

Introduction

The Course of the Argument

In one of the curriculum vitae that Walter Benjamin wrote in 1928, shortly after his hopes of securing an academic position had collapsed, he represents his early philosophical inquiries in terms of four names—Plato, Kant, Husserl, and Marburg: “In particular and in ever-repeated reading, during my time as a student, I concerned myself with Plato and Kant, in connection with Husserl’s philosophy and the Marburg school” (6: 218). In similar documents of the period he says much the same thing—minus the reference to “Husserl’s philosophy.” And the same subtraction is palpable in the reception of Benjamin’s work from its very beginning. Gershom Scholem, who was the first reader of numerous texts under consideration in this volume, and who also co-edited the first collection of Benjamin’s writings, considered his friend something of a phenomenological neophyte: “[Benjamin] gained an indistinct notion of [Husserl’s] *Logische Untersuchungen* [Logical investigations] during his time in Munich.”¹ The other co-editor of the first collection of his writings, Theodor Adorno, was similarly dismissive—not so much of Benjamin’s training in phenomenology as of the phenomenological program as a whole. The collapse of Benjamin’s academic ambitions followed upon the rejection of his *Habilitationsschrift* or second dissertation on the *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (Origin of the German mourning play), the preface to which makes no mention of the founder of phenomenology but at a crucial point quotes a long passage from one of Husserl’s students, namely Jean Héring, from whom Benjamin takes the idea of “essentiality” (*Wesenheit*). Adorno, after borrowing extensively from Benjamin’s preface for the successful completion of his *Habilitationsschrift*, conceived of a plan to earn a Ph.D. at Oxford by

writing a polemic against the phenomenological movement, which would be more or less guaranteed to find a friendly reception among Oxford professors of philosophy.² In response to a report of Adorno's plans for a British doctorate, Benjamin posed a conciliatory question, which suggests that Husserl should not be condemned for the aberrations of his students: "I am eager some day to know more about your annihilation of 'the intuition of essence.' Wouldn't Husserl reconcile himself to such an annihilation, after he could take into account what purpose this instrument could serve in the hands of a Heidegger?" (*GB*, §: 110).

In the curriculum vitae where Benjamin briefly discusses his early interest in phenomenology, he summarizes the methodological program underlying the *Origin of the German Mourning Play* with reference to the very "instrument" Adorno would later set out to "annihilate." Because, as Benjamin explains, his "mode of investigation" acknowledges that every work of art is "incomparable and one-time [einmalig], it stands closer to an eidetic way of taking appearances into consideration than to an historical one" (6: 219)—a notable claim, since it implies that the historical mode of inquiry, however much its proponents may protest to the contrary, tends to deny the incomparability and timeliness of the works under study. The claim is notable for another reason as well: Benjamin emphasizes the proximity of his "mode of investigation" to that of Husserl, but he also refrains from specifying what ultimately separates his work from Husserl and his followers. The study undertaken here seeks to make up for this lacuna by determining the point where Benjamin's philosophical investigations, which culminate in the "Epistemo-Critical Preface" to the *Origin of the German Mourning Play*, part ways with "Husserl's philosophy."

This study is guided by the following thesis: in response to the debates that Husserl unleashes among his students with the introduction of the idea of the phenomenological reduction, Benjamin begins to work out his own version of the reduction, in which the so-called "natural" attitude gets "turned off" (in German, *ausgeschaltet*) and is thus brought to a "halt" (in Greek, *epoché*). The supposedly "natural" attitude—which Benjamin will associate with mythology—consists in the general premises that there is a world of substantial things that lie outside of our consciousness and that our experience is the result of the manner in which these things affect us. The initial aim of the reduction that Husserl first publicly proposes in *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie* (Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological

philosophy) lies in gaining a stance of pure receptivity. Once the phenomenologist has achieved this stance, phenomena give themselves as they are, without distortions that result from theoretical presuppositions, including the “natural” theory that experience derives from causal interaction between the mind and the world. What ultimately separates Benjamin’s mode of thought from Husserl’s, then, is this: from its title onward, *Ideas* proceeds as though the philosopher is fully capable of “turning off” the attitude that bars access to phenomena and can thus enter into the sphere of “pure phenomenology” on the strength of will; Benjamin, by contrast, makes no such concession to the profession of philosophy.

