

“Reduced to a Zero-Point:” Benjamin’s Critique of Kantian Historical Experience

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“So it keeps on writing deeper and deeper for the whole twelve hours.”

- Kafka

I. Introduction

In his early “Program of the Coming Philosophy” (1918), Walter Benjamin says that “it is of the greatest importance for the philosophy of the future to recognize and sort out which elements of the Kantian philosophy should be adopted and cultivated, which should be reworked, and which should be rejected.”¹ In context, the identification of the need for a critical engagement with Kant and Kantianism is neither improbable nor unique to Benjamin. Ernst Bloch, for example, whose *Spirit of Utopia* (1918) perhaps provided the critical starting point for Benjamin’s “Theologico-Political Fragment,” had said in there that “almost everything in us is already in some way thought beforehand in Kant.”² Earlier, the Russian Marxist Georgi Plekhanov had published his disjunctive “Materialism or Kantianism” in Kautsky’s *Neue Zeit* of 1898.³ Comments and articles such as these were indicative of a distinctive, if subaltern, mood against German academic philosophy of the early twentieth century, which was characterized by an almost overwhelming neo-Kantian influence, in the figures of (among others), Natorp, Cohen and Cassirer. Indeed, the effort to overcome this academic neo-Kantianism became a common denominator among an otherwise diverse set of thinkers ranging from various Marxist camps to Heidegger and as far east as the Bakhtin circle.⁴ My purpose in including Benjamin in this grouping is to indicate his engagement in a general problematic, the specific working out of which will turn out to be essential in a

reading of his work. That is, I wish to defend here the proposition that Benjamin's texts, both early and late, carry both implicit and explicit indications of a critical engagement with Kant.

An investigation of the totality of Kantian philosophy and of Benjamin's encounter with it is obviously out of the scope of this paper. I wish, then, to focus on Benjamin's rejection of the Kantian category of "experience." More precisely, I will confine myself to what, on Kantian terms, is the *practical* aspect of the relation, *i.e.*, its occurrence in and as a constitutive moment of history.⁵ In the "Program," Benjamin had claimed that Kant reduced experience to a "zero point" and that "one can say that the very greatness of his work ... presupposed and had as its assumption such an [understanding of] experience whose own value approached zero and which had been able to reach a (we might say: sad) meaning only through its certainty" (BSW 101; trans. revised). In an approach to this passage, two elements of a Marxian critique should be noted. On the one hand, Benjamin's text moves to "unmask" the assumptions of Kantianism and show that its underlying premise contradicts its result.⁶ On the other hand, that experience in Kant only comes to have meaning "through" certainty suggests a risk of fetishization. If experience can only appear for Kant as governed by the category of certainty, then the risk is that the only value which will be recognized in experience is that which can be given in terms of certainty. Certainty will appear to be the originary moment of experience, and any value which experience possessed outside of certainty will be occluded. The structure is analogous to commodities on the market: a commodity is fetishized when its exchange value is thought to be a property which inheres in it, rather than being something (as it were) added by the market. Hence, a fetishized commodity appears to have originated as already in the exchange relation, and to have no value outside of that relation. Whatever the commodity's "use value" might be or have been becomes invisible to the capitalist economic system.⁷

The point here is not to embark on a Marxian critique of Kant. It is, however, to notice two moments in Benjamin's text which will be recurrent. First, the Marxian critique suggests one direction that Benjamin's thought will take, as, for example, when he writes as a "historical materialist" in the "Theses on the Concept of History" of 1940. Second, Benjamin's sensitivity to issues of fetishization, even in his early texts, should cause hesitation at the urge to assign a "messianic" meaning to them. Indeed, to suggest that Benjamin longs for the arrival of the Messiah is to suggest that Benjamin fetishizes "the Messiah" as the moment which redeems (provides meaning to) experience in the world. This, however, is to accuse him of precisely the mistake of which he accuses Kant.⁸ One indication that "messianism" will at the very least have to be thoroughly rethought as a component of Benjamin's early work is that, in the "Theologico-Political Fragment," the nominal form "Messiah" occurs only once.⁹ To put the point more strongly: it seems that Benjamin's "historical materialism" and "messianism" can be seen as aspects of the same thing, and that this "same thing" occurs in the space of a rethinking of Kant's category of experience; part of this rethinking will consist in ridding "messianic" of theological (in the traditional sense) interpretations.¹⁰

In the present context, "same thing" refers to Benjamin's late remark that "our consideration proceeds from the insight that the politicians' stubborn faith in progress, their confidence in their 'mass basis,' and, finally, their servile integration in an uncontrollable apparatus have been three aspects of the same thing."¹¹ The point of the comment is conveyed in the following sentence: this consideration "seeks to give a concept of how dearly our habitual thinking comes to a representation of history that avoids all complicity with the thinking to which these politicians continue to adhere" (I 258, trans. revised). Regardless of who "the politicians" refers to, Benjamin repeatedly warns his reader against such complicity; such warning is one reason to avoid reducing his thought to a vulgar messianism.

Two further aspects of the passage should be noted. First, the question of complicity is, from the outset, rendered insoluble on its own terms, as indicated by the move to a “representation [*Vorstellung*]” of history. In order for such a “representation” not to be complicit, the category of experience on which it is based will also have to be reconfigured. Second, Benjamin’s reference to a “concept [*Begriff*],” which itself follows a reference to monastic discipline, suggests the extent to which avoiding complicity is a matter of the Hegelian “labor of the concept.” In Benjamin’s case, on the one hand, achieving a better representation of history will be an affective undergoing. On the other hand, as the following discussion should suggest, there is a sense in which the concept itself will become a labor, or an activity. Concepts and conceptual activity are irreducibly a praxis: this is one lesson taught by the insight into the politicians.¹² Benjamin’s point is not just that theoretical activity is a kind of praxis; that is, he does not invert the “theory-practice relationship.” Rather, he seeks to displace the representational schema which allows the constitution of theory and practice as separate concepts. This displacement (we will return to this remark) is part of “the task of world politics, whose method must be called nihilism” (BGS II/1, 204).

More precisely, in the second “Thesis,” Benjamin suggests that “the image of happiness which we have is thoroughly colored by the time to which the course of our own existence has assigned us,” and adds that “the representation of happiness oscillates inalienably with that of redemption” (I 254; trans. revised). Insofar as “our image of happiness” is called a “representation,” attention is drawn to the possibility that our reflective “image of happiness” is precisely such a Kantian thought which needs to be rejected because of its danger to actual happiness, or to the experience of happiness. The difficulty inherent in this possibility should be emphasized: the preceding formulation is necessarily a failure insofar as “representation” and “experience” are part of the same schema, and insofar as that schema serves precisely to occlude questions of “happiness” or “actual happiness,” or to (as

will be suggested by Kant's "Universal History" essay) postpone such questions into the indefinite future. This difficulty is why Benjamin had earlier emphasized, but only parenthetically, that "we" may attach the label "sad" to Kantian experience.¹³ Thus, on the one hand, Benjamin had already criticized the Kantian "meaning" of experience as "sad;" on the other hand, the closing passage in this "Thesis" claims that "historical materialists are aware" of the situation. Together, they suggest quite strongly that the rethinking of redemption as a representation of the experience of happiness possible in or beyond history is a necessary component of historical materialism's general indictment of positivistic historicism.

