Introduction: The Concept of Critique

Benjamin's 'critical theory,' his idea of social critique, is one with his concept of history, and its fullest elaboration is to be found in his Arcades Project. To justify this claim would require invoking various earlier moments in his writings and relating them to his historical materialism. This would include considering how he takes up Kant's Critical Philosophy in his 'Program for the Coming Philosophy'; his understanding and problematization of the concept of criticism in early Romanticism in his dissertation, as well as the formulation, in the epilogue of that work, of the task of overcoming the polar opposition of Romantic critique and Goethe's classicist understanding of the 'uncriticizable' character of great art. It would further demand developing the relation of critique and commentary in the opening of his essay on Goethe's Elective Affinities as well as elaborating the relation established in the last part of that essay between rescue, reconciliation, and hope. It would require us to consider the meaning that critique has in the much-discussed 'Critique of Violence' and the sense in which history reveals the co-implication of the order of law and that of myth. Or yet again, we would have to ask why the preface to the The Origin of German Tragic Drama is epistemo-critical, and how the critical character of the presentation of origin depends on recognizing it as a natural-historical, rather than a logical, category.

Benjamin's understanding of history as critique culminates in his Arcades Project. Yet the difficulty in drawing the contours of his position is not least due to this work itself being something of a riddle, and not only because it was left unfinished. Adorno refers to it, after reading the 'Exposé' of the project, as Benjamin's prima philosophia. Despite appearances, it is not a work of cultural history on a limited subject matter. But how could an investigation of the Paris arcades be compared to what Herder, Kant, Hegel, Marx or Nietzsche saw themselves as engaged in, when they were writing philosophical histories? And how are Benjamin's more obviously philosophical remarks, gathered for the most part in convolute N, not his reflections on historiography (as if 'history' is an ontic concept), but rather the scaffolding of a critical philosophical history?

The Work of Art: Critique and Commentary

The idea of critique is part and parcel of the legacy of Kant in philosophy. Internal criticism is for Kant the expression of the autonomy of reason, of its capacity to limit itself while at
the same time orienting itself so as to fulfill all its true needs. Kant’s concept of critique is closely related to his account of judgment. The grammar of judgment, laid out in the Critique of the Power of Judgment, primarily through the articulation of the form of the field of aesthetics, provides an important model for the self-orienting character of internal criticism. Self-guidance through feeling essentially involves a form of subjective activity, which Kant calls reflective judgment. This form of reflection is adopted by the Jena Romantics, through the intermediary of Fichte. Their ensuing concept of the criticism of art is the topic of Benjamin’s doctoral dissertation. But there are many indications that he is reluctant to adopt wholesale the Romantics’ conception. In the epilogue to the dissertation, he sets an opposition between the Romantics’ creative critical reflection, which positions a work within the medium of the idea of art, and Goethe’s conception of art as devoted to the revelation of pure contents, ideals, or archetypes of true nature.

Benjamin’s attempt to develop a concept of critique that overcomes the opposition of Goethe and the Romantics informs the opening of his essay on Goethe’s Elective Affinities. He suggests that there is a contrast, as well as an intimate bond, between the philological commentary, the investigation of what he calls “material content,” and critique, turned to the recognition of what he calls “truth content.” The initial relation between the two is articulated in the understanding that the more significant a work of art is, the more what appears to us as essential and necessary in it fully permeates the material content, that which is contingent and time bound. The idea permeates the material content, and it, in turn, allows the idea sensuous manifestation. Material content and truth content are thus inseparable in the lived experience of the work. This further implies for Benjamin that one can get a sense of the idea in lived experience only on the condition of assuming it not to be perspicuously or decisively present, as truth content. It is immersed, or dispersed, in contingencies. The sense of completeness or perfection through which the truth contents of the work is manifest in the lived experience of art thrives on indeterminacy. This indeterminacy of meaning inheres at the heart of our experience of a great work of literature. It is through that ambiguity that the heart of the matter is signified. Put slightly differently, it is as though the work harbors a secret. Only in being veiled, can truth manifest itself in beauty, as complete and self-identical. There is a dimension of semblance (Schein) in the appearance of perfection that so spellbinds us in the experience of the powerful, magical, beauty of a great work. It would require criticism of a particular character to recognize how truth does justice to beauty, to recognize what in beauty partakes of true nature.