Yet Benjamin does not consequently look for an alternative subject—a nonphilosopher or mystic, for example—who could successfully “turn off” the attitude in question. A thoroughgoing reduction of the “mythological” attitude cannot be accomplished by anyone, including any communal “one,” who would seek to do so. The “oneness” of whatever or whomever accomplishes the “turning off” of the attitude that sees itself as natural is of a higher “power”—in mathematical terms—than any unity of consciousness or community. Thinking in light of this accomplishment, which can be neither anticipated nor foreseen, thus acquires a paradoxically open-ended character. What Benjamin says about the structure of messianicity in the opening sentence of his so-called “Theologisch-Politisches Fragment” (Theological-political fragment), which was probably written in the early 1920s, goes for the structure of the reduction as well: just as the one who “turns off” the “natural” attitude is alone capable of establishing what has thus been accomplished, so, according to Benjamin, “the messiah alone . . . first redeems, completes, creates the relation [of every historical event] to the messianic” (2: 203). The reduction is messianic for this reason: only the unity of a higher “power” than that of consciousness or community can accomplish it. A particular phenomenon will be identified in the course of this study that nevertheless guarantees the existence of a fully “reduced” sphere in the absence of its accomplishment: the coloration of shame. And a name will emerge for this sphere: *time*. The term *time* in this case refers neither to the time of “inner-time consciousness” (Husserl) nor to time as the “possible horizon for any understanding of being” (Heidegger), but, rather, to a “plastic” time, which is shaped in such a way that its course is wholly without direction, hence without past, present, or future, as they are generally understood.³ Time is thus released from what Benjamin identifies as the

“highest category” of “world history,” namely “guilt” (*Schuld*), which stamps every “world-historical moment” with its “unidirectional” character (6: 93)—toward ever-deeper guilt. The task around which Benjamin’s work comes to revolve does not consist in accomplishing the reduction of the natural-mythological attitude through a heroic exertion of philosophical will but, rather, in discovering the tension between the nondirectionality of time and the unidirectionality of history. This tension itself has a direction, which can be discerned in certain works of art and stretches of time: “toward the messianic” (6: 124).



Husserl is only one of the four names that Benjamin mentions in the aforementioned curriculum vitae, and of the four, it is the name he mentions the least often. The absence of Benjamin’s name from accounts of the early years of the phenomenological movement or, conversely, the absence of phenomenology in accounts of Benjamin’s early philosophical writings is hardly an accident, and it cannot be ascribed simply to Scholem’s low opinion of Benjamin’s phenomenological acumen or Adorno’s low estimation of phenomenology in general. Rarely in the writings under discussion in this study does the term *phenomenology* emerge. One reason for Benjamin’s reticence, beyond the fact that his early writings tend to remain silent about the work of his contemporaries, can be discerned from the thesis sketched above: with very few exceptions, Benjamin declines to position himself as the “I” to whom phenomena appear and who is also in command of a language that could describe them as they are given. The other three names Benjamin mentions in connection with his philosophical studies—Plato, Kant, and Marburg—are associated with similar forms of reticence. Plato does not describe what he once saw on “the plane of truth,” to cite a famous phrase from *The Phaedrus* (248b); rather, the task of describing what was once seen is generally left to a character named “Socrates,” who must himself be forced to speak of such things, and even when he does, he does not speak directly of what he has seen. For Kant, phenomena are not only never purely given; they are always only a product of a synthesis, whose synthesizer, under the name of “the transcendental unity of apperception” (K, B 133) or “consciousness in general” (K, 4: 300), is an empty function, which lies at the basis of possible experience but is not itself a possible object of experience.