II. The Kantian *Aporia*: History as Tracing

On the one hand, then, Benjamin has named Kant as the progenitor of a concept of experience which is both despotic and self-evacuating, and which moreover has (in a phrase of the early Marx) "at the same time the privilege of being the case" (*Early Writings*, 202; trans. revised). On the other hand, a number of elements in Benjamin combine to suggest that one mode through which the concept of experience is to be rethought is the writing or representation of history. A brief detour into Kant's understanding of historical writing is therefore in order. In establishing its possibility, Kant had written that a "philosophical attempt to work out a universal history of the world in accordance with a plan of nature ... must be regarded as possible and even as capable of furthering the purpose of nature itself."¹⁴

Initially, one should note that, understood in this way, "history" is something which is always and already wrapped up in the interpretation of events as historical. "History" will be archically structured, whether that structure is acknowledged or not, which means that the "true picture of the past" (I 255) proposed by historicism is a theoretical impossibility. The necessary archic structuring of "history" will be one avenue by which Benjamin approaches

Kant. Hence, in the “Theses,” Benjamin says that “universal history ... has no theoretical armature. Its procedure is additive: it calls up the masses of facts, in order to fill out homogenous and empty time” (I 262; trans. revised).¹⁵ The sense of militarization should not be lost: the “masses” of facts are literally conscripted into the service of a historical apparatus which has no function other than the conscription of facts. This is one sense in which it has a “mass basis” (I 258). The lack of a “theoretical armature,” however, does not entail the lack of any sense of order: conscripted facts are to follow a strict causal order, but because there is no such armature, “historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history” (I 262). From the point of view of universal history, Benjamin’s method can only be “called nihilism” (BGS II/1, 204), although the comment should be understood dialectically: it is not that Benjamin’s thinking is without method; it is that his “constructive method” can only appear as the determinate negation of Kantianism from a position outside of Kantianism. From a Kantian point of view the negation is abstract and thus total.

Second, there is an inscription of “natural” into the Kantian determination of history. Part of Kant’s point is that the historic structure is to be experienced as part of “nature.” The history that one writes is supposed to reflect, and further, the unfolding of a natural order of human events. Kant thereby attaches a necessity to the process: the natural is the necessary, and so it becomes necessary both to continue the understanding of history according to one’s prior structuring - in this case, the coming of enlightenment - and also to act according to this structure. However, since nature is also defined in terms of exteriority to structures of meaning, the necessity it imposes is strangely without determinate content. On the one hand, this means that the Kantian history appears as its own origin (nature is definitionally exterior to it); on the other hand, that Kantian history appears as its own origin or ground means that the necessity through which it functions is abstract, entirely procedural and self-referential.

Here again, Benjamin's description of the process in terms of an "additive" logic analogous to that of the conscription of an army should be kept in view. Dialectically, the "additive" logic recalls Hegel's "bad infinity," the only logic of which is its own perpetuation.

Referring to an understanding based on "quanta," which in this case are analogous both to members of the "mass of facts" and to conscripted soldiers, Hegel writes of a resulting "progress into infinity." The existence of one quantum always implies the existence of another against which it is defined, and Hegel then suggests that the additive process, the "infinite progress," "is the *task* of infinity, not the reaching of it: the perennial *production* of it, without getting beyond the quantum itself and without the infinite being a positive and present thing."¹⁶

The strongly dialectical overtones of Benjamin's critique should at this point begin to be apparent, if only in outline. At the moment, I wish to stress one implication: according to this reading of Kant, what will become important is not so much a particular conflict, but that a particular understanding of "history" and "conflict," and of their relation to "nature" be maintained. As Hegel's remarks on a "progress into infinity" suggest, there is something aporetic in the Kantian understanding of history. "History" and "nature" will be represented as opposing concepts which are capable of reconciliation, but *at the same time* the logic of this representation will render them *incapable* of reconciliation on their own terms.¹⁷ How the historian encounters this *aporia* becomes decisive: if "nature" is presented, as in Kant, as both the ground and the *telos* of history, then the gap between nature and history in the present can be figured as a mark of the defect of the present, and as a matter which will be overcome at some time in the future. However, as an aspect of the "progress into infinity" generated by the representational structure of "nature" and "history," it will be impossible to "represent" the reconciliation as a moment *in* history. Rather, the representation of nature and history can only appear as the *end* of history, as its negation.¹⁸

To bring things together in summary form, Kantian history involves a writing that puts “nature” and “history” under the rubric of “certainty,” and in the process brings about an understanding of “nature” as the “ground” for the fulfillment of “history.” Against this background, one may note that for Kant, historical writing has two essential elements, as given in his definition: “history is concerned with giving an account of these phenomena, no matter how deeply concealed their causes may be” (KPW 41). First, then, a successful history presents an account of phenomena. Second, this account must be causal, perhaps not in the narrow sense of demonstrating the prior physical mechanisms which bring about a given event, but in the more general sense of providing a sufficient explanation for why one event occurs after another. From these, two important corollaries follow: first, that there is such an explanation, and second, that the events are to be construed as somehow together in sequence. The first corollary writes necessity into the conceptual structure of history from the outset. One might or might not have the *correct* (singular) history written, but that there might be more than one possible history, or that a historical phenomenon is not explainable in terms of history, is excluded immediately. To deny either of these corollaries is to abandon history, and that move is attached to the entire weight of abandoning “enlightenment,” which has been given a substantial moral weight, as well as to the responsibility for “peace” and “fulfillment.” Kant’s initial move, then, ensures that the stakes of historical writing are very high. The second corollary focuses the question on writing and on the role of the historian, whose job it is to produce a conceptual apparatus that interprets events as historic so as to bring about the reconciliation of nature and history. For Kant, the practice of history is, in a broad sense, constructive, in the sense that one is to begin with phenomena - historical happenings - and construct a correct sequential account of them. David R. Lachterman puts the observation succinctly: “Kant's version of modernity, which began under the auspices of mathematics, becomes in the domain of history a hermeneutic of manmade signs.”¹⁹

These considerations point to a question: what is the *telos* of Kantian history and how does one get there? What happens when one has correctly interpreted phenomena and brought about the fulfillment of one's natural purpose? The question of speaking about *teloi* – teleology – highlights in a preliminary way a difficulty about reconciling the theoretical demand for history with the practical experience of writing it. Plekhanov had defended the view that Kant's texts exhibited an analogous contradiction inside the thing in itself, which was supposed simultaneously to be *a priori* deducible and causally operative on us ("Marxism or Kantianism;" see above). In a 1786 piece, "On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy," Kant had insisted that natural science could be investigated in two ways – a "merely [*blos*] theoretical," or "teleological;" the latter investigated "only such ends as could be known to us through experience" (KW VIII, 159). On the one hand, then, the capacity for experience will be central to an investigation of historical writing. On the other hand, insofar as Plekhanov's representative materialist complaint is essentially that theory and practice in Kant are contradictories, it suggests the extent to which historical writing, and the discovery/inscription of teleology in history, are the location where this tension is to be played out. In other words, Plekhanov's accusation suggests an avenue for reading Kant's remarks on history. To put matters in summary form: Kant names the *telos* "enlightenment," by which he means "man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity."²⁰ To get there, thinking should construct history such that, as he puts it in the "Idea for a Universal History," "we might by our own rational powers accelerate the coming of this period [*Zeitpunkt*] which will be so welcome to our descendants" (KPW 50). Such a period²¹ of enlightenment would realize the possibilities of peace and of fulfillment of "highest purpose of nature - *i.e.* the development of all natural capacities." The chief obstacle to be overcome is people's "unsocial sociability" - the "tendency to come together in society, coupled, however, with a

continual resistance which constantly threatens to break this society up” (KPW 44). In a somewhat later writing, Kant specifically declines to describe this future point in time:

Nature guarantees perpetual peace by the actual mechanism of human inclinations. And while the likelihood [*Sicherheit*] of its being attained is not sufficient to enable us to prophesy the future theoretically, it is enough for practical purposes. It makes it our duty to work our way towards this goal, which is more than an empty chimera.²²

Here, then, we can see the sense of history as the hermeneutic which reads correctly the signs of nature and in so doing works to construct a world in which, because it follows this hermeneutic and (as we shall see) traces it out, “man” is brought closer to rational enlightenment. Kant’s theory/practice division assures not only moral duty, but teleology and experience. At the same time, however, there is an infinite deferment introduced: the future is always something far enough away to be indescribable, and yet it is also something toward which we are to work.

