



The Fall of Language

ALEXANDER STERN

Benjamin and Wittgenstein
on Meaning

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ABBREVIATIONS

- B* Fritz Mauthner, *Beiträge zu Einer Kritik der Sprache*, 3rd ed., 3 vols. (Stuttgart: J.G. Cotta'sche Buchhandlung, 1921).
- GS* Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972–1989).
- HSW* Johann Georg Hamann, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Josef Nadler, 6 vols. (Vienna: Verlag Herder, 1949–1957).
- HW* *Johann Gottfried Herder Werke*, ed. U. Gaier et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985–).
- O* Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2018).
- PI* Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen / Philosophical Investigations*, revised 4th ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe et al., ed. P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).
- PPF* Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophie der Psychologie—Ein Fragment / Philosophy of Psychology—A Fragment* (also known as “Part II” of the *Philosophical Investigations*), in *PI*.
- PW* Johann Gottfried Herder, *Philosophical Writings*, trans. Michael Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- SW* Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, 4 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996).
- TLP* Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Logisch-Philosophische Abhandlung / Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961).
- WP* Johann Georg Hamann, *Writings on Philosophy and Language*, trans. Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Dual citations to German and English are made where possible. Some translations have been modified as needed for clarity.

THE FALL OF LANGUAGE

Introduction

1. The Language of Nature

Nature speaks. This very old and apparently implausible thesis harkens back to a time when the world teemed with the exploits of gods and spirits, or, later, reflected the will of its Creator. With nature's mysteries largely thought on their way to resolution or, at the very least, rendered mundane by modern science and attendant ways of thinking, nature no longer teems with meaning, but instead lies there passively, a corpse awaiting autopsy. Disenchanted nature is semantically inert. It is there to be described, explained, mined, but not heard.

A world endowed with spiritual meaning promises a tight connection between things and the names we give them. Plato's *Cratylus* goes as far as to argue that names are "correct" insofar as they grasp the essences of the things they name and that we can thus come to knowledge of things through their names. Etymology is, for *Cratylus*, first philosophy. In modern, disenchanted nature, by contrast, the names we assign the furniture of reality can't hope to have much to do with the things themselves, mute and meaningless as they are on their own. Of course words may imitate things. But onomatopoeic connections between words and things, which crop up here and there, can't be anything like essential. The *feeling* we often have that a name is correct can be dismissed as a kind of synesthesia produced by repeated usage. In any case, mimetic words can easily be replaced with non-mimetic ones, or with any arbitrary sign, with no loss of meaning, so long as we all agree on how the sign is to be used. Of course there might be some kind of loss involved—a poetic,

expressive, or aesthetic loss—but this is something extra, separable from the meaning conveyed by the sign.

Meaning in the disenchanted world is, then, primarily reference, a mapping connection obtaining between signs—bits of language—and things—bits of reality. The question of language becomes one of how it reaches out into the world and picks out the objects arrayed before it. As A. C. Danto writes, “Philosophy is concerned *au fond* with [. . .] ‘the space between language and the world.’”¹ On this view, philosophy concerns itself with the question of how this metaphorical space is filled—what conditions must obtain to bridge this gap between world and language and make reference, knowledge, and truth possible.

As Danto describes Ludwig Wittgenstein’s philosophical career, it turns on the latter’s sense that one could not bridge this distance after all. In the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein set out to determine the character of the structural relation obtaining between propositions and states of affairs: the way language must “picture” the world. Here, the Cratylist conception of a connection between word and thing gives way to one between the “logical form” of a proposition and that of states of affairs obtaining in the world. Language has a formal or structural connection to the world that guarantees the truth of facts, rather than a material connection that memorializes some kind of insight into the thing named.

Ultimately Wittgenstein finds his own Tractarian account implausible, however, and concludes, as Danto has it, “that natural language does not represent reality at all, that it has a use but not a descriptive meaning.”² From a scientific—even a common sense—point of view, this appears a puzzling result. If language cannot make factual claims of reality, what are we to make of the factual claims it appears to make of reality? It seems as though two structures, which once appeared to fit together, now float incoherently free of one another. We wander

¹Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 82.

²Ibid. Danto adopts a “standard” reading of the turn in Wittgenstein’s thought here, which I think is generally correct, but has been subject to a great deal of dispute in the last thirty years. See my discussion in Chapter 7. Danto’s description here is perhaps somewhat unsubtle. Wittgenstein does not exactly deny in the *Investigations* that language can represent or describe reality. He argues, rather, that the nature of description is not to be found in a deep structural connection between language and world, but in the language-games in which description plays a role.

territory with a map made for somewhere else. But Wittgenstein is not arguing that language fails to represent or map reality; he is rather trying to convince us to give up the picture that makes us think it tries to. The distance isn't there, and philosophy of language, therefore, constructs bridges to nowhere.

This suggests the view that language reaches across a gap between it and the world—that language *means* the world (or pictures it)—is a thesis about the world as much as it is a thesis about language. In assuming language is layered, as it were, atop reality, we assume that it has a form in common with it. The form of language can tell us something about the form of the world, which, the *Tractatus* tells us, is the “totality of facts, not of things.” A philosophy of language and an ontology here—perhaps everywhere—bleed into one another.

Wittgenstein seems to have thought he erred in generalizing the structure of a particular language-game—making descriptive claims of reality—and applying it to all of language. “Saying” (Wittgenstein’s term) something or “factually stating” it (David Pears’s gloss) is but one of a wealth of ways in which language is used. It appears to depend on a structure of semantic relations obtaining between itself and the world, but we can dissuade ourselves of this chimerical conception of *meaning* if we just look at the way language functions in context—if we describe its use.

There is, however, another way one might respond to Wittgenstein’s failure. One could give up the pursuit of logical form but refuse to give up on a more than merely practical connection between language and world, instead opting to revive the older, Cratylist version of this connection.

This is the path Walter Benjamin takes. His solution places meaning back in the world and understands human language as a subordinate medium of meaning that doesn’t bridge a gap to the world—though it does incorrigibly imagine itself on the other side of such a gap. Benjamin’s operative metaphor sees language not as picturing the world, but as translating it. Language, that is, does not *mean* the world, but transforms and reconfigures its already extant meaning. In fact, this is much more than a metaphor for Benjamin, since for him the way an individual language translates the world is not different in kind from translation among human languages. His solution, moreover, does not succumb to the naive mystical theory of meaning and knowledge that Cratylus puts

forward, as some of Benjamin's readers have assumed. His is a subtle Cratylism that doesn't deny the arbitrary, designative, and conventional aspects of language use, but tries to situate them within a framework that gives priority to a more immediate connection between language and world—what I will call aesthetic meaning.

Wittgenstein's later philosophy does not by any means ignore the aesthetic qualities of language and meaning. He takes them very seriously throughout the *Investigations*, especially in later sections. But to elevate them in significance above the logical capacities of language, as Benjamin does, would be, in Wittgenstein's eyes, to repeat the mistake of the *Tractatus*, but from the other end. However, as I'll argue toward the end of this book, the remarks Wittgenstein marshals against this Cratylist conception of the connection between language and world are weaker than the ones marshaled against the Tractarian conception. Here, Benjamin's philosophy of language can supplement Wittgenstein's. Likewise, with respect to the critique of the essentialization of logical meaning, Wittgenstein's can supplement Benjamin's.

Although Wittgenstein's injunction that we go "back to the rough ground," falls short of Benjamin's radical linguistic theory, which insists on ascribing meaning to the world, comparing their approaches will help disclose the philosophical alternatives available when one leaves behind the standard referential or "designative" paradigm, as I'll call it, following Charles Taylor. It will, moreover, demonstrate the continuing relevance of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German philosophy of language and thematize a number of unresolved and under-recognized philosophical problems concerning linguistic meaning, translation, language acquisition, figurative language, and the relationship between language and non-linguistic art.

The affinities between Benjamin's and Wittgenstein's philosophies of language are not accidental, but the result of a far-reaching shared historical tradition. Although Benjamin and Wittgenstein never met and didn't read each other, they shared a German-language cultural and intellectual milieu that took the expressive and aesthetic character of language seriously and included figures like J. G. Hamann, J. G. Herder, Friedrich Schlegel, Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Fritz Mauthner, Karl Kraus, and others. It was toward this tradition that Wittgenstein, following his period of investment in Gottlob Frege's and

Bertrand Russell's investigations into the philosophy of mathematics, turned back after—and perhaps during—the composition of the *Tractatus*.

2. Two Linguistic Turns

Wittgenstein's work, of course, lies at the heart of what is regarded as the central development of twentieth-century philosophy, the linguistic turn. Language pervades the philosophy of the twentieth century like war pervades its history. Scarcely any philosophical field has gone untouched by the question of language, and, in different ways, language has been enlisted in an attempt to radically reform the nature of philosophy itself. The title of Rudolf Carnap's famous 1932 paper, "The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language" captures the urgency with which the question of language was asked and the philosophical upheaval it threatened and, perhaps, caused. Like the world wars—though it is perhaps grandiose to say so—disputes over the philosophy of language had roots in the social, philosophical, and political upheaval of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. That is, both grew out of complicated and contradictory attempts to alternately understand, cope with, embrace, resist, and advance the ideals of the Enlightenment.

One consequence of the linguistic turn, however, has been to nearly erase that history. This is largely because the linguistic turn grew out of researches into the foundations of mathematics. Frege's work, which is typically taken to inaugurate the linguistic turn, sought to ground arithmetic in logic. To that end, in his *Begriffsschrift*, Frege developed a logical notation that could perspicaciously represent relations among propositions and between signs and objects. He was compelled to address here a number of semantic questions, most famously the relationship between what particular concept or object a sign picks out—its reference—and how it picks it out—its sense.

Although Frege confronted these questions in a mathematical context, his reflections were taken to have wide applicability. There is an assumption in his writing that the differences between using signs in mathematical notation or scientific discourse and using them in other practices, like literature or everyday conversation, are not terribly

significant. The latter are treated as unrefined or incomplete forms of the former. The language of the *Iliad*, for example, is taken to have sense but no reference. Frege regarded ordinary language and its convoluted ways of referring—through opaque senses—as a barrier to clear logical understanding.

The object of study of the philosophy of language was thus established by Frege and Russell as a fixed and stable structure operative independently of any particular practices, social structure, or history. Meaning and the structure of language could be studied, like mathematics and logic, as independent and universal forms. Language's aesthetic qualities and historical evolution—as well as issues like the meaning of figurative language or the problems of translation—are considered (when they are considered at all) obstacles standing in the way of a clear view of the logical and referential form underlying expression or, at best, secondary features of language. The linguistic turn as it was taken by Frege and Russell therefore appears not to enter into a particular philosophical discussion, but to establish a field entire. Thus, a philosopher like John Searle can make the otherwise unaccountable claim that Frege, Russell, and Wittgenstein “invented” the philosophy of language.³ Of course Frege was not the first philosopher to take language as an object of philosophical inquiry—nor even to recognize it as having foundational philosophical importance—but for a number of different reasons, his approach set the agenda for the philosophy of language of the century to follow.

As Hans Sluga has documented, the absence of historical awareness in the uptake of Frege's ideas has left us without a good idea of his philosophical influences and opponents. Sluga argues that Frege's “objectivism”—his insistence that propositions have an objective relationship to the world—and his anti-psychologism have their foil in the anti-Hegelian naturalism of the mid-nineteenth century, whose exponents include little-read philosophers like Otto Gruppe and Fritz Mauthner.⁴ Their treatment of language can be traced back to two proto-Romantic German thinkers credited with founding the *Sturm*

³ John Searle, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 5.

⁴ Hans D. Sluga, *Gottlob Frege* (London: Routledge, 1980).

und Drang movement in German philosophy and literature, Johann Georg Hamann and Johann Gottfried Herder.

These writers can all be regarded as part of what Charles Taylor has dubbed the “expressivist” tradition in philosophy of language, or the “HHH” tradition, referring to three of its central figures, Wilhelm von Humboldt being the third.⁵ This is in opposition to the “designative,” HLC (Hobbes-Locke-Condillac) tradition, of which Taylor counts Frege an inheritor. Taylor’s and Sluga’s work, as well as that of Michael Forster and Katie Terezakis, among others, has shed light on the rich, complicated, and under-recognized tradition in German philosophy of language—an earlier, eighteenth-century linguistic turn.

If we are permitted to call this the first linguistic turn, Hamann is its Frege.⁶ Two more divergent philosophical temperaments can scarcely be imagined. Where Frege’s linguistic turn arose out of attempts to construct a perfectly clear logical notation and maintained a consequent suspicion of language’s poetical and historical features, Hamann’s linguistic turn arose out of a religious conversion and maintained a consequent suspicion of the Enlightenment’s rationalist impulse toward systematization and purification. Where Frege valued clarity, Hamann was notoriously, even purposefully, obscure. Where Frege saw language’s poetry and historical idiosyncrasy as obstacles for logical philosophy to overcome, for Hamann they were essential to the character of language. Where Frege attempted to construct a single logical language, Hamann celebrated language’s plurality. Where Frege saw language as an organ for reason’s expression, Hamann saw in language reason’s origin.

Just as the analytic tradition bears the mark Frege left on it, the tradition stemming from Hamann—and including thinkers, in addition to those named above, like Goethe, Jacobi, Friedrich Schlegel, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche—is stamped with Hamann’s aesthetic interests and excesses, his suspicions of rationalism and “common sense,” his insistence on the importance of tradition, history, and religion as they are embedded in language, and his integration of philosophy with the “critique

⁵ See Taylor’s most recent expression of these ideas in *The Language Animal* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016).

⁶ Michael Forster has argued that it is, in fact, Herder that deserves more of the credit for founding this tradition. I address his argument in Chapter 4.

of language" (*Sprachkritik*) and social criticism. Most importantly, where Frege adapted an Enlightenment, designative understanding of the connection between language and world to new developments in logic and mathematics, Hamann developed a Christian version of the Cratylist understanding of the connection between language and world. He takes the ancient metaphor that sees creation as a text and God as its author with the utmost seriousness.

3. Two Countercurrents

This book is a study of two figures in twentieth-century philosophy who marshaled the resources of the first linguistic turn to resist the second, in the process developing radically unorthodox, yet importantly similar visions for the task of philosophy.

As he was in many other ways, Benjamin emerges here as something of an outsider. Among figures in the continental tradition in philosophy of language, Benjamin may not come to mind as immediately as Heidegger or Derrida, though he influenced Derrida and came to similar insights on the centrality of language far earlier than his contemporary, Heidegger. Benjamin is more closely associated with literature, technology, media, art, urbanization, and nineteenth-century Paris, which occupied his final years, than with the philosophy of language, even though his conception of language as an all-pervasive medium of expression informs his studies of all these things. Benjamin is perhaps even less likely to be thought at all connected with early analytic philosophy of language or figures like Frege and Russell. However, he did reflect on Russell's paradox and regarded his own thought on language as deeply connected to the problematic relationship between mathematics and language. He draws on the thought of Hamann and the tradition following him in part to resist the "bourgeois" (his word for it) philosophy of language that generates Russell's paradox.⁷

⁷ "Bourgeois" is the term Benjamin uses in "On Language as Such" to refer to a designative view of language, or, as he elsewhere refers to it, as a misapprehension of the "sign-character [*Zeichencharacter*] of language." Letter to Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Jan. 13, 1924, *Briefe* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1978), vol. 1, 329.

Wittgenstein's thought, on the other hand, will seem at first pass too engrained in the tradition of Russell and Frege, even if reacting against it, to be implicated in this historical narrative. Moreover, Wittgenstein has long been taken to be completely uninterested in and even independent of the history of philosophy. G. H. von Wright writes for example:

Wittgenstein's later philosophy is, so far as I can see, entirely outside any philosophical tradition and without literary sources of influence. For this very reason it is exceedingly difficult to understand and characterize. The author of the *Tractatus* learned from Frege and Russell. His problems grew out of theirs. The author of the *Philosophical Investigations* has no ancestors in philosophy.⁸

The truth is that much of what appears utterly original and, possibly, baffling in Wittgenstein's thought from the perspective of the Anglo-American philosophy of language of the twentieth century, finds its roots in the expressivist tradition. Wittgenstein's ambivalent existence in between these two traditions is one of the most compelling aspects of his career. Of course, the under-recognition of the impact of expressivism on Wittgenstein's work is due not just to an ahistorical attitude in the analytic tradition, but to the relative obscurity of expressivism itself, and to Wittgenstein's own character and biases. In 1916, for example, he wrote, "What has history to do with me? Mine is the first and only world."⁹ Although Wittgenstein may have overcome this attitude to a certain extent, his conception of his own relationship to his influences, as he expressed it in the preface to the *Tractatus*, never changed:

I do not wish to judge how far my efforts coincide with those of other philosophers. Indeed, what I have written here makes no claim to novelty in detail, and the reason why I give no sources is that it is a matter of indifference to me whether the thoughts I have had have been anticipated by someone else.

⁸ G. H. von Wright, "Biographical Sketch," in Norman Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: A Memoir* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 14.

⁹ Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914–1916*, ed. G. H. von Wright and G. E. M. Anscombe, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 2nd ed., 82. See also a paper by Sluga, which takes this remark for its title, "What Has History to Do With Me? Wittgenstein and Analytic Philosophy," *Inquiry*, 41 (1998), 99–121.

He does mention influences in his notebooks—for example, the oft-cited list of 1931 that names “Boltzmann, Hertz, Schopenhauer, Frege, Russell, Kraus, Loos, Weininger, Spengler and Sraffa” as thinkers whose writing Wittgenstein, “with enthusiasm for [his] work of clarification,” had “seized on.”¹⁰ However, in the actual course of developing his philosophical ideas, Wittgenstein, with a few exceptions, almost never mentions the thinkers or schools of thought he is clarifying, developing, or criticizing.

One important exception comes in remark 4.0031 of the *Tractatus*, where Wittgenstein declares all philosophy to be critique of language, “though not in Mauthner’s sense.” It is *Sprachkritik*, rather, in the sense of Russell, who shows that “the apparent logical form of a proposition need not be its real one.” In this remark, to be discussed in more detail below, Wittgenstein presents, with his characteristic enigmatic precision, a central dividing line between the approach to language of the second linguistic turn and that of the first. Mauthner, an Austro-Hungarian theater critic, novelist, and philosopher of language in the tradition of Hamann and Nietzsche, was widely read in the Vienna of Wittgenstein’s youth and the Berlin of Benjamin’s (but seldom since). For him, *Sprachkritik* meant, most of all, critique of the language of philosophy, politics, and religion, which hypostatizes and speculates about abstract terms to no end, except perhaps ideological ones. For Russell, on Wittgenstein’s reading, it meant critique of everyday language, which is thought to cloak the true logical form of propositions, which needs to be unearthed by philosophical analyses. Where, in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein decides on behalf of Russell and employs the latter’s brand of critique to analyze the picturing relation Wittgenstein sees obtaining between language and the world, in later writings Wittgenstein moves in Mauthner’s direction.

The remark represents a confrontation, then, between two distinct philosophical approaches to language. The later career of Wittgenstein, moreover, represents, to adapt a phrase from Benjamin, an eddy in the stream of analytic philosophy of language, drawing on the philosophical tradition that comes down to him, mostly through Mauthner, to resist the manifold and recalcitrant biases that Wittgenstein comes to see

¹⁰Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, eds. G. H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 19.

embedded in his own earlier philosophy of language and in philosophy in general.

Benjamin's philosophical development involves no similar dramatic turn, but instead the sustained and sophisticated, if opaque, development and application of a number of ideas growing out of the work of Hamann, the Romantics, Nietzsche, and others. After giving up on a career in the academy, Benjamin's later work, with notable exceptions, offers only isolated writings ("The Task of the Translator" and "On the Mimetic Faculty" being the most prominent) in the way of explicit theorizing about the nature of language. But the theory of language he develops in early writings remains of foundational importance to his later and better-known work on media, literature, politics, and material culture.¹¹

In 1916, when Wittgenstein was fighting in the First World War and at work on the material that would become the *Tractatus*, Benjamin wrote an essay on language that would not be published until 1955, fifteen years after his death. "On Language as Such and the Language of Man" is in many ways an odd and obscure piece of writing. It evolved out of correspondence between Benjamin and his friend Gershom Scholem over questions about the relationship between language and mathematics. Although math never explicitly enters Benjamin's essay, the manner in which a mathematical sign designates its object, in contrast to the expressivity of human language and language in general (*Sprache überhaupt*), as Benjamin understands it, looms over the entire essay, which can be said to pose the question: what is meaning outside of designation? Or, what is meaning considered independently of meaning *something*? The essay is complicated by the fact that for Benjamin, as for Wittgenstein, the question of language is not isolable, but bound up with the most basic philosophical, religious, historical, and cultural questions. It is fitting then that the main argument of the essay takes the form of a reading of Genesis. Benjamin interprets Adam and Eve's exile from the Garden of Eden as an exile from the language of God, immanent in nature, and banishment into a language at a distance from things, one

¹¹ Eli Friedlander does an admirable job of bringing this out in his recent book on Benjamin. *Walter Benjamin: A Philosophical Portrait* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012).

that designates them, abstracts from them, and has its purest form in mathematical signs.

As I'll argue in Chapter 1, Benjamin's essay owes its biggest debt to Hamann, whose understanding of divine condescension informs the metaphysical structure in which Benjamin finds human language embedded. But the essay, along with Benjamin's 1925 book, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (published in 1928), also draws on Herder's work and on the Romantic development of some of Hamann's and Herder's ideas, especially in Friedrich Schlegel, the main subject of Benjamin's 1919 dissertation, *On the Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*. In the middle chapters of the book, I will analyze this tradition, some important disagreements that emerge from it, especially between Hamann and Herder, and how Benjamin enters into these debates a century-and-a-half later. I will also show how this tradition comes to influence Wittgenstein through Fritz Mauthner.

This historical work will form a background against which Wittgenstein's and Benjamin's positions can be compared. Putting these various sources into dialogue with one another both illuminates some of their otherwise opaque features and throws into relief what I take to be the most compelling facets of Benjamin's, Wittgenstein's, and indeed the whole tradition's approach to language. Despite some foundational pre-suppositions, there is a great deal of variation in this tradition. The overlap in the Benjaminian and Wittgensteinian understandings of language serves well, I think, to delineate the core of the expressivist approach, while their differences—as well as the fact that both approaches are extreme in their own ways—serve to define two outer limits of that approach: what might be called the aesthetic and practical variants of expressivism. This is a divergence in certain ways already present in the writings of Hamann and Herder, but which is brought out even more strongly in the comparison between Benjamin and Wittgenstein.

4. What is Language?

A child doesn't acquire language all at once. Before they utter their first words, babies cry, babble, and writhe. What separates this prelinguistic behavior from language is not always clear. Overeager grandparents may see in incoherent but clearly expressive babbling their grandchild's first

words. What's more, parents come to understand more or less what their children are after without thinking to call the combinations of cries, babbling, and gesticulation that produce this understanding "language." This is just one example of the ways in which the boundaries seem fluid between what we usually call "language" and "non-linguistic" behavior or phenomena that seem nonetheless to convey some kind of meaning. Where does the behavior stop and language begin? For that matter, what separates the meaning we glean from our experience of the world from the meaning conveyed by language?

Near the beginning of "On Language as Such and the Language of Man," Benjamin proposes that we draw no line. "There is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in a certain sense take part in language, for it is in the nature of each to communicate its intellectual [*geistige*] content" (*GS* 2:140–41 / *SW* 1:62). Benjamin insists that the word "language" is not meant metaphorically here. It is being employed in a radical way, not as a distinctly human *means* of communication, nor strictly speaking as a means of communication at all, but as an extant structure in which objects and events, and even individual human languages, like German or English, take part. Language is an all-encompassing medium of expression—it is meaning *as such*, or what is sometimes called being. The child, on this view, does not so much acquire a language as use words to take hold of and begin to articulate the language that is already there.

What might motivate this boundless expansion of the concept? Part of Benjamin's intention is to counteract the force language takes against itself. Like everything else in philosophy, language must be grasped by language. This, as both Benjamin and Wittgenstein recognize, imposes a form on language that can be constricting and misleading. Language can't get out of its own way.

This is brought out by Herder's criticisms of the Abbé Condillac, whose theory of the origin of language Herder sardonically summarizes like this: "In short, words arose because words existed before they existed." Condillac's theory of language is circular because it assumes the relation between world and language that is established by language. Calling everything language—in effect, refusing to define or circumscribe language—can mitigate this problem. On Benjamin's view, explicitly or implicitly defining language with any narrower sense will inevitably lead to a misunderstanding of the relationship between human language

and the world. As Hamann puts the point, “Language is at the center of reason’s misunderstanding of itself” (*HSW* 3:286 / *WP* 211). Or here is Wittgenstein awestruck at a philosophical problem: “See how high the seas of language run here!” Seeing how high they do run is extraordinarily difficult, and, even more difficult is *keeping* their height in our grasp.