And as for the members of the Marburg school, especially Hermann Cohen, who first established its program of research, and Ernst Cassirer, who developed the program in his own distinct manner, there is simply no question that the “I” is in no position to intuit essences or receive phenomena, even if consciousness is qualified as “transcendental.” Instead of seeking the given within the limits of its givenness, Cohen works out the process of object-generation in the construction of empirical science, and in place of the interpretation of concepts as substances, which are derived from a process of abstraction, Cassirer draws on contemporary mathematics and proposes that they be understood as functions, which are concrete universals, since they describe the law or principle through which all of their values can be determined. The Marburg school thus replaces Kant’s critique of the “faculties” of reason and judgment with “epistemo-critique,” which not only eliminates all talk of mental “faculties” but also does away with any reference to consciousness in general: objectivity is a matter of categorial coherence, not correspondence with things in the world. As their subtitles indicate, both Cohen’s *Princip der Infinitesimal-Methode und seine Geschichte* (Principle of the infinitesimal method and its history) and Cassirer’s *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff* (Concept of substance and concept of function) present themselves as “epistemo-critical prefaces.”⁴ And whereas the slogan Husserl announces in *Logical Investigations*, “to the things themselves” (Hu, 19: 10), captures much of what he is after, the one for which Cohen is doubtless best known, “the fact of science” (C, 57), says very little, unless it is recognized that the “fact” in question does not consist in established bodies of knowledge but, rather, serves as a methodological replacement for transcendental subjectivity. The first chapter of this study shows how Benjamin adopts certain methodological principles from the Marburg school and seeks to discover through an analysis of Hölderlin’s late poetry a point of departure for philosophy, beginning with “pure aesthetics” (2: 105), that is even less amenable than the Marburg school to the concepts of substance and subject alike. The name of this counterpoint to the “fact of science” is *Lehre* (doctrine, teaching, theory), which “teaches” only the transient moment of its transmission.



Just as the antagonism between various schools of neo-Kantianism and various versions of phenomenology frames many of the philosophical

discussions conducted in German academic philosophy from the publication of *Logical Investigations* in 1900 through the tumultuous decade of the 1920s, so does the tension between the Marburg school and “Husserl’s philosophy” traverse many of the essays, dialogues, sketches, and fragments Benjamin wrote since he matriculated at the University of Freiburg in 1913 until the completion of the *Origin of the German Mourning Play*, whose preface is itself an exponent of this tension: the principal term of its title, *epistemo-critique*, is drawn from the Marburg school, but it avoids any engagement with neo-Kantianism and makes no mention of Kant at all. An inverse tension can be discerned in the relation between Benjamin’s writings during his period as a student and the seminars he attended. A significant number of these writings contribute to a broadly conceived “critical altercation [Auseinandersetzung] with Kant and Cohen” (*GB*, I: 441), and yet nowhere was he similarly engaged with any of the neo-Kantian professors whom he encountered. Cohen retired from teaching in 1912, and although Benjamin briefly attended the lectures of Cassirer in Berlin, he showed little interest in them.⁵ As a student in Freiburg, he came into contact with Heinrich Rickert, whose version of neo-Kantianism differed from the Marburg school, especially in its emphasis on the idea of value, but was similarly concerned with the methods by which the object of knowledge is constructed.⁶ In the winter semester of 1913–14 Benjamin attended Rickert’s lectures on the “logic as the foundation of theoretical philosophy” as well as his seminar on Henri Bergson’s theory of time. As it happens, Martin Heidegger was also present in both courses. In a letter to Rickert from the following summer, Heidegger offers his teacher “warmest thank for the strongly philosophical stimulation and instruction that I was able to take away from your lecture course and, above all, from your seminar.”⁷ Benjamin was less impressed with the seminar—or at least less obsequious with regard to its instructor: “I sit there,” he writes to a friend, “and nibble on a sausage” (*GB*, I: 112).⁸

After Benjamin moved to the University of Munich for the winter semester of 1915–16, he encountered for the first time—and perhaps for the last time as well—a professor of philosophy whose seminar sustained his interest. In a long letter to Fritz Radt in December 1915, which begins with a lively description of his usual “disappointment” (*GB*, I: 296) with the quality of his classes, especially those of the art historian Heinrich Wölfflin, Benjamin registers a different kind of dissatisfaction in the case of Moritz Geiger, complaining that his “seminar has too few hours”

(*GB*, I: 301).⁹ In a curriculum vitae written in the year of his death—and three years after Geiger’s—he refers to this experience: “The classes of the Munich philosopher Moritz Geiger left me with a lasting impression” (6: 225). A descendent of an illustrious German-Jewish family—his grandfather was Abraham Geiger, founder of modern liberal Judaism, and one of his more distant relatives, Ludwig Geiger, was a remarkable philologist who produced innovative studies of linguistic and perceptual history, while his uncle became a major Goethe scholar—Geiger contributed to a wide range of philosophical topics, ranging from the theory of quantity in psychology (where he argued in favor of intensive magnitudes), through the theory of the unconscious, to the philosophy of mathematics (especially the axiomatic foundations of Euclidean geometry).¹⁰ The text under discussion in Geiger’s seminar was Kant’s *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Critique of judgment), which is itself concerned with a broad range of topics, beginning with its analysis of the feeling of the beautiful and concluding with a reflection on the final purpose of creation as a whole. Solely in terms of breadth, the primary text for the seminar that left a lasting impression on Benjamin was particularly well suited to the inclinations of its instructor.