Kant follows that “for this reason, even the weak traces of its approach [*die schwachen Spuren der Annäherung*] will be extremely important to us” (KPW 50; KW VIII, 27). Kant’s imagery requires attention, insofar as it indicates the emergence of themes of shaping and molding. The more a shape is traced into something, the more it conforms to its shape. Even, then, the weakest tracings of historiography help to bring about the molding of events into history, and there is a subtle sense of construction at work. These traces have to be drawn, and so the approach of the historic *telos* is a matter of inscription: *Spuren* becomes writing. At first, the inscription is weak; its force derives from the fact that future drawings, that is, renewed philosophies of history, themselves based on previous ones, will strengthen the inscriptions and deepen the marks. Thus, the realization of the historical *telos* from the *hupokeimenon* of historic events is brought about by the historic tracing itself. Kant’s formula also includes a subtle elision, however: insofar as today’s tracings somehow become

the basis for experiencing tomorrow's events as historic, and insofar as experience involves contact with natural exteriority, enlightenment *appears* to author its own approach, even in the verbal "*Annäherung*." Furthermore, the nearer one gets to enlightenment, the more ineluctable and rapid its approach must seem. The *Zeitpunkt* of enlightenment becomes both utopic and inevitable, the former because the continuation of experience in the world definitionally means that one has insufficient basis for *theoretical* knowledge of it; the latter because the more historiography one writes, the more the "growing good of the world" appears to be a matter of the self-movement of nature. In short, the reconciliation of nature and history seems both necessary and impossible.

One way of putting the difficulty of the Kantian construction is that "nature" is used equivocally. On the one hand, "nature" means something along the lines of "natural events." On the other hand, "nature" is also something which is said to be generated through human thought and construction. However, according to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, "natural events" could only appear as already structured by human thought. Hence, the equivocation could only work if there were no loss entailed by subjecting the possibility of experience (encounter "in nature") to human cognitive laws. Otherwise, "natural events" would never appear except as disfigured by the violence of concepts. Benjamin frequently alludes to such a violence, and it is the possibility of violence which can serve as an initial locational marker of Benjamin's critique of Kant. Perhaps the most prominent example is in his "Critique of Violence," which argues that, in addition to the violence within a legal order, there is also a separate, constitutive violence, which occurs in the establishment of that order.²³ In the present context, one may say: Kant's equivocal uses of "nature" occlude the violence which is involved in treating two disparate concepts as though they were equal. That is, it is one thing to show how experiences are explained by categories; it is another to legislate that such an explanation is always available, and that experiences cannot exceed these categories,

which themselves can be known *a priori*. In a late essay on Baudelaire, in which he is engaged in analogous reflections on Freud's "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," Benjamin suggests that consciousness – read: our Kantian understanding of "experience" – acts as a "shock defense," a "screen against stimuli." Again, the application to history is explicit:

Perhaps the special achievement of shock defense may be seen in its function of assigning to an incident a precise point in time in consciousness at the cost of the integrity of its contents. This would be a peak achievement of reflection; it would turn the incident into a moment that has been lived. Without reflection there would be nothing but the sudden start, usually the sensation of fright which, according to Freud, confirms the failure of the shock defense (I 163; trans. revised).

Earlier in the essay, Benjamin had quoted the psychologist Theodor Reik's development of Freudian theory: "memory is essentially conservative; recollection is destructive," and had added the "fundamental principle" of Freud which was its basis: "consciousness originates at the location of a recollective trace." (I 160; trans. revised). Together, these passages suggest that, for Benjamin, the self-evacuation of experience in Kantian theory is a process in which affect or undergoing is impossible. In a technical sense, then, "experience [*Erfahrung*]" names what does *not* occur for a Kantian subject. Against Kant, then, for Benjamin, the "trace" is precisely what is excessive to the Kantian project of tracing history. The pairing of "memory" and Kantian experience, on the one hand, against recollection, on the other, has its parallel in the writing of history. Benjamin writes that "to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'as it really was.' It means seizing hold of a recollection as it flashes up in a moment of danger" (I 255, trans. revised). In other words, the recollective trace is not amenable to Kantian tracing, and if an event becomes a part of Kantian experience or a "moment that has been lived," the possibility of an affective experience of it disappears.

Benjamin graphically figures this loss in the “Theses” image of the “angel of history.” He writes that the angel’s

Face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears in front of *us*, he sees one single catastrophe which incessantly piles ruins upon ruins and [which] hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, which has got caught in his wings and is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him without delay into the future, to which he turns his back, while the pile of ruins in front of him grows to heaven. That which we name progress, is *this* storm. (I 257-258; trans. revised; emphasis in original)

The passage requires a dialectical interpretation. *We* see, presumably, both the angel and a chain of events. The image, in other words, is our own redemptive image of history, viewed from outside, from Hegel’s “moment of sober reflection.” The image is shown as an abstract negation, and suggests a “bad infinity.” The structural position of the angel is messianic. However, the messianic and redemptive urge of the angel is rendered impossible by the structure of the image: progress, which functions invisibly behind the angel, renders it impossible for history ever to reach redemption and vice versa. Hence, the moment towards which we are supposed to be working, “which will be so welcome to our descendants” (Kant) is necessarily inaccessible to us. The reason for such impossibility lies in the logic of the image itself, and is called “progress.”

The figuration of the angel, in other words, compels thought to reject as aspects of the same image both the understanding of history as proceeding causally from now to a point in the future, and the image of that point as one of final, utopian reconciliation. The previous thesis had already warned against drawing the wrong philosophical lesson: “the amazement that the things which we experience [*erleben*] in the twentieth century are ‘still’ possible is *not* philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge, unless it is that the representation [*Vorstellung*] of history from which it derives, is not to be maintained” (I 257,

trans. revised; emphasis in original). The experience of fascism is at the level of cathected, living moments; the amazement at their occurrence “still” being possible is already corrupt because it imagines a redemptive time in the indefinite future when such events could not occur. This amazement, however, *derives from* our understanding of history, which is itself Kantian. It is that precisely because it makes affective experience structurally impossible, prefigures all *Erfahrung* as *Erlebnis*, and thereby serves as a shield against encounters in the world.

