intentionless reality, Benjamin continued:

I subscribe to this proposition. Yet I could not have written it without thereby referring to the introduction of my book on the Baroque Drama, where this entirely unique and, in the relative and modest sense in which such a thing can be claimed, new idea was first expressed. For my part I would have been unable to omit some reference to the book at this point. I do not need to add that if I were in your position this would be even more the case.²⁴⁸

Consequently, Müller-Doohm contends that when Adorno presented “The Idea of Natural History” to the Frankfurt chapter of the Kant Society on July 15, 1932, this “gave him the opportunity and also a suitable forum to acknowledge Walter Benjamin explicitly as a source and inspiration for his ideas.”²⁴⁹ According to Hullot-Kentor, the reason the essay has received significant scholarly attention is “because it contains the central elements of Adorno’s mature works,” in particular the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.²⁵⁰ Despite the fact that “in ‘The Idea of Natural History,’ this [philosophical] style had not been mastered,” the essay nonetheless “establishes the continuity between Adorno’s early and later style and makes this early essay immediately recognizable to readers of his mature works.”²⁵¹ Rose concurs with this point of view, arguing that the themes which Adorno addresses in the lecture “dominated his work after that date,”²⁵² while Pensky states that “the concept of natural history plays a crucial and, typically enough, often subterranean role in virtually all of Adorno’s work.”²⁵³

Despite the title, Adorno explains that his essay is not concerned with scientific natural history, nor is it intended as a work of natural philosophy. Inspired by Benjamin, he explains that “the concept of nature that is to be dissolved is one that, if I translated it into standard philosophical terminology,

²⁴⁷ Eiland and Jennings, *A Critical Life*, 359.

²⁴⁸ *ABC*, 9.

²⁴⁹ Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography*, 149.

²⁵⁰ Robert Hullot-Kentor, “Introduction to Adorno’s ‘Idea of Natural History,’” *Telos* no. 60 (1984), 103.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 98.

²⁵² Rose, *The Melancholy Science*, 50.

²⁵³ Pensky, “The Life and Afterlife of a Concept,” 228.

would come closest to the concept of myth.”²⁵⁴ The natural reading of history is mythological wherever “fatefully arranged predetermined being underlies history and appears in history.”²⁵⁵ Nevertheless, this natural reading of history also allows us to interpret “substance in history.”²⁵⁶ On the other hand, Adorno understands the concept of history as “characterized primarily by the occurrence of the qualitatively new [...] it is a movement that gains its true character through what appears in it as new.”²⁵⁷ Tom Whyman explains that the threat here is of falling into a position of historical relativism, whereby “all historical change might just be nothing more than a random procession of ‘stuff that happens’ [...] If this were the case, then history itself would not be the sort of thing that we (as thinkers) could gain any sort of critical purchase on.”²⁵⁸ Throughout the essay, Adorno links the natural/mythological position with idealism, while he aligns the historical/relativist reading with the empirically inclined social sciences. In this way, Adorno is again attempting to steer a path between empiricism and idealism, and the category of natural history is intended to resolve the problems associated with both the natural/mythological and historical/relativist readings of history. As Adorno himself puts it, the essay aims to “dialectically overcome the usual antithesis of nature and history” by “pushing these concepts to a point where they are mediated in their apparent difference.”²⁵⁹ The obvious parallel with Hegel leads Hullot-Kentor to argue that “while Adorno cites Lukács and Benjamin as the origins of the idea of natural history, the major characteristic of the essay is its Hegelian form, beginning with the initial intention to develop the internal mediation of nature and history.”²⁶⁰ Indeed, Hullot-Kentor goes so far as to claim that “Adorno overcame the ontological interest of Benjamin’s work while maintaining the intention of allegory and constellative thought in the form of immanent critique,” and “in the Hegelian intention of this essay, Adorno was already at work at a critique of ontological elements in Benjamin’s thought.”²⁶¹ However, as revealed by Müller-Doohm, Adorno’s concept of natural history has its genesis in the theoretical discussions he and Benjamin shared in 1929: “One particular postulate of Benjamin’s stood out from the draft that he had read out in Königstein: ‘No historical category without its natural substance, no natural category without its historical filtration.’”²⁶² In a like manner, in “The Idea of Natural History,” Adorno introduces the concept to “comprehend historical being in its most extreme historical determinacy, where it is most historical,

²⁵⁴ *AP*, 111.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.* These notions of myth and fate are prominent in *OGT*, and even more so in Benjamin’s earlier essay “Goethe’s Elective Affinities.”

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁸ Tom Whyman, “Understanding Adorno on ‘Natural History,’” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 24, no. 4 (2016), 454.

²⁵⁹ *INH*, 111.

²⁶⁰ Hullot-Kentor, “Introduction to *INH*,” 106.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*

²⁶² Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography*, 122.

as natural being, [and] to comprehend nature as an historical being where it seems to rest most deeply in itself as nature.”²⁶³ Furthermore, once the essay is read in light of the method Adorno sets out in “The Actuality of Philosophy,” it becomes clear that he is attempting to use a constellation of concepts to interpret reality in a way that steers a path between idealism and empiricism, a method that is greatly inspired by the “Epistemo-Critical Foreword” to *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*. Thus, contra Hullot-Kentor, rather than using Hegel’s philosophical method to critique Benjamin, Adorno is in fact relying on their “common program” to critique both idealism (including Hegelianism) and the empirically inclined social sciences.

After giving an account of the natural/mythological position, which he aligns with his description of Heidegger’s “neo-ontology,” Adorno again shows his faith in philosophy’s “historical development as the unfolding of truth.”²⁶⁴ He states that the concept of natural history “did not fall from heaven”; rather, it is developed out of the early works of Lukács and Benjamin.²⁶⁵ From Lukács Adorno takes up the concept of second nature as it is presented in *Theory of the Novel*, which distinguishes between a meaningful, “immediate” world and a meaningless, “alienated world of commodities”: “[Lukács] calls this world of things created by man, yet lost to him, the world of convention.”²⁶⁶ The concept of second nature is significant for Adorno as in this alienated world of second nature, historically produced phenomena appear as natural. The concept of natural history first emerges out of the problem of second nature as “this fact of a world of convention [...] of estranged things that cannot be decoded but encounters us as ciphers [...] presents itself in the first place as the question of how it is possible to know and interpret this alienated, reified, dead world.”²⁶⁷ Nevertheless, Adorno ultimately argues that Lukács can only interpret this “dead world” “in terms of a theological resurrection, in an eschatological context.”²⁶⁸ Explicitly acknowledging his indebtedness to Benjamin, Adorno declares that “Benjamin marks the decisive turning-point in the formulation of the problem of natural history.”²⁶⁹ First of all, like Lukács’s concept of second nature, Benjamin’s concept of allegory shows how what initially appears as a natural phenomenon is at bottom historically produced: “The relationship of allegory to its meaning is not accidental signification, but the playing out of a particularity; it is expression. What is expressed in the allegorical sphere is nothing but an historical relationship. The theme of the allegorical is, simply, history.”²⁷⁰

²⁶³ *INH*, 117.

²⁶⁴ Buck-Morss, “Introduction to *AP*,” 114-115.

²⁶⁵ *INH*, 117.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 118.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 119.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Furthermore, Benjamin also underlines the other side of the dialectic with his notion of transience, where nature appears as historical:

The deepest point where history and nature converge lies precisely in this element of transience. If Lukács demonstrates the retransformation of the historical, as that which has been, into nature, then here is the other side of the phenomenon: nature itself is seen as transitory nature, as history.²⁷¹

By using the concepts of transience and allegory in parallel, Benjamin avoids the problems associated with both the natural/mythological and historical/relativist readings of history, producing an interpretation that is historically produced and yet still retains meaning. In Adorno's terms, he succeeds in comprehending historical being as natural and in comprehending nature as historical:

According to Benjamin, nature, as creation, carries the mark of transience. Nature itself is transitory. Thus it includes the element of history. Whenever an historical element appears it refers back to the natural element that passes away within it. Likewise the reverse: whenever "second nature" appears, when the world of convention approaches, it can be deciphered in that its meaning is shown to be precisely its transience.²⁷²

For Lukács – as he only sees one side of the dialectic – the problem of reawakening meaning in the world of second nature "is something simply puzzling" which can only be solved by a metaphysical reawakening. For Benjamin, who sees both sides of the idea of natural history, the same problem is "a cipher to be read" – in other words, a problem that can be solved by philosophical interpretation.²⁷³ Adorno therefore reiterates his idea of philosophy from "The Actuality of Philosophy" in this essay, declaring that for natural historical thought "everything existing transforms itself into ruins and fragments" whereby the philosopher is "assigned the task of their intentional interpretation."²⁷⁴ Significantly, he again draws on the terminology of the constellation to describe the task of interpretation, arguing that the constellation can be used to demonstrate the two sides of the interpretive concept of natural history: "This structure is a constellation. It is not a matter of clarifying concepts out of one another, but of the constellation of ideas, namely those of transience, signification, the idea of nature and the idea of history."²⁷⁵ Despite his immense debt to Benjamin in the method of the essay, once again the moment of interpretation is distinctly Adornian as – detached from Benjamin's notion of the mosaic – the constellation stresses the subjective

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Ibid., 120.

²⁷³ Ibid., 121.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

intervention of the philosopher. The appeal to the terminology of the constellation to describe the process of interpretation leads Pensky to link Adorno's method in "The Idea of Natural History" with "The Actuality of Philosophy." In marked contrast to Whyman, who understands natural history as a "therapeutic concept" aimed at alleviating certain "philosophical anxieties,"²⁷⁶ Pensky focuses on the methodological weight Adorno assigns to the "change of perspective," whereby the interpretive concept of natural history reveals "the vision of a social world that has died," and which can only be reawakened by political praxis.²⁷⁷ Adorno himself tries to make the connection between the "change of perspective" generated by philosophical critique and Marxist political praxis at the conclusion of the essay: "I wanted to speak about the relationship of these matters to historical materialism, but I only have time to say the following [...] It could be demonstrated that what has been said here is only an interpretation of certain fundamental elements of the materialist dialectic."²⁷⁸ Despite the underdeveloped form of the essay,²⁷⁹ when read alongside "The Actuality of Philosophy," "The Idea of Natural History" can be understood as Adorno's attempt to utilise Benjamin's philosophical method to mediate between the empiricist reading of history and the idealist position of nature. Further, Adorno invokes the constellation to describe his own distinctive method of philosophy in which the subjective interpretation of the philosopher reveals a fragmented social world which can only be reawakened by political praxis.

²⁷⁶ Whyman, "Understanding Adorno on 'Natural History,'" 452.

²⁷⁷ Pensky, "The Life and Afterlife of a Concept," 232, 234-235.

²⁷⁸ *INH*, 124.

²⁷⁹ Hullot-Kentor observes that it is "awkwardly constructed, at points repetitive, at others almost incomprehensibly desultory." Hullot-Kentor, "Introduction to *INH*," 100.

Chapter 3: Walter Benjamin on language and mimesis

As discussed in Chapter 1, Walter Benjamin's philosophy argues for the central role of language in the presentation of truth.²⁸⁰ Despite the notable shifts that take place across his work, Benjamin's view of the centrality of language is relatively consistent,²⁸¹ and there is scholarly consensus on its significance for his thinking. Paraphrasing Hamann, Beatrice Hanssen describes language as "the 'alpha' and 'omega' of Benjamin's thought,"²⁸² while Uwe Steiner writes that "the true significance of Benjamin's philosophy of language is discernible not so much as the *theme* of his writings but as their *foundation*."²⁸³ Likewise, George Steiner asserts that "it is as a philosopher of language [...] that Benjamin accomplished his best work."²⁸⁴ Despite the general agreement on its significance for his philosophy, interpretations of Benjamin's theory of language vary. This chapter considers the 1916 essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man"²⁸⁵ in connection with the 1918 essay "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy,"²⁸⁶ as well as two short essays written in 1933 ("Doctrine of the Similar" and "On the Mimetic Faculty"), both of which approach language in relation to the human faculty of mimesis. It is argued that a common thread runs through the selected texts, as Benjamin describes a process of language transformation in which meaning is dislodged from an original state of myth, where humankind is condemned to a merely natural life. The link between myth and nature is explained by Jürgen Habermas, who writes that "myth marks a debased human species, hopelessly deprived of the good and just life for which it was determined – banished to a cursed cycle of merely reproducing itself and surviving."²⁸⁷ This process is characterized by ambivalence, as these transformations run the risk of squandering the potential inherent in human language and losing access to the emphatic experience beyond merely natural life. With respect to this danger, the bourgeois theory of language is shown to be the critical target of Benjamin's philosophy of language in both his early work and his later essays on mimesis. Similarly, even though the later essays approach the question of language from a more conventionally anthropological standpoint, and on the surface the prominent theological anchor of the 1916 essay seems to be missing, it is argued that the divine word of God and the perfect

²⁸⁰ Refer to Chapter 1, passage at n69.

²⁸¹ For an overview of the shifting complexion of Benjamin's aesthetic and political writings, see Michael Jennings, "Walter Benjamin and the European avant-garde," in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. David S. Ferris (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 18-20.

²⁸² Beatrice Hanssen, "Language and Mimesis in Walter Benjamin's Work" in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. David S. Ferris (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 54.

²⁸³ Uwe Steiner, *Walter Benjamin: an introduction to his work and thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 42 (his emphasis).

²⁸⁴ Steiner, "Introduction," 20.

²⁸⁵ Hereafter referenced in the text as "On Language."

²⁸⁶ Hereafter referenced in the text as the "Program."