Despite the European war—about which Benjamin remained almost entirely silent, as if even words of disgust were somehow implicated in the celebrations of the war that he unequivocally deplored—the winter of 1915–16 was an auspicious time, and the University of Munich a propitious place, to discuss the foundations of aesthetics: “If anything, the Munich circle [of phenomenology, founded by Alexander Pfänder] was even more gregarious than the Göttingen group, meeting frequently for regular discussions and informal study groups.”¹¹ In 1914, under the title *Ästhetik des reinen Gefühls* (Aesthetics of pure feeling), Hermann Cohen had published a major revision of Kant’s critique of taste. And in the previous year Geiger had singled himself out among Husserl’s students with the publication of *Beiträge zur Phänomenologie des ästhetischen Genusses* (Contributions to the phenomenology of aesthetic enjoyment) in the first number of the *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung* (Yearbook for philosophy and phenomenological research), which he co-edited with Husserl, Pfänder, Max Scheler, and Adolph Reinach, all of whom contributed similarly pathbreaking studies to its first volume, beginning with Husserl’s *Ideas*. Scheler published a treatise on “material ethics,” Pfänder an extensive paper on the psychology of dispositions, and Reinach a remarkable reflection on the a priori foundation of civil law in the speech act of

promising.¹² The degree to which Benjamin schooled himself in “Munich phenomenology” can be discerned from one of the major theses he develops in his *Habilitationsschrift*, which aptly summarizes the research program pursued by Pfänder and Geiger: “Every feeling is bound up with an a priori object, the exposition of which is its phenomenology” (I: 318). And at least three of the four names Benjamin would associate with his student years—Kant, Husserl, and Marburg—converge in Geiger’s seminar.

Of course, nothing can be determined with certainty about what came under discussion during the seminar; but in his *Contributions to the Phenomenology of Aesthetic Enjoyment* Geiger briefly outlines a critique of Kant’s aesthetics that accords with the program that guides *Logical Investigations*. Kant, according to Geiger, is far more concerned with completing the system of transcendental idealism than with the primary phenomenon under investigation, namely the delight in beautiful appearances.¹³ In a review from 1928 Benjamin succinctly expresses a generalized version of this critique: “Husserl replaces the idealistic system with discontinuous phenomenology” (4: 536). The same line of criticism would presumably apply to Cohen’s *Aesthetics of Pure Feeling*, which serves as the third and final part of his “system of philosophy.” Nevertheless, there is reason to suppose that around 1916 Geiger would not have simply reiterated his earlier critique of Kantian aesthetics—or at least would have done so with some hesitation. With the introduction of the idea of a phenomenological reduction, Husserl so altered the character of his philosophical program, particularly in view of its starting point, that his students and disciples had no choice but to reevaluate what they took to be its direction, even if they ultimately decided that they would continue along the lines sketched out in *Logical Investigations*. And something akin to the phenomenological reduction can be discerned in the opening paragraphs of the *Critique of Judgment*. As Geiger indicates, the “disinterestedness” that Kant attributes to anyone who undertakes a specifically aesthetic judgment requires a major modification of the “ordinary attitude.”¹⁴ It is not, however, the philosopher *cum* phenomenologist who prompts this modification; rather, the “natural” or “ordinary” attitude is “turned off” by nature itself—or more exactly, by “free beauties” of nature (K, 5: 229), which are “there” only as correlates of aesthetic delight.