Throughout this book, we will encounter philosophical paradigms that, from the perspective of Benjamin’s, Hamann’s, or Wittgenstein’s arguments implicitly or explicitly delimit the medium of language, thereby placing it in opposition to some non-linguistic structure. Herder, for example, by Hamann’s lights, errs by even entertaining the possibility of the human invention of language in his *Treatise on the Origin of Language*. The designative theorists of language against which Benjamin sets himself err in placing language outside the world and assuming its essential function to be reference to non-linguistic reality. Similarly, the private linguist of Wittgenstein’s *Investigations* errs in detaching inner sensation from linguistic expression and assuming their relation to be purely designative.

These problems are exacerbated by the fact that our philosophical methodology has come to base itself largely on a scientific one, which requires that our investigations isolate their object, divide its structure into parts, and analyze their interrelations and contributions to a whole. By refusing to restrict the concept of language to human language (or to restrict it in any way whatsoever), Benjamin rejects the idea that language can be fully understood as such an isolable object and suggests that any study of language that takes a starting point of this kind will either be radically limited in its scope or, more likely, will mutilate its subject matter.

Although Wittgenstein engages in no such conscious expansion of the concept of language to include everything in created nature, he is similarly cautious about restricting the concept of language. The controlling role that the idea of “form of life” plays in his later philosophy is perhaps the clearest evidence of this. But so is his turn away from Russell’s understanding of *Sprachkritik*. At §92 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein criticizes the idea of a true logical form lying concealed “underneath” everyday expressions. He characterizes this tendency to isolate and analyze language and sentences as part of an inquiry into “the essence of language,” of which he writes:

The question of the *essence* of language [. . .] sees the essence of things not as something that already lies open to view, and that becomes *surveyable* [*übersichtlich*] through a process of ordering, but as something that lies *beneath* the surface. Something that lies within, which we perceive when we see right into the thing, and which an analysis is supposed to unearth.

'The essence is hidden from us': that is the form our problem now assumes. We ask "*What is language?*", "*What is a proposition?*" and the answer to these questions is to be given once for all, and independently of any future experience.

Like Hamann and Herder, Wittgenstein thinks the feeling of an essence is produced here by a form imposed on language by language itself. It is the "forms of the expressions we use in talking about propositions" that "stand in the way" of the confused philosopher (*PI* §93). As he puts it elsewhere, the relationship of logic or philosophy to language is not like that of natural science to its objects of study (*PI* §81).

Against this, Wittgenstein proposes in his own "investigations" not to try to penetrate into the structure of language, but rather to clarify its "function" and "structure" by way of "ordering" or "arranging" it in a particular way so that it becomes "surveyable" (*übersichtlich*). This arranging requires recognizing that language does not stand alone. Damage is done to our understanding of language when its surface manifestations are detached from life—from the language-games of which they are a part—and analyzed as if their true nature consisted in some buried form to be unearthed by the philosopher.

Wittgenstein objects, then, to the essentialization of language and deflates philosophical claims by showing what language does, instead of speculating about what it might *mean*. He puts language back into the world. Benjamin, by contrast—and this accounts for the much more radical character of his philosophy—reacts to some of these same problems by putting the world into language—that is, understanding human language as one manifestation of a pervasive form of linguistic meaning.

There is a price to be paid for blurring the line between language and world and refusing to take it as an isolable object of study. It ensures that nothing like the clarity of analytic philosophy of language will be available to either Benjamin or Wittgenstein. Insisting at the outset that the means they have for expressing themselves are

structurally inadequate or necessarily misleading, both Wittgenstein and Benjamin must abjure the propositional, theory-building structure of academic philosophy. Not just that, but they both also find themselves “running up against the limits of language” and contending with ineffability.

If we consider everything to be linguistic, we seem doomed to an arcane mysticism, to drowning in the “seas of language.” Benjamin must therefore resort to oblique means to express himself. “*Methode ist Umweg*”—method is detour or indirection—as Benjamin puts it in the “Epistemo-Critical Foreword” to the *Trauerspiel* book. Benjamin’s intricate and unstable philosophical methodology continually approaches its material anew, and to advance its arguments uses means—literary interpretation, conceptual mosaics or “constellations,” and heavy use of quotation—ordinarily excluded from philosophical inquiry.

Wittgenstein similarly abjures conventional forms of argumentation, preferring instead analogy, imagined language-games, and dialogic excursions that “criss-cross in every direction over a wide field of thought” (*PI*, “Foreword,” 3). He recognizes that we can’t see language from outside—“our language is deficient in surveyability,” he writes (*PI* §122)—but through these various means we can come to intermediate glimpses of the functioning of our language.

The methodologies of both thinkers reflect the sense, to use Benjamin’s phrasing, that language is not a means for expression, but a medium in which different human languages, gestural language, and non-human forms of communication all interpenetrate one another. Not an object to be delimited and subjected to analysis, language is rather an illimitable structure to be brought (to the extent possible) *into view*. To use the language of the *Tractatus*, both thinkers find that the nature of language can be shown but not said.

5. The Language of Experience

Benjamin’s understanding of the penetration of language into all domains of existence entails the reconceptualization of a number of these domains, perhaps most importantly that of experience itself. Central to Benjamin’s theory of language here is translation, which like language

itself must be conceptually expanded. No longer can it be understood as designating merely a process of conversion between two human languages; the word “translation” comes, rather, to describe the mode by which meaning, in the overarching domain of language as such, *moves* among individual languages—including not just human languages but, for example, the communication of objects to human beings. Even translation between human languages is no longer understood by Benjamin as the rendering of some intermediate content expressed by the foreign language into the target language. This Benjamin describes as “dead translation.” Living translation, by contrast, involves the fluid movement of languages into one another. Benjamin’s picture is one of target languages bending themselves to accommodate the expressive power of the foreign language. Translation, in its essential character, operates, then, not by way of access to a third realm of meanings between or above the respective languages, but rather, Benjamin says, through a “continuum of transformations.” It is more like a shift in register or the way a melody passes from woodwinds to brass instruments in an orchestra than a conversion from feet into meters. Meaning does not just get designated by a new set of signs, but bleeds into the target language, coloring it with the home language as it does so and confusing strict boundaries between the languages.

Living and dead translation correspond, for Benjamin, to the distinction between expressive and designative language—names and signs, as he sometimes refers to them. They also correspond, as I’ll suggest in Chapter 8, to two modes of understanding a sentence that Wittgenstein identifies in the *Investigations*: one in which I can replace the sentence with one that means the same and a second in which I cannot (*PI* §541).

The way experience is expressed in language is also understood by Benjamin in terms of translation. Or as Benjamin puts it in “On Language as Such,” “The name that man gives to language depends on how language is communicated to him” (*GS* 2:150 / *SW* 1:69). The plurality of languages is understood as a product of the fact that these translations are partial and imperfect and take up a different aspect of the communication of nature experienced by humankind. “The language of things can pass into the language of knowledge and name only through translation—so many translations, so many languages” (*GS* 2:152 / *SW* 1:71).

The expansions of the concepts of language and translation thus entail another expansion, that of the concept of experience, which is now to be understood not in terms of the receipt and ordering of sensations but the communication of meaning.

Benjamin's writings on Kant and language suggest, as I will argue in Chapter 1, that the empiricist model of experience—one Benjamin thinks continues to infect Kant's epistemology—is in fact of a piece with a designative picture of language. In criticizing Kant's epistemology for its neglect of language and its empiricist biases, Benjamin again follows in the footsteps of Kant's contemporaries Herder and Hamann, both of whom wrote "metacritiques" of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Benjamin argues that Kant's conceptions of both knowledge and experience are reductive and unnecessarily exclusive, and that the right understanding of the relationship between knowledge and experience requires that we reorient Kant's critical project around language.

For Wittgenstein, too, there is concern not just with the damage done to our understanding of language by the structure imposed on it by language, but also that done to our understanding of experience. And the presuppositions of the dominant empiricist epistemology loom large for him as well. His so-called "private language argument," for example, takes aim at an empiricist or phenomenalist conception of inner experience. He sees a rigid, overliteral interpretation of language expressing pain, for example, as producing the illusion that an isolated individual might, without absurdity, name a particular sensation without speaking about it to others. As I'll argue in Chapter 6, Wittgenstein can be read, in part, as responding to Mauthner's philosophy of language. Although Wittgenstein follows Mauthner in a number of respects—foremost, in construing meaning in terms of use and criticizing philosophical language that has gone "out of circulation"—Mauthner joins this expressivist critique to a Machian empiricism that regards sensation as the foundation of language. In purging Mauthner's thought of empiricist biases, Wittgenstein brings it closer to Benjamin's and Hamann's. Wittgenstein's emphasis, in the notion of language-games, on the continuity between language and non-linguistic activity further complicates the picture of the relationship between language and experience, as does his difficult and unresolved discussion of aspect-seeing in the later stages of the *Investigations* and other late writings.

6. The Language of Art

Benjamin's idea that human language is the product of the translation of the language of experience entails the primacy of poetic language and mimesis—an idea that has a long history in the expressivist and Romantic traditions. It also entails a continuity between language and art. How we ought to understand the expressivity of non-linguistic art like painting and instrumental music becomes a vital question for expressivism. The question especially concerns Herder and Schlegel, whose work is the main object of Benjamin's doctoral dissertation, *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism* (1919). In Benjamin's pan-linguistic framework, art occupies a middle point between the expressivity of nature itself and that of human language. It is therefore crucial in conceptualizing the translation or movement of the former into the latter. Moreover, what is peculiar about human language and its way of meaning will be, for Benjamin, elucidated by setting it against the meaning of non-linguistic art.

In a recent book, Forster writes in detail about the question of art in relation to Herder's and Hamann's respective conceptions of language and meaning.¹² Whereas Herder eventually comes to regard the meaning of these kinds of art forms as dependent on and "bounded by" human linguistic meaning, Hamann, according to Forster, regards meanings of the kind expressed by music as exceeding the expressive capabilities of human language. That is, on Forster's reading of Herder, meaning is produced first and foremost by language and only derivatively ascribable to things like music. It remains, therefore, incapable of expressing anything outside the expressive reach of human language itself. Hamann, on the other hand, allows for such extra-linguistic expressivity (expressivity beyond *human* language) in art.

As I will argue in Chapter 5, given the expansion of the concepts of language and meaning, this turns out to be either a trivial point by Hamann's (and Benjamin's) lights, or, if taken more literally, a mischaracterization. The very idea that art might express meanings that might *or might not* be captured by human language looks peculiar from

¹² Forster, *German Philosophy of Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 178–218.

Hamann's and Benjamin's perspective, since meaning is always only partially translated on the way from one medium to another. The meaning of every act of expression is *sui generis* and, in this sense, impossible for human language to capture. In this sense, every example of art involves the "inexpressible." And yet, on the other hand, the idea of a meaning that could *not at all* be expressed by human language is anathema to both Hamann and Benjamin. There is nothing outside language as such, and thus nothing completely beyond any kind of articulation. The example of art and the question of what kind of meaning it expresses shows more precisely how extreme the position Hamann and Benjamin take up is, and also how widely expressivist theories of meaning can vary.

The expressivity of art in relation to human language is an issue that occupies Wittgenstein as well. Especially important to him is the analogy between painting or pictures and language. The question is bound up for him with the question of the limits of language, and the ineffability of the domain beyond these limits. The early Wittgenstein puzzles over the extent to which the limits of the expressivity of language can be *shown in language*. He has in mind here, however, only a particular usage of language: "saying." The picturing relation between language and world that Wittgenstein regards as essential in the *Tractatus* makes way for a more permissive and complex view of language and its limits in the *Investigations*. The analogy between our understanding of pictures and our understanding of language does not disappear in the late Wittgenstein, however; instead it expands to account for the breadth of uses to which both pictures and language are put.

The idea that language has any strict limitations dissipates, and language itself is raised into a register comparable to that which it reaches in Benjamin. The major difference again is that Wittgenstein deflates questions of meaning by drawing our attention to use, while Benjamin takes the experience of meaning and the continuity between experiential and linguistic meaning very seriously. That is not to say that this continuity is neglected by Wittgenstein. He writes, for example, that "understanding a sentence in language is much more akin to understanding a theme in music than one may think" (*PI* §527). And in the *Investigations* and other late-period writings on aspect-seeing and meaning-blindness, Wittgenstein approaches issues that occupied the early Ben-

jamin, relating to the fluid border between linguistic understanding and perception.

If language is more like art than it seems, it follows that philosophy (“critique of language”) is more like art criticism than we ordinarily think. This is precisely the upshot of both Benjamin’s dissertation and the famously opaque “Epistemo-Critical Foreword” to the *Trauerspiel* book, his attempted *Habilitationsschrift*. In the latter, a number of influences converge—Hamann’s expressivism, early Romantic ideas about art and criticism, Jewish mysticism, Plato, Hegel, and Leibniz, among them—in an attempt to develop an epistemology within the context of the linguistic universalism established in earlier writings. Following Schlegel, whose theory of reflection he reads in his dissertation in line with his own theory of language, Benjamin contends that philosophy is essentially a kind of art criticism. It “sees connections”—to use Wittgenstein’s phrase—among various historical phenomena, groups them together, and interprets them in an attempt, with the phenomena themselves, to represent ideas. Ideas are not “super-concepts,” as Platonism has it, but historically bound configurations that elevate the material that makes them up into an ideal realm and reveal their meaning for the present. Benjamin’s theory of ideas, despite its abstruseness and rampant “chutzpah” (as Benjamin called it) shares some of its impetus with Wittgenstein’s own thinking on the limits of concepts. Both Benjamin and Wittgenstein recognize the distorting influence of human language and concepts on philosophical understanding. Wittgenstein’s use of the notion “family resemblances” to characterize the “overlapping,” “criss-crossing,” non-uniform relations among words in our language is meant to vitiate this effect. Whereas Wittgenstein is satisfied to recognize the effect, and limits his project to helping us do that, Benjamin thinks it can be productively militated against in the pursuit of philosophical truth.

7. Critique and the Role of Religion

Although I focus in what follows on Benjamin’s and Wittgenstein’s conceptions of language itself and their respective developments of expressivism, it is important to note at the outset that these ideas—

especially in Benjamin's, Mauthner's, and Hamann's writings, but also in Wittgenstein's—are closely connected to social and political concerns. Before a transformative trip to London, Hamann was a supporter of the *Aufklärung*. Upon his return, he took aim at the work of Mendelssohn, Kant, and other *Aufklärer*; opposed Frederick the Great's "enlightened" reforms; and inveighed against the Berlin Enlightenment's pretended critical independence of language, religion, and tradition. His reflections on language were by no means disconnected from these concerns. Significantly, Hamann takes to referring to Berlin as a new Babel and Frederick as its Nimrod, suggesting the enlightened regime was a new attempt, united in a single language of reason, to vainly reach to the heavens (*HSW* 3:299–302 / *WP* 174–79).

To Hamann it was clear that the logic of the Enlightenment depended on decoupling reason from language in at least two senses. First, reason needs language as an instrument, a means that can be deployed to support rational management in all domains of society. Secondly, reason cannot be regarded as dependent on language, since it is deemed to have ultimate authority and is tasked with the elimination of the "irrational" elements of society and tradition often encoded in language. Heavily influencing his friend Jacobi, who coined the term, as well as Nietzsche, Hamann saw "nihilism" as the only logical outcome of unrestrained Enlightenment rationality. For these reasons, Hamann is often regarded as an anti-Enlightenment thinker and even as the fount of European irrationalism.¹³ But, given his background and relationships, especially his friendship with Kant, he can also be regarded as an internal critic of the Enlightenment, trying to correct what he regarded as a disembodied and ahistorical conception of reason that neglected the indispensable contributions made by language.

Both Mauthner and Benjamin pick up on this integration of philosophy of language and social criticism. Mauthner's *Sprachkritik* extends the Hamannian line of criticism to Kaiser Wilhelm's nationalizing, homogenizing Germany, and to the all-colonizing scientific worldview.¹⁴

¹³ See Isaiah Berlin's *The Magus of the North: J. G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism*, ed. Henry Hardy (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1994).

¹⁴ See Katherine Arens, *Empire in Decline: Fritz Mauthner's Critique of Wilhelmian Germany* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001); and Elisabeth Leinfellner-Reputersberger, "Die Republik der Sprachen bei Fritz Mauthner: Sprache und Nationalismus," *Die Wiener Jahrhundertwende: Einflüsse, Umwelt, Wirkungen* (Wien: Böhlau, 1993), 389–405.

Mauthner is, in particular, interested in the nefarious hold abstract terms gain over the minds of academics, journalists, politicians, and the public. Benjamin, who signals the social importance of his theory by identifying its foil as the “bourgeois” theory of language, follows Hamann in identifying the Fall of language with the leveling logic of the Enlightenment. As remains underappreciated, Benjamin’s theory of language stands at the foundation of his later analysis of bourgeois material culture. In particular, his famous writings on Goethe, Baudelaire, Kafka, and Leskov; his criticisms of journalistic language in his essay on Karl Kraus and in the *Arcades Project*; his characterizations of the media of photography and film, all depend conceptually on his early characterizations of language and the role of criticism.

Moreover, Benjamin’s thoughts on language make a decisive early contribution to Frankfurt School critical theory, especially as the project was carried out in the work of Theodor Adorno. Of particular importance here are Adorno’s concept of the “non-identical”; his conviction that in language reside largely lost non-conceptual elements that can be retrieved from the conceptual leveling toward which language, especially under the conditions of late capitalism, tends; and that philosophy ought to try to retrieve what is lost through the figure of the constellation or dialectical image.¹⁵ Contemporary critical theory, insofar as it concerns itself with language, concentrates on the intersubjective communicative pragmatics of Jürgen Habermas. It tends to dismiss Benjamin’s theory as theological or incomprehensible and to censure Benjamin and Adorno for ignoring the intersubjective and deliberative aspects of language use. Whether or not a theory of communicative action can serve as the basis for a better concept of rationality and a productive reorientation of the Enlightenment project, critical theory can benefit from an expressive theory of language like Benjamin’s, which can describe how ideology is embedded in, for example, clinical and bureaucratic language. As long as our language itself is reified, euphemized, and bereft, its rational deployment in consenting discursive communities will remain uncritical.

Despite some attempts to locate a politics in Wittgenstein, he was both in his personal life and philosophical remarks largely apolitical. But

¹⁵ See Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), chs. 9–11.

he too recognized the social and, certainly, the ethical implications of some of his thought on language, and the tradition to which it belonged. Karl Kraus, Oswald Spengler, Otto Weininger, and Arthur Schopenhauer are key and well-recognized influences in this light, although Mauthner, Nietzsche, and, even Hamann himself, whom Wittgenstein read, deserve mention too.

Wittgenstein's attitude toward the times he lived through was, at best, obliquely expressed, but it still formed an essential background of his philosophical project.¹⁶ As in the rest of the counter-Enlightenment tradition to which he belongs, he saw Western culture in decline. But what precisely did his remarks on language—which seem aimed at dissolving academic, metaphysical muddles and bringing us to an accurate view of our use of language—have to do with culture? Like Hamann and Benjamin, he saw the tendency that produced philosophical confusion over language as more widely diffused in the culture as a whole, and of a piece with an Enlightenment tendency to feel ourselves to be outside tradition, culture, religion, and even history. Much of his later writing in the *Investigations* and elsewhere—his lectures on aesthetics and religion, and reflections on Freud and Frazer's *Golden Bough* are particularly important—can be read as an attempt to pull us back from this “externalization” of language.

These thinkers' various objections to particular strains of Enlightenment thought are often accompanied by an attraction to religion or religious language. This tendency ranges from Hamann's devout Christianity, to Benjamin's attraction to the Kabbalah and his linguistic interpretation of Genesis, to Mauthner's “godless mysticism,” to Wittgenstein's claim that, though not himself religious, he could not “help seeing every problem from a religious point of view.” With each figure there are various ways to read the relative import of religion in their thought and lives. What is common to all of them, however, is a connection between religion or “mysticism” and holism.

Goethe, himself an important source of both Benjamin's and Wittgenstein's holism, wrote that for Hamann, “Anything isolated is

¹⁶ See esp. Jacques Bouveresse, “‘The Darkness of this Time’: Wittgenstein and the Modern World,” *Wittgenstein Centenary Essays*, ed. A. P. Griffiths (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 11–39; Stanley Cavell, “Declining Decline: Wittgenstein as a Philosopher of Culture,” *Inquiry* 31:3, 253–64; and James C. Klagge, *Wittgenstein in Exile* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010).

reprehensible.”¹⁷ Hamann’s complaints against Enlightenment philosophers revolve around their “putting asunder what nature has joined together” (*HSW* 3:40 / *WP* 117). We’ve seen already that Benjamin’s Hamannian expansion of the concept of language is the result of an insistence that language cannot be understood as an object isolated from the whole. But in Hamann’s and Benjamin’s writing this thought itself expands into something like a philosophical first principle. Where the dominant strain of modern European thought sees philosophy try to imitate the dissecting and systematizing methodology of the natural sciences, for Hamann—who wrote, “my mind seems to comprehend nothing so well as the whole”—the role of philosophy becomes precisely to resist this tendency—to never let us forget that scientific specialization, despite its successes, can also warp our understanding.¹⁸ Indeed, as Benjamin will maintain, the blinders science puts on itself are a condition for its successes. It is important to note, then, that the critique of Enlightenment rationality that Hamann opens is not simply a rejection of science in preference to the old ways threatened by it. It is, to use the language of the Frankfurt School, an immanent critique, insofar as it finds Enlightenment rationality fails by its own standards. Benjamin’s famous “Epistemo-Critical Foreword,” which develops an alternative and holistic philosophical methodology, shows the clear influence of Hamann in this light.

Whether or not a religious commitment forms the background for these ideas, the Judeo-Christian tradition, especially in its emphasis on our inability to comprehend God or the whole, is a fitting register for the expression of these ideas. That expression is certainly not, however, impossible without religion. Benjamin, for example, finds the Bible “only *initially* indispensable for this purpose, because [his] argument broadly follows it in presupposing language as an ultimate reality, perceptible only in its manifestation, inexplicable and mystical” (*GS* 2:147 / *SW* 1:67). The primary reason Benjamin finds biblical interpretation congenial for the exposition of his theory of language is its starting point. It begins from an assumption that creation or reality is a kind of expression or communication—it has meaning, it is open to interpretation, it can be

¹⁷ See James O’Flaherty’s interpretation of Goethe’s remark in his *Johann Georg Hamann* (Boston: Twayne, 1979), ch. 2.

¹⁸ Letter to Herder of 26 August 1774, *Briefe*, vol. 3, 103.

translated. It assumes that this ultimate reality cannot be got behind or analytically defined, but only seen or made manifest in more or less perspicuous ways—shown, but not said.

This is, in a certain way, a humble starting point. It assumes that the kind of clear, rigorous knowledge we have, for example, of our digestive system can't be had of language—not because it's too complicated, but because it's simply not that kind of thing. Both Benjamin and Wittgenstein contend that it is our language itself that gives us the illusion that language might function in a way analogous to the way our stomach does. Our language puts us outside things; it removes us from nature, just like, in Benjamin's reading, Adam and Eve remove themselves from paradise by eating from the Tree of Knowledge. This can be a useful and necessary fiction in discursive practices, but the space language can create between itself and the world is, for both Benjamin and Wittgenstein, a philosophical vanity. Where Wittgenstein specializes in drawing our attention to the places language does this behind our backs, Benjamin gives a speculative and literary account of how language manages to do it at all.

Part I

BENJAMIN'S PHILOSOPHY
OF LANGUAGE



The Metaphysics of Meaning

WHAT FOLLOWS in this chapter is an exposition of the metaphysical background of Benjamin's early theory of language. I clarify, interpret, and advocate on behalf of the starting point around which Benjamin's theory is organized. The crucial concepts here are language as such—the name Benjamin gives to the linguistic character of all reality—and the Adamic name, which serves as an ideal for the human translation of this reality. I leave for Chapter 2 a discussion of Benjamin's account of the character of *actual* human language and limit my discussion here to the metaphysical framework for that account.

Part of the exposition here will involve reconstructing and developing these concepts, without distorting them, in such a way that they are made more independent of the expression they find in Benjamin's writing. The theological, "mystical," or "magical" register in which Benjamin expresses his thought is crucial, but it has perhaps made his philosophy of language easy to ignore or dismiss, at least from a certain perspective. Benjamin, as I've already suggested, does not mean by these terms that language has robust magical features, whatever that might mean, or that language can only be understood through faith, but instead uses them to foreground the condition of profound and fundamental ignorance we find ourselves in vis-à-vis language. It is in effort to bring that ignorance into view, and in so doing to bring language itself into view, that Benjamin refers to its magic.

The chapter is divided into four sections. The first briefly introduces language as such. The second section is a digression into Benjamin's idiosyncratic Kantianism and his critique of the empiricist metaphysics he finds in Kant's conception of experience. Language as such is motivated

by Benjamin's continuation of the Hamannian project of reorienting Kantian philosophy around language. I argue in the third section that the theological concept of condescension, as it is conceived of by Hamann, plays a decisive role in Benjamin's understanding of language as such. The fourth section introduces the idea of a name as Benjamin understands it—that is, as constitutive of an ideal, Adamic form of human language from which real human language is fallen.