It is here that one begins to appreciate the essentially historical character of critique. By this, Benjamin does not mean stepping outside the space of the work and considering the historical conditions of its production. Yet time is the medium of a transformation of meaning in the work. For sure, it is not a transformation in its truth content, which is assumed to be immutable, but rather the shift is in the character, in the meaning of its material contents. The more the work detaches itself from the life in which it was formed, the more realities that belong to its contingent content stand out in their peculiarity. What remains inconspicuous as long as the work is experienced in its lifeworld emerges in time as strange or striking and therefore as material that provides the occasion for philology or commentary. But philology is not to be taken as historicizing, or attempting to reposition the work in its element of life, in that world in which the work was made.

Philological knowledge is strictly speaking the meticulous attentiveness to the emerging details in the internal transformations of the contingent meaning-material. Commentary is, first of all, a form of knowledge that is destructive of the semblance of wholeness, through which the idea shines in the lived experience of the beauty of art. But, in a second moment, the knowledge of the material contents, now released from the unity of the reflective form, can reveal for us a tendency in the work, through which we can first be directed to
the recognition of the order of truth contents. Philological commentary is knowledge that extinguishes the immediate beauty and attractiveness of the work, but opens it to the recognition of a higher actuality of meaning. Thus critique, properly understood, would be inescapably wedded to commentary. Philology is, at one and the same time, the eradication of the immediacy of the beautiful semblance, as well as what prepares or purifies the material content for the presentation of truth content. “The truth content emerges,” as Benjamin puts it, “as that of the material content” (Benjamin 1996, 300).

Benjamin’s concept of critique differs essentially from the Kantian and Romantic idea of reflective criticism, which is conceived as enlivening the work in meaning (see Friedlander 2016a, Part I). For, the quickening of the mind, the unfolding in reflection of a potential endlessness of meaning, which makes the work into a medium of advance toward the idea, would precisely intensify at the same time the semblance character of the work. Critique, as Benjamin conceives of it, does not enliven but, in his words, it is “mortification of the works” (Benjamin 1977, 182). It extinguishes the semblance of beautiful life that inheres in the work in favor of the sober recognition of a fragment of the highest reality it harbors. Through the philological commentary, we can recognize that necessity in the work as an inner limit condition of its content. This inner limit is not one of form, which bespeaks of the active synthesis of the mind, but rather of content. It is tantamount to recognizing the work as imitating or taking part in the highest reality.

Historical Materialism and the Afterlife of Meaning

In the epilogue to his dissertation, Benjamin recasts in relation to the field of aesthetics a problem prevalent in the wake of the Kantian philosophy, that of how to think of the highest unity of reason equally in terms of a transcendental philosophy of the subject and of a philosophy of nature, as an identity of ideal and real, or both as subject and as substance. This was evident in his setting the opposition between the Romantics who draw on Fichte’s philosophy of the absolute subject, and Goethe’s realism of nature as living substance inspired by Spinoza. The problem of overcoming this duality also informs his understanding of history. The model of the work of art showed us that the key to overcoming the antithesis of subject and substance in a higher, critical realism is the attending of philology to the transformation of material contents. Similarly, we can expect a pronounced philological aspect to Benjamin’s historical practice. This is for sure evident at one level in the sheer mass of meaning materials, of quotations, that he amasses in the convolutes of his Arcades Project. But merely pointing to the presence of such material is in no way sufficient without understanding its pertinence to the highest contents philosophy is after.