However the discussion may have gone in Geiger’s seminar, it drew Benjamin into the orbit of phenomenology, which he had previously encountered only in the programmatic form of Husserl’s “Philosophie als

strengte Wissenschaft" (Philosophy as rigorous science): "Geiger's seminar has too few hours. He is assaulted by [military] service, and the problems are too difficult to yield much during a seminar. I am going through a phenomenological work of his [*Contributions to the Phenomenology of Aesthetic Enjoyment*]. I am also reading Husserl's difficult, principal groundwork [either *Logical Investigations* or *Ideas*], so as to gain entrance into his school" (*GB*, I: 301–2).¹⁵ It is in this context that, as Chapter 2 of this study shows, Benjamin goes so far as to experiment with the "instrument" of "intuition of essences" in response to a paper published in *Kant-Studien* that sought to demonstrate that *Ideas* carries out the Copernican revolution in philosophy that Kant left incomplete.¹⁶ And it is in the same context, as the volume as a whole proposes, that Benjamin begins to develop his own version of the phenomenological reduction under the paradoxical premise that it cannot be accomplished by anyone who would seek to do so. It is not as though, for Benjamin, it is simply impossible for things to give themselves as they are; they can appear—but not to Benjamin "himself." Instead, they appear to others—for example, to children. Or they appear to a certain Margarethe, whose description of a dream sets into motion the "dialogue of fantasy" Benjamin probably wrote in late 1915 or early 1916, under the title of "The Rainbow." And phenomena also appear to artists with an ambiguity that derives from their artistic intention. Chapter 2 of this study discusses Benjamin's "entrance" into Husserl's "school," while Chapter 3 concentrates on the two texts he wrote under the title of "The Rainbow," the first of which accords with the *Critique of Judgment* in its exposition of natural beauty—starting with the rainbow—as the "reduction" or "leading back" of phenomena to their origin in the innocent sphere of fantasy. By contrast, the second "Rainbow," which makes no mention of any natural rainbows, departing from the first, proposes in a highly concentrated manner that painting be seen as the "art of paradise." Because a painting cannot purely and simply disclose its painterly character—by inscribing, for instance, "this is a painting" into the painting without making the inscription part of the painting—Benjamin poses for himself the following question: how does a painting acquire a name that is precisely *its* name and not an arbitrary designation? The distinction between name and designation stands, in turn, at the basis of his contemporaneous inquiries into the foundations of logic and the theory of language.



The first of the “logical investigations” that Husserl undertakes in the eponymous treatise begins with a discussion of a distinction that subtends not only the following five investigations but the unfolding of *Ideas* as well, namely the distinction between expression and indication, the rudiments of which can be briefly sketched as follows: whereas an expression embodies “meaning” (*Bedeutung*), an indication does not. In a now famous paragraph of the first investigation Husserl identifies the “solitary life of the soul” (Hu, 19, 1: 35) as the sphere in which discourse firmly detaches itself from all indicative entanglements. As long as I speak only with myself, my speech is purely expressive: what is meant is given in the very act of meaning to say something. As soon as I seek to communicate what I mean, however, my speech falls into the sphere of indication, beginning with the word *I*. In a series of logico-linguistic studies from around 1916, many of which are concerned with Russell’s set-theoretical paradox, Benjamin adopts and transforms the distinction with which *Logical Investigations* begins. In place of the opposition between expression and indication, Benjamin introduces a distinction between “judgments of predication” and “judgments of designation” (6: 9): only in the case of the former can one speak of meaning, properly speaking, whereas in cases of designation, there is merely “inauthentic meaning [uneigentliche Bedeutung]” (6: 10). Whenever a term is said to mean something, its meaning is categorically different from the meaning of a term that means something in the absence of any stipulation as to what it is supposed to mean. The “something” that a properly meaningful term means is, however, first and foremost meaning pure and simple. For this reason, the term in question cannot properly be called a “term” but is in a certain sense indeterminate, which is to say, infinite in its own peculiar way. In still other words, it is a name, the meaning of which derives from the thing named instead of from the speaking subject who would presume to give names to things.

The point of retreating into inner monologue, for Husserl, lies in reducing the scope of indication to zero and thereby allowing the phenomenon under investigation—especially pure logical meaning—to appear as such. It anticipates in this way the theme of the phenomenological reduction, as Jacques Derrida has persuasively argued.¹⁷ In order to achieve a corresponding reduction of designation, for Benjamin, a very different movement is required: not a reversion to the ipseity of the self, which cuts itself off from all communication, but rather a restitution of limitless