I draw mainly in this chapter and Chapter 2 from Benjamin's early work in the 1910s and early 1920s, prior to his book on *Trauerspiel*. My exposition is organized around "On Language as Such and the Language of Man"¹ (1916). Other texts discussed include "On Perception" (1917), "The Program of the Coming Philosophy" (1918), and "On the Task of the Translator" (1921), as well as fragments on language from his notebooks. I will make reference in Chapter 2 to later essays, including "On the Mimetic Faculty" (1933) and "Problems in the Sociology of Language" (1935).

1. Language Everywhere

As I suggested in the introduction, the question of language tends to focus on the relationship between words and objects. How do words refer to objects or states of affairs? This question, taken straightforwardly, assumes a good deal of background that is perhaps not immediately evident. At the very least, it seems already to commit itself to some notion of objects independent of the names we give to them and, on the other hand, words of various kinds "picking out" these objects. The objects may be composed of real, physical, mind-independent stuff that is indifferent not just to our names but also to our perception of them, or they may be phenomena—impingements on various components of our sensory equipment—which after long-term acquaintance we elevate to the status of objects. Whether real or merely phenomenal, the objects are independent of the words and would, one presumes, exist whether or not the words picked them out. The question of how words refer to

¹ I will use "human language" or the "language of humankind" to translate Benjamin's "*Sprache des Menschen*," but I will conform to Jephcott's translation when referring to the published title of the essay itself.

objects thus already separates what it is for us to have an object from what it is for us to name one.

This conventional initial distinction between word and object should be kept in mind as we approach the far less intuitive distinction on which Benjamin chooses to base his philosophy of language, that between language as such (*Sprache überhaupt*) and the language of humankind.² Benjamin does not mean to deny the existence of the conventional distinction but to question its priority. To put it another way, Benjamin will answer the question of how words refer to objects not by trying to explain how the gap between word and object is bridged, but by explaining how that gap is created by human language in the first place.

Benjamin begins by broadening the concept of language to include, first, all human spiritual or intellectual (*geistig*)³ meanings and then, shortly thereafter, “absolutely everything” (*GS* 2:140 / *SW* 1:62). What he means is not that everything must be thought of in terms of *human* language, but rather that human language, to be understood correctly, must be regarded as a particular kind of a broader communicative medium—it must be seen as a particular kind of language. By human intellectual meanings, Benjamin means the experience and expression involved in, for example, art. Works of visual art or music communicate meaning even when written or spoken words are not involved. Of course in cases like this or others Benjamin mentions here—justice, religion, technology—words are not far away. They “underlie or found” these languages of intellectual meaning. Even when words are not explicitly involved, they are in the background, making the practice possible in the first place, and also *potentially* present, waiting in the wings to subject the artwork to interpretation, for example. When we talk about the language of music, we refer to the means it uses to express meanings and the meanings it expresses. These meanings can also be expressed in words, that is, be made more explicit in interpretation or criticism. But, for Benjamin,

²“Language in general,” “language overall,” even “language on the whole,” are also viable translations of *Sprache überhaupt*, which refers both to language in the most basic sense, but also language in a general, broadened sense. That said, for the sake of simplicity and style, I abide here by Jephcott’s translation.

³ I will repeat the familiar refrain that there is no good translation in English for the German *Geist* and *geistig*, which can mean variously spiritual, mental, and intellectual. Jephcott uses “mental,” which suggests, infelicitously, “mental contents” and an individual mind. Benjamin means something like the intellectual content of practices or uses of language.

the language of music, which has to do with the experience of the meaning of a musical piece, cannot be fully captured by words. Benjamin is using the word "language" to apply to practices and experiences that communicate meanings, whether or not these meanings are subsequently communicated or fully communicable in words.

The view that certain human practices have a communicative significance not captured by word usage, while not uncontroversial, corresponds to a familiar, if vague use of the word "language."⁴ In any case, Benjamin immediately takes this thesis a step further and contends that the tendency toward communication of meanings—or "communicability" (*Mittelbarkeit*)—inheres not just in human practices but in "absolutely everything." This notion that there is something linguistic about nature independent of the mind of humankind is, no doubt, considerably harder to countenance. Nevertheless—and this is perhaps part of Benjamin's rhetorical strategy—if we do find the use of the word "language" permissible in reference to the experience of art or music, it becomes difficult to see how we could bar it from the experience of nature.⁵ Here is Benjamin's justification for the complete expansion of the concept of language:

There is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake of language, for it is in the nature of all to communicate their meanings. This use of the word "language" is in no way metaphorical. For to think that we cannot imagine anything that does not communicate its spiritual nature in its expression is entirely meaningful; the greater or lesser degree of consciousness that is apparently (or really) involved in such communication cannot alter the fact that we cannot imagine a total absence of language in anything. (*GS* 2:140–41 / *SW* 1:62)

Even if one accepts that Benjamin means by language something very different from what is ordinarily meant, including the expression involved in things like art and technology, it is natural to object when this kind of expression is attributed to natural objects as well. Even if it

⁴The concept of language is often used, non-metaphorically, in the philosophy of art to interpret the structure and communication involved in art forms that do not express themselves in human language. See, for example, E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (London: Phaidon Press, 1984), 71–73.

⁵We would need a way of differentiating, for example, the expressive capacity of a photograph of a nature scene from the scene itself.

is granted that we cannot imagine a total absence of language in anything, this does not mean that language is not absent from that thing. It is perfectly intuitive to think that objects (or sensations) exist independently of the language we apply to them in thought or word. Such language-free objects, after all, are all that animals and young children seem to have at their disposal. From a common-sense perspective, Benjamin appears to have made the elementary mistake of attributing the contributions of the subject to the objects themselves. But he has, within the space of a few paragraphs, adjudged the distinction between consciousness and mind-independent reality to be impertinent here, and replaced it with a linguistic universalism.

In order to motivate Benjamin's contention, before delving deeper into "On Language as Such and the Language of Man," it is necessary to turn to his engagement with Kant and his view that an empiricist, subject-object epistemology contaminates the Kantian project. In "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy" and "On Perception," Benjamin regards Kant's attempt to overcome empiricism as unsuccessful and argues that fulfilling Kant's ambition requires the turn to language Benjamin takes up in the earlier "On Language as Such."

2. Overcoming Kant and Empiricism

It should be noted at the outset that Benjamin's interpretation is based on an interpretation of Kant promulgated by neo-Kantians of the time. Especially important for Benjamin were Hermann Cohen and his book *Kant's Theory of Experience*. Cohen argued that Kant had taken mathematical natural science as his paradigm for experience and disputed what he considered overly physiological interpretations of Kant prevailing at the time.⁶ For my purposes, the accuracy of the interpretation of Kant is not at issue, but suffice it to say that Benjamin's critique—whether or not he realized it at the time⁷—is directed against a particular understanding of Kant's project. My goal, in any case, is not to

⁶ See Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: New York Review Books, 2003), 74.

⁷ As Uwe Steiner notes, Benjamin expresses greater clarity about this fact in a 1939 review of a book by a contemporary neo-Kantian Richard Höningwald. See Steiner, *Walter Benjamin*, trans. Michael Winkler (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2010), 35–36;

defend Benjamin's interpretation of Kant, nor his criticisms of Kant (though both are defensible). It is, rather, to show how Benjamin's early theory of language arises over concerns with an empiricist epistemological paradigm he regards as widespread and sees infecting Kantian epistemology despite Kant's own attempts to overcome it.

In these essays Benjamin makes three closely related criticisms of Kant. First, Kant's narrow conception of knowledge in accordance with Newtonian science engenders an equally narrow conception of experience. Second, despite an attempt to overcome an empiricist epistemological division between subject and object—which Benjamin regards as an unproductive metaphysical presupposition—Kant's epistemology relies on it to detrimental effect. Finally, Kant's epistemology conflates experience and knowledge of experience. Despite these shortcomings and the unwitting adoption of too much empiricist theoretical machinery, the framework or "typology" of Kantian transcendental philosophy remains, Benjamin writes, indispensable for the critique of a higher form of knowledge that he proposes to undertake.⁸ These criticisms of Kant continue a line of criticism that stretches back to Hamann. Benjamin's solution is not to dispose of the whole Kantian project but to reorient it around language.

Under the interpretation Benjamin adopts, Kant takes as his paradigm of experience the limited mathematizable experience of science. Specifically, Newtonian science constitutes the central premise of the first *Critique*. The *a priori* nature of the forms of intuition and the categories are an answer to the question of how experience must be structured given that we are capable of gaining scientific knowledge. For Benjamin, Kant has hereby privileged the absolute certainty of knowledge over the "integrity of ephemeral experience" (*GS* 2:158/*SW* 1:100). In order to systematize our knowledge of the bare experience of space and time and the objects in it, Kant must separate this experience from moral, religious, and aesthetic experience. The mathematizable experi-

and Benjamin, "Richard Hänigswald, *Philosophie und Sprache. Problemkritik und System*" (*GS* 3:564–69).

⁸ Benjamin is not explicit about why precisely the Kantian typology is indispensable, but he takes epistemology or the theory of knowledge to be the central task of philosophy. Once the correct conception of knowledge—one that pays sufficient heed to the expression of knowledge in language—is in place, Kant's method of exploring the conditions for the possibility of knowledge will produce the right kind of results.

ence we are left with, Benjamin writes, is “experience virtually reduced to a nadir, to a minimum of significance.” “Indeed,” he continues, “one can say that the very greatness of [Kant’s] work, his unique radicalism, presupposed an experience which had almost no intrinsic value and which could have attained its (we may say, sad) significance only through its certainty” (*GS* 2:159 / *SW* 1:101). This is not to object to Kant’s project *per se*, but to call into question its purposefully limited scope and its purposeful fragmentation of experience. In order to engender what he regards as a more suitable, holistic conception of experience, Benjamin will begin from a broader conception of knowledge.

Intertwined with this reductive concept of experience, Benjamin argues, is an epistemological division between subject and object. It is not the accuracy of a distinction between subject and object that is in question. As empirical subjects, we confront objects outside us. Benjamin objects, however, to the entrenchment of the distinction in epistemology. On the empiricist model of epistemology, knowledge is construed as content extracted from the flow of experience. Knowledge is experience refined or elevated to the level of certainty. The crux of Benjamin’s critique of empiricism is that the idea of an individual subject in *possession* of knowledge of objects is a metaphysical presupposition, based on a misleading analogy between knowing and experiencing. That empirical consciousness, perceiving the reality before it, contains a representation of it, may be unproblematic as far as it goes. But in empiricist epistemology, knowledge is conceived of according to that picture of consciousness. Knowledge is simply empirical experience raised to the level of certainty. “In so far as the naïve conception of the receipt of perceptions is concerned,” Benjamin writes, “Kantian ‘experience’ is metaphysics or mythology, and indeed only a modern and religiously very infertile one” (*GS* 2:162 / *SW* 1:103).

Knowledge is thus conceived of as a kind of “super-experience,” to adapt a Wittgensteinian phrasing.⁹ It is experience confirmed and elevated. Knowledge is understood as a kind of impression like an experience, only somehow harder or more solid. This is what Benjamin means by the conflation of experience and knowledge of experience. By modeling knowing or epistemological consciousness as a refined or trustworthy form of empirical consciousness, Kantians and empiricist

⁹See *PI* §97 and §192.

epistemology in general reify knowledge and, at the same time, reduce empirical experience to a degraded form of knowledge. "For [this] concept of knowledge, experience is [. . .] nothing new lying outside it, but rather only it itself in another form" (*GS* 6:36 / *SW* 1:95). Simply put, Benjamin's argument against empiricism is this: we do not have knowledge of experience in the same way that we have experience of objects. Knowledge must instead, Benjamin will argue, be defined according to the medium of its expression, language.

Although the model of empirical consciousness "has crept into epistemology" and persists unvanquished in Kant (*GS* 2:161 / *SW* 1:103), Benjamin does importantly regard the subject-object model as partially overcome in Kant through the view that things-in-themselves are unknowable. Benjamin writes:

Even to the extent that Kant and the neo-Kantians have overcome the object nature of the thing-in-itself as the cause of sensations, there remains the subject nature of the cognizing consciousness to be eliminated. (*GS* 2:161 / *SW* 1:103)

Kant and neo-Kantians are, in Benjamin's eyes, somewhat sensitive to the inadequacies of knowledge conceived of as a subject's possession of an object. The Copernican turn—asserting that objects conform to our cognition of them rather than our cognition to the objects—overcomes the "object nature of the thing-in-itself," which becomes unknowable in the Kantian system. For Benjamin, this is a step toward eliminating empiricist, subject-object epistemology, since it rids us of the idea of a knowable mind-independent object that is the cause of sensations. However, it is only a very tentative step, since Kant's account of the subject-side of his epistemology absorbs much of the empiricist metaphysical dogma to which Benjamin objects.

The trouble for Kant's theory of subjectivity turns, for Benjamin, on his account of the relationship between transcendental and empirical consciousness. Kant makes the transcendental unity of apperception—the capacity of the "I think" to accompany all my representations—a condition for the possibility of cognition. Commentators are divided on exactly what Kant means by this. Is this "I think" actually a possible *a priori* kind of self-consciousness in which we have knowledge of our own experiences (or empirical consciousness), or is it merely a formal and logical condition for the possibility of knowledge? In order to have

knowledge of my experience, I must be able to take up the reflective stance of the “I think.” Benjamin regards this transcendental, or as Benjamin sometimes calls it “epistemological,” consciousness in Kant according to the former interpretation as an actual, robust consciousness and the locus of knowledge. This is an internalization of empiricist epistemology on Benjamin’s reading. Whereas in classical empiricism, an ego works up sensations into ideas and thereby has knowledge, in Kant, transcendental consciousness takes on roughly the role of the empiricist ego and empirical consciousness roughly that of sensation. A version of subject-object epistemology is thus set within the subject itself.

These two distinct perspectives, the transcendental and the empirical, generate two problems for Benjamin. First, empirical consciousness becomes degraded. It becomes an object *for* transcendental or knowing consciousness and therefore, takes on, Benjamin writes, a character no different from that of “fantasy or hallucination” (*GS* 2:162 / *SW* 1:104). Transcendental consciousness views empirical consciousness—or knowledge views experience—like a psychologist views a test subject hooked up to electrical stimuli and made to experience certain sensations. The test subject’s experience cannot be genuine or veridical because it can be explained by the psychologist according mechanisms external to the subject’s experience.

Secondly, the concept of transcendental consciousness is in itself confused. It is purely formal and cleansed of all subjective elements, and so it becomes unclear to what extent “the term consciousness is even still employable” (*GS* 2:162–63 / *SW* 1:104). Knowledge is conceived too much like conscious experience and conscious experience too much like knowledge. Although Kant makes some headway in combatting this conflation, his epistemology ultimately succumbs to it, on Benjamin’s view.

An important part of revising the Kantian project is thus completing the promise that Benjamin identifies in the dissolution of the object side of empiricist epistemology. Kant’s tentative turn away from a conception of knowledge as a relation between a subject and an object must be radicalized. Benjamin does so by moving the locus of knowledge from consciousness—the supposed possessor of knowledge—to language—the medium of its expression. This move engenders much broader philosophical conceptions of both knowledge and experience. Benjamin thus dispenses with the criterion of *a priori* certainty of the kind found

in mathematics, which “ensured that [Kant] devoted almost no attention to the fact that all philosophical knowledge had its unique expression in language and not in formulas or numbers” (*GS* 2:168 / *SW* 1:108). Reflection on language, Benjamin thinks, will engender an appropriately robust conception of knowledge and, subsequently, of experience, rectifying his initial objection against Kant. Benjamin writes:

A concept of knowledge gained from reflection on the linguistic nature of knowledge will create a corresponding concept of experience which will also encompass realms that Kant failed to truly systematize. (*GS* 2:168 / *SW* 1:108)

This reflection must, moreover, overcome the metaphysically tainted, subject-object model of epistemology and provide a way of modeling the relationship between knowledge and experience that does not conflate the two and result in the confusion detailed above. Benjamin thus contends that:

The task of future epistemology is to find for knowledge the sphere of total neutrality in regard to the concepts of both subject and object; in other words, it is to discover the autonomous, primeval [*ureigene*] sphere of knowledge in which this concept in no way continues to designate the relation between two metaphysical entities. (*GS* 2:163 / *SW* 1:104)

Language is this sphere. The turn to language within a reimagined Kantian framework radically expands the kind of experience philosophy and epistemology can take into account, while at the same time providing a context free of a metaphysical division between subject and object.

Benjamin's reorientation, as I've already suggested, is part of the Romantic attempt to “re-enchant” the world in the aftermath of the revolutions in science and philosophy—or to show the errors involved in its disenchantment. A significant part of this reorientation involves our understanding of non-scientific forms of experience—those of religion and art, for example. These are treated by Benjamin not as subjective, psychological projections onto a world of objects, but as translations of meaning already present in reality. The basis of this reorientation or “re-enchantment” is an expansion of epistemological context. As long as the subject-object division remains in place in any form, however re-configured, forms of knowledge that appear to irreducibly include the contributions of a subject will be devalued and, to the extent possible,

cleansed of their subjective elements so that they can be explained in objective terms. To truly overcome this pervasive and resilient model, we must pull back and see this division as a way of seeing the world that grows out of a more basic expressive relation to it that can only be modeled in terms of language.

Meaning, on this picture, is not projected onto the world by human language, but is a precondition for it. Human language, moreover, *produces* this division and is not merely a tool found (or invented) and used by the subject. It is in this way that language can define a “sphere of knowledge” in which the relation between subject and object can be cleansed of its metaphysics, not wholly eradicated. Benjamin’s philosophy of language is, in this light, not just an interpretation of a particular phenomenon—namely, human language—but a starting point (avowedly metaphysical itself) for modeling our place in the world. It is philosophy of language as “first philosophy” in a very strong sense, since it takes language as no less than being itself.

Benjamin does not develop his own alternative epistemology until the “Epistemo-Critical Foreword,” which, in many ways, is the promised “coming philosophy.” There, Benjamin’s theory of language is worked up into a theory of ideas, and the empiricist conception of knowledge is contrasted to a conception of philosophical truth. I will discuss the foreword in detail in Chapter 3, but it should be noted here that just as Benjamin’s epistemology is grounded in his theory of language, the empiricist epistemology criticized in these early writings is bound up with designative theories of language.

If knowledge is regarded as the absolute certainty of an individual consciousness about a given state of affairs, language must be able to refer in a straightforward way to the objects of that experience. There is no room for the translational concept of the relationship between experience and expression that Benjamin develops. The facts of the matter must admit of being conceptualized in complete independence of language. There must be a divide that cleanly separates language from what it expresses. A conception of scientific knowledge, as Benjamin’s interpretation of Kant suggests, all but requires a particular approach to language.¹⁰

¹⁰ See Taylor’s discussion of the connection between an empiricist conception of the sciences and HLC or designative theories, especially Frege’s, in *The Language Animal*, 116–25.

3. A Condescending Word

Benjamin's assertions that everything partakes of language and that, although "consciousness is apparently (or really) involved in such communication [. . .], this cannot alter the fact that we cannot imagine a total absence of language in anything," must be read in light of his engagement with Kant (*GS* 2:141 / *SW* 1:62). Denying the central role the concept of consciousness has taken up in modern philosophy, Benjamin begins instead with language.

Peter Fenves compares Benjamin's starting point here to Kant's argument for space as a form of intuition and a necessary condition for the possibility of appearances.¹¹ Just as we cannot imagine any object without space, we can never imagine an object devoid of language. While Fenves is certainly right to point out the similarity, it is important to notice that Benjamin does not want to characterize the linguistic conditioning of reality as part of a subjective ordering of experience. It is deployed in part to combat that temptation. Whereas Kant's Copernican turn made objects conform to cognition, for Benjamin the question of the relationship between cognition and objects is premature, bringing with it the empiricist epistemological model he finds "unproductive." He steps outside of the Copernican turn by replacing its implicit empiricist metaphysical structure with the metaphysical structure of communicability or language as such. Language as such is thus not a form of intuition, but rather "neutral" with respect to subject and object. For Benjamin, this basic, necessarily preexisting structure of meaning on which the possibility of human language depends is conceived of as prior to any question of subject or object and cannot therefore be lodged in one side or the other.¹² Meaning is an ultimate, always preexistent given.

Benjamin's argument, notably, retains a transcendental form. We begin with reflection on the linguistic character of all knowledge and ask what must experience be like given this character of knowledge. If

¹¹ Peter Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2011), 137–38.

¹² Benjamin's language as such bears a resemblance to the concept of being-in-the-world in Heidegger. Both are attempts to supersede a traditional Western metaphysical understanding of man's relationship to the world. While Heidegger puts man's practical engagement with objects at the forefront of his model, Benjamin here emphasizes communicability as basic.

all knowledge of experience is linguistic, then experience, Benjamin reasons, must itself be linguistic in some manner. It must be open to interpretation in human language. The catch-22 entered into if one tries to refute the claim—trying to describe something in language while preserving its extra-linguisticity—is for Benjamin not at all vacuous, but gives us insight into the position humanity finds itself in vis-à-vis language, a position that Hamann, as we'll see below, conceives of with the theological concept of condescension. *Sprache überhaupt*, language as such, is the name that Benjamin gives the ineliminable communicability inhering in all objects of experience. Knowledge expressed in human language is modeled as translation of this language as such, and in this way no experience is barred from the domain of knowledge.

Benjamin is wary of the triviality or unproductive mystical nature into which such a thesis can easily slip. With language as such he wants to understand the world as a medium of communicability, present in everything, but to immediately identify this medium with everything would end an inquiry into language before it began. In order for linguistic communication to be discussed at all, it must be conceived of as the communication *of* something. This something, which Benjamin calls intellectual being, must be outside of language in order to be expressed. There must, in other words, be mediation between the object and its expression. But, for Benjamin, we too readily accept this distinction and the division between language and world that it implies. For him, there is no “outside language.” But this thesis, understood as Benjamin understands it, seems to stand in the way of its own elaboration. From the beginning, Benjamin's theory faces the problem of ineffability.

Benjamin's solution is to conceive of the distinction between linguistic being and intellectual being—what communicates and what is communicated—in a peculiar and provisional way. Under linguistic being, Benjamin means again to include not just words or linguistic objects conventionally understood; rather, all objects of experience are viewed as communicative. He posits an intellectual being for these objects beyond their linguistic being, so that their linguistic being has something to communicate. The intellectual being is that which is communicated. Crucially, however, for Benjamin, the intellectual being of an object cannot be thought of as communicated by or through (*durch*) its linguistic being; he conceives of it as communicated *in* language, *in* its linguistic being. The mediation here is, then, not that of one object by

means of another, but rather the limitation of a single object: linguistic being is the limitation of intellectual being, or as, Benjamin puts it, linguistic being simply is intellectual being insofar as the latter is communicable (*GS* 2:142 / *SW* 1:63).¹³ This communication thus involves a kind of mediation that is immediate—that is, that lacks any separation—since what communicates is simply a limitation of what is communicated. The relation here, to put it another way, is of one of part to whole, rather than signifier to signified. We cannot consider intellectual being as something separate from or beyond linguistic being. If we do, linguistic being will be a *means* for expressing intellectual being, rather than a medium in which it is expressed. The German word for “immediate” (*unmittelbar*) is importantly a negation of “means” (*Mittel*) rather than of “medium,” as in English. Communication *in* a medium rather than *by* a means is ontologically basic to Benjamin’s conception of reality as an expressive medium.

This separation of linguistic and intellectual being is, as I’ve already mentioned, provisional. Although they must be kept distinct to begin with in order that the theory may be expressed, Benjamin claims that the paradoxical identity of spiritual and linguistic being is the “solution” at “the center of linguistic theory” (*GS* 2:141–42 / *SW* 1:63). Ultimately, there is no intellectual being beyond language, not even something that cannot be expressed. Benjamin writes, moreover, that “this deep and incomprehensible paradox”—that is, the equation of linguistic and intellectual being—finds its expression “in the ambiguity of the word ‘*logos*’” (*GS* 2:141 / *SW* 1:63). This is a reference to Hamann, whose writings on language heavily influenced Benjamin’s essay. Hamann pronounced:

¹³In a book on Benjamin, Sam Weber argues that the translation of *mitteilbar* as “communicable” can be misleading, presumably since it suggests communication among users of language, an implication Benjamin would want to avoid. Since *mitteilen* comes from *teilen* meaning both to split or to part and to share, Weber suggests the English translations “impart” and “impartable.” While I’m not sure that “communicable” is all that misleading, it is valuable to keep in mind the sense of division within *mitteilen*, since, first of all, what is communicable in a thing is only a *part* of its intellectual being. Moreover, translation of the language of things into the language of man is only *partial* and “depends on how language is communicated [or imparted] to him” (*GS* 2:150 / *SW* 1:69). Even though communicability is meant to capture the being of language as medium rather than means, it implies a division that, as we will see, makes it possible to take language as means. See Weber, *Benjamin’s -abilities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 40–41.