The recoding of affect as “lived event,” which recoding causes the affect to disappear as such, should recall Marx’s discussion of commodity fetishism. Insofar as affect is unrepresentable in or excessive to Kantian “experience,” it occupies a place analogous to the materiality of the workers and of use value in Marx’s texts. In fetishization, commodities are subjected to a law which comes from outside (“exchange value,” “market”) and which comes to fully regulate their description. To the extent that the commodity’s description is fully regulated by exchange value, exchange value appears to be its own, original law. In Benjaminian terms, Kantian historical writing bears an analogous character, since the law which is imposed from outside historical events in order to interpret them appears increasingly to be their own law. A completed “history” would be a complete fetishization of the historical events it purported to exhaustively describe, and would mask the initial legislative violence of interpreting events *as* historical, just as describing the violence done to workers solely by a drop in labor prices risks masking the initial violence of declaring that qualitatively different acts of labor are capable, *a priori*, of being exhaustively represented as moments of homogenous labor power. In this context, Benjamin’s complaint in the “Theses” about the “homogenous, empty time” (I 262) of historicism can be seen as motivated by the same thoughts which motivate his early work.

Marx also claims that the commodity form is “abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (*Capital I*, 76); this language provides a clue to an examination of Benjamin’s critique of the theological aspects of the Kantian understandings of history and experience. In schematic form, the critique might look something like the following. A complete reconciliation of history and nature would require the complete integration of the latter into the former such that there was nothing left about which to write a history. However, as long as there are natural phenomena, there will be something to write about. In other words, nature and history can only be resolved at the level of concepts; to bring that resolution into existence for us would require that nature have run its course, which would mean that there be no more time. No more time, however, means no more history, and at that point there is a problem: the jump to a time of no more history has to be decreed by fiat, and in advance. Writing history, in short, can only promise, but not bring about, its own fulfillment. Absent intervention from outside history, nature and history will always be out of joint. There is a qualitative gap between where we are now - still writing history - and where we want to be, at that point in time [*Zeitpunkt*] when there is nothing left to write. The best that can be said is that the gap will be resolved at sometime in the indefinite future, but at that point the game is up: as a philosophical project, history has to simultaneously presuppose both its own completion and its own incompleteness. To resolve this aporia requires a theological maneuver: one has to have a messiah who will put nature and history together for us. If the historian’s *Spuren* is to fill this role, then the boundary between history and theology is effaced, and writing history betrays itself as theological.

III. Benjamin’s Irreligious Messianism

To the theological, Benjamin opposes, as is well-known, the “messianic.” In the remainder of this essay, I wish to argue that these are truly oppositional concepts for

Benjamin, and that “messianic” does not provide a covert or replacement theology, even in his early writings. Rather, “messianic” refers precisely to Benjamin’s attempt to rethink experience in terms which are not complicit with its Kantian devaluation; in short, the effort is to think experience as an undergoing or as affective. In this respect, Benjamin’s critique is a thoroughgoing materialism, entirely in line with a pronouncement of the early Marx: “the foundation of irreligious criticism is: *Man makes religion*; religion does not make man” (*Early Writings*, 244; emphasis in original). But how can an irreligious critique refer to the messianic?

One set of clues for unraveling this question centers around Benjamin’s opposition, in the “Theses,” between “historicism” and “historical materialism.” I have already indicated the way in which Benjamin indicts, with the figure of the angel of history, both historicism and the theory of experience which gives rise to it. As I have also indicated, Benjamin provides explicit warning inside the “Theses” against failing to draw the correct insight from them, both in his injunction against “complicity” and in his caution, in the fragment prior to the appearance of the angel, against drawing the wrong philosophical lesson. In a similar vein, he wrote to Gretel Adorno of the dangers of even publishing the “Theses:” “I do not need to say to you that nothing lies further from me than the thought of the publication of these sketches. They would open gate and door to enthusiastic misunderstanding” (BGS I/2, 1223). Benjamin’s pairing of “gate” and “enthusiastic misunderstanding” is instructive: insofar as the “Theses” final remarks concern a comportment to history in which “every second is the small portal through which the Messiah could step” (I 264), that the publication of the “Theses” could result in something else charging enthusiastically through - not just a small portal, but a wide open gate - should be sufficient warning to step very carefully here, and that, pointedly, that the danger is in the reinscription into Benjamin of precisely that which he is trying to avoid.²⁴

The following additional clues seem easily derivable from the “Theses.” The realization which deflates historicism is presented as follows: “historicism contents itself with establishing a causal nexus of different moments of history” (I 263; trans. revised). The risk of fetishization is already indicated, since insofar as the causal nexus is said to be of moments “of history,” the historian’s view will be determined in advance by his or her understanding of “history.” Hence, “however, no state of affairs is, as a cause and for that reason, already a historical [state of affairs]. It became that posthumously through events which may be separated from it by a thousand years” (I 263; trans. revised). Whatever else this passage indicates, it seems clearly directed at the sort of thinking which motivates the Kantian writing of history, according to which events seem to carry their own historical causality. The historian who proceeds from this insight “stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary” and instead “grasps the constellation in which his own epoch is entered with an entirely determined [*ganz bestimmten*] earlier one” (I 263; trans. revised). The Hegelian usage of determinacy discloses, on the one hand, Benjamin’s intended break with Kantian representations of history. On the other hand, it establishes the self-sufficiency of the historical events: they do not require historicism to be meaningful.

Benjamin reminds his reader of the theological nature of historicism with the comparison to rosary beads; he establishes the opposing messianic through the image of the “constellation” of present and past. One characteristic of constellations is that they resist narrativization, which is another way to say that they resist a certain sort of conceptualization. When one grasps a constellation, it is impossible to relocate things from their locations into a historical chain: without maintaining its structure, a constellation would not exist. In this sense, a constellation *is* its structure, and at that level, fetishization is impossible. Further, one is free to see the same points (events) as parts of different constellations. Thus, for something in this context to resist conceptualization but

nevertheless be in constellation with something else is simultaneously both to deny a causal connection between the past and the present and to affirm the present as structurally related to the past. The present, then, is subtly intensified in two ways: the past is no longer the precursor to the present but its structural counterpart (something which is with one now in the same picture is more present than something which was a pencil sketch for the present picture), which means not only that the present is made plural but also that *the past is seen as truly past, i.e.*, not a part of the present.²⁵ It is this intensification of the present by the past that Benjamin means to trigger by his interruption, and what he means when he says that the historian “establishes a concept of the present as the ‘now time’ in which splinters of the messianic are shot through [*eingesprengt*]” (I 263). “messianic” indicates an intensified present. In the terms of the Baudelaire essay, the re-emergence of historic events in constellation with the present is as an interruptive recollection which disrupts the screening process of historicist consciousness. Insofar as such a recollection comes from outside this consciousness and interrupts it, it can only appear to it as the “end of history.”²⁶

These issues come into sharp, albeit compressed, focus in Benjamin’s 1920-1921 “Theologico-Political Fragment,” a close reading of which will constitute the remainder of this essay.²⁷ One must also proceed carefully with the “Fragment,” as indicated by Benjamin’s odd reference to Bloch at the end of the first paragraph: “to have denied the political meaning [*Bedeutung*] of theocracy with all intensity is the greatest service of Bloch’s *Spirit of Utopia*.” The use of Frege’s “*Bedeutung*” is instructive, especially given Benjamin’s strong early interest in questions of language;²⁸ it suggests that it is a service to deny theocracy a referent. In other words, it is a service to resist setting up history as a motion toward theological fulfillment. Benjamin’s juxtaposition of “*Bedeutung*” with “intensity” also parallels the structure of the previous sentence: “theocracy has no political but only a religious sense [*Sinn*].” The implication is that theocracy is a category of thought,

which means that any effort to construct it in the world, to give it referential content, is disfigured from the outset.²⁹