communicability. The meaning of things derives from the things meant in their names rather than from an act of meaning-bestowal by which the speaking subject relates a word to a thing. As Chapter 5 of this study argues, Benjamin thus replaces Husserl's theme of monologue with the idea of panlogue. And instead of seeing communication as a fall into the sphere of indication, he proposes a reading of the Book of Genesis in which the expulsion from paradise results from the "excitement" (2: 153) of the judging word, which designates things and condemns the speaking subject in the same stroke. In the course of working out his exegesis of Genesis, however, Benjamin gets caught up in a particularly difficult problem: is the original language of human beings constitutively singular or potentially plural? In order to solve this question, he turns away from the schemata developed in response to *Logical Investigations* and adopts a framework of thought that derives from the *Critique of Pure Reason*: for Kant, divine intuition—to the extent that one can speak of such a thing—is altogether spontaneous, whereas human intuition is only receptive; similarly, for Benjamin, the creative word is purely spontaneous, whereas the original language of human beings is spontaneous only to the extent that it is primarily receptive. Because of its residue of spontaneity, however, Adamic language crosses into the sphere of designation, which crystallizes in the form of the proper name. In his preface to his translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux parisiens* (Parisian scenes), which he published in 1923 under the title "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" (The task of the translator), Benjamin does not so much abandon the idea of a lost panlogue as replace it with the concept of "pure language" (4: 13), which never manifests itself as such but which is nevertheless meant by every language as a whole, in complementary relation to every other. Just as the tension between phenomenology and Kantian critique traverses his studies of color and fantasy, so does it propel his contemporaneous reflections on logic and language.



In addition to drawing Benjamin into the orbit of phenomenology, Geiger's seminar on the third *Critique* solidified his sense that there is something singular about Kant's work, in relation to which philosophy acquires a certain continuity. One of the presentations he prepared for the seminar apparently dealt with the second section of the third *Critique*,

which circumscribes the applicability of teleological judgment to both organic beings and the phenomenon of nature as a whole. Although Kant makes little mention of nonnatural history in the context of the *Critique*, all of his occasional essays on human history are intimately bound up with the status of teleological judgment. Before having read the relevant writings, Benjamin conceived of a plan to write his dissertation on “Kant and history” (*GB*, I: 390). Disappointed upon reading a few of the relevant essays, he proposed a dissertation on the Kantian and neo-Kantian idea of the “infinite task.” Although this, too, never came to fruition, he did not thereby relinquish his conviction that Kant’s work, especially its terminology, is comparable to no other, with the possible exception of Plato’s. Nowhere does Benjamin express this conviction more forcefully than in the following passage in a letter to Gershom Scholem from July 1917: “As far as the question goes, which has been demanded for so long: how can I *live* with the position I’ve taken with regard to the Kantian system?—I am constantly at work on making this life possible through insight into the theory of knowledge and must have diligence and patience for the enormous task that, with all due respect, this life means for people of our attitude” (*GB*, I: 402).

Benjamin’s most extensive effort to gain “insight into the theory of knowledge” in this period can be found in an essay he wrote in late 1917 and early 1918, “Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie” (On the program of the coming philosophy), the central thesis of which can be formulated as follows: the purification of the theory of knowledge provides the basis for a concept of “higher experience.” Epistemology gains purity to the extent that it breaks free from all “epistemo-mythology” (2: 161), which ultimately consists in the conviction that experience results from causal interaction between subjects and objects. In this way, “epistemo-mythology” is equivalent to what Husserl calls the “natural” attitude, and Benjamin specifically mentions phenomenology in conjunction with the attempt to work out the structure of “pure epistemo-theoretical (transcendental) consciousness” (2: 162), without the presupposition that consciousness is another name for the subject-term of the subject-object relation. As for the Marburg school, it does not so much lack a sufficiently pure concept of knowledge—Cohen’s major epistemo-critical study, after all, is called *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis* (Logic of pure knowledge)—as fail to understand the essentially continuous character of experience. Under the guidance of the “fact of science,” which requires that

philosophy abstain from giving direction to ongoing research, experience breaks up into the various fields of empirical sciences, which doubtless are all subject to the same “infinite task” but which misunderstand the infinitude of their task by representing it as an endless approximation. In the attempt to grasp the “infinite task” of science as something other than an asymptotic approach to the ideal of perfect knowledge, Benjamin borrows the term *power* (*Mächtigkeit*) from transfinite set theory: just as the size of the linear continuum is of a higher power than that of the set of integers, so the unity of science as a whole is of a higher power than any given unit of scientific inquiry. In later texts, Benjamin replaces “science as a whole” with “philosophy as a system of problem” and then again with “truth” *simpliciter*. Chapter 6 of this study analyzes the drift of these inquiries into the concepts of knowledge and experience. Because both Kantian and neo-Kantian versions of “epistemo-critique” understand the continuity of experience only as a regulative idea, not as the critical element of its constitution, Benjamin develops a Platonic counterpart to the “Kantian typic” (2: 160) in the “Epistemo-Critical Preface,” where a “primordial listening to essentialities” replaces the “vision of essences” that finds expression in the phenomenological “instrument” of *Wesensschau*. It almost goes without saying that anyone whose intention lies in listening to essentialities cannot perceive them for this reason.