Benjamin seeks the proper grounding of the critical dimension in history not in the unity that subjectivity and its internal norms provides us with, but rather in the attention to the material dimension of historical life. But our conception of materiality itself must be such that it takes up the sphere of meaning. Benjamin is after the expressive character of material existence. “The collective,” Benjamin writes, “from the first, expresses the conditions of its life” (Benjamin 1999a, 392). Expression should not be psychologized. It is not the manifestation of an inner mental state, but rather the expression of life. The concept of expression plays an important role in bringing together the forms of living nature and the sphere of human culture. The metaphysics of expression, as it pertains both to nature and man’s belonging to nature, and to his place and task in relation to the natural order, is articulated most succinctly in Benjamin’s early writings on language (see Friedlander, 2012, Chapter I). Human language can be the medium in which the expressive unity of living nature can be actualized. It is not just that language can be used to express various human natural needs but that, properly viewed, it is the medium of expression of the human form of life (and
through it, of nature as a whole). It is only when the concepts of language, meaning, and expression are understood as manifestations of life that we can further think of the expressive character of historical products.

“This research,” Benjamin writes of his *Arcades Project*, “deals fundamentally with the expressive character of the earliest industrial products, the earliest industrial architecture, the earliest machines, but also the earliest department stores, advertisements and so on” (Benjamin 1999a, 460). Correlative with the idea of an expressive unity of life, we can then speak of a morphological or *physiognomic* understanding of history: “To write history means giving dates their physiognomy” (Benjamin 1999a, 476). As he relates himself to Marx, Benjamin contrasts the natural-historical register of expression to an account that relies on a concept of causality drawn from the natural sciences:

Marx lays bare the causal connection between economy and culture. For us, what matters is the thread of expression. It is not the economic origins of culture that will be presented, but the expression of the economy in its culture.

*(Benjamin 1999a, 460)*

An implication of the distinction that Benjamin makes between following the thread of causality and that of expression is that, whereas cause is distinct from effect, the essence from its reflection in appearance, that which expresses itself realizes itself in its expression. Recognizing the economy as origin does not mean that we will be able to delimit well-defined economic processes that are found ‘behind’ the distinct cultural manifestations. Origin is present in the gathering of phenomena, when these are revealed as the unfolding of its inner life. So, it is the very ordering and presentation of the historical material as an origin that will make manifest how economy permeates the sphere of culture. We will perceive the economy in the culture, that is, recognize how it expresses itself in a whole range of cultural manifestations.

“At issue, in other words, is the attempt to grasp an economic process as perceptible Ur-phenomenon, from out of which proceed all manifestations of life in the arcades (and, accordingly, in the nineteenth century)” (Benjamin 1999a, 460). As the reference to the Ur-phenomenon makes evident, the key to Benjamin’s higher realism or expressive materialism is his inheritance of Goethe’s naturalism. In an important statement of the theory of the *Arcades project*, Benjamin writes,

> my concept of origin … is a rigorous and decisive transposition of the basic Goethean concept from the domain of nature to that of history. Origin – it is, in effect, the concept of Ur-phenomenon extracted from the pagan context of nature and brought into the Jewish contexts of history.

*(Benjamin 1999a, 462; see also Friedlander 2016b)*

In attempting to assess Benjamin’s appropriation of Goethe’s conception of nature for history, we need to consider that a form, or method of investigation, cannot merely be taken from one domain and applied to another. The method is inseparable from the character of the domain it opens. Specifically, Goethe’s idea of the primal, or original, is not accidentally related to the presentation of the forms of living nature. Thus, insofar as Benjamin seeks to take up Goethe’s concept of origin from nature into the investigation of history, this would imply that for him history contains a dimension of primal nature, or can be a field in which living nature manifests itself.

Therefore, even if we ultimately establish, following Benjamin, a distinction between nature and history, it would be necessary to bring out the way in which the authentically
historical emerges out of the natural in human collective existence. In presenting history as a primal phenomenon, we assume in it a dimension of natural history. The articulation of the historical must take up what philosophers have referred to as the anthropological dimension of human collective existence. As Benjamin puts it in his Trauerspiel book: “The life of the works and forms which need such protection in order to unfold clearly and unclouded by the human is a natural life” (Benjamin 1977, 47 translation modified).