The reference to Bloch also establishes the contextual basis for reading the fragment as a materialist one. Benjamin had been planning, around the time he wrote the “Fragment,” to write a review of *Spirit of Utopia*. The review never appeared, and any finished manuscript is presumed lost, but Benjamin’s references to it are instructive. To Scholem, he writes that he will “diagnose the [book’s] constitutional flaws and weaknesses but in a thoroughly esoteric language” (13 Jan. 1920; BGB II, 68). Even more strikingly, he tells Ernst Schoen that “my critique” will be “highly detailed, highly academic, highly [and] decisively praising, highly esoterically fault-finding” (2 Feb. 1920; BGB II, 73). To Scholem he writes that the “essential thing now” is that “alongside an explanation of his [Bloch’s] undiscussable Christology, the book requires one of its epistemology,” and refers to his own “denial of the epistemological premises of the book ... a denial *in bloc*” (BGB II, 75). Such a categorical rejection of utopia, considered epistemologically, was territory already explicitly claimed by materialists. In his *Monist View of History* (1871), Plekanov had written, in a passage whose rhetoric is strikingly echoed by Benjamin’s references to opposing forces in the “Fragment:”

In reality, the distinguishing feature of ‘subjective’ thinkers consists in the fact that for them the ‘world of what ought to be, the world of the true and just’ stands outside any connection with the objective course of historical development: on one side is ‘*what ought to be,*’ on the other side is ‘*reality,*’ and these two spheres are separated by an entire abyss – that abyss which among the dualists separates the material world from the spiritual world. The task of social science in the nineteenth century has been, among other things, to build a bridge across this evidently bottomless abyss. So long as we do not build this bridge, we shall of necessity close our eyes to *reality* and concentrate all our attention on ‘*what ought to be*’ (as the Saint-Simonists did, for example): which naturally will have the effect of delaying the translation into life of this ‘*what ought to be,*’ since it renders more difficult the forming of an accurate opinion of it” (*Selected Works* I, 588)

I would like to suggest that it is possible that the “Fragment” is what remains of this critique of Bloch, or at least presents the direction of thought that Benjamin’s critique was taking.³⁰ Insofar as it is possible that the “Fragment” can be so identified, the point of the Bloch praise is to indicate Benjamin’s *opposition* to utopian thought, which means that reading “messianic” in the “Fragment” as utopian and not immanent and affective, is to follow the “Fragment’s” exoteric reading, *i.e.*, to misread it.³¹

IV. The Messiah Demystified: The “Theologico-Political Fragment”

Given the intricacy of Benjamin’s text, a few preliminary signposts are in order, the development and reformulation of which will form part of the reading: (1) “messianic” is to be understood as a trope to designate something outside of the human political order; “Messiah” does *not* indicate something “out there,” but rather indicates the archic structure of a kind of thought or way of being in the world; (2) messianic is paired with “profane,” which indicates the human political order and its aspirations; (3) The “Kingdom of God” roughly names the representation of some sort of utopia or condition of absolute human fulfillment; (4) At issue is the question of what brings about human happiness and this “Kingdom of God,” and how they relate (a) to the “historic” project, and (b) to the messianic; (5) A series of Aristotelian terms will run under the surface of the discussion:³² “*arche*,” indicating the structuring or governance of something; “*telos*,” indicating an end in the sense of fulfillment; “*dunamis*,” indicating potentiality; “*hupokeimenon*,” indicating base or forestructure; “*techne*,” indicating something which does not possess its own *arche* (as distinct from something by *fusis*, or by nature, which does); and “*poiesis*,” indicating production or bringing-forth. The reason for these terms should become apparent during the discussion.

The fragment begins: “Only [*Erst*] the Messiah itself brings to a close [*vollendet*] all historic happenings.”³³ That is to say, historic happenings, situated deeds, are not linear

sequences of “beads on a rosary,” *i.e.*, they are not a series of events by their nature causally connected to one another. Benjamin’s use of the ambivalent “*erst*,” with its suggestion of “first,” further suggests the exteriority of this “Messiah” to these historic events: whatever *arche* they have would be the province of this “Messiah.” In this sense, then, the messianic coming is necessarily the end but not the *telos* of “history,” insofar as history is thought as a causal chain, as something with an *arche* enacted by the tracings of historic writing. When the Messiah comes, the causal chain is broken, regardless of the proximity of its fulfillment. Historic events are brought to a close and completed. That the Messiah is “*erst*” also guards against an urge to imagine that there is some sort of embodied Messiah “out there” who will actually do something. “Messiah” here - note that only once is the nominal form used - names something which structures a particular way of being in the world, which is not conceptually part of that way of being but which nevertheless makes it possible. Benjamin in this regard follows Kafka: the Messiah will “come only on the day after his arrival; he will come, not on the last day, but on the day after” (qt. in Comay, 275). What Zons and Nitschack say of the second “Thesis” applies equally here: “redemption and the messianic ... have no transcendental referent, but originate from the unmediated experience of the singular” (369). Benjamin will gesture later in the fragment to the “spiritual [*geistliche*] *restituto ad integrum*.” Set alongside the possibility of such singular experience, the text obliquely engages Hegel. On the one hand, with Hegel and against Kant, Benjamin affirms a moment of immediate experience (the “here and now” of “sense certainty” in the *Phenomenology*). On the other hand, against Hegel, Benjamin denies that this experience needs to be recuperated in terms of the retrospective motion of *Geist*. In so doing, he affirms, with Marx and against Hegel, what might have seemed to have been a Hegelian insight: the excessivity of “nature” to “the concept.” On Benjamin’s reading, this excessivity can only be recuperated at the cost of an unacceptable violence to the singularity of immediate

experience, both at the level of interpreting such experiences in terms of *Geist*, and at the level of the legislative fiat which says that all experiences can be understood as moments in the univocal unfolding of *Geist*. This points to a fundamental difficulty in Hegel: the story of *Geist* can only be told retrospectively, from the point of view of its own completion. As Hegel repeatedly emphasizes in the *Phenomenology*, individual actors on the “slaughterbench of history” cannot relate themselves to the unfolding of *Geist*. In other words, the point of view of “absolute knowing” at the end of the *Phenomenology* is, on Benjaminian terms, a theological one; immediate, profane experience is, despite Hegel’s efforts to overcome Kant, nonetheless reduced to a “zero point.”³⁴

As the reference to Hegel should make clear, the point of view taken by historicism requires that historic events *become* historic through the agency of something messianic. The Kantian writing of history presents its own abstract negation in the aporetic deferment of the completion of that writing, a negation which can only become determinate by retrospectively imagining a messianic closure of the aporia and the transition into a qualitatively different shape of consciousness. Hence the Messiah “redeems, completes, makes its [history’s] relation to the messianic.” At this point, the significance of Benjamin’s use of the nominal form becomes apparent: the Hegelian trick is ultimately an idealist one, which is to say that it fetishizes the structural relation between a historian and historical events into the conscious activity of an external agent. In this respect, Hegel turns out to be thoroughly Kantian: experience is still only meaningful from a standpoint outside itself, which means that the original Kantian aporia inside the unknowable but causally efficacious thing in itself is not eliminated. The task, then, becomes one of demystification and profanation, of turning the fetishized understanding of nature, which is said to be both radically exterior and knowably autotelic, into an immanent moment within human experience itself. Human experience, in other words, will have to redeem itself.