²⁸⁷ Habermas, "Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism," 39.

knowledge that it entails grounds Benjamin's account of emphatic experience in both his early and mature theories. This interpretation is supported by the fact that, while writing "On the Mimetic Faculty" on Ibiza, Benjamin asked Gershom Scholem to send him a copy of his 1916 essay as his own version was out of reach.²⁸⁸ Further, when these two friends met for the final time in Paris in 1938, Scholem reports that – at Benjamin's insistence – the interconnection between these essays was one of the central topics of their conversations.²⁸⁹ Finally, Benjamin himself made the association explicit in the fragment "Antitheses Concerning Word and Name," a preliminary study for the essay "On the Mimetic Faculty" which will be considered in the concluding section. The purpose of the chapter is therefore to set out the connections between the essay on experience written in 1918, the 1916 essay on language and the 1933 writings that treat language in relation to the mimetic faculty. This will ultimately set the framework for the discussion in the final chapter about the extent to which Benjamin's notion of mimesis influences Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

Language and experience

The stakes of Benjamin's philosophy of language are outlined in his early essay "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy," written in 1918. Benjamin begins by declaring that the central task of philosophy is "to take the deepest intimations it draws from our times [...] and turn them into knowledge by relating them to the Kantian system."²⁹⁰ In order to fulfil this task, the coming philosophy must first "sort out which elements of the Kantian philosophy should be adopted and cultivated, which should be reworked, and which should be rejected."²⁹¹ As regards the latter, Benjamin is most critical of the Kantian conception of experience, arguing that the Enlightenment's "naked, primitive" notion of experience "was of the lowest order."²⁹² He explains that for Kant, "what mattered was not primarily the scope and depth of knowledge but first and foremost its justification,"²⁹³ resulting in an epistemological bias in favour of the sciences – in particular mathematical physics: "What counts for him is the concept of scientific experience."²⁹⁴ In this

²⁸⁸ Steiner, *Walter Benjamin: an introduction to his work and thought*, 42.

²⁸⁹ Scholem, *The Story of a Friendship*, 205.

²⁹⁰ Walter Benjamin, "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy," in *SW I*, 100.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 102. In a letter to Scholem in October 1917 – which Eiland and Jennings describe as the "immediate point of departure" for the "Program" – Benjamin states that "there will never be any question of the Kantian system's being shaken and toppled," and hence that "what is essential in Kant's thought must be preserved." Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin: 1910-1940*, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 97; Eiland and Jennings, *A Critical Life*, 96.

²⁹² Benjamin, "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy," 101.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 100.

²⁹⁴ Walter Benjamin, "On Perception," in *SW I*, 94.

respect, Benjamin's critique of experience is heavily influenced by the account given in Hermann Cohen's book *Kant's Theory of Experience*.²⁹⁵ Scholem recalls he and Benjamin's mutual disappointment when they jointly studied the work in May, 1918, which Benjamin termed "a philosophical vespiary."²⁹⁶ In contrast to the "inferior experience" that emerged from Cohen's interpretation, Scholem remembers that Benjamin was seeking what he called "absolute experience," which "encompassed man's intellectual and psychological connection with the world, which takes place in the realms not yet penetrated by cognition."²⁹⁷ As Benjamin explains in the "Program," this elevated concept of experience depends on language:

For Kant, the consciousness that philosophical knowledge was absolutely certain and a priori, the consciousness of that aspect of philosophy in which it is fully the peer of mathematics, ensured that he devoted almost no attention to the fact that all philosophical knowledge has its unique expression in language and not in formulas or numbers.²⁹⁸

The "Program" concludes by calling for the transformation of Kant's mathematical account of knowledge to make room for its essential linguistic component: "The great transformation and correction which must be performed upon the concept of knowledge, oriented so one-sidedly along mathematical-mechanical lines, can be attained only by relating knowledge to language."²⁹⁹ Habermas duly contends that Benjamin's theory of experience is grounded in his philosophy of language, whereby "experience is acquired through the recovery of a semantics dislodged bit by bit from the core of myth [...] This semantic potential is deposited in myth to begin with and must be released from it."³⁰⁰ According to Habermas, this recovery cannot be achieved by augmenting language, but rather by transforming it. Despite the inherent potential of this process, the transformation of language has an "ambivalent significance," as "Benjamin fears that during these transformations the semantic energies might escape and become lost to humanity."³⁰¹ If this were to occur, the emphatic experience beyond merely natural life would not be revealed: "It is as if Benjamin feared an elimination of myth without an ensuing liberation [...] so that [myth] might triumph even in defeat."³⁰²

"On Language as Such and on the Language of Man"

²⁹⁵ Alexander Stern, *The Fall of Language: Benjamin and Wittgenstein on Meaning* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2019), 33.

²⁹⁶ Scholem, *The Story of a Friendship*, 60.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 59-60.

²⁹⁸ Benjamin, "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy," 108.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 107-108.

³⁰⁰ Habermas, "Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism," 47.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 47, 49.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 44.

To make sense of Habermas's account requires an analysis of Benjamin's 1916 essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man." Max Pensky designates "On Language" as Benjamin's "first significant theoretical writing," stating that "the mystical theory of language and naming developed in it [...] remain[s] remarkably intact throughout Benjamin's work."³⁰³ "On Language" is ostensibly divided into three parts. The first section details language "as such," where all language is defined as the expression of the contents of the mind. This entails an account of the "language of things," whereby nature communicates its mental contents via a mute and purely material presentation. The second section describes the role of human language in its pure, paradisiacal state, which translates the mute language of things into the knowing language of humans. This translation reflects the positive potential inherent in the transformation of language, as it elevates meaning from a rudimentary, natural state to a higher realm. As the objectivity of this translation is "guaranteed by God,"³⁰⁴ in this essay Benjamin's conception of emphatic experience is grounded in the divine word. The third section sheds light on the so-called "Fall of the spirit of language," where humankind fails to name the object according to its essence, squandering the potential latent in human language. Because of its externality, arbitrariness and instrumentality, language in its fallen state is aligned with the bourgeois conception of language, which is the critical target of the essay.

Language as such

Benjamin begins by calling for a broad definition for human language, asserting that "every expression of human mental life can be understood as a kind of language,"³⁰⁵ citing music and sculpture as instances of language that occur beyond the communication of words. Because of this, he contends that "all communication of the contents of the mind is language, communication in words being only a particular case of human language."³⁰⁶ Thus language is marked first and foremost by its expressive function: "all expression, insofar as it is a communication of contents of the mind, is to be classed as language. And expression, by its whole innermost nature, is certainly to be understood only as language."³⁰⁷ As the title of the essay suggests, Benjamin extends his definition of language beyond the human sphere, announcing that "there is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake of language, *for it is in the*

³⁰³ Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics*, 47.

³⁰⁴ *LAN*, 70.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 62-63.

nature of each one to communicate its mental contents.”³⁰⁸ The second half of this sentence is most revealing, as it asserts that all natural entities – plants, animals and objects – possess mental contents, which they communicate reflexively. This reflexive, purely material presentation should therefore be considered nature’s language, which Benjamin labels “the language of things.” In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant famously declares that “thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.”³⁰⁹ Benjamin’s theory of language wishes to hold fast to this premise, while also placing language on each side of the ledger. Regarding the first part, Benjamin asserts that the content of our thoughts is dependent on the language of things: “to think that we cannot imagine anything that does not communicate its mental nature in its expression is entirely meaningful.”³¹⁰ With respect to the second half of Kant’s postulate, our thoughts are also based in language: “we cannot imagine a total absence of language in anything. An existence entirely without relationship to language is an idea; but this idea can bear no fruit.”³¹¹

Nevertheless, Kant explains that concept and intuition must be kept separate, and Benjamin is likewise careful not to collapse the distinction between language and world. He explains that while objects communicate their mental contents in language, and our thought receives it in language, this does not make the mental content of objects purely linguistic: “the mental entity that communicates itself in language is not language itself but something to be distinguished from it.”³¹² As Stern explains, this distinction is necessary, as, “to immediately identify [language] with everything would end an inquiry into language before it began. In order for linguistic communication to be discussed at all, it must be conceived of as the communication of something.”³¹³ Benjamin’s solution is to conceive of the distinction between linguistic being and mental being, whereby the object’s linguistic being is the expressible or communicable aspect of its mental being:

What is communicable in a mental entity is its linguistic entity [...] The language of this lamp, for example, communicates not the lamp (for the mental being of the lamp, insofar as it is communicable, is by no means the lamp itself) but the language-lamp, the lamp in communication, the lamp in expression.³¹⁴

In positing an “inexpressible” aspect of the object that lies beyond experience, both Stern and Eiland and Jennings argue that Benjamin “makes a linguistic modification of the Kantian distinction

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 62 (my emphasis).

³⁰⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 193-194.

³¹⁰ LAN, 62.

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Ibid.

³¹³ Stern, *The Fall of Language*, 41.

³¹⁴ LAN, 63.

between phenomenon and thing-in-itself.”³¹⁵ Given the “gap” that exists between language and world, Stern argues that “linguistic being is the limitation of intellectual being”³¹⁶; as Benjamin puts it “mental being is identical with linguistic being only insofar as it is capable of communication. What is communicable in a mental entity is its linguistic entity.”³¹⁷ This means that while linguistic being and mental being are distinguished, they are not *separated*. If the object and its linguistic expression were separated then the object would be expressed *through* language, – i.e., language would represent the object – however Benjamin insists this isn’t the case: “It is fundamental that this mental being communicates itself *in* language and not *through* language.”³¹⁸ Language is therefore the manifestation of the object’s capacity for expression: “*There is no such thing as a content of language; as communication, language communicates a mental entity – something communicable per se.*”³¹⁹ This leads Benjamin to describe language as an “immediate medium” – immediate in the sense that the means of communication is not external to the object (the object communicates immediately), nevertheless language remains a medium of communication. The immediate aspect of this communication is what Benjamin describes as the “magic of language.”³²⁰

The language of man

In the language of things, the immediate medium of language is mute: “They can communicate to one another only through a more or less material community.”³²¹ Like things, humankind too communicates its mental being in language. However, humanity differs from nature in that “the language of man speaks in words. Man therefore communicates his own mental being (insofar as it is communicable) by naming all other things [...] *It is therefore the linguistic being of man to name things.*”³²² This means, first, that the language of things is directed to humanity: “To whom does the lamp communicate itself? The mountain? The fox? – But here the answer is: to man.”³²³ As humans receive the language of things immediately, the language of humans is likewise magical. However, while the magical aspect of nature’s language is its material presentation, “the incomparable feature of human language is that its magical community with things is immaterial and purely mental.”³²⁴

³¹⁵ Stern, *The Fall of Language*, 46. Eiland and Jennings write that the inexpressible aspect of the thing itself “recalls the Kantian *noumenon*, the unknowable ‘thing in itself’ assumed to lie behind appearances.” Eiland and Jennings, *A Critical Life*, 88.

³¹⁶ Stern, *The Fall of Language*, 42.

³¹⁷ *LAN*, 63.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.* (his emphasis).

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 66. (his emphasis).

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

³²² *Ibid.*, 64 (his emphasis).

³²³ *Ibid.*

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.

Consequently, humankind's language is dependent on the presentation of things: "if the lamp and the mountain and the fox did not communicate themselves to man, how should he be able to name them?"³²⁵ Because of this dependence, human language is marked by its receptivity. Benjamin thus speaks of "the translation of the language of things into that of man," continuing that "it is necessary to found the concept of translation at the deepest level of linguistic theory," as "the language of things can pass into the language of knowledge and name only through translation."³²⁶ In addition to its receptive function, human language also has an expressive function, as when humankind names nature it expresses itself to God: "*in the name, the mental being of man communicates itself to God.*"³²⁷

To elucidate his account of language, Benjamin draws on the Judeo-Christian creation narrative presented in Genesis 1-2, in which nature was created according to the word of God. As humankind was created in God's own image, Benjamin interprets this as God endowing humanity with the gift of spoken language – "which had served *him* as a medium of creation" – interposing human beings between himself and mute nature: "[humanity] is now invested with the gift of language and is elevated above nature."³²⁸ Pensky observes that there is a "blissfully ordered hierarchy of God, humanity, and nature" in Benjamin's account, which involves a corresponding hierarchy of languages: the creative word, the knowing name, and the mute language of things.³²⁹ In God's word, language is both creation and knowledge: "In God, name is creative because it is word, and God's word is cognizant because it is name."³³⁰ The human name is no longer creative in the divine sense, but it enables humankind to attain knowledge of the world it inhabits: "God rested when he had left his creative power to itself in man. This creativity, relieved of its divine actuality, became knowledge."³³¹ As it is denied the elements of both knowledge and sound, Benjamin states that the language of things is both metaphorically and literally dumb.³³²

By endowing humankind with the ability to name nature, God also assigned humanity the task of completing his creative act in a double sense. By raising nature to the realm of knowledge, humankind completes God's creative act vis-a-vis nature: "God's creation is completed when things receive their names from man."³³³ The human name is thereby described as the "likeness" of God's

³²⁵ Ibid., 64 (his emphasis).

³²⁶ Ibid., 69-71.

³²⁷ Ibid., 65 (his emphasis).

³²⁸ Ibid., 68.

³²⁹ Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics*, 50.

³³⁰ *LAN*, 68.

³³¹ Ibid.

³³² Ibid., 67.