Benjamin’s notion of life extends beyond the confines of the identification of life with the sensitive, beyond the notion life understood in terms of the purposiveness of the organic, and beyond the Aristotelian hylomorphic account of living beings. In Benjamin’s essay ‘The Task of the Translator,’ it becomes clear that he attributes life in a non-metaphorical sense to works of art and cultural products. The highest manifestation of life investigated by philosophy is recognized in what has “a history of its own”: “the philosopher’s task consists in comprehending all of natural life through the more encompassing life of history” (Benjamin 1996, 255).

The historical unity of life is related, yet also distinguished from the characterization of life in terms of purposiveness, whether of the organic or of practical reason. “All purposeful manifestations of life, including their very purposiveness, in the final analysis have their end not in life but in the expression of its nature, in the presentation of its significance” (SWI, 255). This formulation, which distinguishes the terminal actualization of life in significance from the realization of purposes of life, precisely leaves room for the understanding that the unity of significance, the life of history, can even encompass the destruction of the purposive nexus. So as to mark this higher life that comes to expression in history, Benjamin refers to it as including what he calls afterlife (nachleben).

One could therefore think of the meaning of social products insofar as they are part of a functional nexus of social practices. They would then pertain to articulating the life of the collective body. But, the philological investigation of material corporeality that is of interest to history, to historical materialism, does not seek the expressions of the life of the collective body, but rather of its afterlife, as such contents or cultural products reveal their meaning when detached from their life surroundings.

**Myth and Primal History**

We can get a glimpse of the breadth of expression that Benjamin seeks to achieve through the prism of the historical phenomenon of the arcades by reading his ‘Exposés’ of the project. Virtually every topic of the convolutes is touched upon in this concentrated presentation in an extraordinarily abbreviated manner. But more importantly, something like a cosmology, or a natural history of modern humanity, involving the most fundamental dimensions of the human form of life, is laid out in the ‘Exposés’. They are schemata for a monadological presentation of a human world, expressed through the material culture of nineteenth century Paris. The ordering of these material contents presents the dimension of what Benjamin calls in other contexts creaturely life (see, in particular, The Origin of German Trauerspiel and the essay ‘Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death’). The ‘Exposés’ gives us thereby a sketch of historical existence configured in terms of the broadest categories. A list of some of them would include New – Primal, Utopia – Myth, Wish – Fate, Organic – Inorganic, Inner – Outer, Movement – Petrifaction, Mechanism – Life, the Universe – the Particular, Construction – Destruction, Work – Play, Individuality – Typicality, Repetition – Uniqueness.

The opening of the 1939 exposé formulates the subject matter of the work as following the implications of an antinomy of the nineteenth century’s historical consciousness: the sense of progress in history, on the one hand, and a view of its repetitive character, on the
other. This latter is attributed to Schopenhauer, who supposedly argues that the meaning one could draw from history would be already available in comparing Herodotus and the morning newspaper. All the intervening adds nothing but tedious details to the repetitive dynamics of primal forces. The opposed vision of universal history isolates the 'achievements' of humanity, its great moments so to speak, thereby providing us with a measure of progress. This is why Benjamin calls such a view, best represented in the history of civilizations, "the treasure trove" of the present.

The two horns of the antinomy properly formulated will prove to feed on each other and belong to one another: "The belief in progress … and the representation of eternal return are complementary. They are the indissoluble antinomies in the face of which the dialectical conception of historical time must be developed" (Benjamin 1999a, 119). Schopenhauer's schema of repetition is not a truthful vision of history but, if anything, an inkling of the reality of his present times whose idealized mirror image is the ideology of progress. More importantly, these visions of history are themselves expressions of distorted collective life. A different history, a different 'transmission' of the past, or a different tradition that the present can take on, would be recognized when we turn to the dynamics of the material basis. It becomes evident how the directionality of progress in the reified vision of the past rests on another vector that involves "a constant toil of society" (Benjamin 1999a, 14). Benjamin represents this duality of standpoints in a powerful figure:

Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which current rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to the traditional practice, the spoils are carried in the procession. They are called 'cultural treasures'.