That the Messiah (or the messianic completion of Kantian enlightenment) is fetishized can be shown as follows: from the point of view of the motion authored by Kantian historiography, the *actual* arrival of the Messiah would be an *aporia*, the sudden rendering of utopia unattainable because the Messiah interrupted progression to it. At no point can the present describe itself as having completed historical motion, but if the Messiah were to arrive, there would no longer a question of the *telos* of history. History created the need for the deferment of its own realization. For example, one of the Soviets' enduring legacies has been environmental devastation. In Semipalatensk, far away from Soviet Russians but practically on the heads of the indigenous Kazakh herders, the Soviets conducted open air nuclear weapons testing. The Kazakhs have since opened a museum of glass jars containing the formaldehyde-preserved, disfigured and still-born babies that followed. When Benjamin speaks of the "pile of debris" before the angel of history, it is something like this he has in mind, a wreckage generated because the present *could not* in principle be a state of fulfillment; it could only be thought as on the route to the future. Present experience, in short, reaches a zero-point. An analogous situation seems to obtain with efforts to induce "structural adjustment" and "austerity measures" into "developing" economies: the process of introducing a "market-based" economy is so violent that the benefits of that economy become unattainable, while western leaders express surprise that child labor is "still" widely practiced.

Benjamin therefore continues that "the kingdom of god is not the *telos* of the historical dynamic [*Dynamis*]; it cannot be set as the goal. Historically seen, it is not the goal but the end." Here we should read *telos* and *Dynamis* - that is, *dunamis* - together to hear: the kingdom of God is neither the cause nor the consummation of the motion that is historic happenings. The kingdom of God could only be the motion of a Messiah. Benjamin continues that "therefore, the order [*Ordnung*] of the profane cannot be built-up on the

thought of the kingdom of God.” Structuring the profane on such a thought or representation actually postpones the possibility of a moment in which individual experiences could be redeemed. Perversely, then, insofar as the “messianic” is understood as descriptive of a state of affairs in which singular experiences have meaning, the only way to bring such a state of affairs about is by *not* introducing the postponement of a future Kingdom of God on Earth. In this sense, to assist the motion of the profane is to assist the motion of the divine. If, as Benjamin says (and tags as “one of the essential teachings of the philosophy of history”), “the order of the profane has erected itself on the idea of happiness [*Glück*],” then to bring these two together is to say that to assist in building (profane) happiness is to assist, without declaring such, the coming of what has been called the “messianic.” That is, such building should erect itself on the possibility of the intrusion of messianic fulfillment, a condition in which, to return to the “Theses,” “every second was the small gate through which the Messiah could step” (I 264). Benjamin says here, “thus, the profane, indeed, is not a category of this kingdom, but a category, and indeed the most correct one, of its quietest approach,” which means that the erection of the order of the profane on happiness assists the arrival of the content of the Kingdom of God by not representing that Kingdom as the fulfillment of the order of the profane. That is, the erection of the order of the profane on happiness - not the “sad” Kantian experience - helps to bring about the messianic *arche* in us. The esotericism of Benjamin’s fragment is complete: not only does the praise for Bloch disguise a thoroughgoing critique of utopian thinking, but, as an aspect of this critique, the exoteric language of the messianic shows that the only possible route to the fulfillment supposed in imaginations of the Messiah, is in rejecting categorically the intrusion of such imaginations into thought.

Benjamin continues: “in happiness all that is earthly strives for its downfall.” The line seems to be, above all, a critique of reification, insofar as all that is earthly is in a natural

motion of coming into being and passing away. This seems an application of the dialectical dictum that things turn into their opposites and of its corollary that conceptual representations of natural events have a limited historical applicability. Benjamin continues that “only in happiness is its downfall determined to find it,” indicating that only a shape or determination of consciousness which organizes the profane on happiness avoids the “progress into infinity” of the freezing of this natural motion into representative schema. He adds that this is true even if the “immediate messianic intensity of the heart, of the inner individual man goes through misfortune [*Unglück*], in the sense of suffering [*Leiden*].” Two points should be emphasized. On the one hand, affectivity in the sense of undergoing requires the anti-utopian recognition that experience necessarily can be both fortunate and unfortunate. On the other hand, “man” can be taken equivocally: insofar as the modern subject is primarily an “individual man,” in that it presents itself as starting from an “originary state” of individuation from “nature,” Benjamin is indicating the misfortune for that representation to which a non-complicit understanding of history would lead.³⁵

Thus, on the one hand there is the “spiritual [*geistlichen*] *restitutio ad integrum* which introduces immortality,” *i.e.*, there is on the one hand the sense of history understood as in Kant and Hegel, which introduces the idea of the kingdom of God into the profane as its *telos*. On the other hand, there corresponds a worldly [*weltliche*] *restitutio*, which “leads to the eternity of its downfall.” The worldly, which is to say the natural motion of historic events, leads to the eternity of the downfall of both the earthly and the spiritual *restituto*. This downfall occurs in several ways: as the downfall of the earthly to its own natural motion, understood as happiness; but also to the downfall of the messianic *arche* into us - of the “spiritual” into the earthly. The complete profanation of the spiritual is the condition for its realization as experience. It is to rethink history towards this downfall that is the essential change of comportment to which thinking must turn, because it is to bring thinking toward

this downfall that brings about the ending of the historic understood as *geistliche*. We must think, in other words, against the construction of an infinitely deferred happiness, and paradoxically, in so thinking against this projected possibility, we will be assisting its actual arrival. This doubled sense of the building of the profane, in which it turns toward its natural downfall in happiness and therefore toward the luck which is its own interruption in the messianic, is what Benjamin means by “*Glück*.”

One might say, then, that the recomportment requires understanding nature and the profane not as an exteriority to be finally expunged, but as the immanent possibility of its own affective realization.³⁶ Kantian history treats the messianic kingdom as the *telos* of the order of the profane, which is to say that it treats the messianic as a representation of the time when the profane rids itself of its own profanity. There is, however, no structural possibility of the realization of such a moment, and insofar as the messianic is the interruption of the profane, it is unreachable. The profane is, thought from the standpoint of the messianic, the potentiality out of which the messianic emerges, according to the motion of the messianic itself. The order of the profane must therefore erect itself on *Glück*; not the barren, unreachable and therefore un-lived happiness that is the *telos* of a utopian historical dynamic, but on a *Glück* that is a happiness pregnant with the possibility of its own consummation as happiness, and thus as affective, singular experience. So to strive, and this striving is a natural motion, is to strive precisely to no representational schema. Such a method is called “nihilism,” and is, for that reason, “the task of world politics.”

Because there is no representation of a univocal historical order, recomportment of the understanding of experience in accordance with the profane or nature is a development of a new habituation that contains within itself the possibility of its own “messianic” discovery as an affective way of being in the world. Benjamin does not project what one might either do or say at such a moment. Such a projection would be to lapse back into constructive

history; if everything Benjamin says about that catastrophe is right, he *cannot* speak programmatically. That Zons and Nitschack can say almost exactly the same thing of the end of the “Theses” suggests the continuity of that text with Benjamin’s early writings. They write: “how the revolutionary chance of the historical materialist in the ‘struggle for the oppressed present’ can suggest a revolutionary chance for the present to escape the catastrophe is of course unknown” (383).