³³³ Ibid., 65.

creative word, while mute nature is its “residue.”³³⁴ Secondly, by blessing it with the language of the name, God made knowledge the essence of humankind: “Man is the knower in the same language in which God is the creator. God created him in his image; he created the knower in the image of the creator.”³³⁵ By naming nature and attaining knowledge of the world it inhabits, humankind also completes God’s creative act vis-a-vis humans. Benjamin’s hierarchy of languages is therefore characterized by mutual dependence: God relies on the human name in order that his creative act is completed, and nature relies on it to be completed creation. At the same time, humankind relies on both the mute language of things – for their expression as creations of nature – and on the word – for both creation and knowledge. Situated between nature and God in this chain of dependence, the human name must be precise with respect to both its receptive and expressive functions. As mentioned, the name must be receptive to the mute language of things in order to intuit nature, and Benjamin therefore speaks of naming as “the translation of the mute language of things into that of man.”³³⁶ Nevertheless, the objectivity of this translation is “guaranteed by God” – “for God created things; the creative word *in them* is the germ of the cognizing name.”³³⁷ This means that humankind must also be receptive to the creative word of God which “shines forth” in the mute language of things.³³⁸ Finally, in the act of naming humans must also be precise in an expressive sense, as only when the name reflects the word of God can humankind attain knowledge of the world. The translation of the mute language of things into the language of humans therefore embodies the inherent potential of the transformation of language, as it raises meaning from its rudimentary, natural state – which is synonymous with myth³³⁹ – to the “infinitely higher” realm of knowledge: “It is therefore the translation of an imperfect language into a more perfect one, and cannot but add something to it, namely knowledge.”³⁴⁰ Given it elevates humankind’s relationship with the world it inhabits, this knowledge encapsulates Benjamin’s concept of emphatic experience, which in 1916 is anchored in the divine word of God: “[Humankind’s task] would be insoluble, were not the name-language of man and the nameless language of things related in God and released from the same creative word.”³⁴¹

The Fall of the spirit of language

³³⁴ Walter Benjamin, “Antitheses Concerning Word and Name,” in *SW II*, 717.

³³⁵ *LAN*, 68.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 69, 70.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, 70 (my emphasis).

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

³³⁹ See above, passage at n287.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*

In Paradise, the hierarchy of God, humanity and nature existed in perfect harmony, making the task of naming straightforward. God's creative word shined forth clearly in nature's mute language, and as humankind named nature according to this essence, "the paradisiacal language of man must have been one of perfect knowledge."³⁴² The ambivalent nature of Benjamin's account of the transformation of language is revealed in his discussion of "the Fall of the spirit of language." Upon creating the natural world "God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good."³⁴³ Humankind's original sin was its vain desire for meaning from beyond God's creation by seeking knowledge of good *and evil*: "The knowledge to which the snake seduces, that of good and evil, is nameless. It is vain in the deepest sense, and this very knowledge is itself the only evil known to the paradisiacal state."³⁴⁴ By seeking knowledge outside creation, Benjamin describes the question of good and evil as "empty prattle."³⁴⁵

After the Fall, both human beings and nature are cast out of Paradise, severing the connection between the word, the name, and the mute language of things. In the task of naming, humankind must be receptive in such a way that it perceives the word of God which "shines forth" in the mute language of things, and humans must express themselves in such a way that the name reflects the word of God. Not only is humanity now isolated from God, but nature is also cut off from the divine, hence the mute language of things no longer communicates its essence transparently. In this respect, God's punishment for humankind is reflective of the original sin itself, as after the Fall humans must seek knowledge of the world without direct access to its essence, the creative word of God. The Fall is therefore the moment in time in which knowledge is deposited in myth, as human language is utterly dependent on nature "cut off from the transcendent."³⁴⁶ The simple process of translating the transparent language of things according to the word of God now mutates into the infinitely more difficult process of revelation, where humans must translate the now obscure language of things – knowledge deposited in myth – into names that reflect their essence – revealed knowledge. Sigrid Weigel likewise contends that the Fall of the spirit of language occurs "at the moment in which language enters the state of history," where history is understood as the intervening period between creation and revelation.³⁴⁷ The inflated difficulty of the task of revelation is reflected in Genesis, when God banished Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden: "In

³⁴² Ibid., 71.

³⁴³ Genesis 1: 31.

³⁴⁴ LAN, 71.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 72.

³⁴⁶ Ross, *Concept of the Image*, 22.

³⁴⁷ Sigrid Weigel, *Walter Benjamin: Images, the Creaturely, and the Holy*, trans. Chadwick Truscott Smith (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2012), 24.

the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread.”³⁴⁸ The lost access to the perfect knowledge of Paradise, where the object and name are internally united, leads to the birth of the “external” human word. While the human name is hailed as the likeness of the creative word, Benjamin describes the external human word as a “parody” of the word of God:

It is a knowledge from outside, the uncreated imitation of the creative word. Name steps outside itself in this knowledge: the Fall marks the birth of the *human word* [...] The [human] word must communicate something (other than itself). In that fact lies the true Fall of the spirit of language.³⁴⁹

Benjamin calls attention to three main consequences of the Fall for language. First, language becomes a means for humankind and, as it no longer names the object according to its essence, it becomes a mere sign.³⁵⁰ Secondly, humankind’s original sin brings about the necessity of judging language (i.e., differentiation between good and evil), as, not only is it the birth of evil, but God must have recourse to the judging word to expel Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. The third significance of the Fall – which results from the previous two – is the birth of abstraction, as language no longer corresponds to the object as it did in language’s paradisiacal state, but rather stands in for it:

This immediacy in the communication of abstraction came into being as judgment, when, in the Fall, man abandoned immediacy in the communication of the concrete – that is, name – and fell into the abyss of the mediateness of all communication, of the word as means, of the empty word, into the abyss of prattle.³⁵¹

Once the word of God no longer shines forth transparently from nature and language becomes a mere means for humankind, the multiplicity of human languages necessarily follows, each of which fails to name the object according to its essence and squanders the potential inherent in human language: “After the Fall, which, in making language mediate, laid the foundation for its multiplicity, linguistic confusion could be only a step away [...] Signs must become confused where things are entangled.”³⁵² Ferber notes that the Tower of Babel acts as an important allegory for humanity’s newfound instrumentality after the Fall.³⁵³ In the same way that the people of Babel turned their back on God in attempting to reach heaven by their own hand, the human word turns its

³⁴⁸ Genesis 3: 19.

³⁴⁹ *LAN*, 71 (his emphasis).

³⁵⁰ Stern thereby refers to the Fall of the spirit of language as “the Fall of aesthetic language into designative language.” Stern, *The Fall of Language*, 63.

³⁵¹ *LAN*, 72.

³⁵² *Ibid.*

³⁵³ Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy*, 140.

back on the word of God by using language as a mere means to its own ends, where the word merely stands in for the object.

Finally, the Fall of the spirit of language has repercussions for the welfare of nature. Nature's muteness in Paradise is blissful, as its essence shines forth clearly in its mute language and consequently humankind names it aptly, elevating it to the realm of knowledge and completing its creation. After the Fall, when nature and its language are cut off from God, "the appearance of nature is deeply changed. Now begins its other muteness, which is what we mean by the 'deep sadness of nature.'"³⁵⁴ Nature's muteness is now one of lament, in which it mourns the fact that, cut off from the divine word, humankind can no longer perceive its essence and as a result it is overnamed: "how much more melancholy it is to be named not from the one blessed paradisiacal language of names, but from the hundred languages of man, in which name has already withered."³⁵⁵ In the same way that the gap between the human name and the human word marks humanity's remoteness from the "innocent first day of Creation," Weigel explains that "lament is thus seen as the creature's mode of expression once it has become distanced from Creation."³⁵⁶ Only human language can wrest knowledge from myth – this is its inherent potential – yet its transformation after the Fall displays the precariousness of this process, as the human word fails to name the object according to its essence and thereby fails to unveil the emphatic experience beyond merely natural life. The by-products of language in this state – "empty prattle," the multiplicity of languages and overnaming – reflect Habermas's contention that "during these transformations the semantic energies might escape and become lost to humanity."³⁵⁷

The bourgeois conception of language

Benjamin sets his account of language against what he calls the "bourgeois conception of language," which considers there to be no intrinsic connection between object and word. The word that represents the object is thus an arbitrary signifier, and any other word could just as easily replace it without any meaning being lost. Language and world are thereby "external" to one another, as objects are expressed *through* language rather than *in* language. On this view, language exists as a mere instrument of communication: "the advocate of such a view can assume only that man is communicating factual subject matter to other men [...] It holds that the means of

³⁵⁴ LAN, 72.

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 73.

³⁵⁶ Weigel, *Images, the Creaturely, and the Holy*, 12, 24.

³⁵⁷ Habermas, "Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism," 47.

communication is the word, its object factual, and its addressee a human being.”³⁵⁸ Stern argues that Benjamin’s theory of language is a “middle way” between the designative bourgeois conception and the mystical theory of language which asserts that “the word is simply the essence of the thing.”³⁵⁹ According to Stern, the mystical view of language is correct to draw a connection between the essence of the thing and its manifestation in language, but this connection is “too tight.” On the other hand, designative theory is right to suggest that there is a distinction between language and world, but in absolutely separating the two, the connection between language and world becomes “too loose”: “By steering between these two views, Benjamin seeks to do justice to what Hamann refers to as the aesthetic and logical sides of language. Human language is conceived of as inhabiting a continuum between something like an aesthetic essence of the thing and an arbitrary marker for it.”³⁶⁰ However, by describing Benjamin’s theory as a “middle way,” Stern obfuscates the fact that the bourgeois conception of language is the critical target of Benjamin’s own theory. Benjamin himself is clear on this: “man is bound to the language of things [...] it is no longer conceivable, as the bourgeois view of language maintains, that the word has an accidental relation to its object, that it is a sign for things (or knowledge of them) agreed by some convention. Language never gives *mere* signs.”³⁶¹ On account of its externality, arbitrariness and instrumentality, the bourgeois conception of language is a manifestation of the situation of language after the Fall, as it squanders the potential inherent in language. Cut off from the divine, humankind is condemned to a debased, merely natural existence.

Revisiting language and experience

Michael Jennings argues that the failure of his *Habilitationsschrift* in 1925, combined with newfound political and aesthetic commitments, led to radical changes in Benjamin’s writing: “it is as if he woke up sometime in 1924 as a different writer.”³⁶² It was in this period that Benjamin turned his attention to the new cultural forms emerging in France and the Soviet Union, producing essays on children’s literature, toys, gambling, pornography, folk art, and a wide variety of media including film, radio, photography, and the illustrated press.³⁶³ However, Jennings asserts that with these changes Benjamin’s theoretical writing “lost some of the force and all of the systematic complexity of his pre-1924 work.”³⁶⁴ One of the first indications of Benjamin revisiting his early

³⁵⁸ *LAN*, 65.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 69.

³⁶⁰ Stern, *The Fall of Language*, 50.

³⁶¹ *LAN*, 69 (his emphasis).

³⁶² Jennings, “Walter Benjamin and the European avant-garde,” 18-19.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

work on language is the 1931/1932 fragment “Experience,” in which he repeats the aforementioned critique of the Kantian concept of experience: “There is no greater error than the attempt to construe experience – in the sense of life experience – according to the model on which the exact natural sciences are based.”³⁶⁵ In contrast to this, he endorses a conception of experience “based on self-immersion,” recalling his claim in the “Epistemo-Critical Foreword” that truth “can be grasped only through the most exacting immersion in the details of a material content.”³⁶⁶ Shortly thereafter, in 1933, Benjamin produced two associated essays that recalled his 1916 essay on language – “Doctrine of the Similar” and “On the Mimetic Faculty.”

Benjamin’s theory of mimesis

The mimetic faculty refers to the inherent ability to perceive and produce similarities. Benjamin argues that while the mimetic faculty can be observed in non-human nature, “the very greatest capacity for the generation of similarities, however, belongs to human beings.”³⁶⁷ While previously humanity was elevated above nature by virtue of its language, which was gifted by God, here humankind’s superiority is attributed to the unique capacity of its mimetic faculty: “there may be no single one of [human beings’] higher functions that is not codetermined by the mimetic faculty.”³⁶⁸ According to Benjamin, this faculty has both an ontogenetic and a phylogenetic history. In the ontogenetic sense, “children’s play is everywhere permeated by mimetic modes of behavior”³⁶⁹ – behaviour he elsewhere describes as an immersive, rather than detached, way of being in the world: “in childhood we wander through the world of things like the stations of a journey of whose extent we can form no conception [...] so as subsequently to enable the objects of the world around to accrete, layer by layer.”³⁷⁰ He therefore suggests that the mimetic faculty remains most intact in children and newborns: “If, however, mimetic genius was really a life-determining force for the ancients, then we have little choice but to attribute full possession of this gift, and in particular its perfect adaptation to the form of cosmic being, to the newborn.”³⁷¹ In the phylogenetic sense, the mimetic faculty again appears to decay over time: “on the whole, a unified direction is perceptible in the historical development of this mimetic faculty [...] For clearly the perceptual world of modern human beings seems to contain far fewer of those magical correspondences than did that of

³⁶⁵ Walter Benjamin, “Experience” in *SW II*, 553.

³⁶⁶ *OGT*, 3.

³⁶⁷ *DOS*, 694.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁰ Walter Benjamin, “The Lamp” in *SW II*, 691.

³⁷¹ *DOS*, 694, 695.

the ancients or even that of primitive peoples.”³⁷² The apparent decline of the mimetic faculty is conveyed via the example of astrology, as the “sensuous shape giving” involved in reading the stars shows that “we no longer possess in our perception whatever once made it possible to speak of a similarity which might exist between a constellation of stars and a human.”³⁷³ However, Benjamin explains that rather than dealing with a “dying out” of the mimetic faculty, we may be facing “a transformation that has taken place within it”: “It must be borne in mind that neither mimetic powers nor mimetic objects have remained unchanged over time; and that, in the course of centuries, the mimetic power, and with it the gift of mimetic perception, have disappeared from certain fields – perhaps in order to flow into others.”³⁷⁴ To explain this transformation, Benjamin expands on the standard definition of mimesis to include the perception and production of both sensuous and *nonsensuous* similarities. The mimetic gift for recognizing and generating sensuous similarities therefore evolves into the ability to perceive and produce nonsensuous similarities. This transformation is observed most clearly in language, which develops from an original, sensuous form of similarity (e.g., onomatopoeia and images) to its modern, nonsensuous form. Nonsensuous similarity thus ties together the object and its expression in language, meaning that written and spoken words retain a strand of similarity to the signified object: “It is thus nonsensuous similarity that establishes the ties not only between what is said and what is meant, but also between what is written and what is meant, and equally between the spoken and the written.”³⁷⁵ This parallels Benjamin’s earlier theory of language, as human language must imitate and translate the language of the thing; as Alison Ross puts it, “Benjamin’s notion of similitude puts forward a conception of expressive form that draws on his earlier theological conception of the language of the name [...] similitude is Benjamin’s theory of the communication of things ‘in words.’”³⁷⁶ However, while previously the objectivity of this translation was “guaranteed by God,” Benjamin now suggests that the notion of nonsensuous similarity explains how words meaning the same thing in different languages “while often not possessing the slightest similarity to one another – are similar to the signified at their center.”³⁷⁷ Nevertheless, he insists that the mimetic element “does not develop in isolation from its other, semiotic aspect,”³⁷⁸ leading Uwe Steiner to claim that the semiotic component acts as a “‘storehouse’ that can open an access to the mimetic, or magical, element of

³⁷² Ibid., 695.