(Benjamin 2003, 391)

The deeper tendencies expressing the conditions of existence of the nineteenth century reveal themselves to the historical gaze of the present initially in the afterlife of the material contents in a peculiar illumination of the material culture of the past: "the new forms of behavior and the new economically and technologically based creations that we owe to the nineteenth century enter the universe of a phantasmagoria" (Benjamin 1999a, 14). The notion of phantasmagoria suggests how what achieves expression is precisely a compromised state of collective existence. In other words, the attention of the historical materialist to the 'metamorphosis' of material products makes manifest the space of human life whose schema is the rule of myth. Benjamin seeks to characterize through the investigation of the arcades the primal phenomenon of history. The primal in human existence is the mythical. Authentic historical time emerges in the struggle against the burden of myth.

The mythical isn't merely identified in the character of early human societies, or of primitive forms of human existence. The force of Benjamin's view of primal history lies in the understanding that the mythical is ever-present in the space of human life. His presentation of the nineteenth century as primal history brings out the form of the struggle with the mythical that shapes the image of modernity. "Every ground must at some point have been made arable by reason, must have been cleared of the undergrowth of delusion and myth. This is to be accomplished here for the terrain of the nineteenth century" (Benjamin 1999a, 456). The struggle against the hold of the mythical is a dimension of the task of articulation of the space of meaningful fulfillment open to the present. The mythical has its hold, precisely as long as the space of life of the past does not undergo the highest meaningful articulation. This would mean that the problem of emerging out of myth is ever renewed, both in the struggles of the individual life as well as for the collective. Myth is the primal ground against which individuation or uniqueness in history arises.
History as Critique

Mythical life belongs to the dimension of totality which has not undergone concretization or individualization; it is un-actualized life, which Benjamin sometimes calls ‘mere life’ (bloße Leben). Early on, in the essay ‘Fate and Character,’ he thinks of such a field of life as ruled by fate. Such existence may not be conscious of the sources of its suffering. In part, this has to do with the close connection between the entanglement in myth and the form of a wishing consciousness. The latter is “the utopia that has left its trace in a thousand configurations of life, from enduring edifices to passing fashions” (Benjamin 1999a, 5). Both sides are equally expressed in the material products of the nineteenth century. The entanglement in myth can be called the primal past and the utopian wish the primal future. (Benjamin speaks of “primordial passion, fears, and images of longing” as well as of the “alluring and threatening face of primal history” (Benjamin 1999a, 393).) Primal history is the recognition of a period through the polarity of utopia and as mythical dread, as wish and as guilt. Ultimately, it is a form of human existence that is captivated and doomed to repetition. Blanqui’s cosmological phantasmagoria of eternal return – the vision which sums all others – ends the 1939 ‘Exposé’.

The Dream Configuration and the Dialectical Image

The material reality of the past comes together as a whole, meaningfully, initially as a configuration of dream, expressing the distortion of primal history. Dream is the expressive character of the reality that the past takes as it is gathered from its material products. Benjamin writes of the moment in which the things of the past put on their “true – surrealist – face” (Benjamin 1999a, 464). This means that even if we can speak of such and such facts that happened, that belong to the reality of the past, referring to the past as a dream implies that it is not fully actualized in its significance. But a further important implication of the language of dream is that the distortions expressed in material existence point to a higher measure, to that which is their highest actualization. As Benjamin puts it: “… we seek a teleological moment in the context of dreams. Which is the moment of waiting. The dream waits secretly for the awakening” (Benjamin 1999a, 390). The possibility of awakening in decisive social action is grounded in being attuned to this inner teleology of the dream. The dream configuration contains within itself the ‘direction’ for actualization, the signal of true historical existence in relation to which the historical materialist orients himself. The sense of the historical tendency to be actualized in and through the metamorphoses of material content is put powerfully in a figure that one finds in ‘On the Concept of History’:

As flowers turn toward the sun, what has been strives to turn – by dint of a secret heliotropism – toward that sun which is rising in the sky of history. The historical materialist must be aware of this most inconspicuous of all transformations.