“Language is reason—*logos*,” and struggled in his writings to give a finer account of their relationship.¹⁴

Logos should be understood here not simply as the human capacity for reason but according to the sense it has in Plato and in the New Testament as defining the structure of reality. On the metaphysical picture of linguistic and intellectual being that Benjamin puts forward here, justice is done to this ambiguity since linguistic being and intellectual being are regarded as identical insofar as intellectual being is communicated. The idea of a real existent intellectual being *beyond* linguistic being would violate the pervasiveness of language just established. This concept of intellectual being is intended, then, not to establish a two-level ontology, but rather to mark a limitation. Linguistic being, which is all we have access to, is always already partial as the medium in which intellectual being communicates itself through self-limitation. The identity of these two elements as a “solution at the center of linguistic theory,” is in effect the dissolution of the concept of intellectual being altogether. To borrow an image from Wittgenstein, intellectual being is a kind of scaffolding that can be removed after the theory is built. It is fundamental to Benjamin’s philosophy of language that we always remain within the medium of language and thus unable to reach intellectual being.

Hamann’s conception of condescension (*Herunterlassung*) is of decisive importance to the difficult view Benjamin puts forward here. Condescension, an important concept in Lutheran theology, is the view that God humbles or accommodates himself—literally lowers himself down—to human cognitive capacities, especially in the person of Christ.

¹⁴ Johann Georg Hamann, Letter to Herder of August 6, 1784, *Briefwechsel*, ed. Walther Ziesemer and Arthur Henkel (Wiesbaden/Frankfurt am Main, 1955–1979), vol. 5, 177. Hamann is criticized by recent commentators—Christina Lafont and Michael Forster, in particular—for a naïve equation of reason and language. Lafont regards this equation as the deleterious source of a tradition in philosophy of language ending with Heidegger and Gadamer, according to which sense or linguistic meaning completely determines reference. Forster regards the equation as an unsophisticated statement of a mutually determining relationship between reason and language, which Herder models more convincingly and with more nuance. In her book, however, Katie Terezakis argues convincingly that Hamann never intends reason and language to be simply identified with one another, although he remains himself uncertain of how to model their relation. See Lafont, *The Linguistic Turn in Hermeneutic Philosophy*, trans. José Medina (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 1999); Forster, *After Herder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 301–19; and Terezakis, *The Immanent Word: The Turn to Language in German Philosophy, 1759–1801* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 13–14.

Hamann radicalizes the concept and applies it to all human experience so that all creation, including that of humankind itself, is regarded as God's self-limitation. He writes:

It belongs to the unity of divine revelation that the Spirit of God should have lowered himself and emptied himself of his majesty just as the Son of God did in assuming the form of a servant, and just as the whole of creation is a work of the greatest humility. (*HSW* 2:171)

Jesus's humility in becoming man and emptying himself (*kenosis*) of his divine being is taken by Hamann to be an analogy for creation itself.¹⁵ In a sense, for Hamann, creation itself is already fallen, even before the Fall of Man, because of God's condescension. As will become evident, this always already fallen character of creation or language, both language as such and human language, is crucial to Benjamin's metaphysics of language. This is why he finds the Genesis narrative indispensable (at least, initially) for his exposition.

Hamann's understanding of condescension has two major consequences. First, reality itself is taken to be a constricted medium of expression, which Hamann, like Benjamin, characterizes in terms of language.¹⁶ Second, our ability to even assert God's transcendence is discarded since all we can know is the limitation itself, not what is limited nor even that there exists something that is so limited.¹⁷ As Katie Terezakis writes, "For Hamann, the very idea of condescension subverts 'theology' as oxymoronic."¹⁸ Our necessary ignorance of the true nature of God is, for Hamann, all we know of him. We can only speak of Him, and indeed of all creation, indirectly through ironic, analogical, and paradoxical language. The kind of theology that makes direct claims about the nature of God, therefore, involves a misunderstanding of God and the human condition relative to God. God's humility, conde-

¹⁵ See John R. Betz's discussion of Hamann's early biblical writings. Betz, *After Enlightenment: The Post-Secular Vision of J. G. Hamann* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 38–62.

¹⁶ Hamann writes in a letter to Jacobi, "What in your language is *Being*, I would rather name the *Word*." Hamann, Letter to Jacobi, 1787, *Briefe*, vol. 7, 175.

¹⁷ See Hamann, *Sokratische Denkwürdigkeiten* (*Socratic Memorabilia*), *HSW*, vol. 1. Translated as *Socratic Memorabilia* by John O'Flaherty (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967), Partial translation also at *WP* 3–8. See also Terezakis, *Immanent Word*, 29–31.

¹⁸ Terezakis, *Immanent Word*, 31.

scending to humankind in the act of creation, demands a humility on the part of human beings, who as parts of that creation, are incapable both of grasping anything transcendent or even of properly conceiving of anything transcendent we are unable to grasp. “Our form of knowing,” Terezakis writes, “cannot be comprehensive, for it begins with and extends out of a condition of constraint.”¹⁹

In “On Language as Such,” Benjamin develops and articulates the linguistic structure of creation implied by Hamann’s understanding of condescension. The influence of this concept on Benjamin’s distinction between linguistic and intellectual being is decisive. Language is a medium of expression that pervades existence; linguistic being is the self-limitation of an intellectual being that is unknowable.

The distinction between linguistic and intellectual being is also similar to that between the sensible and intelligible in Kant’s *Critique* insofar as it marks a limit to the kind of knowledge human reason can reach. However, because creation is understood as a medium brought into being by God’s self-limitation, the concept of condescension implies our ignorance of the limit itself. It’s not just an illusion to claim we have knowledge of transcendent objects or can have such knowledge; it is also an illusion to divide the world into objects falling on one side of the limit and “objects” beyond it. The limitation implied by condescension and Benjamin’s intellectual being is limitation without the idea of a beyond. It is limitation as *constitutive* of the character of reality. This paradoxical ontology explains the paradoxical identity and non-identity of linguistic and intellectual being. Linguistic being, as creation, seems to require an entity outside it that creates or speaks it—God or the idea (intellectual being) of which linguistic being is the expression—but, for Hamann and Benjamin, the speech is, at the same time the speaker. God is the Word. Language is intellectual being’s self-limitation as creation is God’s.

This gives the medium of language itself the character of self-limitation—that is, something that is intrinsically, rather than externally, limited. A brief contrast with Kant’s understanding of the ideas of reason may be useful. Whereas for Kant the ideas of reason reach toward intelligible objects about which nothing can be known since they are

¹⁹Terezakis, “Is Theology Possible After Hamann?,” in *Hamann and the Tradition*, ed. Lisa Marie Anderson (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press), 181–98, 182.

not cognized through experience, for Benjamin, the limits of experience and knowledge are identified with the limits of language—language being construed as the medium of reality. Therefore, the very notion of attempting to reach beyond experience—that is, beyond linguistic being—is already incongruous. “An existence entirely without relationship to language,” Benjamin writes, “is an idea; but this idea can bear no fruit even within that realm of ideas whose circumference defines the idea of God” (*GS* 2:141 / *SW* 1:63). The ideas of reason in Kant do serve a regulative purpose in uniting and systematizing the knowledge legitimately gained by the understanding. And intellectual being too plays a kind of regulative—or, more properly, hermeneutic—role in the system Benjamin establishes here. It makes it expressible.

Benjamin offers the example of a lamp as something that communicates itself in language. “The language of the lamp,” he writes, “communicates not the lamp (for the intellectual being of the lamp, insofar as it is *communicable*, is by no means the lamp itself), but the language-lamp, the lamp in communication, the lamp in expression” (*GS* 2:142 / *SW* 1:63). Benjamin here makes a linguistic modification of the Kantian distinction between phenomenon and thing-in-itself. The lamp in communication is something like the lamp in experience, the phenomenal lamp. But the “language-lamp” is not, at least not in the first place, the object of a subject’s experience. The lamp is simply taken to be communicable. Though the approximate analogue of a Kantian phenomenon, the language-lamp is the lamp’s own communicability—a self-limitation of the lamp’s intellectual being—rather than the result of the subjective conditioning of experience. As a result, when Benjamin talks about the lamp itself he does not mean something beyond our experience, which although not graspable in experience is certainly conceivable (as something we cannot know). He means something beyond language, which we can neither know nor conceive of not knowing.

Another way Benjamin explains this paradoxical structure is in terms of language’s mediate immediacy. That is, he wants to give an account of communication “as such” that is both immediate—that is, is not communication by means of a middle term—and mediate—that is, still manages to communicate *something*. Benjamin’s precise characterization of the provisional distinction between spiritual and linguistic being, modeled on the self-limiting nature of God in Hamann, accomplishes this goal. Benjamin writes:

Mediality [*das Mediale*], which is the immediacy [*die Unmittelbarkeit*] of all spiritual communication, is the fundamental problem of linguistic theory, and, if one chooses to call this immediacy magic, then the primary problem of language is its magic. (*GS* 2:142–43 / *SW* 1:64)

The mystery of language is, for Benjamin, centered around its capacity to limit itself or, as Terezakis puts it in reference to Hamann's writings on language, "to mediate its own immediacy."²⁰

Benjamin believes that this character of language also explains a further feature of language as a whole, including human language, namely, its infinity. He continues the passage above:

At the same time, the notion of the magic of language points to something else: its infiniteness. This is conditional on its immediacy. For precisely because nothing is communicated *through* language, what is communicated *in* language cannot be externally limited or measured, and therefore all language contains its own incommensurable, uniquely constituted infinity. Its linguistic being, not its verbal contents, defines its boundaries. (*GS* 2:142–43 / *SW* 1:64)

Language's infiniteness follows closely upon its immediacy. By infiniteness, Benjamin means not just the infinity of language as such—the infinity of reality—but also the infiniteness of the languages of humankind. The infinite character of language is conditional on its immediacy since, as a self-limiting and self-communicating medium, language has no outside. Although it expresses itself through limitation, there is no limit to what it can express. Human languages, as will become clearer in the section to follow, are understood as naming this already linguistic reality. Although they are severely constricted themselves by human finitude and the means available for translation, they share in language's infinity because they name it. Benjamin suggests that if language is taken initially to be a means of reference rather than a medium of being, we could not regard its infinity as an intrinsic feature but only as something derived from a structure external to or underlying it.

Consider, for example, Noam Chomsky's accounting of the infinite character of language. Chomsky, influenced by Humboldt's philosophy of language and given to citing Humboldt's understanding of language's "infinite use of finite means," reasons that the evident ability of human language to express an infinity of content from a finite set of words or

²⁰Terezakis, *Immanent Word*, 41.

sounds requires a generative mechanism—namely, a grammar with a genetic basis—out of which speakers can produce an infinite number of sentences. “[The speaker’s] grammar must [. . .] contain a finite system of rules that generates infinitely many deep and surface structures”—deep structures being the propositional structure underlying the “corporeal aspect” of language, usually its sound.²¹ Specifically, Chomsky explains language’s infiniteness through recursion, the capacity to embed clauses in one another *ad infinitum*. This establishes generative grammar as the explanation of language as “a system of discrete infinity, rare in the organic world.”²² Chomsky’s is thus an infinity of verbal and semantic contents that must be explained by a system of linguistic production in the mind. He considers human language a system whose features can be explained by an underlying and rare biological structure.

Benjamin is concerned with a very different kind of infinity and offers a very different explanation for it. First of all, Benjamin’s infiniteness is not something language possess as a system considered in isolation from the world. Chomsky’s theory shares the Tractarian assumption that meaning is something independent of language and produced by it, and so requires an explanation of the semantic structure lying beneath the surface structure; it requires “critique of language” in Russell’s sense. Meanings are expressed through language. The kind of infinity we get is therefore a formal one that has to do with the means a speaker has at his disposal to produce sentences. But is this a satisfactory explanation of what we might think of, at first blush, as the infinity of language? We could imagine a very impoverished language consisting only of expressions of guilt, for example, that nonetheless had the kind of grammatical, recursive infinity Chomsky describes.

By describing the world in terms of communication, Benjamin offers a much simpler account of linguistic infinity. The infinity of human language, as Benjamin sees it, is not formal but expressive and derived from the expressivity of reality itself, which cannot be externally bounded. The infinity of the number of sentences we can generate is not the product of a grammatical mechanism in the mind but simply of the nature of reality. The things we say are considered as much products of

²¹ See Chomsky, *Language and Mind*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 15, 26–27.

²² Chomsky, *Language and Mind*, 183.

the things there are to say as they are products of mind that has gained mastery over an infinitely productive system.

4. Naming as Such

Within the framework of language as such, Benjamin turns his attention to humankind, considering the human being not as the privileged inventor and sole possessor of language but as one of an infinity of entities having linguistic being. What is peculiar about humanity is that our linguistic being “speaks in words” (*GS* 2:143 / *SW* 1:64). Humanity’s linguistic being consists in naming. This is but a particular form of language—naming-language. “To identify naming-language with language as such is to rob linguistic theory of its deepest insights” (*GS* 2:143 / *SW* 1:64). To take human language as the only language is already to disengage it from the world. Once this step has been taken, the external world is robbed of any communicative significance in itself, and language can only be understood as a self-contained system, functioning by way of designation and propositional truth. Continuity between human language and reality is lost.

Benjamin refers to the conception of language that takes human language as a means, its object as states of affairs, and its addressee as an individual human being as “bourgeois” (*GS* 2:144 / *SW* 1:65). Words, as we’ve already seen, are regarded as arbitrary (or possibly arbitrary) inventions assigned to objects by fiat. They have no intrinsic connection to the objects that they name. In principle, any sound or any mark can stand for any object or state of affairs. The name is reduced to a simple sign. Wittgenstein, in his own critique of theories of language in this vein, asks his reader to consider a man who utters a series of unintelligible words and later contends that by them he meant, “Thank heaven it’ll soon stop raining” (*PI* §540).

If reference is not the fundamental way in which human language relates to the world, what is it? In attempting to elucidate the relationship between human language and the linguistic totality of nature he’s introduced, Benjamin positions his theory as a middle way between a designative theory and a mystical theory of language according to which “the word is simply the essence of the thing” (*GS* 2:150 / *SW* 1:69). The latter theory fails “because the thing in itself has no word, being created

from God's word and known in its name by a human word" (*GS* 2:150 / *SW* 1:69). But both types of theory get something right.

The mystical theory recognizes that the thing is communicable or communicates meaning, and that human language is, in some sense, connected to this immediate communication. On Benjamin's view, however, the communication of language as such far outpaces the words human language can give to it, and so this connection can never be as tight as the mystical theory imagines. The designative theory, on the other hand, is right that, of course, we can use linguistic signs as arbitrary markers for things, but wrong to take this designative relation as the foundation and philosophically central feature of human language. It takes the connection between language and world, in other words, to be too loose. By steering between these two views, Benjamin seeks to do justice to what Hamann refers to as the aesthetic and logical sides of language (*HSW* 3:288 / *WP* 215). Human language is conceived of as inhabiting a continuum between something like an aesthetic essence of the thing and an arbitrary marker for it.²³

The linguistic being of reality, never captured completely by the word as the mystical theory would have it, is the basis for humankind's naming and makes it possible. Benjamin writes:

The name that man gives to language depends on how language is communicated to him. In name the word of God has not remained creative, it has become in one part receptive, even if receptive to language. This receptivity is directed towards the language of things themselves, from which again and again silently and in the mute magic of nature the word of God shines forth. (*GS* 2:150 / *SW* 1:69)

Human language is thus tasked with naming the language of things, which contain or reflect their creation in God's word—the creative self-limitation that brings things into being. Human languages are conceived of as constricted media, that have their origin in attempts to name the self-limited medium of language as such. These attempts are translations of one language into another, in which much is lost from the original and multiple versions—that is, human languages—are possible.

²³The word "aesthetic" must be understood in a more basic sense than it usually is, not as concerning the experience of artworks or beauty but concerning sensory perception more generally.

Benjamin's argument in "On Language as Such" for the priority of naming-language takes the form of an extended interpretation of the Genesis story of creation, the Fall, and the dissolution of human language into a plurality after the construction of the tower of Babel. The Fall serves to mark the transition between naming—that is, a purely aesthetic language—and designative language. As mentioned in the introduction, Benjamin's theory does not depend on the literal truth of the Biblical creation myth, nor does it require the historical or theoretical viability of the existence of a single human language. Rather, Benjamin finds in the myth a consideration of language as an "ultimate reality" and an ideal vehicle for expositing his view about the relationship between language as such and human language. The creative word of God is used allegorically to explain this intellectual being—language as such—in order to shed light on it; it is not intended to stand in for it. Benjamin introduces the allegory this way:

If in what follows the nature of language is considered on the basis of the first chapter of Genesis, the object is neither Biblical interpretation nor subjection of the Bible to objective consideration as revealed truth, but the discovery of what emerges of itself from the Biblical text with regard to the nature of language; and the Bible is only *initially* indispensable for this purpose, because the present argument broadly follows it in presupposing language as an ultimate reality, perceptible only in its manifestation, inexplicable and mystical. (*GS* 2:147 / *SW* 1:67, italics original)

The Bible is cited, in other words, as a narrative ladder that provides an initial framework for discussing the nature of language, but which can be afterwards thrown away without losing any of the insights that have been gained. Benjamin uses it because it allows him to explore the presupposition of language as an ultimate and inexplicable reality. He uses it for its literary productivity, not because it contains, even in coded form, the truth about language.

The notion that interpretation of a literary or religious text can lead to insights that are ultimately independent of that text and its own claims to truth is admittedly foreign to the techniques of contemporary philosophical argumentation. The difficulty here is compounded by the fact that Benjamin does not make a clear delineation between the narrative and his own theory. The latter emerges from and then slips back into the former, making it difficult, though not impossible, for the reader

to distinguish Benjamin's theses from the story of the Fall. Benjamin's methodology (though, at this early stage, still undeveloped) is consistent with the essayistic one he will espouse in the "Epistemo-Critical Foreword."²⁴ The idea of language is to be approached through an interpretation of Genesis. The details of that narrative are by no means absolutely authoritative regarding the question of language, nor is the narrative the only path by which the question of language can be approached. Benjamin's use of Genesis is essayistic—it is an attempt to drive at the nature of language from a particular starting point and perspective. In this way it is necessarily fragmentary, provisional, imperfect. Still the principles for a theory of the nature of human language can be isolated from the essay and evaluated.

In Genesis God names things into existence with the words, "Let there be." The word of God creates things and it also immediately cognizes what it creates.

The absolute relation of name to knowledge exists only in God; only there is name, because it is inwardly identical with the creative word, the pure medium of knowledge. This means that God made things knowable in their names. Man, however, names them according to knowledge. (*GS* 2:148 / *SW* 1:68)

God's creative language is the medium in which prelapsarian man recognizes and knows creation. God's naming is thus not to be understood at all on a par with man's naming. Divine naming is creation and the instantiation of God's perfect cognition of what he has created. The creative word and his cognizing name (knowledge) are identical. Human-kind's naming of creation also establishes knowledge, but it lacks the immediate relation to creation that God's word and knowledge does. Thus, "All human language is only the reflection of the divine word in a human name. The name is no closer to the [divine] word than [human] knowledge is to creation" (*GS* 2:149 / *SW* 1:68).

We should be careful with Benjamin's terminology, which is not always perspicuously deployed. There are five linguistic levels to be

²⁴ Philosophy or philosophical criticism is there tasked with interpretation that removes objects or texts from their context and attempts to orient them toward what is extreme in them, thereby putting them in service of an extra-phenomenal idea. Philosophical ideas or essences are not abstracted but ideal artistic constructions from which the phenomena can be "read off." In the same way, here, Benjamin attempts to read the nature of language off of the Genesis narrative. See Chapter 3.

distinguished. The Fall of language begins from the divine word or *divine name* (1), which are identical, the former being associated with the act of creation and the latter with God's knowledge of that creation. I read this as the biblical equivalent of what Benjamin has earlier called language as such. Next comes humankind's naming of creation, but here there are distinctions to be made. The *Adamic name* (2) is not to be considered actual words of human language, but ideal translations of the word of God. Benjamin, as seen in the passage above does not always distinguish between the Adamic name and the human name, but I will make such a distinction. The *human name* (3) is like the Adamic name in being a purely aesthetic response to nature, but unlike it in that it captures nature only partially. Both kinds of name are distinct from the *human word* (4) that is born, as we'll see, with the Fall. Finally, there is the *sign* (5), a word considered only as an arbitrary marker for a thing.

The Adamic name is a completely aesthetic reaction to the object that captures it in the limited way that it is communicated to a human being. It is in this sense ideally particular, an *absolutely* proper name that applies only to the object experienced and cannot be applied to other objects of the same genus. Benjamin is likely influenced here by, among other sources, Nietzsche's description of concepts as essentially falsehoods in his "Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense." Nietzsche there affirms that concepts like "leaf" are "formed by dropping these individual differences arbitrarily, by forgetting those features which differentiate one thing from another."²⁵ The concept suggests the Platonic picture of actual objects as flawed instantiations of the ideal form. "Like form," Nietzsche writes, "a concept is produced by overlooking what is individual and real, whereas nature knows neither forms nor concepts and hence no species, but only an 'X' which is inaccessible and indefinable by us."²⁶ Adamic names in Benjamin's model fill the place of this "X."

The notion of a completely particularized language is meant to shed light on the abstraction and loss of particularity structurally embedded

²⁵ Nietzsche, "Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne," *Kritische Studienausgabe*, eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1988), vol. 1, 873–890, 880. Translated as "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense," in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. Raymond Geuss, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 139–53, 145.

²⁶ Ibid.

in our own language. This goes not just for nouns, but for all concepts. We could imagine, for example, a language that paid concentrated semantic attention to the domain of eating and had different verbs for various kinds of eating, depending on the food, the person or animal, the occasion, and so forth.²⁷ Imagine that even this degree of particularity were not enough, and the language came to require every unique act of eating have its own word. This would be a name in Benjamin's sense, where the act of naming is unique to the particular object named. If we imagine an entire language composed of such names, it quickly becomes impossible to maintain anything like our everyday concept of language. Such a language would not be *about* the world at all, but would simply be a continuous aesthetic response to it.

Humankind is tasked in Genesis, on Benjamin's reading, with naming nature in such a way as to capture the divine language which created it. Adam's names for the animals are an example of the ideal naming from which human language is fallen. Benjamin's thesis is that this kind of ideal naming-language must be regarded as the foundation of human language, and that the other capacities of human language—designation, concept use, abstraction—can only be properly seen as derived from this foundation.

The ideal character of Adamic language should make it clear that Benjamin does not imagine this language to even approximate a real, historical original language, despite the manner in which Benjamin's theory is sometimes interpreted. It, like the biblical narrative as a whole, gives him a platform for his view, which is primarily about the *composition* of language, not its history. (We could say the same of creation myths in general: to be taken seriously they need not be taken literally, but rather as a kind of scaffolding for understanding the human condition.) This not to say Benjamin's theory might not also have implications for how language tends to develop historically and for how language is acquired by children, its phylogenesis and its ontogenesis. I will comment on some of these implications in Chapter 2. But it concerns first and foremost the structural relationship between reality and language.

That relationship, as we saw, was informed by a Hamann-inspired reorientation of Kant's transcendental project. Where Kant asks how our

²⁷This example appears in Douglas Hofstadter and Emmanuel Sander's *Surfaces and Essences: Analogy as the Fuel and Fire of Thinking* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 10.

cognition must be structured given the character of our experience—especially those aspects of our experience that prove amenable to scientific reasoning—Benjamin tries to step outside subject-object oriented epistemology by asking what reality must be like given the character of our relationship to it. The conclusion that reality must itself be linguistic must be carefully interpreted, since Benjamin is not using the word “language” in anything like its accustomed manner. Indeed, there is something almost obvious about the point he wants to make. The meaning conveyed by our language cannot come from nothing. I’ve tried to show in this chapter that if we take this idea—the priority of aesthetic meaning—seriously, some common-sensical presuppositions of the philosophy of language are undermined. Meaning as such is something human language takes over, adopts, *translates* in Benjamin’s sense of the word, not something it invents. The almost ineluctable sense of meaning as something underlying our utterances and of our language as a means for expressing meanings must, given this understanding of a basic semantic structure that must precede our language, be radically revised.

But how does this translation of reality actually proceed? And what are we now to make of the designative understanding of language? How can it be explained? What does it, perhaps, get right and what wrong? And how does Benjamin propose to evolve language’s designative capabilities out of its aesthetic foundation?

Language Out of Eden

THE WORD OF GOD is a language so perfect it brings things into being. The most Adam can aspire to is a language that reflects the language of things (the echo of God's creative word). In Eden, he does this perfectly—that is, without losing any of the qualities of the thing in the thing's reflection, in the name. Adam's fallen descendants fall far short of this.

As I've already noted, Benjamin does not draw a clean distinction between the "Adamic name" and the "human name," which can be confusing. Such a distinction is suggested at certain points in the essay, however. The problem here is, in part, a product of the fact that in Genesis the breaking apart of a single language into a multiplicity of human languages comes well after the actual Fall, in the story of the tower of Babel. Benjamin, at points, seems to place the multiplicity of languages, or at least the reason or ground for it, before the Fall, but places it sometimes after, as will become evident in the discussion below.