³⁷³ Ibid., 696.

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 695.

³⁷⁵ Ibid., 696-697.

³⁷⁶ Ross, *Concept of the Image*, 73.

³⁷⁷ *DOS*, 696.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 697.

language.”³⁷⁹ Benjamin seizes upon “a peculiar ambiguity of the word ‘reading’” to shed further light on these two components:

The schoolboy reads his ABC book, and the astrologer reads the future in the stars. In the first clause, reading is not separated out into its two components. Quite the opposite in the second, though, which clarifies the process at both its levels: the astrologer reads the constellation from the stars in the sky; simultaneously, he reads the future or fate from it.³⁸⁰

In the astrology example, the mimetic component of language occurs as the astrologer interprets the pattern of the stars, while the semiotic component refers to the future or fate that the pattern reveals. In contrast, the ABC example appears to be a purely semiotic procedure, as the child interprets the meaning of words from alphabetical signs. However, as the words retain a strand of similarity to the signified object, the mimetic component of language still occurs, only it is less immediately apparent because of the transformation from sensuous to nonsensuous similarity. Benjamin therefore refers to selection on the basis of similarity as “the primal form of reading,” spelling out the transformation of language from an original, sensuous form of similarity to its modern, nonsensuous stage:

If, at the dawn of humanity, this reading from stars, entrails, and coincidences was reading per se, and if it provided mediating links to a newer kind of reading, as represented by runes, then one might well assume that this mimetic gift, which was earlier the basis for clairvoyance, very gradually found its way into language and writing in the course of a development over thousands of years.³⁸¹

The development from sensuous to nonsensuous similarity therefore embodies the inherent potential of the transformation of language described by Habermas, as it raises meaning from a rudimentary, natural state to a higher one. Benjamin thus refers to language as “the highest application of the mimetic faculty,” one which comprises “the most perfect archive of nonsensuous similarity.”³⁸² Immersive language practices – i.e., reading and writing – grant access to this “archive,” whereby “similarities flash up fleetingly out of the stream of things only in order to sink down once more.”³⁸³ This perception of similitude gestures towards Benjamin’s mature conception of emphatic experience. Nevertheless, as this perception “flash[es] up” only “fleetingly,” Benjamin

³⁷⁹ Steiner, *Walter Benjamin: an introduction to his work and thought*, 47. In “On the Mimetic Faculty,” Benjamin employs an evocative metaphor: “the mimetic element in language can, like a flame, manifest itself only through a kind of bearer. This bearer is the semiotic element.” Walter Benjamin, “On the Mimetic Faculty” in *SW II*, 722.

³⁸⁰ *DOS*, 697.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*

³⁸² *Ibid.*, 698.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*

reasons that similitude is “bound to a moment in time.”³⁸⁴ He concludes that the perception of similarity “must be grasped in an instant,” lest the reader is left “empty-handed,” squandering the potential that inheres within human language.³⁸⁵

Tracing the connections between “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” and “Doctrine of the Similar”

Benjamin makes explicit the association between “On Language” and “Doctrine of the Similar” in the fragment “Antitheses Concerning Word and Name,” a preliminary study for the essay “On the Mimetic Faculty.” Benjamin amplifies the connection between sensuous similarity and the mute language of things, stating that “the communication of matter in its magical community *takes place through similarity*.”³⁸⁶ In the same way that the human name is dependent on the mute language of nature, Habermas observes that “the mimetic capacity is the mark of an original dependency on the forces of nature.”³⁸⁷ In this respect, in Benjamin’s early work myth is understood as humanity’s utter dependence on nature once they are both cast out of Paradise and cut off from the divine. Similarly, in the later essays the transition from sensuous to nonsensuous similarity dislodges knowledge from myth as meaning is freed from its original dependency on nature. While the language of things is aligned with sensuous similarity, the language of humans corresponds with nonsensuous similarity. In the same way that nonsensuous similarity transcends the merely sensuous realm, in “On Language” Benjamin notes that when humans receive the language of things, they do so in a way that is “immaterial and purely mental.”³⁸⁸ In that essay, the language of humans is understood in terms of its receptive and expressive functions – it must be receptive to the mute language of things, and in the act of naming it expresses itself to God. The language of humans therefore contains both the mimetic and semiotic components described in Benjamin’s mature theory of mimesis. Stern accordingly describes human language as the translation and imitation of the language of things, while Habermas contends that “Benjamin adhered to a mimetic theory of language throughout his lifetime.”³⁸⁹ At the same time, the distinction between the semiotic and mimetic components in Benjamin’s mature theory of language makes it an “immediate medium” in the same sense as the language of humans, which is further underlined by the fact that

³⁸⁴ Ibid., 696, 698.

³⁸⁵ Ibid.

³⁸⁶ Benjamin, “Antitheses Concerning Word and Name,” 717 (my emphasis).

³⁸⁷ Habermas, “Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism,” 49.

³⁸⁸ LAN, 67.

³⁸⁹ Stern, *The Fall of Language*, 62; Habermas, “Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism,” 48.

in both 1916 and 1933 Benjamin refers to the mimetic connection between nature's material presentation and its immaterial reception in human language as the "magical aspect of language."³⁹⁰

However, while previously the objectivity of this translation was "guaranteed by God," Benjamin's mature theory suggests that it is nonsensuous similarity that ties together the object and its expression in language. Consequently, while in 1916 Benjamin's concept of emphatic experience is grounded in the divine word, on the surface his concept of similitude appears to be without this theological dimension. Nevertheless, Ross argues that "the pre-lapsarian Adamic naming language of man and the transparent relation to things that it entails is the pivot of the theory of similitude," whereby "the opacity of sensuous form" is the consequence of the Fall; a consequence which is "in some sense pierced through in the flashes of transparent illumination of things in the experience of similitude."³⁹¹ As an archive of nonsensuous similarities, language "provides an access point to a pre-lapsarian past" of perfect knowledge, and as the perception of similitude "is in every case bound to a flashing up,"³⁹² it "recalls but cannot restore [the] pre-lapsarian state."³⁹³ This interpretation is supported by the text of "Antitheses Concerning Word and Name": "the fleeting appearance of similarity has the character of an anamnesis, which takes possession of a lost similarity that was free from the tendency to become dissipated. This lost similarity, which exists in time, prevails in the Adamite spirit of language."³⁹⁴ The idea that language is an archive of similarities endorses Benjamin's earlier criticisms of the bourgeois conception of language, as it too rejects the notion of language as "an agreed-upon system of signs."³⁹⁵ In both Benjamin's early and late theory of language, the sign is indicative of the danger involved in the process of semantic transformation: "The character of the name is damaged by that of the sign [...] The symbol is definable as a sign by means of which no similarity can appear."³⁹⁶ The bourgeois conception of language is therefore the critical target of Benjamin's theory of language in both 1916 and 1933, as it epitomizes Benjamin's fear "that during these transformations the semantic energies might escape and become lost to humanity."³⁹⁷ Thus, in Benjamin's theory of mimesis the transformation of language retains an "ambivalent significance," as the bourgeois theory of language threatens to extirpate the final traces of similarity between the object and its linguistic signifier, endangering humankind's access to an emphatic experience beyond merely natural existence. According to Habermas, if the lingering

³⁹⁰ *LAN*, 67; *DOS*, 697.

³⁹¹ Ross, *Concept of the Image*, 76, 89.

³⁹² *DOS*, 695.

³⁹³ Ross, *Concept of the Image*, 76, 80.

³⁹⁴ Benjamin, "Antitheses Concerning Word and Name," 718.

³⁹⁵ *DOS*, 696.

³⁹⁶ Benjamin, "Antitheses Concerning Word and Name," 718.

³⁹⁷ Habermas, "Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism," 47.

stream of similarity between nature and language “run[s] dry,” then “the poetic faculty to interpret the world in terms of human needs would falter.”³⁹⁸

While Benjamin largely recapitulates “Doctrine of the Similar” in the later, published version of the essay, “On the Mimetic Faculty,” he explicitly abandons the parallel between the magic of language and mimesis: “language may be seen as the highest level of mimetic behavior and the most complete archive of nonsensuous similarity: a medium into which the earlier powers of mimetic production and comprehension have passed *without residue, to the point where they have liquidated those of magic.*”³⁹⁹ Ross contends that in this later essay, “magic is now seen as an imposition or enslavement, which the transfer of the mimetic gift to language loosens.”⁴⁰⁰ Hanssen convincingly defends the claim that “the competing programs of these two sources – the more sober psychoanalysis, the spirited kabbalah” goes some way to explaining “the striking discrepancies” that existed between the two essays:

Where the first version unambiguously aligned itself with mystical and theological conceptions of language, the second proposed a more “naturalistic” account of the phenomenon [...] a position that may have reflected Benjamin’s effort to come closer to Scheerbart’s and Brecht’s praxis of a pared-down, non-auratic language, stripped of all magic.⁴⁰¹

The explicit references to mystical language theory are removed, and the theological anchor of “On Language,” which remains alive – albeit in a somewhat sublimated form – in “Doctrine of the Similar,” is removed in the final, published version of the essay. Most significantly, this suggests that, freed from the overt theological framing of the 1916 essay, “On the Mimetic Faculty” describes the transformation of language in a more one-sidedly positive light when compared to the dichotomy between revelation and the fall depicted in Benjamin’s early theory of language.

³⁹⁸ Ibid., 50.

³⁹⁹ Benjamin, “On the Mimetic Faculty,” 722 (my emphasis).

⁴⁰⁰ Ross, *Concept of the Image*, 84.

⁴⁰¹ Hanssen, “Language and Mimesis in Walter Benjamin’s Work,” 65.

Chapter 4: Abstraction and Mimesis, or, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

Dialectic of Enlightenment was co-written by Adorno and Horkheimer during the Second World War, between 1939 and 1944. In December 1944, the Institute published a mimeographed edition of 300 copies which was distributed to friends and associates.⁴⁰² This version, which bore the title *Philosophical Fragments*, was dedicated to the memory of Walter Benjamin.⁴⁰³ The work was altered and expanded prior to its official publication in 1947, in which the title of the first essay, “Dialectic of Enlightenment,” became its permanent title.⁴⁰⁴ This chapter focuses on that first essay.⁴⁰⁵ Despite the dedication, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is often seen as the point at which Adorno’s independence from Benjamin is marked, and as a result, scholarship has tended to focus on other philosophical influences – most notably Hegel. J. G. Finlayson typifies this position:

this period in [Adorno’s] life is marked by a discernible shift away from the Benjaminian approach of esoteric interpretation [...] toward a more philosophical approach of “immanent critique” [...] The Hegelianization of Adorno’s work at this point appears to have been a crucial factor not only in his gaining Horkheimer’s approval, but also in gaining his own distinctive philosophical voice.⁴⁰⁶

The most influential – albeit intensely contested – interpretation of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* comes from Adorno and Horkheimer’s former student, Jürgen Habermas. Habermas refers to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as the authors’ “blackest book,” arguing that the authors turn their back on a constructive Marxist analysis of society in favour of the “‘black’ writers of the bourgeoisie, foremost among them the Marquis de Sade and Nietzsche.”⁴⁰⁷ The most enduring feature of Habermas’s reading is the idea that the increasing instrumentalisation and rationalization of society lies at the heart of Adorno and Horkheimer’s analysis, whereby “*Dialectic of Enlightenment* holds out scarcely any prospect for an escape from the myth of purposive rationality that has turned into objective violence.”⁴⁰⁸ For Habermas, then, it is not Hegel, nor Kant, Benjamin or Marx who lays the foundation for Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique, but rather Nietzsche, whose “critique of

⁴⁰² James Schmidt. “Language, Mythology, and Enlightenment: Historical Notes on Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,” *Social Research*, vol. 65, no. 4 (1998), 809.

⁴⁰³ Eiland and Jennings, *A Critical Life*, 677.

⁴⁰⁴ Schmidt. “Language, Mythology, and Enlightenment,” 811.

⁴⁰⁵ Retitled in the 1947 version as “The Concept of Enlightenment.”

⁴⁰⁶ J. G. Finlayson, “Hegel and the Frankfurt School,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Hegel*, ed. Dean Moyer (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), 1169 n17. Müller-Doohm agrees with this line of thought, see Introduction, n24-25.

⁴⁰⁷ Jürgen Habermas, “The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno” in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 106. Rose supports reading Nietzsche as the central influence, contending that “the notion of a ‘dialectic of enlightenment’ is an interpretation of Nietzsche.” Rose, *The Melancholy Science*, 34.