(Benjamin 2003, 390)

In seeking further to articulate the emergence from a space ruled by myth into social action informed by history, it is essential to take up Benjamin’s deep suspicion about the notion that it is in a system of law of the state that the possibility of the highest expression and realization of the concept of the will lies. One aspect of this problem with the place of the law in human existence is developed in his ‘Critique of Violence’ and can be encapsulated in the understanding of the collusion of law and the manifestations of mythical life in human collective existence.

Benjamin takes the distinction between force that is involved in setting up law, and force involved in its preservation, and problematizes the separation between them, which is a necessary condition of their legitimacy. Throughout the essay, Benjamin develops a number of cases of the perverse relation of the law-preserving and the law-making, recognizable,
for instance, in what he calls the “spectral” character of the police. The ambiguous co-
implication of these two aspects of legal force is their expression as the manifestation of
mythical violence. Benjamin identifies the critique of violence with the “philosophy of its
history.” “A gaze directed only at what is close at hand can at most perceive a dialectical rising
and falling in the lawmaking and law-preserving forms of violence” (Benjamin 1996, 251). But,
history, properly understood, “makes possible a critical, discriminating, and decisive
approach to its temporal data”; it makes visible the perverse entanglement of law-preserving
and law-instating violence. What becomes visible in history is precisely the demonic am-
biguity in their ‘cooperation.’ The cycle, or oscillation, of the two manifestations of force is
“maintained by the mythic forms of law” (Benjamin 1996, 251). It is fate that manifests itself
in time, as eternal return, through the perverse character of law (see Friedlander 2015).

But the space of political action cannot simply be separated from the mythical manifesta-
tion of law by setting up different principles of action or even by adopting a total disen-
gagement from the state as in the nonviolent general proletarian strike, which Benjamin
discusses in that essay. Politics gets its direction from the critical character of materialist
history:

Materialist historiography … is based on a constructive principle. Thinking in-
volves not only the movement of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking
suddenly comes to a stop in a constellation saturated with tensions, it gives that
correlation a shock, by which thinking is crystallized as a monad.

(Benjamin 2003, 396)

Several things need to be noted about this important passage. First, the necessity of a
monadological presentation of history means that what is highest in it, its truth contents,
can never be present as abstract essences or ideas, but rather always as they come to be mir-
rored, concentrated or abbreviated in a carefully chosen individual phenomenon, such as the
arcades of Paris. But the discrete multiplicity of truth contents recognized in the monadic
presentation is not to be identified with the endless plurality of material contents gathered
in the construction. The construction allows the present to recognize these weighty highest
contents, as it were, as the balance of the myriad of material contents of the past:

All historical knowledge can be represented in the image of balanced scales, one
tray of which is weighted with what has been and the other with the knowledge the
present has [of that past]. Whereas on the first the facts assembled can never be too
humble or numerous, on the second there can only be a few heavy, massive weights.

(Benjamin 1999a, 468 translation modified)

Secondly, as we have argued, material contents appear initially as a configuration of myth,
in which we become aware of the hidden opposed demands that are made of life. Repetition
ensues from these contradictory demands that implicitly rule the life of the collective. The
impossibility of encompassing these dimensions together concretely leads Benjamin to refer
to this problematic ambiguous unity as a “constellation of dangers.” This makes clear that
the constructive character of Benjamin’s historiographical practice should be contrasted to,
say, a Kantian constructivism such that developed by John Rawls, which aims to determine
a reflective equilibrium between the fundamental intuitions found in public political culture.
Benjamin’s presentation of origin is constructive as well. But for him the construction of
an origin does not take the form of representing our deepest commitments in an original
position, in a procedure that yields the contentful equilibrium between these values. The
balance of the highest contents emerges in the arrest of the ambiguity of myth.
Finally, whereas the movement of thought presupposes the intentional forms of consciousness, the arrest is to be understood as the realist moment of thought or of meaning, as the highest articulation of content. The constructive work opens to a non-intentional moment of recognition of the standard of the highest actuality. "... [O]ne could speak of the increasing concentration (integration) of reality, such that everything past (in its time) can acquire a higher grade of actuality than it had in the moment of its existing" (Benjamin 1999a, 392). The founding concept of historical materialism, as Benjamin puts it is “not progress but actualization.” Actualization is not to be confused with purposive realization. It cannot be characterized as realizing an aim or goal, or even in terms of the regulative character of an infinite task of practical reason. The schema of action that actualizes the past emerges as an image unique to that present which takes up the past as its own. “How [the past] marks itself as higher actuality is determined by the image as which and in which it is comprehended.”