Whereas Chapter 6 takes up Benjamin’s transformation of Kantian theoretical philosophy, Chapter 7 is concerned with his corresponding transformation of Kant’s practical philosophy. The primary text under consideration is a set of notes that Scholem transcribed into his diary in the fall of 1916. The opening claim of these “Notizen zu einer Arbeit über die Kategorie der Gerechtigkeit” (Notes toward a work on the category of justice) asserts that a “possession-character” (S, I: 401) accrues to goods by virtue of their transience; but it is nevertheless unjust for anyone, including society at large, to make them into actual possessions. Benjamin thus responds to the opening paragraphs of Kant’s *Doctrine of Right*, which seek to expand the concept of right beyond the sphere of its immediate applicability—the human body, roughly speaking, along with whatever anyone happens to be holding at any given moment—on the basis of the postulate that every nonpossessed thing must be avail-

able for my use under the condition that I be able to bring it “under my control” (K, 6: 246). The phrase *under my control* is a translation of “in meiner Gewalt.” *Gewalt*, for Kant, is distinguished from *Macht* (power) insofar as it consists in an “act of the elective will” and so can be described as minimally rational. By virtue of its rationality, *Gewalt*—which Kant himself translates both as *potestas* (authoritative power) and as *violentia* (violence)—thus establishes the starting point of law. At the outset of the *Doctrine of Right*, then, is the following thesis: *Gewalt* in all its troubling ambiguity prepares the ground for right, which should eventually extend to every part of the globe under the sign of “eternal peace.”

Declining to affirm the initial steps of the *Doctrine of Right*, Benjamin seeks to identify the category of justice, which requires, in turn, a supplementary critique: in this case, a critique of *Gewalt*. For Kant, law (*Recht*) is the political correlate to pure practical reason, for it lays out a stable structure of relations among rational beings within which they are able to use both themselves and things without degrading themselves or others in the process. For Benjamin, by contrast, the political—or perhaps more exactly, the real or effective—counterpart to pure practical reason consists in pure *Gewalt*, which destroys the structure of right and thus does away with the legally sanctioned illusion that any use of persons or things can be disentangled from the complex of guilt. In the event of pure *Gewalt*—which can never been recognized as such—the mechanism that stores up, monopolizes, and delivers the current of power as though it were a natural resource is suddenly “turned off” (*ausgeschaltet*). This is what Benjamin means by the term “presiding power [waltende Gewalt]” (2: 203), which closes his contribution to the critique of *Gewalt*.



The central chapter of this volume revolves around a “very difficult remark” that Benjamin proposed at the start of an afternoon-long conversation with Scholem in August 1916: “The years are countable but, in contrast to most countables, not numerable” (S, 1: 390; 2: 601). As a student of mathematics, Scholem was in a good position to help Benjamin develop the “problem of historical time”—a phrase Benjamin borrows from Georg Simmel—in conjunction with this remark. In reflecting on the results of their conversations in August 1916, Benjamin began a long

letter to Scholem on the theme of language and mathematics, which he ultimately abandoned because of its immense difficulty, instead writing a “little treatise” (*GB*, I: 343) under the systematic title “Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen” (On language as such and on human language). In the letter where he announces his near completion of the “little treatise” he returns to the “problem of historical time” and briefly outlines a critique of a recent essay by a fellow participant in Rickert’s seminar on Bergson—namely Heidegger, whose “Zeitbegriff in der Geschichtswissenschaft” (Concept of time in historical scholarship), according to Benjamin, “documents in an exact manner how *not* to go about this matter” (*GB*, I: 344). Reversing the direction of Heidegger’s methodology yields the following result: as long as years are countable, they cannot be numbered; once they are numbered, there are none left to count. The number of every historical year is always in a certain sense “one,” regardless of the calendrical system that a regime has stipulated and made so conventional that it comes to appear natural.