⁴⁰⁸ Habermas, “The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment,” 114.

knowledge and morality anticipates [instrumental reason].”⁴⁰⁹ Given he reads *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a genealogy of the thorough instrumentalisation of reason which nevertheless maintains the need to critique modernity, Habermas declares that

Horkheimer and Adorno find themselves in the same embarrassment as Nietzsche: If they do not want to renounce the effect of a final unmasking and still want to continue with critique, they will have to leave at least one rational criterion intact for their explanation of the corruption of all rational criteria.⁴¹⁰

Although *Dialectic of Enlightenment* resists the theory of power in which Nietzsche sought “refuge,” Habermas still sees the work as ultimately carrying out a “performative contradiction”: “A practiced spirit of contradiction is all that remains of the ‘spirit of [...] unrelenting theory.’”⁴¹¹

Scholars sympathetic to Adorno tend to agree that Habermas’s interpretation has miscued subsequent scholarship on *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Hammer notes that because of the widespread acceptance of Habermas’s critical account, it is now a standard view in the literature that the work treats the destructive consequences of instrumental reason. However, Hammer argues that “while instrumentality certainly plays an important role” in Adorno and Horkheimer’s assessment of modern reason, “it is not *the* central term of the book. The central term, if any, is *identity*.”⁴¹² In a similar vein, Martin Shuster claims that the prioritization of the category of instrumental reason “has gained currency because *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is read in light of Horkheimer’s later works.” According to Shuster, in fact “it is more profitable to read *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in light of Adorno’s later works, where the central theme is identity,” as “instrumental rationality is merely symptomatic of a deeper problem centering on identity.”⁴¹³ Similarly, Gillian Rose argues that Adorno “did not share Horkheimer’s concern with instrumental

⁴⁰⁹ The idea that *DE* is primarily a diatribe against instrumental reason and that the central influence is Nietzsche ultimately go hand in hand: “Nietzsche was the great model for the critique of ideology’s totalizing self-overcoming;” and “Twenty-five years after the conclusion of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno remained faithful to its philosophical impulse and never deviated from the paradoxical structure of thinking as totalizing critique. The grandeur of this consistency is shown by a comparison with Nietzsche, whose *Genealogy of Morals* had been the great model for a second level of reflection on the Enlightenment.” *Ibid.*, 107, 120.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 126-127.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*, 128. One example of the impact of Habermas’s reading comes from Seyla Benhabib, who writes ‘[the] critique of enlightenment becomes as totalizing as the false totality it seeks to criticize [...] *If the plight of the enlightenment and of cultural rationalization only reveals the culmination of the identity logic, constitutive of reason, then the theory of the dialectic of the Enlightenment, which is carried out with the tools of this very same reason, perpetuates the very structure of domination it condemns.*’ Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 166, 168 (her emphasis).

⁴¹² Hammer, *Adorno and the Political*, 43 (his emphasis).

⁴¹³ Martin Shuster, *Autonomy after Auschwitz: Adorno, German Idealism, and Modernity* (London and Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 16. Even though the notion of instrumental reason is the focal point of his critique, it’s worth noting that Habermas also acknowledges the extent to which *DE* “fits unobtrusively into the continuity of what was later designated as negative-dialectical thought”. Jürgen Habermas, “Notes on the Developmental History of Horkheimer’s Work,” *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 10, no. 2 (1993), 68.

reason,” and that “reification and Marx’s theory of value are much more important in Adorno’s analysis of society.”⁴¹⁴

While Susan Buck-Morss also sees Adorno as the more influential of the co-authors, her claim is not that the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* rehearses his mature concept of identity. Rather, Buck-Morss emphasizes the parallels between Adorno and Horkheimer’s co-authored work and the early essay “The Idea of Natural History.”⁴¹⁵ While the “German idealists”⁴¹⁶ note that Adorno continues to grapple with many of the questions of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in his ensuing work while clearly engaging with Kant and Hegel, Buck-Morss highlights that Adorno was already engaging with such questions prior to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and in these earlier works the most commanding voice is that of Walter Benjamin: “Adorno’s 1932 speech was openly indebted to Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel* study; *Dialectic of Enlightenment* showed just as clearly the influence of Benjamin’s *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, the last piece he wrote before committing suicide in 1940.”⁴¹⁷ For Buck-Morss, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is at heart an attempt to fulfill “precisely the cognitive task which Benjamin had identified in 1940 as the most pressing, that is, to dismantle the myth of history as progress.”⁴¹⁸

In recent years a considerable portion of Adorno scholarship has been dedicated to exploring the influence of the two key figures of German idealism, Kant⁴¹⁹ and Hegel, with J. M. Bernstein as a leading voice. Bernstein characterizes Adorno as a Hegelian, stating that “however [much] he departs from Hegel, [Adorno] accepts the rudiments of Hegelian idealism.”⁴²⁰ Bernstein argues that if, for Hegel, philosophy is its *own time* apprehended in thought, “to be writing philosophy after the French Revolution is significantly different from writing philosophy [as Adorno does] ‘after Auschwitz.’”⁴²¹ Bernstein claims that the chief aim of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is to demonstrate “how it was possible that the rational process of enlightenment which was intended to secure freedom from fear and human sovereignty could turn into forms of political, social, and cultural domination.”⁴²² To do this, Adorno and Horkheimer situate Hegelian concepts in a new historical

⁴¹⁴ Rose, *The Melancholy Science*, 6.

⁴¹⁵ Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 59.

⁴¹⁶ See below.

⁴¹⁷ Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 59.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁴¹⁹ The most reliable account of Kant’s influence on *DE* comes from Martin Shuster, *Autonomy after Auschwitz*, 7-41.

⁴²⁰ J. M. Bernstein, “Negative Dialectic as Fate: Adorno and Hegel” in *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, ed. Tom Huhn (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 19. Aside from Bernstein’s account, two recent interpretations that focus on the influence of Hegel are William Maker, “Two Dialectics of Enlightenment” in *Hegel Bulletin*, vol. 33, no. 2 (2012): 54-73 and Pierre-François Noppen. “Reflective Rationality and the Claim of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*” in *European Journal of Philosophy*, vol.23, no. 2 (2015): 293-320.

⁴²¹ Bernstein, “Negative Dialectic as Fate,” 20.

⁴²² *Ibid.*, 21.

setting, such that the dialectic of myth and enlightenment is “a generalization and radicalization of ‘The Enlightenment’ chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.”⁴²³ The speculative proposition that guides Hegel’s analysis of the Enlightenment is that pure insight and religious faith are mutually dependent. However, in the Enlightenment pure insight disavows this dependence, permanently eroding religious faith and ultimately bringing about its own demise: “enlightenment rationality, pure insight as permanent critique, because it has no content of its own, because its goodness or worth comes solely from the dissolving of illusion, can be, finally, nothing but the empty thinking of the self thinking itself.”⁴²⁴ Enlightenment reverts to a purely subjective form of reason, an anthropomorphic myth, and Bernstein contends that “in broad terms, this *is* the dialectic of enlightenment.”⁴²⁵ He unpacks this further by explaining that both Hegel’s dialectic of pure insight and religious faith as well as Adorno and Horkheimer’s historically generalized dialectic of myth and enlightenment are to be understood through the lens of Kant’s account of concept and intuition: “Reason is to faith as concept is to intuition. So, enlightened or subjective reason is a version of concepts without intuitions (which are of course empty), and faith a version of intuitions without concepts (which are of course blind).”⁴²⁶ My own interpretation largely agrees with Bernstein’s analysis, however I explain the dialectic of enlightenment by way of the two competing aspects of knowledge – abstraction and mimesis – in order to throw light on Benjamin’s lingering influence on the text.⁴²⁷

The major split between the “Adorno scholars” and the “German idealists” centres around Adorno and Horkheimer’s aim to “prepare a positive concept of enlightenment which liberates it from its entanglement in blind domination.”⁴²⁸ The success of this objective has been disputed by some German idealists. In comparing the critique of enlightenment in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to Hegel’s critique in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, William Maker argues that Adorno and Horkheimer “reject [...] the possibility of objective knowledge, philosophical science,” such that “the possibility of final enlightenment is precluded *a priori*.”⁴²⁹ Likewise, Shuster contends that no positive program of enlightenment appears in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, suggesting instead that Adorno’s later work grapples with questions he and Horkheimer could not solve.⁴³⁰ Bernstein is

⁴²³ Ibid., 22.

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

⁴²⁵ Ibid. (his emphasis).

⁴²⁶ Ibid., 23.

⁴²⁷ One recent example of the blind spot in Adorno scholarship with respect to Benjamin’s influence is Hulatt’s “The Place of Mimesis in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*.” Despite the topic, Benjamin does not rate a mention. Owen Hulatt, “The Place of Mimesis in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*” in *The Routledge Companion to the Frankfurt School*, ed. Peter E. Gordon, Espen Hammer and Axel Honneth (New York and London: Routledge, 2019).

⁴²⁸ *DE*, xxviii.

⁴²⁹ Maker, “Two Dialectics of Enlightenment,” 67, 71.

⁴³⁰ Shuster, *Autonomy after Auschwitz*, 12, 40.

ambivalent. On the one hand, he agrees with Shuster that Adorno's later work attempts to solve the aporia of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: "How can reason inquire after the meaning that it itself has expunged? *Negative Dialectics* is intended as a response to this dilemma."⁴³¹ On the other hand, he argues that Adorno and Horkheimer do suggest how enlightenment can prevent its self-destruction – it must become self-reflexive so that its means-based reason can be directed towards rational ends: "they state that their task is to continue the process of reflection, forcing enlightenment to 'examine itself' [...] Through reason's self-examination the most general aims of enlightenment are preserved."⁴³² Pierre-François Noppen concurs with this latter point. In defending their claim to have prepared a positive concept of enlightenment, he argues that for Adorno and Horkheimer "reflexivity is the centrepiece of the conception of rationality that is the background of their whole critique."⁴³³ For both Bernstein and Noppen, then, to whatever extent Adorno and Horkheimer present a positive program of enlightenment, what they put forward is thoroughly Hegelian. Contra Habermas, Buck-Morss argues that Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis is not an indication that they had lost all hope in the enlightenment, but rather "this critique was made *for the sake of* the Enlightenment and the rationality which it promised."⁴³⁴ Hammer agrees with Buck-Morss that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* "draws heavily on the work of Benjamin," again emphasizing the theses "On the Concept of History" in this respect.⁴³⁵ Likewise, Hammer also defends the book's aim to "anticipate a more complete conception of reason," arguing that "such a conception would focus on the notion of mimesis" – albeit he notes that this is a notion which the authors "never spell out in detail."⁴³⁶

The interpretation presented in this chapter seeks to address several of the issues cited in the secondary literature. First, while I agree with those in the scholarship who argue that identity underpins instrumentality, I consider the notions of identity and nonidentity by way of the opposition between abstraction and mimesis. I argue that, for Adorno and Horkheimer, mimesis and abstraction are two fundamental and necessary aspects of knowledge. In the historically generalized account of enlightenment the authors present, the mimetic aspect of knowledge is progressively undermined by the abstract one. While this has obvious parallels with Benjamin's philosophy of language described in Chapter 3, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* the process of increasing abstraction

⁴³¹ Bernstein, "Negative Dialectic as Fate," 32.

⁴³² J. M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge, England; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 86.

⁴³³ Noppen, "Reflective Rationality," 304.

⁴³⁴ Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 61 (her emphasis).

⁴³⁵ Hammer, *Adorno and the Political*, 42. In line with Hammer and Buck-Morss, Bernstein argues that Adorno and Horkheimer "were patently following the lead of Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on the Concept of History.'" Bernstein, *Disenchantment and Ethics*, 85 n16.

⁴³⁶ Hammer, *Adorno and the Political*, 47.

in language is accompanied by a corresponding process in other areas, namely social organization and religion. Given modern forms of domination in society are precipitated by parallel forms of thought wherein the mimetic aspect of knowledge is suppressed, it follows that mimesis must be reintroduced to knowledge to forestall enlightenment's relapse into mythology and facilitate a glimpse of freedom in society. By shedding light on the concept of mimesis, I seek to defend Adorno and Horkheimer's claim to have prepared a positive concept of enlightenment. In this respect, while I agree with Hammer's claim that the notion of mimesis is central to the positive conception of knowledge outlined by the authors, I also seek to allay his misgivings regarding the term by spelling out its Benjaminian connection. Indeed, while both he and Buck-Morss emphasize the impact of the theses "On the Concept of History" for Adorno and Horkheimer's account, here it is argued that several of Benjamin's much earlier writings are also influential. The key aim of this chapter is to complicate the conventional narrative which sees *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as the point at which Adorno's independence from Benjamin is marked.

Abstraction, or, "enlightenment reverts to mythology"

Enlightenment thinking is typically understood as a corrective and liberating movement against the counterforces of myth.⁴³⁷ "The Concept of Enlightenment" seeks to explicate the two theses of the dialectic of enlightenment: "Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology."⁴³⁸ These theses are then expanded on in remaining "philosophical fragments," hence the first essay is "the theoretical basis of those which follow."⁴³⁹ Shuster duly maintains that "The Concept of Enlightenment" "anchors the essays following it," such that "the remaining chapters serve as applications, extensions, or implications" of the first one.⁴⁴⁰ As my account begins by detailing enlightenment as a process of increasing abstraction in knowledge, this means starting with the second thesis, "enlightenment reverts to mythology." I will then move on to an analysis of mimesis as a counterweight to abstraction, which entails an explanation of the first thesis, "myth is already enlightenment."

According to Adorno and Horkheimer, enlightenment involves a) the disenchantment of nature and b) its domination. In the first sense, enlightenment's program is wholly negative – it seeks to negate myth: "Enlightenment's program was the disenchantment of the world. It wanted to dispel myths, to

⁴³⁷ Habermas, "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment," 107.

⁴³⁸ *DE*, xviii.

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*, xviii.