The imagistic dimension of Benjamin's understanding of history has been the object of a variety of interpretations. Benjamin clearly states his “refusal to renounce anything that would demonstrate the materialist presentation of history as imagistic [Bildhaft] in a higher sense than the traditional presentation” (Benjamin 1999a, 463). So as to account for this imagistic character of materialism, it is not sufficient to point to the concrete character of the material contents (such as arcades, fashion, or flanerie). For what is at issue is the recognizability of truth-contents in an image. The higher intuitability needs to be understood in relation to the recognition of the standard or measure for actualizing the past emerging in the construction that orders the material contents as an origin or primal phenomenon. The highest actuality of the origin of possibilities is an archetype. An archetype is not an abstract idea, but rather a primal image, which Benjamin calls the dialectical image.

The dialectical image is not an object of knowledge but rather of recognition: “The authentic – the hallmark of origin in phenomena – is the object of discovery, a discovery which is connected in a unique way with the process of recognition” (Benjamin 1977, 46). Benjamin avails himself of the notion of recognition not in order to articulate an ideal of mutual recognition through social institutions, but rather to mark the mode of revelation of the archetypal, of that which is not an intentional object of consciousness, but rather an ultimate actuality. The language of archetypes might for sure be open to various problematic misappropriations. And Benjamin is concerned with distinguishing the dialectical image from “archaic images” or from the archetypal that is at the service of myth, as it is, for instance, in Jung. One might also worry, especially if one relates the account of the ‘dialectical image’ to that of ‘origin’ in the ‘Epistemo-Critical Preface’ of the Truerspiel book, that such a turn to archetypes would lead to Platonism, to seeking the image of history in a heaven of eternal forms. For sure, a Platonic idea, as opposed to a Kantian regulative idea, is precisely the unique highest reality, the archetype, of which all phenomena are copies or ectypes. Yet paying attention to what recognition involves for Benjamin makes clear that the standard of highest actuality is always presented through the ordering of contingent material as the “purification” of the phenomenal (the “saving of phenomena” (Benjamin 1977, 33)), and its temporality is that of the passing: “The true image of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability, and is never seen again” (Benjamin 2003, 390).

Recognition is bound with the temporal category of opportunity. Opportunity is the temporal category through which the political subject of the present relates to a specific past as part of his own historical life, that is, views the present as a chance for actualizing the tendencies revealed in the afterlife of the historical material. Opportunity is for someone, and for that reason, it is unique and passing. A situation does not present an opportunity in and of itself, but rather it becomes an opportunity only for the one who has the presence of mind to recognize it as his own. Yet the conditions for something being an opportunity cannot be
predicted subjectively, for they are not reducible to the abstract characterization of preexistent goals or aims. That an opportunity is unpredictable and unique means that it can only be recognized in its concreteness, in concretizing the dream configuration of the past. Since grasping an opportunity depends on seeing your own chance to actualize the past, one could speak here of a unity of historical life that brings together the present and its specific past. It is the dimension of memory or remembrance (Eingedenken) in history. Since opportunity is concrete, unique, and unpredictable, Benjamin speaks of the dialectical image as “the involuntary memory of humanity.”