The importance lies in teasing out the structural relationship between human language's multiplicity and its externalized or mediate character. Things become very difficult here and any resolution is necessarily tentative and speculative, but I'll suggest, against some of Benjamin's comments, that we ought to consider the mediate character of language—our ability to take it as means—as conditional on its multiplicity. In other words, in order to treat a word as a sign for a thing, we must be capable of varying it. I'll thus treat the "human name" throughout, as Benjamin sometimes suggests, as a version of the Adamic name that is more limited than it, and thus admits of multiplicity.

A word of human language, as I'm interpreting Benjamin's theory, exists on a continuum between a name and a sign. As a name, it is maximally aesthetic; its meaning lies irreducibly in its material being. A name cannot be replaced by any other without its meaning being lost. As a sign, a word is maximally logical. Its meaning is what the most flat-footed designative theory says it is; it can be replaced by anything and retain its meaning. Human language as it actually exists approaches these ideal poles on either end, in mathematical signs and onomatopoeia, respectively, but neither is ever really instantiated as real human language. Between them, the reality of the human word lies, on one side dissolving into mathematical abstraction and on the other into art.

1. Naming and the Mimetic Faculty

How does the language of things Benjamin establishes in the first half of "On Language as Such" pass into the language of humankind? Since the human name is not creative but a mere reflection of the language of things—a repository of the creative word of God—how humanity names a thing depends on how he experiences it. Human names are simply imitations of the manner in which the thing is communicated to him. As Fred Rush puts it, on this view, "Language is not essentially communicative or descriptive; rather it is an attempt to take the character of nature and intervene in it through sonic and phonetic action."¹ Language begins as an immanent, mimetic attempt to give voice to the meaning communicated by nature and not as a way of referring to objects.

What are we to make of this linguistic mimesis? We have, of course, examples of direct imitation in our language today, namely in onomatopoeia. When we use the expression "Boom!" for example, we are usually not designating an object or even a sound, but rather imitating or responding to something, an explosion or an accident. The word has even been adopted for usages where there is no specific object before us. "And then—boom—he was gone," for example. The word thus begins

¹ Fred Rush, "Jena Romanticism and Benjamin's Critical Epistemology," *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism*, eds. Andrew Benjamin and Beatrice Hanssen (New York: Continuum, 2002), 123–36, 132.

with a basis in an aural similarity between the sound of the word and the sound of an explosion, but once it becomes a part of the language, it can, by means of analogical or what Benjamin terms translational transformations, move through the language. So, in the latter example, the word is made to take on the suddenness we associate with an explosion, rather than its sound.

In both cases the word "boom" has no corresponding object or *meaning* outside itself. If someone describes an experience of an explosion, and in the middle of their description exclaims, "BOOM!", we would not be tempted to treat the exclamation as *referring* to the noise in the way that "a boom" in the phrase "I heard a loud boom" might be said to refer to the noise. Its meaning is more imitative and immediate than that. And it is understood, we might say, much more like the boom itself is understood than like an abstract term is understood. It conveys, transforms, or translates the experience directly, rather than describing it. Likewise, in the phrase "and then—boom—he was gone," the speaker hopes to convey a particular quality of the experience of the disappearance, one he or she could, again, use descriptive language to refer to, but instead chooses to convey in a more immediate fashion. Notice, too, that with these uses of "boom," the character of the meaning conveyed will depend greatly on intonation, volume, the speed with which the word is said, and, perhaps, on accompanying gesture.

It is only when "boom" becomes a non-interjectional, more grammatical part of the language in phrases like "I heard a boom," or, more abstractly, "a boom in the stock market," that it begins to seem to *have* its meaning. And, again, through analogical transformations, the word moves further from its source in mimesis, until it is capable of referring to a surge of financial transactions. Its connection to the sound of an explosion—to the sensuous world, that is—may become more and more tenuous as the word winds its way through our language. Here, not only does how precisely the word is said become much less significant, but nothing in the aesthetic quality of the word appears intrinsic to its meaning. In the case of "I heard a boom," we can imagine "a boom" being substituted with "an explosion" without anything significant being lost. We can even imagine in the latter usage that the word "boom" only ever arbitrarily designated actual explosions to begin with—that there is nothing onomatopoeic in it at all. And there are of course many

words in our language whose imitative origins are forgotten once they've strayed from their onomatopoetic home to a tenuously and contingently related conventional resting place.

For Benjamin, our conception of the influence of onomatopoeia on our language must, along with the concept of language itself, be expanded. In 1933's "On the Mimetic Faculty," he entertains the possibility that, as Rudolf Leonhard writes, "Every word—indeed, the whole language—is onomatopoetic" (*GS* 2:212 / *SW* 2:721). It is evident, of course, that the kind of similarity present and recognizable in the word "boom" is lacking in most of our language. "It is not enough," then, as Benjamin writes, "to think of what we understand today by the concept of similarity" (*GS* 2:210 / *SW* 2:720). He speculates that language is, in fact, an "archive of" what he calls "nonsensuous similarities" (*GS* 2:213 / *SW* 2:722). Examples of this include the correspondences of astrology, animistic religion, or dance. Like these practices, words are to be imagined as products of an impulse to see meaning in the world and express it with the means available, even when there is no sensuous relationship between the world and the expression. Benjamin writes that this is not confined to spoken language but applies to script as well, where runes—marks of magical significance—precede letters. Even in the relationship between written and spoken language—between, for example, the sound a letter designates and its shape—Benjamin thinks a nonsensuous similarity can obtain.

At work here is, Benjamin thinks, a faculty, "the mimetic faculty," involved in the production and recognition of similarities, including nonsensuous ones. It is itself subject to historical evolution, so that many of the similarities archived in our language are no longer evident to us, in precisely the same way as the animistic, cultic resonances of our ancestors' world are no longer available to us. "[Our] gift for seeing similarity is nothing but a rudiment of the once powerful compulsion to *become similar* and to behave mimetically" (*GS* 2:210 / *SW* 2:720). Yet, the language passed down remains rooted in that world, those similarities, that tight connection to the world.

Although it is based in the world of magic, language is instrumental in destroying it, as Benjamin writes in the final sentence of "On the Mimetic Faculty." There he calls language "a medium into which, without residue, the earlier powers of mimetic production and comprehension

have migrated, until they reach the point that they liquidate those of magic" (*GS* 2:213 / *SW* 2:722). This is a puzzling thought, but I take it the idea is that, although the magic of the mimetic faculty is the foundation out of which human language emerges, it is destined to destroy it. We reach the point where the mimetic faculty changes—becomes more abstracted and less creative—but the language we are left with gives us something like the objective world and lifts us out of a more immanent engagement with the world. The development of language doesn't just track, reflect, or influence the development of the human relationship to the world; the two are inextricable from one another. This is in part the story of Genesis and "On Language as Such," which Benjamin consulted while writing "On the Mimetic Faculty." The point is not that the connection between language and the world is magic, but that language has its foundation in a magical understanding of the world. As a result, we can only understand our language and the world it gives us if we understand how it emerged from that world and what is still owed to it. In order to come to such an understanding, we must work against the tendency to instead understand that language and its view of the world as simply a confused and inferior version of our own.²

Needless to say, Benjamin's discussion here is, even by his standards, highly speculative and, perhaps necessarily, sketchy. Still, the idea that onomatopoeia and mimesis take on a far greater role in language than is ordinarily imagined can help provide a better understanding of what Benjamin means by a name. The point is to see language, to the extent possible, as continuous with things like dance, incantation, and an animistic understanding of the world. He wants us to see language as emerging from the world and turning back to reflect on it, rather than approaching it from a distance. This will enable us to see the birth of the human word as something that is both rooted in immanent engagement with nature and something that detaches—or tries to detach—itself from nature.

Figurative language, more broadly, can be understood this way as well. It is not creation *ex nihilo*, but requires some preexistent matter to *figure*. Even when it lacks the straightforwardly direct transformation of nature into sound as is found in onomatopoeia, figurative language is direct in the same sense, responding immediately to a part of the

²See my related discussion of Wittgenstein on Frazer's *Golden Bough* in Chapter 9 below.

world. Here, too, the mimetic faculty is involved, not only in seeing similarities between human language in itself and the world, but also between different domains of the world. Through the medium of language we use one part of our experience to speak for another. So when I refer to my coworker as a “hyena” or a depression as “spiraling,” I speak one domain in the idiom of another. As Taylor puts it, analogy and metaphor are here “figuring one object or event through another.”³ I see a particular corner of the world under a certain aspect and use language well established in another corner of the world to figure it and thus bring it to light.

Just as onomatopoeia only names the sound, the figurative language we use in a given situation will be very limited and depend on how the thing is communicated to us. Only an aspect of the phenomenon is brought out by an analogy. It may be a very significant one of course: the sense, for example, that a depression is going in circles, compounding and deepening like a spiral. But in making certain aspects of the phenomenon available it will leave others in the dark or even occlude them itself. Just as something is said to be lost in translation between two human languages, aesthetic language or naming always involves loss in the translation of reality into sound, or the use of one aspect of reality to represent another.

The important point here, and one Taylor brings out nicely in his book, is that analogy, metaphor, and metonymy do not just provide us with new ways of describing phenomena we’ve already recognized and articulated in more literal language. “The phenomenon,” he writes, “swims into our ken along with the attribution.”⁴ Moreover, Taylor points out, it is not just individual phenomena that become illuminated in this way, but entire domains. For example, how much of our emotional and spiritual language would be lost without spatial metaphors? Or, how much of our intellectual language without metaphors of light and darkness, surface and depth, sight and blindness?⁵

³Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 139.

⁴Ibid., 146.

⁵The line between these literal and metaphorical languages is not always easy to draw. Consider “he went along but was blind to their plans.” We might say that more literally by replacing the sentence with “he was an unwitting accomplice.” But “unwitting” comes from the Proto-Indo-European root “weid-” meaning “to see.” So in a sense we’re only replacing a legible metaphor with a hidden one. In other words, our language consists not of metaphorical and literal language, but metaphors of varying

We might—and Benjamin, I think, would—go further here, for it is not just the case that these phenomena cannot be articulated without figurative language, but that they cannot be articulated without the other, figuring domain of phenomena. Our language is a conduit here for translation of one domain into another. This puts human language in a very different relationship with the world, whereby it can take up its meaning, move it from place to place, and thereby allow the world to shine light on itself, to create connections. Language appears here not as a tool that maps, represents, or pictures the world, but one that gives more articulate, well-defined form to its extant meaning.⁶ Language brings the world to expression.

The primacy of aesthetic meaning in Benjamin does not negate the descriptive or designative purposes to which language is put; it just makes them secondary. These aspects of language can never cleanly be pulled apart. The examples of aesthetic language I've discussed already exhibit a certain tendency toward the descriptive. In comparison to language as such, human language is, Benjamin writes, "limited and analytical." It passively and partially names what is already created, and thus already tends to divide up reality—to analyze or categorize it.

2. Translation

The language of humankind is in its most fundamental character, a translation in this broadened sense of imitation—an imitation of the language of the thing that seeks to capture a particular expressive power of it using the means available to human beings. As language develops and its archive of semantic means expands, it becomes possible to

degrees of vitality. We can consider aspects of Benjamin's theory an attempt to make good on Nietzsche's claim that all of language, including truth itself, is no more than figurative language in various stages of decrepitude and decay.

⁶Cf. Heidegger's understanding of the Greek term "technē" in "Origin of the Work of Art." There, Heidegger does not understand "technē" as a "practical performance" but as "a mode of knowing," *alitheia* or *unconcealment*. "To create," he writes, "is to let something emerge as a thing that has been brought forth." There is a great deal of overlap between this understanding of art as bringing into the open and Benjamin's understanding of naming and translation. See Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993), 184–85.

extend established usages into previously unarticulated domains. That is, it is possible to better articulate one kind of language with another—to, that is, translate the unarticulated language of a particular domain into the language of a domain that is already well-articulated. These translations are open, in the sense that they can never be complete: they have histories of development, revision, and disappearance. They necessarily cause us to miss certain aspects and thus can lead us astray in varying ways and to varying degrees. It is not just in philosophy that the grip of a particular metaphor or analogy can mislead, but in politics, religion, and science as well. Before moving into Benjamin's account of the Fall of aesthetic language into designative language, we need a better idea of how precisely he proposes to revise our understanding of translation, the manner in which, as Wittgenstein puts it, "meaning moves."

Benjamin places the concept of translation at the heart of language:

It is necessary to found the concept of translation at the deepest level of linguistic theory, for it is much too far-reaching and powerful to be treated in any way as an afterthought, as has happened occasionally. Translation attains its full meaning in the realization that every evolved language [. . .] can be considered a translation of all the others. (*GS* 2:151 / *SW* 1:70)

Restricted to translation among human languages, the concept of translation will be given only peripheral importance and its central relationship to the character of language in general will go unrecognized. This restricted understanding of translation, moreover, exaggerates the differences between human language by isolating them from each other and ignoring the fact that they are all themselves translations of the same thing, namely language as such.

For Benjamin, the category of *a* language can itself be misleading since it suggests an independent stratum of expression, a system having its own independent structure that can be mapped onto other similar structures but remains in principle independent of them. We might be better served, Benjamin suggests, quoting Rudolf Pannwitz, treating what are called languages instead as dialects of a single language, since translation among dialects suggests a transition along a continuous medium, rather than a leap from one stratum or means of expression to another. Pannwitz writes:

[The translator] must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language. It is not generally realized to what extent this is possible, to what extent any language can be transformed, how language differs from language almost the way dialect differs from dialect.⁷

Thus, as will become apparent below, the broadened category of translation has consequences not just for the character of language as a whole but for translation narrowly understood as translation between two human languages.

The language of things is mute, and humankind brings it to sound, which depends on how the things communicate themselves to, or are experienced by, us. All translation thus involves "passing through" language as such. And it is this linguistic nature of reality that guarantees the objectivity of translation. "[God's] creative word [. . .] is the germ of the cognizing name," Benjamin writes (*GS* 2:151 / *SW* 1:70), and, though names differ from language to language, their compatibility is guaranteed by language as the linguistic medium of reality. In fact, all linguistic activity, including thinking, writing, and speaking, involves translation understood in this broad sense. Once the concept of language is expanded to include all of experience, all intellectual activity can be considered as a kind of movement from one language to another.

It might seem that translatability can easily be explained without recourse to language as such and its guarantee of objectivity. Doesn't it simply follow from the fact that all human languages develop in the same environment and refer to objects in it, experience of which is conditioned in some manner by our shared physiology? To a certain extent, Benjamin need not be read as disagreeing with a naturalistic explanation of this kind, so long as its consequences are correctly understood. That is, nature here must be understood as meaningful. For if it doesn't make any contribution to the meanings of the languages—that is, if it is not understood as itself a medium of meaning translated into individual languages—then it would, in principle, be possible for individual human languages to be incommensurable.

Their meaning might be conceived of as being intellectually self-generated and imposed from without on a semantically inert nature. There could be radical incommensurabilities between languages because

⁷ Pannwitz, *Die Krisis der europäischen Kultur* (Nürnberg: Hans Carl, 1917), 240, 242. Qtd. at *GS* 4:20 / *SW* 1: 262.

there would be no meaning outside them through which they could relate. We might expect much more difficulty coming to terms with foreign languages than is in fact experienced. In such a world we might, for example, expect Benjamin Lee Whorf's largely disproven hypothesis that languages and their accompanying conceptual schemes can be radically incommensurable or untranslatable to be much more convincing.⁸ At the very least we can say that if languages are thought of at a distance from the world, translatability would not be *immediately* given or necessary.

Benjamin writes,

With the [. . .] relationship between languages being that of media of varying densities [*Dichte*], the translatability of languages into one another is given. Translation is the transportation of one language into another through a continuum of transformations. Translation passes through continua of transformation, not abstract regions of equivalence and similarity. (*GS* 2:151 / *SW* 1:70)⁹

Languages are "media of varying densities" because they name different aspects of reality in different ways and to different degrees. They divide up the semantic field that is language as such differently and thus produce divergent concepts and conceptual distinctions, for example that between *essen* (human eating) and *fressen* (animal eating) in German, which doesn't exist in English. Mandarin has different verbs for "playing"

⁸Cf. Donald Davidson's argument against the dualism of empirical content and conceptual scheme, which he calls the "third dogma" of empiricism. This dogma is the same as the one Benjamin implicitly rejects when he insists on the communicability of reality. Of course Davidson's proposed solution to the question of intertranslatability, which remains broadly empiricist and casts everyday communication in terms acts of belief-ascription and evaluation of truth conditions, is foreign to Benjamin's view. The continuous, medial relationships between languages means that, for Benjamin, the dichotomy of translatable and untranslatable that Whorf relies on when he contrasts the relationships between European languages with that between Hopi and a European language, is false. See Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 183–98.

⁹The word for density in German, "*Dichte*," is very close to "*Dichtung*," a word for poetry or literature or fiction in general that has no exact equivalent in English. Herder also plays on this closeness in his *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, which brought "*Dichtung*" into wide usage in nineteenth-century Germany. *Dichten* also means to invent. So in Herder, as in Benjamin, this group of words serves to describe the invention of human language as a poetic distillation of the language of nature. See *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, ed. Barbara Cassin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 216–19. Heidegger also uses the word to similar effect, especially in later writings on Hölderlin and in the "Origin of the Work of Art." See *Basic Writings*, 199.

a particular type of musical instrument or sport, depending on the specifics of the activity involved.¹⁰ Different languages emphasize different aspects of experienced reality either through vocabulary or grammar, but no evolved language is capable of expressing anything that is *absolutely* inexpressible in any other language because languages are in no sense closed off from one another. Two languages thus relate to each other immanently—through the common linguistically-conditioned reality in which they both participate—and not by way of an abstract realm of meanings. Any method of explanation that lacks a conception of creation as meaningful or communicable in itself will be tempted to locate what languages share—meanings—in abstracta beyond language or sense data in the mind. Benjamin's concept of translation resists this picture and replaces it with one in which meaning is in language itself, and individual human languages come to grips with other human languages in the same way they come to grips with nature. Translation between human languages, to put it another way, is possible because all language is already translation.

Without this concept of meaning inhering in nature and words themselves languages are effectively closed off from one another, and the correspondences between words of different languages must be facilitated by a third term. Each language would be in this case a different map lying atop an independent world. Translation would be like conversion from one unit of measurement to another, a matter of relating two interchangeable systems whose particular manner of quantifying is merely a matter of convention. For Benjamin, this is a "dead theory of translation" (*GS* 4:13 / *SW* 1:256). In its late development, as meaning becomes fixed and the living character of a language harder to perceive, dead translation can appear to be paradigmatic.¹¹ But dead translation,

¹⁰These examples are drawn from Hofstadter and Sanders, *Surfaces and Essences*, 9–12.

¹¹Benjamin refers to an "overnaming" in the "relations of human language to that of things" and an "overprecision that obtains in the tragic relationship between the languages of human speakers" (*GS* 2:156 / *SW* 1:73). The proliferation of fallen human languages leaves things with thousands of different names, which have "withered"—lost their necessary connection to the thing—and can now, at least apparently, be substituted for each other without any loss of meaning, since all they do is transmit content. Things are never correctly named, on the one hand, and, on the other, words lose their particular connection to the thing they name and enable the overprecision of translation that treats them as mere signs. Systems of writing and nationalism, by slowing the development of language and giving it a stability it did not have before, make the dead theory of translation easier to maintain.

like arbitrary, designative meaning itself, must be understood as special and secondary rather than fundamental and primary.

Benjamin contextualizes dead translation within an understanding of the aesthetic relations between languages. In the “Task of the Translator,” he writes:

In the words *Brot* and *pain*, what is meant is the same, but the way of meaning it is not. This difference in the way of meaning permits the word *Brot* to mean something other to a German than the word *pain* means to a Frenchman, so that these words are not interchangeable for them; in fact, they strive to exclude each other. As to what is meant, however, the words signify the very same thing. While the way of meaning in each word conflicts with the other to such an extent, each complements the other in the languages from which the words are derived. In fact, each way of meaning in them complements the other with respect to what is meant. In the individual, uncomplemented languages, that is, what is meant is never met in relative independence, as in individual words or sentences, but rather comprehended in constant flux, until it is able to emerge from the harmony of all ways of meaning as pure language. (*GS* 4:14 / *SW* 1:257)

What is meant never appears as itself—it only could appear as such in pure language—but rather in constant flux—now *Brot*, now *pain*—but never the meaning of these words in itself. Although these ways of meaning differ and even conflict with one another, they complement each other with respect to what is meant. A German who knows the word *pain* knows another way of meaning what is meant by *Brot*. This is another way of comprehending the thing meant and so offers some, very slight, new knowledge of the thing, new knowledge of that element of the thing that the word *pain* names. Knowledge here is meant not in the sense of scientific knowledge of course, but an understanding of experience broadly understood.

This kind of knowledge is perhaps easier to grasp when, as in the above examples from German and Chinese, we are dealing with distinctions in a foreign language that are not made in our own. Here we obviously have different ways of dividing up experience. The importance, for Benjamin, does not necessarily lie in the fact that our language has an impact on how we experience the world—as Whorf has it. Just because our language doesn’t make the distinction between *fressen* and *essen* doesn’t mean we don’t experience the distinction.

Rather, the import of these differences lies in the domain of "pure language" that they point toward. That these additional distinctions can be made points to the infinite number of other such distinctions that might be made in our language, or any language, and aren't. Pure language here means the language of reality itself that Adamic language is capable of naming. Even where there are one-to-one conceptual correspondences in our languages, as with *pain* and *Brot*, the same kind of "elevation," as Benjamin calls it, into this higher linguistic register can occur. It lies not in recognizing any conceptual division of our experience, but in the particular way—the name—an element of our experience is grasped.

Were all these ways of meaning what is meant by the word "bread" harmoniously arranged together, Benjamin writes, from them would emerge the word in pure language, "the harmony of all the various ways of meaning" (*GS* 4:14 / *SW* 1:157). It is only through the activity of translation, movement through pure language, that we can come to recognize this fact. Although *pain* and *Brot* mean the same thing, then, they do not mean each other—they are not interchangeable signs in complete and distinct systems of expression. They both express their meaning only partially or fragmentarily and name different elements of what is named by them. The thing meant is never confronted, but as we move from language to language we are shown, as it were, different sides of it.¹² Pure meaning is an ideal that we never reach. Still, in the act of translation—movement through the medium of language as such—we are provided a partial glimpse of the totality from which individual words are fallen.

¹²In the theory of ideas, this notion of names in different languages bringing to light different features of a thing is connected to the Nietzschean requirement that philosophy apply a multiplicity of perspectives to its subject matter. The idea of grouping all the words for a thing together also comes out of Nietzsche, although he doesn't use it in the positive sense that Benjamin does:

When different languages are set alongside one another it becomes clear that, where words are concerned, what matters is never truth, never the full and adequate expression; otherwise there would not be so many languages. The "thing-in-itself" (which would be, precisely, pure truth, truth without consequences) is impossible for even the creator of language to grasp, and indeed this is not at all desirable. He designates only the relations of things to human beings, and in order to express them he avails himself of the boldest metaphors. ("Über Wahrheit und Lüge," *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 1, 879. "On Truth and Lying," *Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, 144.)

This has normative implications for the translator's task, which is not to merely render in the target language the content expressed by the original work, in order that that content be felicitously transmitted to the reader, but to use the expressive capacity of the original language to affect the target language.¹³ The very notion of "content" is itself problematic since the thing meant is never expressed independently of particular ways of meaning. Benjamin writes:

Translation, instead of imitating the sense of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's way of meaning, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel. (*GS* 4:18 / *SW* 1:260)

Benjamin advocates more literal translation, which permits and even encourages what would traditionally be regarded as infelicities of expression in the target language that result from the incorporation of the original's way of meaning.¹⁴ The goal of translation is not at all to make foreign works available with as little strain as possible to a new audience, but rather to use the original language to expand the communicative power of the target language, to contribute to its enrichment and development, and in this way demonstrate that both languages belong to a communicative medium greater than any single language.

3. Multiplicity and Externalization

Not only, then, is translation the manner in which language as such moves into human language, but translation among human languages offers the opportunity to glimpse language as such. In the same way as putting together two fragments of a shattered pot requires some concept, however tentative, of the whole pot, translation allows and even requires that we understand human languages as fragments of a whole. The multiplicity or fragmentation of human languages is thus not only a product of immense limitations in our attempts to come to terms

¹³ Benjamin uses Hölderlin's highly literal Sophocles translations to illustrate this point.

¹⁴ Benjamin follows Herder and Schleiermacher here in the idea that the target language in translation ought to demonstrate its flexibility in incorporating the meaning of the original.

with reality; it is also the best means we have for overcoming those limitations.