The escape itself would be revolutionary; to project a meaning onto it would be to repeat the mistake made by Lukács and others. Benjamin’s “nihilism” is meant to suggest the need for a fundamental revaluation and reassessment of human experience, beginning with the rejection of the notion that the “human” spirit is progressing to a final happiness. As the emblematic German Enlightenment thinker, Kant’s texts present for Benjamin a fundamental object of analysis and point of opposition, insofar as they both present a separation between the “spiritual” and profane and attempt to elevate the latter to the former. For Kant, the stakes were high: failure to pursue enlightenment risked reversion to a state of nature, the Hobbesian *bellum omnium contra omnes*. For Benjamin, they were equally high: pursuit of the Kantian idea of happiness produced not fulfillment, but a state of permanent estrangement which could be figured by a continuous pile of human wreckage, the production of which was aided and abetted by a false promise that, although such suffering was surprisingly still possible, it was ultimately to be redeemed by a future which “would be so welcome to our descendants.”

¹ In Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1996) [= BSW], 101-102. Original text: Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1977) [= BGS] II/1, 159. Other Benjamin texts in translation are contained in *Illuminations*,

ed. Hannah Arendt and trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968) [= I].

References to Benjamin's correspondence are to Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, ed. Cristoph GÖdde and Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1995) [= BGB].

² Ernst Bloch, *Geist der Utopie (Erste Fassung)*, *Gesamtausgabe* 16 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1971), 271. As will be evident, Benjamin thoroughly rejects Bloch's utopianism.

³ In Georgi Plekhanov, *Selected Philosophical Works* (London: Lawrence and Wishart), 2:398-415. Plekhanov makes two points which will be of interest in the present context: (1) In general, he defends his position that Kant's text contradictorily asserts both that things in themselves causally affect consciousness, and that they are unknowable. Plekhanov then avers that resolving this contradiction leads one either to subjective idealism or materialism. The following passage from Benjamin's "Program" can be compared: "The problem faced by Kantian epistemology ... has two sides, and Kant managed to give a valid explanation for only one of them. First of all, there was the question of the certainty of knowledge that is lasting, and second, there was the question of the integrity of an experience that is ephemeral" (BSW 100). The question of the "integrity of an experience that is ephemeral" in Benjamin is what Plekhanov broadly calls "materialism." (2) Plekhanov asserts that "the bourgeoisie are interested in resurrecting Kant's philosophy because they hope it will help them to lull the proletariat into quietude" (413). In particular, this resurrection will counter proletarian "atheism" and "Spinozism." Insofar as Benjamin self-identifies as a "materialist," then, one is led to suspect the possibility that his "messianism" will be "atheistic" in the strict sense of lacking a God. This seems particularly possible in light of another point of Plekhanov's: "*Materialism* has been the slandered no less than *socialism* has. That is why, when we hear arguments on materialism, we must sometimes ask ourselves whether this doctrine is not being distorted" (407).

⁴ See Gershom Scholem's reflections on his and Benjamin's efforts against Cohen, in his *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Harry Zohn (Philadelphia: Jewish Society of America, 1981), 19-85, *passim*. For the Bakhtin circle, see Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1984), 35-62. For Heidegger, see his works of the 1920's, especially *Being and Time* and the early sections of *History of the Concept of Time*, trans. Theodore Kisiel (Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1992).

⁵ One aspect of Benjamin's critique will be the denial of such a separation of theory and practice. The question of the priority between the two in Kant is too complex to be treated here. For an argument for the primacy of practice (which, in this context and in Kantian terms, would establish the ultimate sufficiency of Benjamin's attack at the entry point of history), see David R. Lachterman, "Kant: The Faculty of Desire," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 13:2 (1990), 181-211.

⁶ Cf. the closing passage of Marx's famous letter to Arnold Ruge of September, 1843: "We are therefore in a position to sum up the credo of our journal in a *single word*: the self-clarification (critical philosophy) of the struggles and wishes of the age What is needed above all is a *confession*, and nothing more than that. To obtain forgiveness for its sins, mankind needs only to declare them for what they are." In Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 209.

⁷ Marx's discussion of commodity fetishism is at *Capital I*, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (Moscow: Progress, 1954), 76-87. Benjamin did not apparently read *Capital* until the mid-1920's; one can nonetheless presume that he would have encountered at least the structure of the argument before writing the "Program." One should also note that Hegel's *Logic* presents itself as a critique of reification, and that Benjamin had been exposed to Hegel from a very early age. On the latter point, see Anson Rabinbach, "Between Enlightenment

and Apocalypse: Benjamin, Bloch and Modern Jewish Messianism,” *New German Critique* 34 (Winter 1985), 78-124: 90. Benjamin refers to reading Hegel (who “seems to be frightful”) as part of his university studies in Feb. 1918 (BGB I, 435); he refers to his school teacher Wyneken’s basis in “Hegelian philosophy” as early as 1912 (BGB I, 70). None of this is meant to imply Benjamin’s endorsement of Hegel’s results; it is meant to indicate that Benjamin had an understanding of Hegel, at least at some level, by the time he wrote the “Program.”

⁸ Of course it is possible that Benjamin succumbs to this mistake. However, his awareness of it as a mistake suggests the need to read very carefully.

⁹ See the following discussion for further details and for references.

¹⁰ Scholem locates the *topos* of this claim as an “often puzzling juxtaposition of the two modes of thought, the metaphysical-theological and the materialistic, so that the two became intertwined. This interlocking of two elements that by nature are incapable of balance lends precisely to those of Benjamin’s works that derive from this attitude their significant effect and that profound brilliance that distinguishes them so impressively from most products of materialist thought and literary criticism, noted for their uncommon dullness” (*Walter Benjamin*, 124). For some thoughtful reflections on this conjunction in Benjamin, particularly as it plays out in his *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, see Jeanne-Marie Gagnebin, “*Histoire, mémoire et oubli chez Walter Benjamin*,” *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* (1994), 365-389.

¹¹ “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt and Trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968) [= I], 258. The original text of the “Theses” is at BGS I/2, 691-704.

¹² In this regard, Benjamin has at least two modern precursors, Spinoza and the early Marx. For a reading of the former informed by Benjamin, see Idit Dobbs-Weinstein, “Rereading the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* in Light of Benjamin’s ‘Theologico-Political Fragment,’” in *Piety, Peace, and the Freedom to Philosophize*, ed. Paul Bagley, *New Synthese Historical Library* 47 (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999), 67-89; and for a materialist reading of Spinoza, see Étienne Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, trans. Peter Snowdon (London: Verso, 1998). For Marx, see Marx’s comments about “activity” and the “species being” of the *1844 Manuscripts*, in *Marx’s Early Writings*, 322-334.

¹³ Kant, of course, specifically excludes the possibility that happiness be a category of morality, understood in this case as the principle through which an individual ought to organize his or her encounters with others in the world. Happiness can be at most an empirical principle. See his remarks in the *Grundlegung*: a philosophy “which mixes pure principles under the empirical does not deserve the name of a philosophy” (Preface; in *Kants Werke: Akademie Textausgabe* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1968) [= KW], IV, 390), and in the second section, where Kant concedes that happiness (*Glückseligkeit*) is a purpose which all rational beings possess by natural necessity, but then sharply distinguishes this from the categorical imperative imposed by the moral law, demoting the attainment of happiness to prudence or skill (*Klugheit*) (KW IV, 415-416).

¹⁴ “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose,” in *Kant: Political Writings*, trans. H. B. Nisbet, ed. Hans Reiss, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: CUP, 1991) [= KPW], 51. Original text: KW VIII, 15-32.