Hope in the Past

The idea of actualizing the past in the present is the basis of Benjamin’s reinterpretation of Kant’s figure for the critical moment in philosophy:

The Copernican revolution in historical perception is as follows. Formerly it was thought that a fixed point had been found in ‘what has been’ and one saw the present engaged in tentatively concentrating the forces of knowledge on this ground. Now this relation is to be overturned, and what has been is to become the dialectical reversal – the flash of awakened consciousness. Politics attains primacy over history. The facts become something that just now first happened to us, first struck us; to establish them is the affair of memory.

This appropriation of the Kantian moment can be confusing. Recall that for Kant the Copernican moment is the idealistic understanding that there is a primacy to the subject in the constitution of the very form of the object. But Benjamin uses the same figure to think of a materialistic turn in history.

Therefore, we cannot articulate the place of the historical subject of the present in the constitution of the image of the past in terms of the unity of the present. Understood in idealistic terms, Benjamin’s statement that “Politics attains primacy over history” would risk making the critical turn merely a call to marshal or use history for political ends and interests. But the interests of the present are “preformed in the object,” preformed in the past [K2,3] (Benjamin 1999a, 391). In other words, we must ask ourselves how the turn of the past around the present is tantamount to a critique of the present order. To actualize the past would be “interspersing [history] with ruins – that is, with the present” (Benjamin 1999a, 474). The present undergoes critique insofar as it becomes the locus of action oriented to the highest actualization of the past. It is precisely by understanding the unity of life between a specific past and the present, revealed in the dynamics of the material contents, that one can avoid the ideological misappropriations of history.

This can be further underscored by considering how Benjamin reconceives Kant’s question ‘what may I hope for?’ For Kant, the concept of hope points to the religious dimension of the ethical. Hope is for the highest good – the unity of morality and happiness. Strictly speaking, this is not an object of volition, or it cannot be brought about by the will. This is why it involves, for Kant, the postulates of God and the immortality of the soul. For Benjamin, this theological moment is translated into a dimension of the afterlife of meaning.
in history. It establishes the space of afterlife as that wherein the process of transformation of meaning opens the horizon of hope.

If we think of this notion of afterlife as essential to the opening of a horizon of hope in history, it would imply a duality in the space of hope, the separation of the one who hopes from the one for whom there is hope. I cannot hope in the first person, for myself. This is not to be understood subjectively. One might indeed speak of a person feeling hopeless, yet objectively speaking, the situation presents possibilities open to them. And similarly, there would be a subjective possibility of being full of hope, yet one's situation being in fact a dead end. But what we consider through the relation of hope and afterlife is that though there might not be redeeming possibilities in the world of the past (in its own time), there is hope for that world from outside it, as it were, from an another-worldly standpoint, meaning from the present. The present hopes for the past.

"Only for the sake of the hopeless have we been given hope" (Benjamin, 1996, 356). To construe this understanding historically leads to the following problem: A world in which there is no room for hope cannot share the same possibilities with that world from which we can kindle the hope for it. Otherwise, those possibilities would already lie within the space of meaning of the world we conceive to be cursed. But if they do not share the same space of meaning, in what sense can the world to come be that in which the hope for the past arises? What kind of mediation can be established between the two worlds, the mournful or cursed world on which darkness descends and the world in which morning dawns and a horizon of reconciliation for that past is revealed? The emerging possibilities in the dialectical image of the past were neither possibilities of the past, nor are they identified through the purposes of the present. Recognizing them does, however, require the present to take up the dreams of happiness of the past, even if they are wholly semblance. Benjamin establishes this relation in a powerful passage of the second thesis of 'On the Concept of History':

in the idea of happiness vibrates the idea of redemption. The same applies to the idea of the past, which is the concern of history. The past carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to redemption... like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim. Such a claim cannot be settled cheaply. The historical materialist is aware of this.

(Benjamin 2003, 390 translation modified)

References

Further Reading


Benjamin W. (1996), pp. 236–252, ‘Critique of Violence’, Cambridge: Harvard University Press. (An elaboration of the co-implication of the legal order and the violence of the rule of myth, as well as of the opposition of the divine and the mythical through which rescue and actualization in history can be thought).