The precise place this multiplicity is meant to occupy in Benjamin's theory is nonetheless ambiguous, as I've mentioned. In "On Language as Such," Benjamin associates the plurality of languages with the Fall, although, as he points out, in Genesis the confusion of languages in Babel comes much later. First, Benjamin suggests that the conditions for the plurality of human languages inhere in the structure of language as such. He writes:

As the silent word in the existence of things falls infinitely short of the naming word in the knowledge of man, as the latter in turn must fall short of the creative word of God, so is the ground for the multiplicity of human languages given. The language of things can pass into the language of knowledge and name only through translation—so many translations, so many languages—once man has fallen from the paradisiacal state that knew only one language. (*GS* 2:152/*SW* 1:71)

There is always slippage involved in the translation between the unspoken language of things and human language. This slippage is the reason or ground for the plurality of languages. Although, as Benjamin writes, "the paradisiacal language must have been one of perfect knowledge, [. . .] later all knowledge is infinitely differentiated in the multiplicity of language, was indeed forced to differentiate itself on a lower level than creation in name" (*GS* 2:152/*SW* 1:71). Each human language's translation of the language of things involves a different kind of knowledge; each names experience in a different manner.

As will be expounded in more detail in the sections to follow, Benjamin primarily reads the Fall as the moment language becomes designative or a *means* for expression. The question arises, then, how the multiplicity of languages relates to their capacity to be taken as means. Benjamin writes of the Fall:

The knowledge of good and evil leaves behind the name; it is a knowledge from outside, the uncreative imitation of the creative word. The name steps outside of itself in this knowledge: the Fall is the birth-hour of the human word, in which the name no longer lives uninjured, and which steps out of naming-language, out of its own knowing, immanent magic, in order to become explicitly (*ausdrücklich*), from the

outside as it were, magic. The word must now communicate something (outside of itself). (*GS* 2:152–53 / *SW* 1:71)¹⁵

Benjamin characterizes the Fall as at once something entirely expected, even constitutive, of human language—“the birth-hour of the human word”—and, at the same time, a breach of some kind, a step outside of naming-language and into a language of signs, where the word becomes a sign for the object named. On the one hand, then, human language seems to be capable of a naming that, though imperfect, remains immanent in the sense that human naming translates the language of things and exists in the same linguistic medium; on the other, human naming seems destined to fall into language as a means.

There are three elements of human language that Benjamin identifies here: (1) its imperfect and limited naming of creation, (2) its plurality, and (3) its transition into externality or means. He seems to have already stated that the imperfection of human naming is the basis of linguistic plurality, which only becomes manifest with the Fall. But he also later writes, “In stepping outside the purer language of name, man makes language a means (that is, a knowledge inappropriate to him), and therefore also, in one part at any rate, a *mere* sign; and this *later* (my italics) results in the plurality of language” (*GS* 2:153 / *SW* 1:71). And later on he writes:

After the Fall, which, in making language mediate, laid the foundation for its multiplicity, linguistic confusion could be only a step away. Once people had injured the purity of the name, the turning away from that perception of things in which their language passes into man needed only to be completed in order to deprive men of the common foundation of an already shaken spirit of language. (*GS* 2:154 / *SW* 1:71)

This account of the multiplicity of human language is inconsistent, as Peter Fenves notes.¹⁶ On the one hand, multiplicity seems conditioned by our limited naming of creation; on the other, it seems conditioned by the externalization of names with the Fall, which makes it possible for

¹⁵ Benjamin is given to the use of the term “magic” or “magical.” As he notes in a letter to Martin Buber, Benjamin means the word in the sense of “unmediated.” Letter to Buber of July 1916, *Briefe*, eds. Gershom Scholem and Theodor Adorno (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1978), vol. 1, p. 126. Translated in the *Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940*, eds. Scholem and Adorno, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 80.

¹⁶ Fenves, *Messianic Reduction*, 148–49.

words to stand as signs for objects. For Fenves, the problem is that Benjamin is moving away from an account that countenances the possibility of prelapsarian, completely non-designative language that eventually decays into multiplicity toward a view that regards plurality and designation as irreducible parts of human language that can be lessened to a degree through translation and interpretation, but never eliminated. Some of the inconsistency here can be dampened if we take, as I have, Benjamin's use of the Genesis story as allegorizing a present, basic condition of language. The Fall has always already happened. Prelapsarian, Adamic language, as well as divine language can only be taken as ideals that demonstrate the nature of language as a medium without referring to any historical actuality. The plurality of human languages is, therefore, taken to be necessary and the Fall is an expression of the necessity of this plurality rather than an explanation of its origins. Benjamin throughout, then, has the latter view that Fenves ascribes to him.

Benjamin's allegiance to the Genesis narrative makes it difficult to resist the temptation to understand his theses as asserting something about the necessary temporal development of language, and sometimes even makes it seem as if the plurality of human languages and the notion of language as means are accidental and could have been avoided. But as I've been interpreting the theory, a singular Adamic language need not be regarded as corresponding to or approximating any actual language. Plurality, limited and imperfect human naming, and the capacity of language to act as a means should be regarded as a complex that makes up the basic condition of human language. There is evidence that this is what Benjamin intends. Even though he writes that taking language as a means "*results in the plurality of languages,*" he forewords this remark by saying that "for the essential *composition* of language, the Fall has a threefold significance" (*GS* 2:153 / *SW* 1:71, my italics). The suggestion is that a reading of the Fall can tell us about the composition of human language, not that we ought to consider it an approximation for an actual temporal development. Indeed the narrative itself can eventually be dispensed with.

All that being said, the movement of language from name to sign does have a temporal dimension, both phylogenetically and ontogenetically. Benjamin, as is made clear in "On the Mimetic Faculty," does believe the aesthetic connection between human words and what they name was stronger in prehistoric languages. And as comes to the fore

in a review of psychological and linguistic research, "Problems in the Sociology of Language" (1935), he is convinced that the same structure repeats itself in the language acquisition of children, who originally perceive the word as part of the thing named.¹⁷ Still, neither of these positions commits Benjamin to the view of the actual possibility of Adamic language. The Fall and fallenness identifies a polarity, or a tendency toward designation that inheres in language, its development, and its acquisition.

The question remains, even if the real possibility of Adamic naming is not at issue, what are we to make of the compositional relations between these three features of human language? The simplest solution is to take the multiplicity of languages as necessarily implied by imperfect and limited human naming. Since humankind names imperfectly and our naming depends on how the linguistic being of things is communicated to us, there are multiple ways in which the language of things can be translated into the language of man; thus, languages are many.

Benjamin's later suggestion that the Fall, in which it becomes possible to take language as a means, conditions its later plurality is, I think, a product of a distinction Benjamin fails to make sufficiently clear between Adamic and human naming. The problem is that human naming is, in a sense, *prelapsarian*, in that it is not yet mediate in the way of the human word, and in a sense *post-lapsarian* in that it is, in comparison with Adamic naming, multiple. Genesis does not fit the theory perfectly here, but the salient question is not about the multiplicity of language relative to the Fall, but about the structural relationship between multiplicity and externalization.

The nature of that relationship remains unclear. A strict interpretation of Genesis suggests that the mediate character of language is structurally prior to its multiplicity, since Babel follows the exile from Eden, but one might think the reverse, that the externalization of language is conditional on its multiplicity. Because naming is imperfect and language is multiple, there is already a certain distance between name and object. This is not yet the mediation of language as means, but that of mere part to whole: the name as a particular distillation of the object. Still, one might think that once we see the thing distilled into different parts, different names, we are already partway to seeing

¹⁷I discuss this essay in detail in Chapter 4.

the object as independent of its name, of externalizing the name into a word. The externalization of the word would be an exploitation of the looseness already present in the multiplicity of naming. Multiplicity would make the name vulnerable to being disengaged from the thing and made into a word. The human capacity for reflection and reason would thus be founded on linguistic plurality.

Suffice it to say that in Benjamin the externalization of language is bound up with the limitations of naming and language's multiplicity. It is, moreover, not a shortcoming of human language. The Fall of language, like the Fall of humanity, makes the fallen what it is. Externalization is thus "the birth-hour of the human word." The Fall represents the beginning of an external perspective on language, which is required for an external perspective on the world. This is humanity coming into its own, stepping outside of the immanent language that connected it to things and animals and making it capable of judgment. Judgment requires us to step outside of name-language because in judgment words do not have meaning *in* a linguistic medium; rather they designate objects *by* linguistic means.

Three sets of important questions remain unanswered. First, outside of the context of Genesis, what is in the nature of language that leads inexorably to the externalization of the name, the word of judgment, and language as means? What is the precise nature of language's ability to be taken as means? Is it to be regarded as a kind of vulnerability in human language that can be exploited to varying degrees or a stable element present in all human language to the same degree? Second, if this understanding of language as means is in some sense basic to language, isn't there at least a sense in which the "bourgeois" theory of language is correct or, at least, ineluctable? What status does it have in Benjamin's paradigm? And, third, how precisely does Benjamin want to model the relationship between authentic, immanent language and mediated, external language?

4. Russell's Paradox and Word-Skeletons

In fragmentary notes written around the time of "On Language as Such," Benjamin sketches out some ideas about the distinction between the language of judgment or designation and authentic meaning, and even

offers a solution, by way of this distinction, to Russell's paradox. Before returning to the narrative of "On Language as Such," I want to explore these notes, which will give us a better idea of what Benjamin is trying to get at outside the context of the Fall. In the discussion that follows, I am not so much interested in the viability of Benjamin's solution to the paradox, nor even primarily in his criticisms of a view of language he regards as implicit in the formulation of the paradox. Rather, these fragments are useful because they show Benjamin struggling to understand the relationship between naming and judging language outside the context of Genesis and the Fall, and, in this way, shed light on the essay. Benjamin's solution, as Fenves points out, applies to a linguistic version of the paradox, which runs as follows:

Every predicate *a* can either be asserted of itself and may in this case be designated as a 'predicable,' or it cannot be asserted of itself, in which case it can be called 'impredicable.' The predicate *thinkable* is predicable, for it is itself thinkable. The predicate *virtuous* is impredicable, for it is not itself virtuous. This disjunction between predicable (*p*) and impredicable (*i*) is complete. . . . therefore the predicate *i*=impredicable is either *i* or *p*. And if it is impredicable (*i* is *i*), it is thereby asserted of itself, therefore predicable (*p*).¹⁸

Benjamin's "attempted solution" is brief: "Of a sign [*Zeichen*] nothing can be predicated. The judgment in which meaning [*Bedeutung*] is associated with a sign, is not predicative. Russell confuses judgment of meaning and judgment of predication" (GS 6:11) Benjamin simply states that we err when we stipulate or designate (*bezeichnen*) a meaning to a sign, and then treat that meaning as if it were a predication, that is, a property somehow intrinsic to the meaning of the word.¹⁹ In this case we let "predicable" mean "able to be asserted of itself." We assign a meaning to the sign. Why does this designation not provide for the possibility of predication? Can't designation establish a meaning as meaningful as the meaning of a word like "virtuous"? Benjamin seems to think not.

¹⁸ Fenves, *Messianic Reduction*, 126–27. The formulation is Gerhard Hessenberg's.

¹⁹ Benjamin's use of *Bedeutung* is misleading here. The replacement of it in "The Judgment of Designation," with "designation" (*Bezeichnung*) clarifies things. Here, though, "*Bedeutung*" does function something like it does for Frege (as the English "reference"). It's not impossible, given Scholem's interest in Frege, that Benjamin has Frege's usage in mind.

In another contemporaneous fragment called "The Judgment of Designation" (replacing the ambiguous "judgment of meaning") Benjamin writes:

Russell *designates* a word to which one can attach its own meaning as a predicate (in what sense this is meant remains to be seen) as "predicable." He designates a word in which this is not the case as "impredicable." [. . .] The subjects in both these judgments are signs. That is, they mean nothing other than spoken and written complexes. As signs these complexes can only appear as subjects in the named judgments; a predicate other than the named predicate cannot be attached to it. Perhaps one forms the judgment: "'Impredicable' is predicable or impredicable," which underlies Russell's paradox; thus the subject in it means: the judgment "a word's own meaning cannot be attached to it" and yet this subject is a judgment and not a word, thus the judgment which underlies Russell's paradox shows itself to be false, or rather senseless since it predicates a concept of a disparate order to the subject. (*GS* 6:9–10)

Benjamin's contention, in short, is that we cannot treat the sign that has been designated in a judgment like an authentic word of which other things can then be predicated. The sign is a mere complex of sounds or lines. It is analogous to the designation in mathematics, Benjamin writes, of the name *a* to the side of a triangle (*GS* 6:9).²⁰ This designation does not thereby bestow on the sign the ability to function as a fully or authentically meaningful word in the language. Rather, it plays its role only in the specific context in which it is introduced. The designation that generates Russell's paradox appears to admit a meaningful word into language, but it only has meaning, according to Benjamin, in the judgment which designates that meaning.

²⁰I have found no evidence that Benjamin read Frege, but he was clearly familiar with and interested in contemporary developments in philosophy of mathematics, in his own right and through his close friendship with Gershom Scholem, the scholar of Judaism who was trained in mathematics and certainly read Frege. Of the role of mathematics in "On Language as Such," Benjamin wrote to Scholem:

From the title you will note a certain systematic intent, which, however also makes completely clear for me the fragmentary nature of its ideas, because I am still unable to touch on many points. In particular, the consideration of mathematics from the point of view of a theory of language, which is ultimately, of course, most important to me, is of a completely fundamental significance for the theory of language as such, even though I am not yet in a position to attempt such a consideration. (*Briefe* 129; *Correspondence*, 82)

The paradox, in other words, is generated by an implicit adherence to a theory of language that does not distinguish between words that are created by simply designating meanings of signs and the words that in some more authentic sense belong to a language. It presupposes, that is, a “bourgeois” theory of language, where the word functions as an arbitrary bearer of meaning and is not distinguished from signs, at least not in a significant manner. If we subscribe to a picture of language where words stand for objects and sentences are a means for expressing meanings, then we can consider those meanings independently of the words. Under these conditions, there can be no possible problem with inventing and inserting new words into the language, provided we designate their meanings in the manner Russell does. (This is, more or less, according to the view, the way all words are invented. They don’t constitute meanings but simply pick them out.) They become integrated into the language as a whole in exactly the same way as a mathematical sign can be used and manipulated in formulas.²¹

We can see that Benjamin is looking for a way to characterize the more basic and authentic meaning upon which the mechanical conception of meaning as designation employed by a designative theory of language rests and to thereby dissolve some of the apparent problems such a theory generates—a way, in other words, to distinguish a word from a sign. The crux of Benjamin’s solution finds its way into “On Language as Such”: the Fall is interpreted in such a way as to show that judgment of the kind that makes designation possible is conceptually posterior to and dependent on immanent naming. The Fall is that moment in which it became possible to conceive of a word as a sign. Words, though they can of course be *taken* as signs, differ, for Benjamin, from signs like “predicable” and “impredicable.”

²¹It’s worth noting that Benjamin’s solution does not have anything explicitly to do with a form of self-reflexivity that a system of logic or language is unable to handle, but instead concerns the more basic level of what it is to ascribe and employ meaning—what happens when a mathematical conception of meaning as designation is transposed into ordinary language. Thus, though his solution bears some resemblance to Russell’s theory of types insofar as it argues that “disparate orders” have become confused, it works on a more basic level. Whereas Russell’s theory postulates higher-order classes (predicates of predicates and so forth), Benjamin suggests we need a different characterization of first-order meaning and, in particular, of the moment we move from an immanent use of language to an external one. We have erred in taking a word of human language as a simple sign, and an account of how to distinguish word and sign from one another remains lacking.

In two fragments from the period after "On Language as Such," (dated to 1920 or 1921), Benjamin approaches the same question from a different angle. Here Benjamin remarks on the phenomenon of reducing a word to our experience of it—its sound or written composition. I quote both fragments in full:

(1) There is an intention in the word "table"—□ possibly—but also an intention in the word without representation: "—table—" (by the way, the textbook case of an intentional alteration).²² Expressionless in the maximum is the postulated but unfounded meaning in the merely virtual word-picture. Expressive in the maximum is the grinning appearance of meaning empirically pushing itself forward, which rests on the sound-picture [*Lautbild*]. Weakening of the symbolic and communicative power in the word-skeleton. (The word grins).

(2) It is odd that after multiple glances at a word under consideration the intention toward its meaning forfeits itself in order to make a place for another intention, what one might with reason call the word-skeleton. (One can designate the skeleton of an arbitrary word for example the word "tower" as follows: "—tower—").

The linguistic structure [*Gebilde*], thus also the word, communicates its communicability and symbolizes a not-communicability. A word thus does not communicate the thing (object), which it apparently designates [*bezeichnet*]; but rather that which it in truth means [*bedeutet*]. Thus the word "tower" does not designate some "one" tower, and just as little "the" tower, but rather it means something, and indeed without designating it. That the word "tower" means something means nothing else than that it communicates something. If I designate something, then I do not communicate it; on the contrary, I abstract completely from its communicability in order to order [*einreihen*] it in another context. If I designate the three corners of a triangle with ABC then those letters do not mean the triangle corners—that is, they do not communicate them. The precise relations of meaning and designation remain to be determined. One is permitted to suppose that there are contents, objects, which something essentially is, which are not at all able to be designated, but are only able to be meant, for example God, life, longing (*Sehnsucht*). It is highly problematic whether there are also objects for which the opposite is true, that are only designated, but not able to be

²²Benjamin means here the fact that the German word for table, "*Tisch*" is a textbook example of historical shift in meaning, since the word initially meant "dish." See Chapter 8 for further discussion of this passage in the context of Wittgenstein's conception of "meaning-blindness."

meant. Most likely there are no such things since *the possibility of the designation of an object rests upon meaning-ability* [Bedeutbarkeit].

When one now says the word “tower” means “tower” (not designates “tower”), then one means thereby two things since the meaning obtains only under two conditions, whose fulfillment makes this possible. One means first of all that the word “tower” communicates something, secondly that it symbolizes something; however, neither the communicated nor the symbolized are themselves “tower.” “Tower” is solely and alone the meaning. The word “tower” communicates first of all its own communicability. It communicates as word, that it is communicable, and this “it” is an intellectual being. This is something original and a word therefore also communicates that a certain, original being is communicable. But thereby alone it still means nothing. It indeed communicates something completely certain and definite, namely a communicability, but that of which it communicates the communicability, that it does not itself communicate, that it means. And in order to determine the object of its meaning, it is required that a *virtus* be found in the word other than that which communicates. (GS 6:15–16; italics mine)

These sketches are further attempts to understand the independence of the word from designation, to establish that designation is secondary to and dependent on a more basic concept of meaning. Benjamin believes that this independence can be seen when we bracket the meaning of the word. What is left, the word-skeleton or sound-picture, still communicates—as everything communicates for Benjamin—but it no longer “symbolizes” anything, as he puts it here. The communicability of the word, thought independently of any object of intention, brings to the fore the fact that the primary meaning of the word is nothing outside of the word itself—it is not the particular object or concept designated, for example. “Tower” simply means “tower.” The possibility of drawing attention to the experience of the word outside of a meaningful context—repeating it over and over to ourselves, for example—will make this important fact clear to us.

His logic seems to be as follows. Once we see that the word-skeleton “—tower—” still communicates and that what it communicates cannot be anything external to it, since we have completely set aside its intentional meaning, we will recognize that “tower,” too, communicates nothing outside of itself. The difference between the two is not like that of an instance of “ABC” that designates nothing and one that designates the sides of a triangle. Rather, it is like that of an inert, expressionless

face—which like the word-skeleton is never completely expressionless of course (a face lacking expression would be no face at all)—and a maximally expressive or, as Benjamin puts it, grinning face. What precisely is added here in the move from “—tower—” to “tower” is a meaning beyond the communicability of the word-skeleton, but one that rests on it. This meaning Benjamin calls another “*virtus*,” a virtue or power, of the word.

It is interesting that Benjamin uses the Latin *virtus* here. The word means literally “manliness” and was initially associated with military merit or valor in ancient Rome, but came to mean, more generally, “virtue” or “excellence.” During the Republic, it was particularly associated with acts of expression or action in the public sphere. Cicero writes, “All *virtus* lies in its use.” It is thus to be distinguished from a more modern conception of virtue as something inner or private that can be deciphered or proven in actions, but lies in some way separate from them.²³ This tracks a distinction Benjamin himself is trying to make between expression in language and the expression of content by means of language.²⁴ The word-skeleton makes it evident that meaning at its most basic does not admit of the separation between material and content designative theories assume.

Readers familiar with Wittgenstein will, I think, already see important parallels between two elements of his work, which I will mention in passing here and return to, along with the word-skeleton, in Chapter 8. These are aspect-seeing and the distinction between saying and showing, which appears explicitly in the *Tractatus* and remains important, in altered form, in the *Investigations*. Aspects are the particular figure we see, for example, in a collection of lines or, as the concept is later applied, the particular meaning we see in letters or sounds. Wittgenstein is, like Benjamin, preoccupied with this phenomenon of meaning inhabiting material and asks repeatedly the extent to which it is necessary.

He also makes a distinction between two kinds of meaning—showing and saying—that parallels in a number of important ways the distinction Benjamin is drawing here between meaning and judgment. Although

²³ An epitaph thus praises an early Roman consul, Barbatus, by saying “his appearance [*forma*] was a match for his *virtus*.” See Mary Beard, *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome* (London: Profile Books, 2015), 134.

²⁴ See my discussion in Chapter 9 of a letter Benjamin writes to Buber dealing with the issue of the relationship between intention and language.

this distinction no longer appears prevalently in Wittgenstein's later work, he does continue to reflect on the kind of immanent meaning involved in an expression that shows its meaning (in itself) and one that says it (that is, says something "outside" of itself). For example, he comments in the *Investigations* on two senses in which we can understand a sentence: "the sense in which it can be replaced by another which says the same" and "the sense in which it cannot be replaced by any other" (*PI* §531). Both the later Wittgenstein and Benjamin are concerned with the manner in which the presumed centrality of the function of saying or judgment, though obviously characteristic and perhaps even definitional for human language, can lead to misunderstandings of language. Benjamin goes further in that he endeavors to *show* that, to put it in Wittgensteinian terms, saying is dependent on showing.

5. The Fall into Designation

It is the lack of this radically immanent, nearly tautologous understanding of "first-order" *meaning*—authentic meaning—that Benjamin regards as complicit in the generation of Russell's paradox. To put it another way, what for Russell and Frege is first-order meaning or designation is for Benjamin already of the second order.

In "On Language as Such," the distinction between authentic meaning and designation is idealized in that between immanent naming language and the fallen language of judgment. The Fall is thus for Benjamin an allegorical representation of the dependence of designation on authentic meaning or naming. The presence of the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden represents a vulnerability to externalization that is always already present in human language. Benjamin claims that the tree provides no actual knowledge of good and evil.

Even the existence of the Tree of Knowledge cannot conceal the fact that the language of Paradise was fully cognizant. Its apples were supposed to impart knowledge of good and evil. But on the seventh day, God had already cognized with the words of creation. And God saw that it was good. The knowledge to which the snake seduces, that of good and evil, is nameless. It is vain in the deepest sense, and this very knowledge is itself the only evil known to the paradisiacal state. (*GS* 2:152 / *SW* 1:71)

Eating the apple is merely the vain or idle [*nichtig*] step beyond Adam and Eve's limitations; this is evil itself. In the same way, humankind steps outside of naming language in designation. It tears the immanent name from its place in nature and takes it to be "communicating *something* (other than itself)"—takes it, in other words, to be referring.

In the Fall, human language loses its place in nature—as the peculiar way that humankind communicates its intellectual being—and takes itself to refer to nature from outside. This externalization of language is a vanity because it imitates the creative word of God—it is "the uncreative imitation of the creative word." It does not imitate the act of creation, but rather the creative word's capacity to cognize the created world. This knowledge is "inappropriate" to human beings. The external name purports to be a means through which a thing is communicated; it purports to grasp the thing in its entirety and transpose it into another realm. It is therefore a "parody of the creative word of God" because it seeks to elevate its knowledge to God's level, despite the fact that its language is wholly parasitic on the creative word and far more limited than it. It gives our language its distance from reality, its objectivity.

The elevation of human language in the Fall proves to be more than mere parody however. Judgment or designation has its own magic and even its own "immediacy," though this immediacy is parasitic upon the immediacy of the immanent name. In the external word, Benjamin suggests, lie the origins of abstraction.

Name [. . .], with regard to existing language, offers only the ground in which its concrete element are rooted. But the abstract elements of language—we may perhaps surmise—are rooted in the judging [*richtenden*] word, in judgment [*Urteil*]. The immediacy (that is, however, the linguistic root) of the communicability of abstraction lies in in judicial judgment [*richterlichen Urteil*]. This immediacy in the communication of abstraction became judging [*stellte sich richtend ein*], when, in the Fall, man abandoned immediacy in the communication of the concrete—that is, name—and fell into the abyss of the mediateness of all communication, of the word as means, of the vain word, into the abyss of prattle. For—it must be said again—the question as to good and evil in the world after the Creation was empty prattle. The Tree of Knowledge stood in the garden of God not in order to dispense information on good and evil, but as an emblem of judgment over the questioner. This immense irony marks the mythic origin of law. (*GS* 2:154 / *SW* 1:72)

Benjamin here uses the word *richten* along with *Urteil* to refer to judgment. *Richten* means to judge but also to point, to direct, to address. The judging word no longer names the thing properly speaking, but points to or designates it. The origin of the immediately judging or designating word, Benjamin suggests here, is the residue left by the immediacy of the name once it has been abandoned. Naming language is incapable of abstraction because it is immanent in nature, immersed in the particularity of what it names. Every word is a proper name. When humankind steps outside of immanent naming and enters the “abyss of mediated language,” of the word as sign or means, the immediate connection to the thing is lost, but the word remains immediately connected to the thing in a different manner.