⁴⁴⁰ Shuster, *Autonomy after Auschwitz*, 14.

overthrow fantasy with knowledge.”⁴⁴¹ The second sense, enlightenment’s positive program, is tied to the development of the modern scientific method, which sought to “establish man as the master of nature.”⁴⁴² It is important to note that enlightenment in sense b) depends on enlightenment in sense a),⁴⁴³ indicating that identity underpins instrumentality, as disenchantment is predicated on identity thinking, while domination is a result of instrumentalisation.⁴⁴⁴ Having said that, it is my contention that abstraction and mimesis – terms associated with Benjamin’s oeuvre – are just as central to Horkheimer and Adorno’s analysis as the terminology of identity and nonidentity, which is commonly affiliated with Hegel.⁴⁴⁵

Enlightenment as the disenchantment of nature

Adorno and Horkheimer state that enlightenment’s program of disenchantment “means the extirpation of animism.”⁴⁴⁶ This involves the elimination of anthropomorphic or subjective reason: “Enlightenment has always regarded anthropomorphism, the projection of subjective properties onto nature, as the basis of myth [...] According to enlightened thinking, the multiplicity of mythical figures can be reduced to a single common denominator, the subject.”⁴⁴⁷ In its quest for objectivity, enlightenment as disenchantment first seeks unity: “Unity remains the watchword from Parmenides to Russell. All gods and qualities must be destroyed.”⁴⁴⁸ If all that exists can be reduced to a single common denominator, this enables quantification and calculation. The critique of enlightenment as disenchantment is therefore primarily a critique of formal logic and mathematics: “Formal logic was the high school of unification. It offered Enlightenment thinkers a schema for making the world calculable. The mythologizing equation of Forms with numbers in Plato’s last writings expresses the longing of all demythologizing: number became enlightenment’s canon.”⁴⁴⁹ Because enlightenment reason first seeks unity, Adorno and Horkheimer describe abstraction as “the instrument of enlightenment,”⁴⁵⁰ whereby “nature, stripped of qualities, becomes the chaotic stuff of mere classification.”⁴⁵¹ Bernstein explains that abstraction occurs via “reiterability,” in which discrete particulars are repeatedly subsumed under ever more abstract universals and the

⁴⁴¹ *DE*, 1.

⁴⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴⁴³ The distinction between the “positive” and “negative” senses of enlightenment is explained in Bernstein, *Disenchantment and Ethics*, 93.

⁴⁴⁴ Hammer, *Adorno and the Political*, 43; Shuster, *Autonomy after Auschwitz*, 16.

⁴⁴⁵ This is supported by the fact that in “The Concept of Enlightenment,” identity, nonidentity, and their cognates are mentioned only 10 times, whereas abstraction, mimesis and their cognates are mentioned 15 times.

⁴⁴⁶ *DE*, 2.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

distinctive and material aspects of phenomena are gradually whittled down,⁴⁵² such that “whatever might be different is made the same.”⁴⁵³ The authors refer to this notion of reiterability as enlightenment’s “principle of immanence,” which they parallel with mythology’s principle of fated necessity: “The principle of immanence, the explanation of every event as repetition, which enlightenment upholds against mythical imagination, is that of myth itself.”⁴⁵⁴ Both myth and enlightenment are therefore “fatefully arranged” systems of meaning⁴⁵⁵:

In the terseness of the mythical image, as in the clarity of the scientific formula, the eternity of the actual is confirmed and mere existence is pronounced as the meaning it obstructs. The world as a gigantic analytical judgment, the only surviving dream of science, is of the same kind as the cosmic myth which linked the alternation of spring and autumn to the abduction of Persephone.⁴⁵⁶

By abstracting the particular and material aspects of phenomena in favour of general and universal characteristics, the subject no longer takes the object as it really is, hence enlightenment reason “amputates the incommensurable”⁴⁵⁷ and “tabooe[s] knowledge which really apprehends the object.”⁴⁵⁸ As noted in Chapters 1 and 3, this notion of abstract knowledge is one of Benjamin’s earliest and most enduring critical targets, one which is clearly expressed in the fragment “Language and Logic,” treated in Chapter 1: “The relation between concepts – and this relation governs the sphere of knowledge – is one of subsumption. The lower concepts are contained in the higher ones – that is to say, in one sense or another what is known loses its autonomy for the sake of what it is known as.”⁴⁵⁹ This subsumption of the actual object by the subjective concept “makes the new appear as something predetermined which therefore is really the old,”⁴⁶⁰ an idea that Adorno first expressed in a letter to Benjamin in 1934.⁴⁶¹

Because this process of abstraction “eschews reason’s dependence on objects,” Bernstein argues that enlightenment reason systematically misrecognizes its object:

⁴⁵² Bernstein, *Disenchantment and Ethics*, 88.

⁴⁵³ *DE*, 8.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁵ This is Adorno’s definition of myth in *INH*, 111.

⁴⁵⁶ *DE*, 20.

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁵⁹ Benjamin, “Language and Logic,” 272-273.

⁴⁶⁰ *DE*, 21.

⁴⁶¹ *ABC*, 38: “the question concerning the muteness of works of art has led me in the most remarkable fashion right into our central question, that of the coincidence of the modern with the archaic. And indeed from the other end of the spectrum: from the archaic itself. For I have come to realize that just as the modern is the most ancient, so too the archaic itself is a function of the new.”

If the concepts employed in giving recognition necessarily pass over this perceptual and judgmental beginning, or acknowledge it only in terms of the application of what is already conceived of as logical or rational in itself, then what is recognized will be misrecognized at the same time.⁴⁶²

In this regard, Adorno and Horkheimer's dialectic of enlightenment recalls Hegel's dialectic of mastery and servitude, as while the misrecognition of unmediated mastery is "dissolved," by abstracting the particular and material aspects of the object in favour of the universal characteristics of the subjective concept, enlightenment reason "perpetuates [misrecognition] in universal mediation, by relating every existing thing to every other."⁴⁶³ Echoing Marx's critique of exchange value from the opening chapter on *Capital*,⁴⁶⁴ abstraction brings about the transition from "specific representation" to what Adorno and Horkheimer term "universal fungibility."⁴⁶⁵ In the same way that all commodities – including human labour – are made proportional in the capitalist marketplace, enlightenment rationality makes *everything* comparable by "amputating" the particular and material aspects of the object via the subjective concept. While in earlier times "fetishes had been subject to the law of equivalence," in modernity "equivalence itself becomes a fetish."⁴⁶⁶ By abstracting away all the qualitative features of the object, enlightenment reason, which sought a wholly objective form of knowledge, instead reverts to an anthropomorphic projection of the object by the subject. This is the main sense in which enlightenment as disenchantment reverts to mythology.

Enlightenment as the domination of nature

According to Adorno and Horkheimer's narrative, disenchantment results from the drive of self-preservation: "Humans believe themselves free of fear when there is no longer anything unknown. *This has determined the path of demythologization.*"⁴⁶⁷ Given both myth and enlightenment seek to explain nature to quell its apparent threat, they declare that "enlightenment is mythical fear radicalized."⁴⁶⁸ This fear gives rise to the enlightenment drive to dominate nature: "What human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and human beings.

⁴⁶² Bernstein, "Negative Dialectic as Fate," 25-26.

⁴⁶³ *DE*, 8.

⁴⁶⁴ Marx argues that the rise of the money form, in which all products are related to one another via a universal currency, "conceals the social character of private labour and the social relations between the individual workers, by making those relations appear as relations between material objects." Thus, in capitalist society, commodities "do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material relations between persons and social relations between things." Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Classics, 1990), 166, 169.

⁴⁶⁵ *DE*, 6-7.

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 11 (my emphasis).

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

Nothing else counts.”⁴⁶⁹ Francis Bacon, the father of empiricism, is seen as the personification of this program: “The ‘happy match’ between human understanding and the nature of things that he envisaged is a patriarchal one: the mind, conquering superstition, is to rule over disenchanting nature.”⁴⁷⁰ While the critique of enlightenment as disenchantment is aimed primarily at formal logic and mathematics, the critique of enlightenment as domination is principally directed against the empirical sciences and the rise of modern technology. Furthermore, as the previous passage makes clear, the instrumentalization and domination of nature depends on disenchantment as a process of abstraction, as “it is the identity of mind and its correlative, the unity of nature, which subdues the abundance of qualities,”⁴⁷¹ in order that “without regard for differences, the world is made subject to man.”⁴⁷² As disenchantment turns thought into “a tool”⁴⁷³ whose function is the domination of nature, Adorno and Horkheimer state that “technology is the essence of [enlightenment] knowledge,” a form of knowledge which “aims to produce neither concepts nor images, nor the joy of understanding, but method, exploitation of the labor of others, capital.”⁴⁷⁴ It must be emphasized that the authors do not wish to reject these areas of knowledge altogether, but as Hammer explains, they condemn the situation in which “one part of reason is taken for the whole, that is, as exhaustive of what reason can be.”⁴⁷⁵ The authors make this point clear in the preface, where they deplore the decline of “theoretical education” in favour of practical and technical proficiency:

in the operations of modern science, the major discoveries are paid for with an increasing decline of theoretical education [...] In the mysterious willingness of the technologically educated masses to fall under the spell of any despotism, in its self-destructive affinity to nationalist paranoia, in all this uncomprehended senselessness the weakness of contemporary theoretical understanding is evident.⁴⁷⁶

They argue that, by becoming a wholly instrumental form of reason, enlightenment thought can focus only on means rather than ends:

Reason serves as a universal tool for the fabrication of all other tools, rigidly purpose-directed and as calamitous as the precisely calculated operations of

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., 2.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁷² Ibid., 5.

⁴⁷³ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁴⁷⁵ Hammer, *Adorno and the Political*, 47. Similarly, Bernstein writes that “instrumental or subjective reasoning, in which items are understood and explained by being subsumed under general theories, is only a part of reason, that part whose job is to enable our coping with and mastering of threatening nature. When this part of reason is taken to be the whole of reason, theoretically and practically, then we end up in the apparently ever-moving but, in reality, static iron cage of modernity.” Bernstein, “Negative Dialectic as Fate,” 21.

⁴⁷⁶ *DE*, xvi.

material production, the results of which for human beings escape all calculation. Reason's old ambition to be purely an instrument of purposes has finally been fulfilled.⁴⁷⁷

Here the alliance of instrumental reason and modern technology which facilitated the Holocaust – a theme which underlies the entire book – is most evident, and ultimately Adorno and Horkheimer argue that means-based instrumental reason devours ends-based meaning altogether: “On their way toward modern science human beings have discarded meaning. The concept is replaced by the formula, the cause by rules and probability.”⁴⁷⁸ Enlightenment knowledge, shorn of ends-based meaning, is revealed to be nothing more than power over nature: “Today, when Bacon's utopia, in which ‘we should command nature in action,’ has been fulfilled on a telluric scale, the essence of the compulsion which he ascribed to unmastered nature is becoming apparent. It was power itself.”⁴⁷⁹ Given this knowledge derives from the drive of self-preservation, humankind returns to a natural state of existence: “Individuals shrink to the nodal points of conventional reactions and the modes of operation objectively expected of them. Animism had endowed things with souls; industrialism makes souls into things.”⁴⁸⁰ Considering myth and nature are synonymous,⁴⁸¹ the return of mankind to a natural state of existence is the key sense in which enlightenment as domination reverts to mythology. As enlightenment reason has revealed itself as power over nature, and as humanity has reverted to nature, in enlightenment society human beings are themselves the object of domination:

Through the mediation of the total society, which encompasses all relationships and impulses, human beings are being turned back into precisely what the developmental law of society, the principle of the self, had opposed: mere examples of the species, identical to one another through isolation within the compulsively controlled collectivity.⁴⁸²

Adorno will later refer to this state of affairs as the “administered world,” in which the individual becomes a mere specimen: “in the concentration camps it was no longer an individual who died, but a specimen.”⁴⁸³ Not only does enlightenment first disenchant nature to dominate it, but enlightenment rationality also instantiates itself in society, with disastrous consequences. This three-step process is outlined in the following passage:

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., 23.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid., 33-34.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁸¹ See Chapter 2, quoted at n254.

⁴⁸² *DE*, 29.

⁴⁸³ *ND*, 362.

Under the leveling rule of abstraction [disenchantment], which makes everything in nature repeatable, and of industry [domination], for which abstraction prepared the way, the liberated finally themselves become the ‘herd’ [social reality], which Hegel identified as the outcome of enlightenment.⁴⁸⁴

Mimesis, or, “myth is already enlightenment”

At the most basic level, the thesis that “myth is already enlightenment” puts forward the claim that myths were a device for explaining the world: “Myth sought to report, to name, to tell of origins—but therefore also to narrate, record, explain.”⁴⁸⁵ Importantly, in the same way that enlightenment seeks to dispel myth, myth itself displaces magic, an earlier means for explaining and interacting with the world. Shuster thereby notes that in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* there is “tripartite periodization,” where the magical period is allegedly prior to both the mythological and the enlightening worldview.⁴⁸⁶ In this respect, enlightenment is both a time period and an intellectual process. As a time period, enlightenment denotes the stage of world history after mythology; as a process, it details the progressive undermining of mimetic rationality by abstract logic. This emphasizes the sense in which philosophical terms such as enlightenment and truth are “real concepts”⁴⁸⁷ in that they instantiate themselves in social reality:

Both these terms, enlightenment and truth, are to be understood as pertaining not merely to intellectual history but also to current reality. Just as enlightenment expresses the real movement of bourgeois society as a whole from the perspective of the idea embodied in its personalities and institutions, truth refers not merely to rational consciousness but equally to the form it takes in reality.⁴⁸⁸

In terms of definition, enlightenment as a time period and enlightenment as a process are intricately linked, as the period begins when abstract knowledge first becomes dominant with respect to mimesis.

In the magical period humankind’s relationship to nature was primarily mimetic, as the subject sought to influence the object by imitating it: “The magician imitates demons; to frighten or placate them he makes intimidating or appeasing gestures.”⁴⁸⁹ In this respect, Adorno and Horkheimer’s concept of mimesis follows Benjamin’s, as he also sees the mark of mimesis in magical practices:

⁴⁸⁴ *DE*, 9.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁸⁶ Martin Shuster, “The Critique of the Enlightenment,” in *A Companion to Adorno*, ed. Peter E. Gordon, Espen Hammer and Max Pensky (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2020), 256.