¹⁵ The Kantian target of these remarks is highlighted in the following sentence, in which Benjamin says that “materialistic historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle” (I 262). The Kantian adoption of principle is criticized precisely

insofar as it does not generate a regulative principle, but only a principle for its own continuation.

¹⁶ *Wissenschaft der Logik. Werke 5-6* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1969) [= WL], I, 262.

¹⁷ Again, similar passages in Hegel's *Logic* should be retained: "The quantum changes itself and becomes another quantum; the further determination of this changing, that it progresses *into infinity*, lies in that the quantum is set as self-contradictory in itself [*als an ihm selbst sich widersprechend gestellt ist*]" (WL I, 260). That the quantum is being considered "*an sich*" suggests both a Kantian target and that the problem lies in the formal specification of the method of proceeding according to quanta.

¹⁸ At this point, the fundamental Christianity of Kant's position can be underscored: the present is "fallen," in the sense that "man" and nature are separated; their reconciliation (the end of history) is possible through "good works."

¹⁹ *The Ethics of Geometry: A Genealogy of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 16.

²⁰ "What is Enlightenment?" in KPW 54-60: 54. Original text: KW VIII, 35-42: 35.

²¹ One should really notice here that it is a *point* in time, something which, like a limit in calculus, would be deferred indefinitely into the future; reaching it almost suggests the cessation of the movement of time.

²² "Perpetual Speech: A Philosophical Sketch," in KPW 93-130: 114. Original text: KW VIII, 341-386: 368.

²³ See BSW 326-252. Original text: BGS II/1, 179-203.

²⁴ For readings of the "Theses" broadly compatible with the one presented here, see Rolf Tiedemann, "Historical Materialism or Political Messianism? An Interpretation of the Theses 'On the Concept of History,'" *Philosophical Forum* 15:1-2 (Fall-Winter 1983-84), 71-104; Raimar Zons and Horst Nitschack, "Walter Benjamins 'Thesen Über den Begriff der

Geschichte,” *Zeitschrift für Philosophische Forschung* 34 (July-September 1980), 361-383; and Rebecca Comay, “Benjamin’s Endgame,” in *Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy*, ed. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London: Routledge, 1994), 251-291. For examples of the reading which I am opposing, which reads Benjamin’s text as exhibiting a messianic longing, see Christopher Hering, “Messianic Time and Materialistic Progress,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 16:2 (May 1985), 156-166 and Iseult Honohan, “Arendt and Benjamin on the Promise of History: A Network of Possibilities or One Apocalyptic Moment?” *Clio* 19:4 (1990), 311-330.

²⁵ One recalls that in the disfigured image of the Angel, events of the past can be *neither* grasped nor let go into the past.

²⁶ One must avoid a misreading: Benjamin is *not* indicating that “history” should “begin anew” from a “new perspective.” Such a new beginning would not avoid complicity with historicism. Adorno is thoroughly Benjaminian when he later writes: “a new beginning at an alleged zero point is the mask of strenuous forgetfulness, an effort to which sympathy with barbarism is not extraneous.” *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), 71. Rebecca Comay refers to the “blank” generated by this procedure and notes that it “is thus not the pristine innocence of a new beginning ... Benjamin will elsewhere have identified such innocence with the amnesia of ‘starting all over again.’” (“Benjamin’s Endgame,” 269). Zons and Nitschack’s warning also seems worth repeating: “the most difficult moment and indeed the fundamental difficulty of an interpretation of the Benjaminian “Theses” therefore ought to be not to fall back behind itself in its explanation. That is, not to destroy its intention through the interpretative process” (362).

²⁷ As the fragment is very brief and the translation requires substantial revision in places, all translations will be my own, based on the German text at BGS II/1, 203-204. An English

translation can be found in *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 312-313. The title of the fragment was apparently not Benjamin's, but was provided by Adorno, who first published the piece, added the title, and misdated it as a late fragment (see Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin*, 91). Adorno's error is instructive in two ways. First, it points to the coherence between Benjamin's early and late writings. Second, the title recalls Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*. I will not explore this relation here; the interested reader may consult the references given above (note 12). Given Benjamin's description of "sad" Kantian experience, the following comment of Balibar's with regard to Spinoza should be kept in view: "sovereignty can only be identified with divine authority by presupposing or imposing the perception that the whole of nature (and with it the realm of 'chance') is a goal-directed order created as such by God. The result is a culture of fear in its most uncontrollable form: fear of God, accompanied by an obsessive fear of impiety, from which flows a continual sadness. Theocracy is essentially sad" (46-47).

²⁸ Scholem reports attending Frege's lectures at Jena; see his *Walter Benjamin*, 18-19.

²⁹ In this regard, Benjamin seems to work both with and against a movement in radical Jewish thought at the time, which rejected political utopianism. Benjamin here will also reject utopianism as a category of thought. For this movement, see Rabinbach, "Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse," *passim*.

³⁰ It is also possible that the failure of the critique to appear is a matter of the impossibility of reconciling its form and its content: the esotericism might have required Benjamin to reject any form which would have been acceptable to a publisher.

³¹ The exoteric/esoteric distinction should be handled with care, since the writing predates Strauss, whose work tends to overdetermine contemporary discussions. Benjamin's usage of the term should be understood in light of his discussions with Scholem (and with the Jewish

community in general) and with regard to currents in Jewish thought of the immediate postwar years. For some of the background of this distinction in that context, see Scholem, *Walter Benjamin*, and (correcting Scholem on some of the evidentiary points), Rabinbach, “Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse.” Evidence from before and after the “Fragment” also supports the approach taken here to reading it; I will indicate two such moments. First, Benjamin and Scholem had extensive conversations detailing their disappointment with Cohen’s work *Kant’s Theory of Experience*. On this anti-Kantian mood, see Scholem, *Walter Benjamin*, 18-60. Second, in the mid-1920’s, prior to reading Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness*, Benjamin expressed the opinion that his “nihilism” would prevent his agreement with Lukács’ “Hegelianism.” Given the nature of Lukács’ text, this should be understood to be a gesture which opposes “nihilism” to utopianism. See BGB II, 483.

³² I am *not* arguing that Benjamin is “an Aristotelian,” and not just because, in this context, that is a meaningless designation. What I am suggesting is that Benjamin drops some Aristotelian words into his discussion, and that reflection on those words serve to illuminate aspects of his text.

³³ BGS II/1, 203. All references in this section are to the “Fragment,” unless otherwise noted.

³⁴ Overcoming the inability of actors in history to do anything which matters is Marx’s point in the 11th “Thesis on Feuerbach:” “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point is to *change* it” (*Early Writings*, 423; emphasis in original). To be able to change the world requires, in this context (and possibly in the case of Marx, though not in the case of many of his followers), that one’s “profane” experiences matter, and are not to be deferred until some “day after” when all profane experiences will be redeemed at once, retrospectively.

³⁵ An additional possible target of this remark is Buber's interiorization of "essential Judaism." Benjamin's antipathy to this project is well documented in Scholem, *Walter Benjamin*; and in Rabinbach, "Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse." The critique of an abstractly individuated "originary state," *i.e.*, the notion that the human is essentially social, is announced in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, although Hegel still proceeds from an abstractly individuated "will." The critique is carried out explicitly, and against Hegel, in Marx's *1844 Manuscripts*.

³⁶ In the following, the closeness between Benjamin's fragment and a materialist reading of Spinoza should be apparent.