Benjamin is far from clear here about what immediacy remains or how the name’s immediacy is transformed. Nevertheless, he is compelled to assert that the knowledge of the judging word is immediate, even if strictly speaking this knowledge is empty, having no content except its own transgression and vanity.

How are we to conceive of these two different kinds of immediacy? In further fragmentary notes written in 1916 or 1917, Benjamin refers to the immediacy of the name as “necessary” as opposed to the “unnecessary” or arbitrary immediacy of the word. He writes:

The ground of intentional immediacy, which appertains to each meaning, therefore first of all to the word, is the name in it. The relationships among word, name and object of intention are as follows:

- 1) Neither the word nor the name is identical with the object of intention.
- 2) The name is something (an element) in the object of intention itself which liberates itself from it; thus the name is not accidental.
- 3) The word is not the name, but rather the name comes in the word, linked to other elements or another element (which? signs?).

The relationship of the sign to the three named concepts:

- 4) The sign designates not the object of intention and nothing in the object intention; consequently,
- 5) the sign designates not the name, which is something in the object of intention. [. . .]

- 6) The sign designates the word, that is, the immediate however not necessary (like the name) indication of the object of intention.
(GS 6:11)²⁵

The first two important things to note about the passage are that the name “comes in” the word and that the name is a necessary indication because it is “an element in the object.” The externalization of the name in the Fall thus represents the loss of the *necessary* element linking the word to the object: that is, the loss of the pure name. Only freed from this necessary connection to the object can the word abstract from it and use it as a means of judgment. In the notes above and in “On Language as Such,” Benjamin calls the word considered independently of its name-element the sign or the “mere sign.” As sign, the word becomes a means for judging and subsuming the object, making it an object of knowledge (*Erkenntnis*). “Tower” begins to stand for the concept tower, and to this concept, general properties can be ascribed—judgments can be made. The Tree of Knowledge, for Benjamin, thus represents at the same time the knowledge of true and false, since it is only in abstraction that it is possible for a word to designate an object, abstract from it, and predicate properties of it. Importantly, however, Benjamin regards the word as maintaining a connection to the name that comes in it. The name captures the communicability of the thing itself. It is only because of the name-element that the word maintains the immediate connection to the object, even though in judgment the name-element has, as it were, been disengaged or pushed into the background.

What are we to make of the name-element retained in the word? I have argued that names ought to be conceived of as ideals—maximally expressive aesthetic words that capture the expressivity of the object. Here, Benjamin writes about them as actual elements of the word, parts of objects themselves, “liberated” from them. Benjamin may have here in mind psychological investigations into the developmental stage in which children become aware of the relationship between sign and referent.²⁶ Before this stage, as psychologist Lev Vygotsky notes, “the word

²⁵This passage provides further support for the claim I’ve already made that Benjamin uses the Fall to illustrate the difference between name (communicability) and word (designation). This distinction exists within human language—“the name comes in the word”—and is not one between types of language.

²⁶There is also an important predecessor of this idea in Herder’s *Treatise on the Origin of Language*. Herder goes as far as to argue as that for a human being to take a part of an object

appears to the child as an attribute or a property of the object rather than as a mere sign.”²⁷ For Benjamin, this necessary stage in the development of language in the child is also necessary to the structure of language as a whole. The name as an element liberated from the object is the remnant of an utterly immanent and expressive relationship with nature that translates the language of things. Once the name is externalized into the word—and designation becomes possible—the name remains a present, if suppressed, element, evidence of the necessary foundation of human language in language as such.

Benjamin’s further contention that the sign designates not the object of intention but the word itself seems to betray the very concept of a sign. If a sign doesn’t designate its object but the word itself, in what sense is it a sign? Benjamin’s point seems to be that designation is not primarily a relationship between words and objects but rather a perspective on the word itself. That is, in order to conceive of a word as standing for an object, we first require a perspective that conceives of the word in independence of the object, and it is this externalized perspective that Benjamin is calling a sign here.

Transposing these concepts from human language into pictures might make it easier to see what Benjamin’s getting at. Take a picture of a tower as the analogue of Benjamin’s word. There is in the picture something non-accidental, a resemblance, connecting the picture (or word) to the object. This is something, we might say, that is in the object of intention itself. This image of the tower is, at least in Benjamin’s sense, part of the tower. This aspect of the picture would be the analogue of the name-element. It is the part of the object that communicates itself to the artist and gets translated or transformed in the picture. The word remains immediately connected to the object through this name-element, but in the word itself this connection is loosened. It is an immediacy that is no longer necessary—that is, that could be otherwise. The picture, too, indicates its object with a non-necessary (though also

as a signal for the whole—the bleating of a sheep signaling the animal’s presence—is already, in some sense, “a word.” See my discussion of Herder in Chapter 3.

²⁷ Lev Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, trans. Alex Kozulin (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986), 61. Vygotsky mentions Henri Wallon, Kurt Koffka, Jean Piaget, Henri Delacroix, and Karl Bühler as originators of this idea. See further discussion of Vygotsky in Chapter 4. At this stage (1918), Vygotsky’s work was not yet written, but Benjamin may have already come across the idea in Bühler.

not arbitrary) immediacy. And this is roughly accurate in the case of pictures. They're not mediated and therefore cannot be arbitrary designations of their objects, but they could, at the same time, be otherwise. No picture offers a complete representation of its subject, and we can always imagine a different treatment of the subject, even if we are discussing something as accurate as a photograph.

What separates a picture from a word, however—in most cases at least—is that a picture does not become designative. It does not lose its immediacy and become capable of being understood as a sign. This could happen, of course, and perhaps something of the kind does happen with pictographs. We could also imagine a future in which people lost the ability to see figures *in* paintings—perhaps because people stopped producing pictures and the extant ones began to deteriorate physically but retained through custom the sense that they indicated particular objects. And so a (once) realistic still-life would be taken as an arbitrary sign for what it depicts.

The sign thus takes advantage of the looseness of the word from what it indicates, and, finally, rends it completely from this immediate connection. Once conceived of this way, the word itself can come to stand for its object, and concepts are born. The sign is the word seen from outside. It is language that is, in a sense, already *about* language, and must thus be preceded by the structure of meaning Benjamin is at pains to describe in the essay.

This designative structure of language is thus an achievement of language, rather than its foundation. It depends on an always preexistent immediate structure of meaning that it is able to externalize, in just the same way that the designative still-life depends on the depictive one. This means, among other things, that a certain kind of forgetfulness is inherent in the structure of human language. Figurative language must be forgotten, its immediate connection to nature must wither, so that we can see it as an arbitrary designation of its object and begin to use it conceptually.

I've stressed thus far that Benjamin's essay offers an account of the structure or composition of language, despite its narrative form. The aesthetic and designative are present in all human language at all times. But this, again, does have consequences for the historical development of language. One consequence that becomes evident here is that, although language exists on a structural continuum between its aesthetic and des-

ignative functions, it has tendency to evolve from the former toward the latter. As figurative language ages, it is, as I've put it, loosened from its immanent connection to reality, and its designative and abstractive qualities can then come to the fore, to the point that users completely forget metaphorical or metonymic origins of the language they are using.

This, I take it, is what Benjamin objects to in the conception of language that leads to Russell's paradox. This designative structure is taken as primary and self-evident, and it is used without hesitation to introduce new linguistic innovations, with no sensitivity to the more basic kind of meaning that makes designation possible. Benjamin's "solution" may or may not have any particular bearing on the issues at the intersection of language and mathematics that occupy Russell and Frege, but it does to serve to contextualize them. The problem is not just, as Wittgenstein puts it, that inquiries into meaning that have their foundation in mathematics and logic tend to have a "one-sided diet" and "nourish [their] thinking with only one kind of example," but that they fail to account for the deeper fount of meaning that makes that kind of example possible.

6. Conclusion

In Genesis, Adam and Eve recognize that they are naked after eating the forbidden fruit. They realize for the first time that they have bodies, understand their bodies as objects, and, like Sartre's peeping Tom, are pulled out of their absorption in the world and become self-conscious. They are made to feel ashamed. Benjamin's reading connects Adam and Eve's realization that they have bodies to having an object in general. The self-consciousness that makes them ashamed of their naked bodies is but one manifestation of the "turn away from things" and immanent naming language occasioned by the Fall as Benjamin reads it. This turn is the externalization of language.

The transgression Adam and Eve commit and the knowledge they gain are one and the same. In the act of transgression they already elevate themselves above and tear themselves out of nature. Their knowledge and shame are nothing more than this. And their exile from Eden is a mere technicality—they've already removed themselves from the Garden.

Benjamin's inventive reading of Genesis leaves us with a number of loose ends. Humankind will henceforward have to survive by means of

the instrumental rationality made possible by the externalization of language.²⁸ What separates human beings from animals is not language in itself, but the naming language capable of becoming a reflexive sign. But Benjamin's attempt to derive reason from this expanded concept of language remains sketchy, perhaps necessarily so, and dependent on the Genesis narrative. Moreover, we are left toward the end of Benjamin's essay with the tantalizing but largely unexplicated suggestion that our rational capacities are inextricable from our struggle to act morally—a connection that is embodied in the two uses of the word "judgment."

Benjamin concludes this essay with a summation of the "purified concept of language" he hopes to have provided. "The language of an entity," he repeats, "is the medium in which its intellectual being is communicated" (*GS* 2:157 / *SW* 1:74). As I have argued, Benjamin's central contention is that the philosophical problems associated with human language can only be understood from the perspective of language as such—from the thesis that all things are communicable, that everything has its own language. From this perspective, again, reference and designation, the capacity for abstraction and judgment, appear as achievements of language, rather than its foundation.

Ultimately Benjamin is trying to track the distorting effect language has on our understanding of reality in the very process of making it available in the distinctive way it is available to human beings. This is what Hamann refers to when he says "language is at the center of reason's misunderstanding of itself," and what Wittgenstein refers to when he writes of "the bewitchment of our understanding by the resources of our language." It is commonplace among philosophers of language who tread this ground to despair of its difficulty. Wittgenstein is the most eloquent about it. Looking back at his own attempts to show the logical form of language in the *Tractatus*, he writes, "We feel as if we had to repair a torn spider's web with our fingers" (*PI* §106).

²⁸There are important connections here to Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, especially in their reading of Homer's *Odyssey* as an allegory for the development of instrumental, bourgeois rationality. Odysseus's survival in the episode with Polyphemus in which he calls himself "Nobody" depends on him recognizing the arbitrary connection between words and things, a removal unavailable to mythical consciousness, according to which "the word was thought to have direct power over the thing." See *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 47–48.

It might seem that Benjamin is doing something of the kind Wittgenstein does in the *Tractatus* and warns against later on: that is, attempting to show the unsayable character of language. While it is almost certainly true that Wittgenstein would be wary of Benjamin's project, it is not the project of the *Tractatus*. It does not seek to elucidate or show the structure according to which language maps itself onto the world. Rather, like the *Investigations*, it attempts to dissuade us from the feeling that it does map itself onto the world, and to place designative language in the right context. Unlike the Wittgenstein of the *Investigations*, however, Benjamin does think there is a more basic character to language. It is not "beneath" the designative functioning of language like the logical form of the *Tractatus* is, but it is prior to it.

And, as in the *Tractatus*, in Benjamin that character cannot be said, since the nature of saying is what it seeks to elucidate. It must be shown or, better, told, in the way a story is told, since, like any creation myth, it seeks not to explain our life logically, but to cast what is already known and experienced in a certain light. The test of the value of this story lies not in its literal truth but in the framework it provides for looking at our language. In this, it bears a resemblance to literature whose value lies likewise in the framework it provides for looking at our life. This will discomfit many philosophers, but if language does, as Benjamin and Wittgenstein think, eclipse logic, a different kind of reasoning is called for. Benjamin proposes not to solve the mystery of language, nor to dissolve it, but to insist on it.

From this point, this book will branch off in three distinct but closely related directions. Chapter 3 will explore how Benjamin's theory of language supports his understanding of the task of philosophy as it is expounded in his notoriously opaque "Epistemo-Critical Foreword" to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Part II will further explore the historical tradition that Charles Taylor and Michael Forster have called expressivism, tracing the historical provenance of Benjamin's theory, and intervening, from a Benjaminian perspective, in some controversies in that tradition and the philosophy of language more broadly. It will also explore Fritz Mauthner's import in this tradition and his influence on Wittgenstein. And Part III will offer an interpretation of Benjamin and Wittgenstein as dual inheritors of this tradition, compare and contrast their views, and treat of some central issues in the philosophy of language on this basis.

The Theory Gets Dressed Up

EIGHT YEARS AFTER 1916's "On Language as Such," Benjamin completed a study of the German *Trauerspiel* (mourning play)—an unappreciated Baroque genre characterized by violence, exaggeration, and the collapses of royal houses. The genre had been interpreted by most critics as an inferior imitation of classical tragedy.

Trauerspiel had been a longstanding concern of Benjamin's as evidenced by two fragments written at the same time as "On Language as Such": "Trauerspiel and Tragedy" and "The Meaning of Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy." In the latter piece, Benjamin identifies tragedy with drama and dialogue proper. It belongs exclusively to human speech. "There is no such thing as tragic pantomime," he writes (*GS* 2:137 / *SW* 1:59). *Trauerspiel*, on the other hand, centered around sadness or lament—which are present in nature, music, and feeling—expresses more continuity with non-linguistic nature. "Language in the process of change is the linguistic principle of the *Trauerspiel*," he writes, and he calls its basic question "how language can express sadness" (*GS* 2:138 / *SW* 1:59–60). Whereas in tragedy language has completely detached from nature and established its own world, *Trauerspiel* travels a path from pure feeling to lament in language and finally to dissolution in music.¹

¹ Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* forms the background to these early reflections. Tragedy, like late or Euripidean tragedy on Nietzsche's analysis, is conceived of as a formal, Apollonian, purely linguistic art form. The satyr plays, on which Nietzsche postulates tragedies are based, and early tragedies are formally similar to the *Trauerspiel* as Benjamin's reads it. These plays, for Nietzsche, involve the movement of choral verse—representing a state of nature—through individuation in a single voice, that of the hero, finally ending in the unity of the chorus through the tragic hero's demise. Benjamin directly confronts Nietzsche's critique of modern opera later in the book (*GS* 1:386 / *O* 94–96). See Eli Fried-

Benjamin submitted the study as a *Habilitationsschrift* to the faculty of the University of Frankfurt, but he was in the end advised to withdraw it to avoid the embarrassment of rejection, definitively ending his hopes of an academic career.² The famous “Epistemo-Critical Foreword” serves in part as a critique of the contemporary methodology in literary criticism and the philosophy of art that lead to the misjudgment of the significance of *Trauerspiel*, but it aims at far greater heights. The foreword is a treatise on the nature of truth and beauty; the relationships among concepts, ideas, and phenomena; and the task of philosophy as a whole, which Benjamin defines as the presentation of truth.³

Benjamin’s early philosophy of language serves as the indispensable background for these reflections. Benjamin referred to the “Epistemo-Critical Foreword” in a letter to Gershom Scholem as “unmitigated chutzpah” and “neither more nor less than the prolegomena to an epistemology, a kind of second stage of my early work on language [. . .] dressed up as a doctrine of ideas [*Ideenlehre*].”⁴ Language as such and Adamic naming serve as the foundation for Benjamin’s conception of the philosophical idea. In this chapter, I set out to demonstrate the manner in which Benjamin works his theory of language into a

lander, “On the Musical Gathering of Echoes of the Voice: Walter Benjamin on Opera and the *Trauerspiel*,” *The Opera Quarterly*, 21:4 (Autumn 2005), 631–46.

²The book, submitted for *Habilitation* without the audacious first half of the foreword (which was included in the 1928 published version), was judged incomprehensible by the committee at Frankfurt. The committee chair, Hans Cornelius, wrote in his report, “I was unable—despite repeated, concentrated efforts—to derive a comprehensible meaning from these [art historical observations] [. . .].” Max Horkheimer, an assistant professor at Frankfurt at the time, also read it and came to the same conclusion. See Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014), 231–32; and Berkhart Lindner, “Habilitationssakte Benjamin: Über ein ‘akademisches Trauerspiel’ über ein Vorkapitel der ‘Frankfurter Schule’ (Horkheimer, Adorno),” *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 53/54 (1984). The ideas in the *Trauerspiel* book, ironically, would come to exercise an important influence on Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the seminal text of Frankfurt School critical theory. As Eiland and Jennings note, Horkheimer would also, as director of the Institute for Social Research, be responsible for providing Benjamin the limited but necessary institutional support that financed work on the Paris Arcades and other essays during the latter part of his life.

³Benjamin, it should be noted, has replaced the concept of “philosophical knowledge,” which he opposed to mathematical or scientific knowledge in earlier writings on Kant, with “truth.” In the *Trauerspiel* book he reserves the term “knowledge” for scientific knowledge. It is no longer *philosophical knowledge* that cannot be formulated in terms of *subject-object* epistemology, but *truth* that cannot be grasped *intentionally*.

⁴Letter to Scholem of Feb. 19, 1925, *Briefe*, vol. 1, 372; *Correspondence*, 261.

fully-fledged epistemology. The question Benjamin is trying to answer is what can philosophy hope to accomplish given that it must express itself in fallen language.

The discussion is organized around the following topics: (1) Benjamin's conception of a philosophical treatise; (2) his critique of a trio of philosophical methodologies and the related distinction he draws between knowledge and truth; (3) the idea in Benjamin's sense; (4) the concept of redemption; (5) the concept of origin; (6) the concept of allegory and the origin of *Trauerspiel*; and (7) the relationship between the idea and the Adamic name. While Benjamin's theory of language tracks its fall from the name to the human word, his theory of ideas proceeds in the reverse direction, attempting to reconstruct the name out of the human word. It explores the possibility of establishing a method for recovering a form of intellectual perception of phenomena analogous to their ideal apprehension in Adamic names. The end of philosophy is, on this view, a complete articulation of experience.

1. *Das Traktat*

The foreword begins by asserting the preeminence of one philosophical methodology—that of the treatise or tractate (*das Traktat*)⁵—over the three dominant alternatives in philosophy since the early modern period, which he refers to as rationalism, systematic philosophy, and empiricism. It is important not to read the term “treatise” as the straightforward espousal of doctrine it may connote, although, as we'll see, its connection to doctrine is by no means accidental.⁶ The concept of the treatise is attractive to Benjamin for two main reasons. First of all, it has theological and historical dimensions, going back to both the Talmudic tradition and scholasticism. Second, like an essay, its methodology—at least as Benjamin conceives of it—is fluid or digressive, meaning it is

⁵ Benjamin also uses the word *Abhandlung* later in the foreword to refer to this form, but the Latinate *Traktat* emphasizes the scholastic roots of the concept, the connection to the Talmud, and perhaps also to point to Spinoza's own use of the term in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*.

⁶ For example in his “Essay as Form” (1958), which is heavily indebted to the “Epistemological Foreword,” Adorno counterposes the *essai* to the scientific treatise (*Abhandlung*), which he conceives of in a traditional sense as an investigation that takes a single methodology, applies it to a problem, and comes up with a solution.

never settled and is always beginning again, taking up its object from a new perspective. In the opening of the foreword, Benjamin asserts the importance of the question of presentation (*Vorstellung*) for philosophy.⁷ The treatise preserves this question in its very form, since, as he conceives of it, it is continually renewing its quest for truth by approaching it anew, building on and reinterpreting past tradition.

The conception is developed partially out of Benjamin's understanding of the Kabbalah and the Talmudic tradition. Scholem reports that Benjamin said that the foreword could be understood only by "someone familiar with the Kabbalah."⁸ It is likely that he meant by this not that only those with specific knowledge of the content of Kabbalah would understand it, but that only those accustomed to something with such a degree of hermeneutic and historical complexity would understand the level of nuance Benjamin requires of philosophy in the foreword. In any case, the structure of Torah interpretation in the Jewish tradition—especially its commentary form, its openness to argumentation, and its frequent digressions—all contribute to Benjamin's conception of the treatise.

The important point here is that the tractates that make up the Talmud have a very different status in the Jewish tradition than the Torah itself.⁹ The tractates are commentaries and the record of debates. They

⁷I follow Eiland in using the English "presentation" for *Vorstellung* here. Neither "representation" nor "presentation" is perfect, but since part of the point of philosophical *Vorstellung* is that the idea presented is not available outside the context of the presentation—that is, it is not re-presented—"presentation" is to be preferred.

⁸Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2012), 152.

⁹The extent to which Benjamin had substantial direct engagement with the Talmudic tradition at this point is questionable. Wilfried Menninghaus and Graeme Gilloch both suggest that the influence of this tradition is mostly filtered through the German tradition. Gilloch cites, in particular, Hamann, Schlegel, and Novalis. See Gilloch, *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Polity Press, 2002), 251n, and Menninghaus, *Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980), 192. Hamann, in particular, refers in his "Aesthetica in Nuce" to the "large and small Masorah," which were annotations and commentaries on the text of the Torah written to aid in transmission—the large being more extensive comments above and below the text, and the small interspersed in the margins. The Hebrew *Masorah* means "tradition." Hamann cites them in his criticism of the abstractions of rationalism:

Behold! the large and small Masorah of philosophy has overwhelmed the text of nature, like the Great Flood. Were not all its beauties and riches bound to turn into water?—Yet you perform far greater miracles than the gods ever delighted to do, with oak-trees and pillars of salt, with petrified and alchemical metamor-

take the text as authoritative but leave unresolved a number of interpretive issues, which are amenable to different approaches and solutions and so require a “secondary literature” that extends across centuries. Interpretations of more recent eras do not simply replace the old but are layered on top of them—sometimes quite literally on the page—and engage with them. Benjamin’s distinction between the philosophical form of the treatise and the concept of doctrine (*Lehre*) roughly tracks this distinction between Torah and Talmudic tractate.¹⁰

Lehre plays an important, if undeveloped, role in Benjamin’s earlier writings, especially “On Perception” and “The Program of the Coming Philosophy.” In an “Addendum” to the latter essay, Benjamin attempts to give a preliminary characterization of the relationship between religion and philosophy that mirrors the foreword’s more developed conception of the relationship between *Lehre* and the treatise.

Kant separated philosophy into epistemology (the critical part) and metaphysics (the dogmatic part). As we saw in Chapter 1, Benjamin follows him to an extent, though he wants to deny the independence of epistemology from metaphysics. Benjamin’s unique radicalization of the Kantian epistemological project, attempting to bring it to bear on experience in general and not just mechanical-scientific experience, requires more than a program for merely extending it to different domains of experience, including those of art and religion itself.¹¹ It requires a new concept of epistemology. I quote Benjamin in two parts:

phoses and fables to convince the human race—You make nature blind, that she might be your guide! or rather, with your Epicureanism you have put out the light of your own eyes, that you might be taken for prophets who conjure inspiration and expositions out of the empty air.—You would have dominion over nature, and you bind your own hands and feet with your Stoicism, so that in your poetic miscellanies you may sing falsetto on the diamond fetters of fate all the more movingly. (*HSW* 2:207 / *WP* 80)

Despite the characteristic obscurity of Hamann’s prose, his central point is relatively clear. Philosophy, or reasoning in general, which was originally employed as a hermeneutical aid in understanding and passing down a tradition, becomes the object of inquiry itself. It completely overwhelms and obliterates the doctrine that was given. This obliteration of religion is treated by Hamann as, at the same time, an obliteration of nature.

¹⁰This word also has an important resonance in the German tradition. It is used by Fichte (*Wissenschaftslehre*), Jacobi (*Letter on the Doctrine [Lehre] of Spinoza*), and Goethe (*Zur Farbenlehre*), among others.

¹¹See Eli Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin: A Philosophical Portrait* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 31–36.

The original or primal concept of epistemology has a double function. On the one hand the concept is the one which by its specification, according to the general logical foundation of knowledge, penetrates to the concepts of specific types of cognition and thus to specific types of experience. This is its real epistemological significance and simultaneously the one weaker side of its metaphysical significance. However, the original and primal concept of knowledge does not reach a concrete totality of experience in this context, any more than it reaches a concept of existence. (*GS 2:170 / SW 1:109*)

Epistemology as a theory of knowledge of experience is, on the one hand, a theory of knowledge of particular objects, which means of the particular types of experience corresponding to those objects. We can think of the individual sciences here. But such epistemological theory can never encompass what is “originally” and “primarily” meant when we talk about knowledge of experience. A systematic ordering of all these arenas of experience would itself never be able to encompass experience or existence in general. It would merely be a patchwork and would not do justice to the continuity of ordinary experience.¹²

Benjamin continues:

But there is a unity of experience that can by no means be understood as a sum of experience, to which the concept of knowledge as doctrine [*Lehre*] is *immediately* related in its continuous development. The object and the content of this doctrine, this concrete totality of experience, is religion, which, however, is presented to philosophy at first only as doctrine. Yet the source of existence lies in the totality of experience, and only in doctrine does philosophy encounter something absolute, as existence, and in so doing encounter that continuity in the nature of experience (*GS 2:170 / SW 1:109*, italics original).