⁴⁸⁷ The notion of enlightenment and truth as “real concepts” is discussed at length in Noppen, “Reflective Rationality.”

⁴⁸⁸ *DE*, xvi.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

One might well assume that this mimetic gift, which was earlier the basis for clairvoyance, very gradually found its way into language and writing in the course of a development over thousands of years [...] in other words: it is to script and language that clairvoyance has, over the course of history, yielded its old powers.⁴⁹⁰

Adorno and Horkheimer contrast this mimetic mode of behaviour with enlightenment in several ways. Firstly, enlightenment favours unity to dominate nature: “the essence of things is revealed as always the same, a substrate of domination. This identity constitutes the unity of nature.”⁴⁹¹ In contrast, mimetic magic understood nature as a diverse entity:

The rites of the shaman were directed at the wind, the rain, the snake outside or the demon inside the sick person, not at materials or specimens [...] Magic is bloody untruth, but in it domination is not yet disclaimed by transforming itself into a pure truth underlying the world which it enslaves.⁴⁹²

In comparison with enlightenment’s principle of universal fungibility, because nature was not understood as a “unified cosmos,” magic involved specific representation: “What is done to the spear, the hair, the name of the enemy, is also to befall his person; the sacrificial animal is slain in place of the god.”⁴⁹³ Significantly, while enlightenment reason is subjective, mimetic knowledge is based on the object: “At the magical stage dream and image were not regarded as mere signs of things but were linked to them by resemblance or name [...] Magic like science is concerned with ends, but it pursues them through mimesis, not through an increasing distance from the object.”⁴⁹⁴

However, as this quote demonstrates, magic – like enlightenment – had an instrumental relation to nature. Hammer duly notes that mimetic rationality cannot be merely opposed to instrumental reason, as “from the very dawn of humanity, mimesis [...] became inscribed in rational procedures.”⁴⁹⁵ This problematizes Hulatt’s claim that mimesis is a “drive” that runs counter to the drive of self-preservation, as, like the abstract reasoning of enlightenment, mimesis is a rational attempt on the part of the subject to quell the threat of nature.⁴⁹⁶ Rather than being understood as a

⁴⁹⁰ *DOS*, 697-698.

⁴⁹¹ *DE*, 6.

⁴⁹² *Ibid.*

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁹⁵ Hammer, *Adorno and the Political*, 48. Similarly, Jarvis maintains that “magic and mimesis are themselves cognitive practices” which entail “the incipient entanglement of rationality and domination.” Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 30.

⁴⁹⁶ The same problem crops up for Hulatt in his suggestion that the drive of self-preservation be given a “mimetic turn.” Hulatt, “The Place of Mimesis” 356, 362.

drive, mimesis should be viewed as one fundamental aspect of rationality that is counterposed to rationality's other foundational moment, that of abstraction. In this respect, while abstraction is the "instrument of enlightenment,"⁴⁹⁷ mimesis is the "instrument of magic." Over time, humankind comes to discover that the logic of abstraction is of greater value in quelling the threat of nature than the logic of mimesis, hence tendencies toward materiality, specificity, and receptivity are increasingly displaced by abstraction, generality, and subsumption: "The self which learned about order and subordination through the subjugation of the world soon equated truth in general with classifying thought, without whose fixed distinctions it cannot exist. Along with mimetic magic it tabooed the knowledge which really apprehends the object."⁴⁹⁸ Enlightenment is thus seen as the transformation of knowledge from a state of "raw mimesis" – "mimesis as an unalloyed state and mode of relating to the world"⁴⁹⁹ – to radical enlightenment, where knowledge is wholly abstract and "all qualities [are] destroyed."⁵⁰⁰

To demonstrate the transformation from mimetic to abstract knowledge, the authors draw on the domain of religion. The earliest stage of religion they identify is "the murky, undivided entity worshipped as the principle of *mana*,"⁵⁰¹ which represents "nature as a universal power"⁵⁰² that looms threateningly over humankind: "What the primitive experiences as supernatural is not a spiritual substance in contradistinction to the material world but the complex concatenation of nature in contrast to its individual link."⁵⁰³ Crucially, *mana* is also recognized as the primal form of identity, and therefore the birth of abstraction: "If the tree is addressed no longer as simply a tree but as evidence of something else, a location of *mana*, language expresses the contradiction that it is at the same time itself and something other than itself, identical and not identical."⁵⁰⁴ *Mana* is succeeded by the magical stage, where nature is no longer a universal entity, but rather magical spirits are "identical with elements."⁵⁰⁵ From the moment of its birth in *mana*, the logic of abstraction appears in a more developed state in magical rituals of specific representation: "the substitution which takes place in sacrifice marks a step toward discursive logic."⁵⁰⁶ That said, in the magical stage mimesis is still the dominant tendency, and abstraction is merely germinating. Magic

⁴⁹⁷ *DE*, 9.

⁴⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁹⁹ Hulatt, "The Place of Mimesis," 355. Rabinbach refers to this as "animistic identification." Anson Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe: German Intellectuals between Apocalypse and Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 176.

⁵⁰⁰ *DE*, 5.

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵⁰² *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵⁰³ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

is succeeded by the polytheistic religion of mythology, whose Gods symbolize a more abstract version of the spirits that preceded them: “The Olympian deities are no longer directly identical with elements, but signify them. In Homer Zeus controls the daytime sky, Apollo guides the sun; Helios and Eos are already passing over into allegory. The gods detach themselves from substances to become their quintessence.”⁵⁰⁷ Nevertheless, mimesis remains influential in Greek mythology: “The murky, undivided entity worshipped as the principle of *mana* at the earliest known stages of humanity lived on in the bright world of the Greek religion.”⁵⁰⁸ The monotheistic God of Judaism and Christianity marks a further step towards abstract knowledge, as God is totally abstracted from nature, and it is finally succeeded by radical enlightenment, where “the distinction between God and man is reduced to an irrelevance.”⁵⁰⁹ In the same way that raw mimesis “equates the nonliving with the living” by projecting *mana* onto inanimate nature, radical enlightenment “equates the living with the nonliving” by abstracting away all the qualitative features of the object via conceptual unification.⁵¹⁰ In this sense, while raw mimesis is recognized as the birth of abstraction, radical enlightenment “is itself mimesis: of death.”⁵¹¹

As suggested by the claim that *mana* is the primal form of identity, the transformation from mimetic to abstract knowledge observed in religion is mirrored in language. Like Benjamin before them, Adorno and Horkheimer use the example of hieroglyphs to refer to language’s mimetic origin: “As the hieroglyphs attest, the word originally also had a pictorial function.”⁵¹² In this respect, linguistic practices are rooted in mimetic *images*, while the classificatory aspect of language occurs via the *sign*.⁵¹³ While Bernstein has read this section in relation to Hegel, and Shuster has noted its importance as regards Kant, I will defend the claim that Benjamin’s philosophy of language is crucial to understanding the distinction between image and sign.⁵¹⁴

In language’s journey from the mimetic image to the abstract sign, “the teaching of the priests” represents the median point, “in the sense that in them sign and image coincided.”⁵¹⁵ The symbol therefore exists halfway between the image and the sign – it retains the mimetic function of the image, nevertheless it also contains the element of repetition necessary for the classificatory sign: “Nature as self-repetition is the core of the symbolic: an entity or a process which is conceived as

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid., 10.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid., 5.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid., 11.

⁵¹¹ Ibid., 44.

⁵¹² Ibid., 12. For comparison with Benjamin, see Chapter 3, quote at n381.

⁵¹³ Ibid., 13.

⁵¹⁴ Bernstein, “Negative Dialectic as Fate,” 23; Shuster, *Autonomy after Auschwitz*, 18-21.

⁵¹⁵ *DE*, 12.

eternal because it is reenacted again and again in the guise of the symbol.”⁵¹⁶ As will be discussed below, Judaism is seen as the corresponding median point in the transformation of religion, as in the *Bilderverbot*, the two opposed aspects of knowledge again coincide. After reaching this symbolic moment, humankind continues to favour the logic of abstraction over the element of mimesis, hence the image is gradually displaced by the sign: “Inexhaustibility, endless renewal, and the permanence of what they signify are not only attributes of all symbols but their true content.”⁵¹⁷ By the stage of radical enlightenment, image and sign are wholly sundered. The sign estranges itself from the object and loses the element of mimesis inherent in the symbol, while the image loses the ability to identify the object, and cannot be considered knowledge: “As sign, language must resign itself to being calculation and, to know nature, must renounce the claim to resemble it. As image it must resign itself to being a likeness and, to be entirely nature, must renounce the claim to know it.”⁵¹⁸

As discussed in Chapter 3, Benjamin concludes the fragment “Antitheses Concerning Word and Name” by explaining that while the mimetic gift has been transferred into language, language is always in danger of losing this feature and becoming wholly abstract.⁵¹⁹ According to Adorno and Horkheimer’s account of the separation of image and sign, this danger has very nearly become a reality, as enlightenment’s preference for mathematical signs⁵²⁰ leads it to “denounce the words of language, which bear the stamp of impressions, as counterfeit coin that would be better replaced by neutral counters.”⁵²¹ In a passage that resembles Benjamin’s critique of the bourgeois conception of language, they argue that radical enlightenment threatens to extirpate the mimetic strand in language altogether:

The world of magic still retained differences whose traces have vanished even in linguistic forms. The manifold affinities between existing things are supplanted by the single relationship between the subject who confers meaning and the meaningless object, *between rational significance and its accidental bearer*.⁵²²

Regarding Benjamin’s account, Habermas contends that if the lingering stream of similarity between nature and language “run[s] dry,” then “the poetic faculty to interpret the world in terms of

⁵¹⁶ Ibid.

⁵¹⁷ Ibid.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid., 12-13.

⁵¹⁹ See Chapter 3, n396.

⁵²⁰ *DE*, 4-5: “Anything which cannot be resolved into numbers, and ultimately into one, is illusion; modern positivism consigns it to poetry.”

⁵²¹ Ibid., 2.

⁵²² Ibid., 7 (my emphasis). In Benjamin’s words, “it is no longer conceivable, as the bourgeois view of language maintains, that the word has an *accidental* relation to its object, that it is a sign for things (or knowledge of them) agreed by some convention.” *LAN*, 62 (my emphasis).

human needs would falter.”⁵²³ In a similar vein, Adorno argues elsewhere that “cognition can never rid itself of its mimetic moment” without “end[ing] up in madness.”⁵²⁴

The role of mimesis in Adorno and Horkheimer’s positive concept of enlightenment

Nevertheless, in the same way that enlightenment instantiates itself in social reality, Adorno and Horkheimer insist that truth, too, is a “real concept,” leading them to declare that “it is not existence that is without hope, but knowledge which appropriates and perpetuates existence as a schema in the pictorial or mathematical symbol.”⁵²⁵ As domination in society is precipitated by parallel forms of thought, it follows that a new form of reason is required to reshape society. This is foreshadowed in the preface as the “aporia” of the book, as while “the first matter we had to investigate [is] the self-destruction of enlightenment,” the authors declare that “freedom in society is inseparable from enlightenment thinking.”⁵²⁶ In this respect, despite the pessimism of Adorno and Horkheimer’s description of the transformation of knowledge, it retains – like Benjamin’s account before it – an ambivalent significance. Nevertheless, while both accounts display this ambivalent tendency, the dialectic of enlightenment differs markedly from the disruptive, messianic notion of redemption advanced by Benjamin, which emphasizes that we must seize a particular moment in time as it “flash[es] up fleetingly out of the stream of things only in order to sink down once more.”⁵²⁷ This messianism, which loses *all hope* in the notion of historical progress, culminates in his claim in “On the Concept of History” that the only way to redeem humankind is to “blast open the continuum of history.”⁵²⁸ Despite their negativity, Adorno and Horkheimer insist that the possibility of truth – and its social equivalent, freedom – still inheres in the historical process: “Each advance of civilization has renewed not only mastery but also the prospect of its alleviation.”⁵²⁹ Their stated aim is therefore to “prepare a positive concept of enlightenment which liberates it from its entanglement in blind domination.”⁵³⁰

It has been suggested that, as a process of increasing abstraction in knowledge at the expense of mimesis, enlightenment leads to the domination of human and non-human nature. I defend the

⁵²³ Habermas, “Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism,” 50.

⁵²⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique*, trans. Willis Domingo (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), 147; Theodor W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1993), 40.

⁵²⁵ *DE*, 21.

⁵²⁶ *Ibid.*, xvi.

⁵²⁷ *DOS*, 698.

⁵²⁸ Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” in *SW IV*, 396.

⁵²⁹ *DE*, 32.

⁵³⁰ *Ibid.*, xviii.

claim that the form of reason that would disentangle knowledge from domination and facilitate a glimpse of freedom in society must adhere to both the mimetic and classificatory aspects of knowledge. Given enlightenment reason clearly involves a dearth of the former, it follows that the mimetic aspect of knowledge must be reintroduced to forestall enlightenment's relapse into mythology. The crucial passage for detailing this form of reason lies in a single, particularly dense paragraph at the very centre of the first essay. It was noted earlier that the enlightenment process of increasing abstraction in knowledge can be demonstrated with respect to both language and religion. The central passage brings together these two processes by demonstrating that they each contain a redemptive moment. When brought together, the redemptive moments that correspond to the process of enlightenment in language and religion gesture towards the positive concept of enlightenment that Adorno and Horkheimer claim to prepare.