In the course of the aforementioned conversation Scholem poses a question that runs congruent with, yet remains distinct from, the problem of historical time: what is the shape of time? In “Zwei Gedichte von Friedrich Hölderlin” (Two poems of Friedrich Hölderlin), Benjamin had earlier developed the enigmatic concept of “temporal plastics [zeitliche Plastik]” (2: 119) in order to address this very same problem. Associating the “plastic” shaping of time with Bergson’s idea of duration, Benjamin draws on a striking phrase from the second of the two poems he analyzes: “turn of time [Wende der Zeit].” Far from being a particular point of time—a revolutionary moment, for instance—“turn of time,” for Benjamin, and perhaps for Hölderlin as well, describes the structure of time in general, which is somehow always “turned.” During their conversation Scholem in August 1916, Scholem and Benjamin dismiss the “metaphysical” notion that the course of time must be represented as an irreversible motion along a straight line; instead they associate time with a variety of more complicated curves, the last of which curiously accords with Benjamin’s interpretation of the phrase from Hölderlin: a curve, namely, that is continuous yet nondifferentiable. No tangent lines can be drawn in relation to a curve of this kind; hence it has no direction: every point takes a sharp turn and cannot therefore be “touched” (4: 19) in accordance with a law given by the curve itself. Not only is the shape of time unimaginable; it is inviolate—and thus innocent.

Shortly before his death Scholem claimed to have in his possession a detailed document of the conversation in August 1916, but it has apparently been lost. The conclusion to this study proposes that Benjamin takes up the suggestion that fleetingly emerged in his conversation with Scholem in August 1916. The course of time is captured by a curve that is everywhere continuous yet nowhere differentiable: it is so sharply “turned” at every point that it proceeds without direction, neither progress nor regress, and every one of its stretches is not only like every other but also like the course of time as a whole. For the same reason, every time recapitulates—without ever exactly repeating—the whole of time. In this way, Benjamin responds to the Nietzschean idea of the eternal return of the same. Time, so construed, runs counter to history, and the tension between time and history, which repeats itself in the tension between history and myth, points toward a messianic resolution, in which history suddenly forms in conformity with the nondirectional, hence “senseless,” course of time.



The ordering of the chapters in this volume is not so much chronological as systematic. The first two chapters describe Benjamin’s “critical altercation” with the two major programs of philosophical research undertaken at the universities where he studied: first, neo-Kantianism, then phenomenology. The middle three chapters are concerned with the structure of space, time, and meaning respectively. And the final two chapters describe Benjamin’s transformation of Kantian theoretical philosophy, on the one hand, and Kantian practical philosophy, on the other. The order of chapters does not conform to the contours of a philosophical system in order to project the system of philosophy that Benjamin somehow failed to develop; rather, the systematic structure of the exposition is meant to serve as a grid through which the texts under consideration can assert their independence from the protocols and procedures of traditional philosophical discourse. The argument thus unfolds in conjunction with readings of specific items in the dossier of Benjamin’s early writings. Because each chapter is a relatively self-contained analysis, certain themes are necessarily repeated in summary form. And in certain places, particularly the central chapter, the analysis of the text requires, to a certain extent, its reconstruction.

There is no presumption here of “full coverage.” Many of the important documents for an understanding of Benjamin’s “intellectual develop-

ment" are missing, such as, for instance, his relation to Gustav Wyneken in particular and to the German youth movement in general. With the exception of Benjamin's dense essay on Hölderlin, little is said in this volume of his writings on German literature, or of his own private contribution to the German literary tradition in the form of a sonnet sequence written in memory of the poet Friedrich Heinle, which begins with an epigraph from Hölderlin's "Patmos." With regard to Benjamin's dissertation on Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis, with its afterword on Goethe, there are only brief discussions; and even less is said about Benjamin's major essay on Goethe's novel *Wahlverwandtschaften* (Elective affinities). The greatest lacuna, however, is the almost total absence of any reference to the texts Benjamin wrote after the rejection of his *Habilitationsschrift*. This absence is not generated by the expectation that there will be a second volume. What Fritz Heinle writes to one of Husserl's sons shortly before he committed suicide and they were sent into battle is probably true for Benjamin as well: "I read a lot, much philosophy, but it does not go very far."¹⁸