Harking back to Benjamin's 1916 essay "On Language," the passage begins by explaining that, even though language is in danger of becoming wholly abstract, "enlightenment as a nominalist tendency stops short before the *nomen*, the non-extensive, restricted concept, the proper name."⁵³¹ Once identified as a refuge for mimesis in language, the name is linked with the *Bilderverbot*, as, although Judaism prohibits graven images – outlawing magical practices of mimesis (fetishes, sacrifices, dance, etc.) – Adorno and Horkheimer argue that mimesis is negated *and preserved* in the prohibition on uttering the name of God: "the link between name and essence is still acknowledged in the prohibition on uttering the name of God."⁵³² This is a significant transformation in the process of enlightenment, as with the conversion of mimetic practices into conceptual laws, knowledge is no longer depicted by means of sensuous representation, but rather by rational negation. Anson Rabinbach duly contends that in the notion of the *Bilderverbot* "the Jews [...] crossed the threshold from mythology to symbolism," a moment which signals both the origin of enlightenment and its redemptive moment⁵³³:

The disenchanting world of Judaism propitiates magic by negating it in the idea of God. The Jewish religion brooks no word which might bring solace to the despair of all mortality. It places all hope in the prohibition on invoking falsity as God, the finite as the infinite, the lie as truth. The pledge of salvation lies in the rejection of any faith which claims to depict it, knowledge in the denunciation of illusion.⁵³⁴

⁵³¹ Ibid., 17.

⁵³² Ibid.

⁵³³ Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe*, 177. Hammer likewise holds that the *Bilderverbot* "represent[s] culture's triumph over nature." Hammer, *Adorno and the Political*, 66.

⁵³⁴ *DE*, 17.

The authors proceed to align negative theology with the Hegelian concept of determinate negation, as both reject magical practices that present immediate, sensuous representations of the object, meanwhile they also reject its opposite – abstract representations of the object via the concept. It is no secret that Adorno saw Benjamin’s philosophy – and indeed his own – as drawing on negative theology,⁵³⁵ which even led to his chastising Benjamin when he felt Benjamin transgressed against this impulse.⁵³⁶ Peter E. Gordon has recently explored the connection between negative theology and social criticism in Adorno’s work, arguing that he “resists any affirmation of theology,” instead seeking to “preserve theology only by overcoming it entirely.”⁵³⁷ While Gordon does not cite the below passage, this exact intention is expressed in Adorno and Horkheimer’s parallel between the *Bilderverbot* and determinate negation, both of which adhere to the mimetic and conceptual aspects of knowledge: “determinate negation does not simply reject imperfect representations of the absolute, idols, by confronting them with the idea they are unable to match [...] It teaches us to read from its features the admission of falseness which cancels its power and hands it over to truth.”⁵³⁸ This anticipates Adorno’s later conception of negative dialectics, as the true is read off “the false, that which should not be.”⁵³⁹

In drawing the comparison with determinate negation, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that, despite prohibiting its depiction, negative theology does not negate the absolute in a merely *abstract* sense, unlike Buddhism, whose “stereotyped formula of nothingness [...] ignores the ban on calling the absolute by its name no less than its opposite, pantheism, or the latter’s caricature, bourgeois skepticism.”⁵⁴⁰ In their “explanations of the world as nothingness or as the entire cosmos,” the authors assert that Buddhism, pantheism and bourgeois skepticism all ignore the ban on naming the absolute, thereby reverting to “sublimated magical practices.”⁵⁴¹ Despite endorsing his notion of determinate negation, they then apply this same critique to the third, “positive” moment of Hegel’s dialectical system:

With the concept of determinate negation Hegel gave prominence to an element which distinguishes enlightenment from the positivist decay to which he consigned it. However, by finally postulating the known result of the whole

⁵³⁵ *ABC*, 66-67.

⁵³⁶ *Ibid.*, 53, 105.

⁵³⁷ Peter E. Gordon, *Migrants in the Profane: Critical Theory and the Question of Secularization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 139.

⁵³⁸ *DE*, 18.

⁵³⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics: Fragments of a Lecture Course 1965/1966*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 29.

⁵⁴⁰ *DE*, 17-18.

⁵⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

process of negation, totality in the system and in history, as the absolute, he violated the prohibition and himself succumbed to mythology.⁵⁴²

In “postulating the known result” of the process of determinate negation “in advance,” Hegel treats the object with the same indifference as the enlightenment concept, leading to the claim that for both Hegel and the enlightenment “the trial is pre-judged,” meaning that their respective systems are “totalitarian as only a system can be.”⁵⁴³ This anticipates Adorno’s mature critique of Hegel, which argues that in positing a third, “speculative” moment, “Hegel violates his own concept of the dialectic” by “pass[ing] over into affirmation and therefore into ideology.”⁵⁴⁴ While Hegel’s notion of determinate negation adheres to the mimetic and conceptual aspects of knowledge, the third, positive moment violates the prohibition on false idols as the concept subsumes the object. As a consequence of this analysis, Adorno and Horkheimer explicitly avail themselves of Benjamin’s philosophy of language, arguing that language which adheres to both mimetic and abstract rationality “becomes more than a mere system of signs,” which thereby “discloses each image as script.”⁵⁴⁵ Paying heed, as it does, to the mimetic aspect of knowledge in which the concept is based on the object, Benjamin’s philosophy of language acts as a necessary counteragent to the overly abstract nature of Hegelian dialectics.

In this chapter I have argued that Adorno and Horkheimer present abstraction and mimesis as two fundamental and necessary aspects of knowledge. Enlightenment is defined by the progressive undermining of mimetic rationality by abstract logic, leading to modern forms of domination in thought and society. The combination of Benjamin’s philosophy of language and Hegel’s dialectics, developed via the notions of negative theology and determinate negation, constitutes the positive concept of enlightenment that Adorno and Horkheimer claim to have prepared.

⁵⁴² Ibid.

⁵⁴³ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁴ Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, 147; Theodor W. Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2001), 144. In this latter document Adorno makes it clear that “the doctrine of the positive negation, is precisely and strictly the point at which I refuse to follow Hegel.”

⁵⁴⁵ *DE*, 18. Benjamin states that “script has thus become, like language, an archive of nonsensuous similarities, of nonsensuous correspondences.” *DOS*, 697.

Conclusion: The terminology of the constellation and mimesis in Adorno's negative dialectics

The conclusion to Chapter 4 brings together the two halves of the thesis, as while Adorno saw Benjamin's philosophy of language as a necessary antidote to the overly abstract nature of Hegel's dialectical system, in a like manner he saw Hegel's dialectics, with its affinity for the concept, as a remedy against Benjamin's more "object-centric" method, which I outlined in Chapter 2. In the philosophical portrait he painted of Benjamin after the latter's death, Adorno attests that the priority of the object constitutes the truth of Benjamin's philosophy,⁵⁴⁶ nevertheless he criticizes Benjamin's tendency to do away with the necessary subjective element: "Between myth and reconciliation, the poles of his philosophy, the subject evaporates [...] For this reason Benjamin's philosophy is no less a source of terror than a promise of happiness."⁵⁴⁷ This "anti-subjectivism"⁵⁴⁸ is to be contrasted with his account of Hegel's subjectivism: "The limits [of] Hegelian philosophy are also those of its truth, that is to say, the remnants of *prima philosophia*, the supposition of the subject as something which is, in spite of everything, 'primary.'"⁵⁴⁹ In fusing Benjamin's theory of knowledge with Hegelian dialectics, Adorno set out to achieve exactly what he had implored Benjamin himself to do during the 1930s,⁵⁵⁰ and in this respect, Hegelian dialectics accounts for the "theory" that Adorno believed was so severely lacking in Benjamin's work.⁵⁵¹ Only later, in *Negative Dialectics*, would Adorno make this fusion of Hegel's determinate negation with Benjamin's theory of knowledge more explicit:

The unifying moment survives without a negation of negation, but also without delivering itself to abstraction as a supreme principle. It survives because there is no step-by-step progression from the concepts to a more general cover concept. Instead, the concepts enter into a constellation. The constellation illuminates the specific side of the object, the side which to a classifying procedure is either a matter of indifference or a burden. The model for this is the conduct of language. Language offers no mere system of signs for cognitive functions.⁵⁵²

⁵⁴⁶ "[Benjamin] was impelled to break the bonds of a logic which covers over the particular with the universal or merely abstracts the universal from the particular." Adorno, "A Portrait of Walter Benjamin," 230.

⁵⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 235.

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 239.

⁵⁴⁹ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 71.

⁵⁵⁰ Examples are littered throughout their correspondences, especially in the two critical letters Adorno wrote to Benjamin discussed in Chapter 2. *ABC*, 66, 104-114, 281-289.

⁵⁵¹ See Chapter 2, passages at n190, n196.

⁵⁵² *ND*, 162.

This passage reflects the centrality of the concepts of the constellation and mimesis for Adorno's mature notion of negative dialectics, as the constellation seeks to offset the overly abstract nature of Hegelian dialectics to ensure that language does not lose contact with its mimetic aspect, which would otherwise render it a "mere system of signs." On the other hand, negative dialectics also shows Adorno's fidelity to the concept, an allegiance which he argues was inconstant in Benjamin: "Benjamin's concepts still tend to an authoritarian concealment of their conceptuality. Concepts alone can achieve what the concept prevents."⁵⁵³ In this respect, I concur with Hammer, who characterizes Adorno's negative dialectics as "riveted by an unresolved conflict between Adorno's two philosophical super-egos: Benjamin and Hegel."⁵⁵⁴

Ultimately, the enduring presence of these two terms in Adorno's oeuvre, the constellation and mimesis, complicates the "conventional narrative" discussed at the outset, in which Adorno is seen as Benjamin's "disciple" in the early 1930s before he ultimately develops a voice that commentators consider to be independent of Benjamin's influence. The use of the terminology of the constellation in Adorno complicates this narrative as, while Adorno agrees with Benjamin that truth is conditioned by the object, once Adorno's use of the term in "The Actuality of Philosophy" and "The Idea of Natural History" is read in light of Benjamin's inauguration of the term in *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, it suggests that Adorno already had misgivings about Benjamin's "anti-subjectivism" as early as 1931, when he wrote "The Actuality of Philosophy." In both this early document and *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno's use of the terminology of the constellation insists on two things: that the object is the locus of truth, and that this truth must be mediated by the interpretation of the subject.⁵⁵⁵ In this respect, I hope to have also cleared up how Adorno's two notions of the constellation relate to each other.⁵⁵⁶

The presence of the terminology of mimesis, in contrast, complicates the position the conventional narrative takes on Adorno's supposed transition beyond his early Benjaminian phase. As we saw, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is often singled out as the signal point of this alleged break.⁵⁵⁷ However, once the opposition of abstraction and mimesis is brought to the forefront of Adorno and Horkheimer's text, and once this opposition is read in light of the central place that the term

⁵⁵³ Ibid., 53.

⁵⁵⁴ Hammer, *Adorno and the Political*, 99.

⁵⁵⁵ In emphasizing the continuity between Adorno's use of the constellation in *AP* and *ND*, I dispute the claim made by Stern and Jarvis that Adorno's use of the constellation in this latter document is chiefly inspired by Max Weber, rather than Benjamin. Jarvis, *A Critical Introduction*, 176; Stern, "Guilt and Mourning," 66n14.

⁵⁵⁶ This query is raised in J. G. Finlayson, "On Not Being Silent in the Darkness: Adorno's Singular Apophaticism." *The Harvard Theological Review*, vol.105, no. 1 (2011): 16-17, n68.

⁵⁵⁷ Refer to Chapter 4, passage at n406.

“mimesis” occupies in Benjamin’s philosophy of language, then the latter’s lingering influence on *Dialectic of Enlightenment* becomes apparent. When one considers that the term “mimesis” informs the positive concept of enlightenment that Adorno and Horkheimer claim to have prepared, and further that this positive account anticipates Adorno’s mature conception of negative dialectics, then the alleged break with Benjamin seems overstated.

The complication of the conventional narrative of Benjamin’s influence on Adorno defended here suggests a number of paths for further inquiry. One possible path involves deepening the ties between Benjamin and Adorno’s work touched on in this thesis. First, the ambivalent process of the transformation of language discussed in Chapter 3 informs other, similarly ambivalent processes described in Benjamin’s work; notably the ambivalent progress of history hinted at in Chapter 4⁵⁵⁸ and the decline of the aura. Both processes, the decline of the aura and the progress of history, were influential for Adorno, while also eliciting a critical response.⁵⁵⁹ Furthermore, even though the constellation and mimesis are two of the most enduring terms that Adorno inherits from Benjamin, other, often related terms are also relevant and in need of investigation, such as “myth,” “fate,” and “natural history.” Another line of inquiry raised in the thesis involves weighing the influence of Benjamin examined here against the other major influence on Adorno’s thought, Hegel. As Hammer notes, these competing influences on Adorno’s thought are echoed by the competing positions in Adorno scholarship.⁵⁶⁰ It is my position that, in the same way that Adorno used each of these competing figures to counteract what he saw as the excesses or pitfalls of the other, the Benjaminian or Hegelian aspects of Adorno’s thought can be a source of new insights into his thinking.⁵⁶¹ In particular, it would be important to pursue a critical assessment of the success of Adorno’s attempt to integrate these two vastly different thinkers. The following appraisal by Gillian Rose, mentioned in Chapter 2, gives an indication of the difficulties entailed in Adorno’s attempted integration:

[Adorno] construed the pre-Marxist writings, especially *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, in a tendentious quasi-Hegelian way [...] Benjamin was never a Hegelian [...] On the other hand, the most apparently ‘Hegelian’ aspects of Adorno’s materialism [...] were always too imbued with Benjamin’s ideas to make sense from a Hegelian perspective.⁵⁶²

⁵⁵⁸ See Chapter 4, passage at n528.

⁵⁵⁹ See Bernstein, *Disenchantment and Ethics*, especially Chapter 2, “Disenchantment: The Skepticism of Enlightened Reason,” 75-135. Habermas also discusses these processes at length in “Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism.”

⁵⁶⁰ Hammer, *Adorno and the Political*, 99.

⁵⁶¹ See Introduction, n30-31.

⁵⁶² Rose, *The Melancholy Science*, 47.

This thesis has not embarked on a qualitative appraisal of this sort, nor has it sought to defend Adorno from such accusations, nevertheless I believe that Rose has framed the topic appropriately, and it is one that is ripe for further philosophical attention.

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