Religion and specifically the concept of doctrine (*Lehre*) represent the totality of experience that Kant and the neo-Kantians abandon in favor of limited knowledge of specific realms of scientific experience. Religion is thus understood, not foremost as a particular faith tradition, but as a representation of experience as a united whole. No matter what we may think of the substance of the doctrine handed down by a particular

¹²In this context, we should also recall Benjamin’s charge that Kant conflates knowledge of experience and experience itself. This conflation allows science to think the totality of experience as a sum of different kinds of cognition. Benjamin conceives of an experience as a totality from which these different kinds of cognition are cordoned off.

religion, religion in general, just by attempting to understand experience as a whole, contains the truth that experience is a whole, and only later divided into restricted domains and forms of scientific knowledge.

Philosophy inherits, or ought to inherit, from religion, then, not the content of doctrine itself but this holistic representation of experience. This provides an ideal—whether it is called God, spirit, the absolute, or the unity of experience—toward which philosophy must always orient itself. For Benjamin, philosophy can therefore never achieve the independence from religion that it pretends to. This is not only because without religion or *Lehre*, philosophy has no model for the totality of human experience, but also because science and, consequently, philosophy based on a critical systematization of scientific experience cannot ever recreate or recover, out of its fragmented results, this totality of experience.

Although this does not imply that philosophy ought to treat religion as revealed truth, it does mean that philosophy cannot be “purified” of its theological inheritance. The sense religious doctrine provides of unified and total experience cannot be dispensed with, at least not without doing harm to philosophy itself. Philosophy is a historical elaboration of, or commentary on, a given doctrine of unity. Furthermore, language—the medium in which doctrine is expressed—theology, and history are taken to be essential constituents of philosophical vocabulary and theory; they are also indispensable. If we do dispense with the religion and philosophy passed down to us, we essentially abandon philosophy as a discipline that attempts to come to terms with experience as a whole. Benjamin's allegiance to religion and history are also an allegiance to the language in which doctrine is expressed and passed down. To the extent that religion or doctrine is completely dispensed with, philosophical truth, which can only be accessed through language and therefore through history, is renounced in favor of fragmented forms of scientific knowledge, and philosophy will find itself in thrall to the unproductive metaphysical biases produced by science when it lays claim to truth.

The treatise, as Benjamin conceives of it, does not therefore espouse doctrine. It requires the ideal unity that doctrine represents as a starting point. It, moreover, aspires to the ideality of doctrine as an endpoint for philosophy. As he somewhat cryptically puts it, “To be sure, in its closed

and finished form, philosophical writing will constitute doctrine, but it is not within the power of mere thought to confer on it such closure" (*GS* 1:207 / *O* 1). Religion and doctrine provide the ideal, absolute unity and totality of experience to which philosophy must aspire, but given that it is limited by the expressive capacities of human thought and human language, this is an ideal that will never be reached. Still, it is only in view of this ideal, as will become clearer below, that the philosophical activity of the treatise can make sense. In other words, philosophical interpretations of an object are oriented toward this ideal in the same way that Talmudic interpretation of issues of law are oriented toward the word of God. Such interpretations only make sense when the particular fragment or issue is seen in light of a united whole, even when that whole remains itself occluded.

The treatise as the form of philosophical practice is interpretive, partial, and open-ended. In treating its object of inquiry as a part of an ideally unified concept of experience, it always at least implicitly acknowledges its own inevitable limitations. It thus, as Benjamin makes clear, is not meant to confer knowledge to its audience. It neither conveys doctrine dogmatically nor does it apply the "coercive" power of mathematical proof or any other single methodology. The treatise seeks neither to prove nor to command. Rather, it "constantly begins anew," always stopping, "pausing for breath," and reconsidering its approach, willing to see its object from a different vantage point and start over again (*GS* 1:208 / *O* 3). Its method is thus not conceived of as a methodology that allows the philosopher to capture the object in its essence. Rather:

Presentation is the quintessence [*Inbegriff*] of [the treatise's] method. Method is detour [*Umweg*]. Presentation as detour—such is the methodological nature of the treatise. Renunciation of the unbroken course of intention is its immediately distinguishing feature. (*GS* 1:208 / *O* 2–3)

Benjamin means something here more than merely that the mode of presentation is important to the character of the treatise. A universal method applicable to different contexts and contents is completely absent here, and its absence is in itself constitutive of the method of the treatise. The question of how to present the truth, *as a question*, is central to philosophical method. It remains systematically unresolved, and

precisely in its being unresolved it is productive or characteristic, since it forces method to be digressive, forever stepping back, reassessing, and approaching its object again from a different direction. It is only in the sum of these diverse approaches to an object that we can bring the truth about it into view. The centrality of presentation is also a product of the character of truth as Benjamin has defined it. Unlike knowledge, which can be captured and expressed in any number of ways, truth is bound up with its own expression. It is not captured, but brought out or brought to expression.

This situation that philosophy finds itself in is a product of the Fall of language as Benjamin interprets it in his earlier works. Human expression is only ever capable of partial translation of the language of nature. It is fallen into fragments, and the truth—represented by Adamic names in “On Language as Such”—can be built up out of these fragments. As in the story of the tower of Babel, language is not just partial and confused, but also scattered. The task of philosophy is to put these scattered fragments in an order that approaches truth. This is an ordering that takes place in what Benjamin will call the realm of ideas. Presentation is, therefore, not a merely formal question, but integral to the substance of what is expressed by philosophy.

Benjamin compares the treatise to the mosaic, both of which, he notes, “achieve their highest development in the West during the Middle Ages” (*GS* 1:208–09 / *O* 3). Despite the continual variation in interpretive methodology, its necessarily indirect forms of expression, and its inability to maintain a distance from its object as scientific knowledge does, “philosophical contemplation is not lacking in momentum,” and the treatise, like the mosaic, is not incapable of representing a whole. He writes:

The value of thought-fragments [*Denkbruchstücken*] is more decisive, the less they are immediately capable of measuring themselves against the fundamental conception, and the brilliance of the presentation depends on this value to the same extent that that of the mosaic depends on the quality of the poured glass. The relationship of the micrological work process to the plastic and intellectual whole demonstrates how the truth-content lets itself be grasped only through the most exact immersion in the details of the material content. (*GS* 1:208 / *O* 3)

In “The Task of the Translator,” Benjamin imagined grouping together the various words in human languages for a single object would

bring us closer to the Adamic name. Each thought-fragment in the treatise must, in the same way, be grouped together around an idea, and at the same time each fragment must on its own be interpreted or formed in light of the role it will play in this grouping. The more extreme the detail—or apparently unimportant to the whole—the more valuable painstaking analysis of it that unites it with other relevant pieces of thought in order to bring them into relation to the whole. As will become clearer below, the painstaking, “micrological” analysis of fragments of experience in the treatise is what allows them to be elevated toward the totality of experience, no matter how far from or irrelevant to the whole they may seem on their face.

2. Epistemology Critique

Benjamin further elaborates the form of the treatise in opposition to three dominant and “godless” forms of philosophy—philosophy lacking a concept of doctrine—arising from the early modern period and after. These we can call rationalism, systematic philosophy, and positivism. Benjamin takes Spinoza and his “*more geometrico*” as his model for rationalism.¹³ Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* undermined a literal interpretation of the Bible and argued for the independence of philosophy from religion. For Benjamin, philosophy’s attempt to detach itself from religion is at once an attempt to detach itself from history. “Philosophical doctrine rests on historical codification. It is therefore not simply to be conjured up *more geometrico*” (GS 1:207 / O 1). Spinoza’s argument for

¹³ Benjamin’s use of Spinoza evokes the famous *Pantheismusstreit* breaking out in 1783 between F.H. Jacobi and Moses Mendelssohn over the possibly Spinozistic philosophical views of G.E. Lessing, the recently deceased giant of German intellectual life. This controversy also forms an essential part of the historical milieu surrounding the reception of the first critique, the first edition of which had come out two years earlier. In his correspondence with Mendelssohn, Jacobi contended that a consistent and thoroughgoing rationalism could not help but lead to a wholly deterministic Spinozist pantheism—viewed as no less than a heretical atheism at the time—precluding not just genuine faith but also human freedom. Mendelssohn took the opposing view, affirming the rationalist view of harmony between faith and reason. The first critique, especially in K. L. Reinhold’s important 1786 *Letter on the Kantian Philosophy*, was cited as preserving this harmony. Benjamin enters this debate, almost 150 years later, on the side of Hamann and Jacobi. See Frederick Beiser, *Fate of Reason* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 44–108.

the independence of philosophy from religion thus amounts, from Benjamin's perspective, to a historical error. Philosophical form, again, must refer at least implicitly to "those objects of theology without which truth cannot be thought" (*GS* 1:208 / *O* 2). It cannot therefore proceed by means of logical deduction independent of the given concept of totality provided by religion.

Kant's critical project famously "attempts to limit reason to make room for faith," and thus to preserve a rationalist separation of the two spheres while containing the threat of the former against the latter. Kant seeks to limit reason by barring the use of pure reason without reference to the objects of intuition. He does, however, admit a regulative use for the holistic ideas of reason (God, the soul, and the world) in the Appendix to the "Transcendental Dialectic." For Kant too, then, truth is, in a certain sense, inconceivable without these theological objects. The understanding requires the immanent use of the ideas in order to ensure the systematic unity of scientific theory. Kant writes that this immanent use of the ideas "postulates a complete unity of the understanding's cognition, through which this cognition comes to be not merely a contingent aggregate but a system interconnected in accordance with necessary laws."¹⁴ The status of the ideas of reason is far from certain in the Appendix. Suffice it to say, however, that, if the transcendental ideas do play such an important role, Kant does seem to readmit a form of metaphysics, however slight and regulative, into philosophy. Benjamin can be read as exploiting this opening in his attempt to reconfigure Kantianism in terms of a total concept of linguistically-conditioned experience.

The ideal in Benjamin is still regulative in a sense, since philosophy will never actually reach its "finished form" beyond "the power of mere thought." But this fact does not place a prohibition on pursuing a truth that is more than a mere systematization of all the different spheres of knowledge; rather, it changes the character of this pursuit. The re-orientation of Kantian critique around the totality of experience—the linguistic nature of experience—changes the character of the ideas of

¹⁴ *Kritik der reinen Vernunft, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4, ed. German Academy of the Sciences (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1973), A645 / B673. Translation from *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

reason, which can no longer be regarded as aids to systematic conceptual thought, but provide the initial indications, the vocabulary, from which the philosophical pursuit of truth can begin. These ideas, and religion itself, provide the ideal of united experience without which philosophy, as Benjamin understands it, cannot begin. Their use is, moreover, still immanent, as we will see, since they are not pursued as independently existing forms—they are not, in other words, objects of Platonic contemplation—but through the interpretation and presentation of phenomena.

Benjamin's inventive way of treating the profane phenomena of early capitalism in the *Arcades Project* as sacred objects is thus not merely an idiosyncratic form of aesthetic criticism, but a product of his heavily modified Kantianism, which pursues a critique of experience in its linguistically-conditioned totality with an eye toward its unity. Philosophical interpretation must, therefore, see in discarded advertisements, for example, fragments of a continuously united whole, and through its interpretation make them appear as such—that is, show them in light of or as fragments of a unified whole. Whereas science, in putting objects under interpretation, isolates and investigates certain features of them, philosophy attempts to broaden their significance by seeing them as fragments of a whole; it attempts, as Benjamin puts it later in the foreword, to redeem them.

Benjamin thus rejects Kant's understanding of the relationship between the ideas of reason and the understanding, and consequently his conception of philosophical truth. Kant's critical project, having relegated the ideas of reason to a regulative role, inaugurates the "the nineteenth-century concept of system" (*GS* 1:207 / *O* 2):

Insofar as the concept of system determines philosophy, the latter is in danger of contenting itself with a syncretism that seeks to capture the truth in a spider's web stretched between bodies of knowledge, as though truth came flying in from outside. But this studiously acquired universalism comes nowhere near to attaining the didactic authority of doctrine. If philosophy is to preserve the law of its form not as a mediating guide to knowledge but as presentation of truth, then it is necessary to emphasize the practice of this form—not however its anticipation within the system. (*GS* 1:207–08 / *O* 2)

It is the task of guiding this syncretism (though Kant would of course not characterize it as Benjamin does) that Kant assigns to the ideas of

reason. The truth, for Kant, can only be a unified system of knowledge, since the apparent metaphysical truth to be gained by pursuing the ideas of reason has been eschewed. The ideas of reason are indispensable for the task of unification, but do not themselves point to the truth since, taken on their own terms, they will lead to metaphysical illusion. Kantian truth remains, as Benjamin already objected in his early works, determined by an empiricist subject-object model of consciousness. Truth “flies in” from outside and is to be properly grasped or extracted from experience by an epistemological consciousness which has, with the help of the ideas of reason, all the knowledge gained from the disparate forms of scientific experience. (The spider metaphor Benjamin uses here may come from Hamann, who referred to both Spinoza and Kant as system-building spiders.)¹⁵ This ideal of truth abandons the side of philosophy that aims at *Lehre*. Benjamin’s task, taken over from Hamann, is to replace the Kantian critical model with one that understands truth not as an object for a subject (nor as an aggregation of such objects), not as a possession, but as a product of history and human language.

Whereas Kant and the system builders of the nineteenth century at least pursue a philosophical form of knowledge that transcends the knowledge on offer from any individual science, strands of positivism that become dominant in the early twentieth century simply take scientific knowledge to meet the standard of philosophical truth. Benjamin’s main targets here seem to be Machian programs for providing a unified scientific world-picture, which culminated in the work of the Vienna Circle in the late 1920s and 1930s. These programs took the form either of a reduction of all sciences to physics (Moritz Schlick and Rudolf Carnap) or a systematic, encyclopedic aggregation of scientific and social scientific knowledge (Otto Neurath), all of them explicitly eschewing metaphysical language. Benjamin’s criticisms apply to both approaches.

He maintains that the demand for “flawless coherence in scientific deduction” misunderstands the nature of scientific knowledge and the attempt to group the discontinuous scientific disciplines into a coherent whole misunderstands the nature of philosophical truth:

¹⁵ See *Briefe*, vol. 1, 378; vol. 2, 203; vol. 7, 181. Cited in Berlin, *Magus of the North*, 18, 40.

Such systematic closure has no more in common with truth than does any other mode of presentation that aims to assure itself of the truth in mere pieces of knowledge and their contexts [*Erkenntnisse und Erkenntniszusammenhängen*]. The more painstakingly the theory of scientific knowledge probes the disciplines, the more unmistakably their methodological incoherence is revealed. With every specific disciplinary domain come new and indemonstrable assumptions; in each domain the resolution of inherited problems is asserted as emphatically as their insolubility is argued in another context. (*GS* 1:213 / *O* 8–9)

Scientific explanations are solutions to specific problems, which require initial assumptions and interpretations to set a context for the execution of deductive rationality.¹⁶ These assumptions both overturn the prior contexts that prove unable to solve problems in a specific field and are incompatible with the contexts set in other fields. Programs for a unified science require that the empirical practice of particular sciences be ignored or regarded as somehow incomplete or provisional, while Benjamin suggests this incompleteness and the incoherence among disciplines is characteristic of science. “This discontinuity of scientific method, however, is so far removed from constituting an inferior, provisional stage of knowledge that it could, on the contrary, positively further the theory of knowledge, if it were not deterred by the overweening ambition to take possession of the truth, as an undivided unity, in an encyclopedic embrace of what is known” (*GS* 1:213 / *O* 9). The will to systematic coherence in the face of countervailing evidence in the philosophy of science is thus an ineffectual and disoriented remnant of

¹⁶A full reconstruction and appraisal of the philosophy of science Benjamin only hints at here would take us too far afield. But it is worth mentioning that Benjamin cites the then-influential French philosopher of science Emile Meyerson in a footnote to the last quoted sentence. Meyerson emphasized that every scientific theory requires certain starting assumptions about the nature of reality that are “irrational” or “metaphysical” insofar as they exist outside the deductive logic of the theories themselves and cannot be rationally justified by them. These assumptions serve to effectively close individual sciences off from one another, epistemologically speaking. At least this is what Benjamin seems to extrapolate from Meyerson’s text. That is, despite, as Benjamin puts it, “the unphilosophical features” of a philosophy of science that sees the incoherence among the different sciences that results as merely “accidental”—to be remedied in the future—this incoherence is a necessary result of the scientific method applied in a wide array of contexts to a wide array of ever-evolving problems. See Meyerson, *De l’explication dans les sciences* (Paris: PUF, 1921). Translated as *Explanation in the Sciences* by David A. Siplfle and Mary-Alice Siplfle (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991). See also M. Anthony Mills, “Explicating Meyerson: The Critique of Positivism and Historical Épistémologie,” *HOPOS: The Journal of the International Society for the History of Philosophy of Science* 5 (2), 318–47, esp. 336–40.

philosophy proper—which is avowedly metaphysical or religious in Benjamin's sense—in a positivist program that purports to describe the world without metaphysics.

Benjamin goes on to characterize a realm of philosophical truth occupied by what he calls ideas. Despite this truth being a genuine unity, he claims right away that it has its own “discontinuous structure”:

The great generic divisions that determine not only philosophical systems but their terminology—the most general being logic, ethics, and aesthetics—have their significance, then, not simply as names of specialized disciplines but as monuments [*Denkmale*] of the discontinuous structure of the world of ideas. (*GS* 1:213 / *O* 9)

What are we to make of this discontinuity of “the world of ideas” given the manner in which Benjamin has contrasted truth's holism with the discontinuities of scientific knowledge? The discontinuity of the realm of truth is not meant to be an incommensurability or incoherence as exists among the different scientific disciplines, which understand phenomena according to different starting assumptions. Ideas relate to phenomena in an entirely different manner than do concepts. They do not grasp and contain or possess phenomena. Rather the philosopher offers a “descriptive exposition of the world of ideas” into which “the empirical world enters [. . .] and dissolves.” (*GS* 1:212 / *O* 8). In this way, Benjamin says, phenomena are “redeemed” and united in the idea. “They are divested of their false unity so that, divided out, they can participate in the genuine unity of truth” (*GS* 1:213 / *O* 9).

Conceptual knowledge, as is already suggested in Benjamin's theory of language, involves a reduction of phenomena according to the particular ends of various sciences. This reduction makes them suitable for the generalizations of scientific knowledge, but that the phenomena are so reduced is rendered invisible by the epistemology of scientific philosophy. It pretends to strive toward a unity of conceptual knowledge, even as the interpretations of phenomena offered by the individual sciences (or research paradigms within a single scientific field) diverge more and more widely. This false unity Benjamin proposes to replace with “the genuine unity of truth.”

In this project of presenting ideas, which is at the same time redeeming or rescuing the phenomena from their conceptual leveling,

concepts themselves remain indispensable. As I'll suggest below, this is simply because philosophy must express itself in human language, which, as we saw in the previous two chapters, is fallen or leveled in concepts. Concepts "effect the resolution of things into their elements"; this "conceptual discrimination is above suspicion of pernicious sophistry only where it has in view the salvaging of phenomena in ideas" (*GS* 1:213–14 / *O* 9). In the task of representing truth, concepts are not used as a means for grasping or subsuming the phenomena as objects of knowledge, but play an interpretive role, isolating the relevant elements of phenomena in order to allow for their configuration or presentation and consequent redemption in the idea.

A better understanding of Benjamin's realm of truth beyond these initial, audacious indications requires a more precise discussion of Benjamin's definition of concepts and his reinterpretation of the Platonic idea along the lines of the Adamic name. What Benjamin is looking for here is no less than a way to characterize a philosophical mode of description that, even though consigned to using concepts, is in itself non-conceptual.

3. The Long Way to Truth

I've already suggested that Benjamin's theory of the relation between concept and idea is essentially a development of his theory of the relationship between word and name in "On Language as Such." The concept of the treatise combines for Benjamin his view that philosophy both requires a notion of truth or doctrine in order to reflect the essential unity of experience, and must pay close attention to the issue of presentation, which can never be settled but must take the "long way" of continual detour or digression. These two interrelated concerns—truth and presentation—lead him to a reconsideration of the Platonic system, which not only establishes truth—the ideas—beyond the phenomena, but also, in the *Symposium*, concerns itself with beauty as the presentation of truth. The *Symposium* "expounds truth—the realm of ideas—as the essential content of beauty" (*GS* 1:210 / *O* 5).

Benjamin's theory rejects, however, what he describes as a neo-Platonic concept of vision into the realm of ideas, in which beauty simply

plays the role of the bearer of truth (*GS* 1:214 / *O* 11–12).¹⁷ It attempts to steer a path between this conception of truth as the object of intuition or insight and the model of truth as a super-concept,¹⁸ which relates to phenomena the same way a generic concept “comprehends under itself its contents” (*GS* 1:214 / *O* 10).¹⁹ Yet, “the idea belongs to a realm fundamentally different from the realm of that which it grasps” (*GS* 1:214 / *O* 10). Benjamin’s challenge is to describe this realm neither as accessible only to esoteric intellectual intuition, nor as a mere abstract container for the phenomena that fall underneath it. The truth as it is represented by Benjamin’s version of the idea must fulfill conditions that might seem on their face contradictory. It must be at once (1) extra-phenomenal, (2) immanent, and (3) non-conceptual.

Benjamin uses two metaphors to model the relationship between phenomena and idea. The first is that of the constellation: “Ideas are to things as constellations to stars” (*GS* 1:214 / *O* 10). The figure of the constellation is attractive because it satisfies all three conditions listed above. As a constellation, the idea is a configuration of phenomena that comprises a whole that is not itself an object in the world of phenomena. It is extra-phenomenal, then, in the sense that it goes beyond any of the phenomena that make it up. The constellation is also not ideal in the sense of being a Platonic form of any single star that makes it up. It would be wrong to characterize the constellation as something that utterly transcends the stars. Although more than them, it remains immanent in them. Nor, finally, does the constellation in any sense “contain” the stars beneath it in the manner an individual is contained under a concept.

The stars are the elements from which a constellation is constructed. They contribute to the depiction of a constellation, but they require configuration or interpretation in order to become elements of the constellation. I must see the star as part of the constellation. That is, someone must show me the constellation or teach me to see the stars

¹⁷The “Epistemo-Critical Foreword” is sometimes read as Platonic, and it certainly engages some of Plato’s ideas, including, in addition to truth and beauty, form and *anamnesis*. But the result is no more Platonic, at least on any conventional reading of Plato, than it is Hegelian or Kantian.

¹⁸See Rush, “Jena Romanticism and Benjamin’s Critical Epistemology,” 132–33.

¹⁹The two extremes steered between here mirror the extremes of mystical and bourgeois theories of language in “On Language as Such.”

this way. The idea is thus an “objective [yet] virtual arrangement” of the phenomena and “their objective interpretation” (*GS* 1:215 / *O* 10). It is not a subjective understanding imposed on the world; the stars that make up the constellation are really there. But it is not simply the phenomena themselves; it requires that they be presented in a particular (virtual) manner.

The figure of the constellation thus bears a close relationship to that of the treatise as it was characterized above—each star can be understood as an extreme of the idea as a whole. They are brought together to represent the boundaries of an idea. The manner in which the phenomena are to be interpreted in order to make them into extremes and in what precise sense Benjamin believes these interpretations to be objective will be taken up in the discussion of the use of concepts below. Suffice it to say for now that philosophical criticism aims to interpret phenomena in such a way that they are reoriented away from everyday reception and toward the whole, the true. Through interpretation, the philosopher gives the reader a new way of looking at things in the same way the astronomer illuminates the night sky.

The second metaphor, also cosmological, describes the sense in which truth is the content of beauty. Beauty is, again, not a sign in the phenomenal world standing for a form in a transcendent realm. Truth cannot simply be signified as the content of a given phenomenon the way a sentence might be thought to signify a fact; rather, truth, in Benjamin’s sense, must develop or unfold in the presentation of phenomena. We could say, using contemporary philosophical jargon, that ideas supervene on the phenomena in which they’re presented. Benjamin writes:

Can truth do justice to the beautiful? This is the core question in the *Symposium*. Plato answers it by assigning to truth the role of guaranteeing being to the beautiful. In this sense, then, he expounds truth as the content of the beautiful. But such a content does not come to light in an uncovering [*Enthüllung*] so much as manifest itself in a process that can be described figuratively as the burning up of the cover [*Hülle*] as it enters the circle of ideas—a conflagration of the work in which its form reaches the highpoint of its radiance. (*GS* 1:211 / *O* 7)

A typical model of the relationship between a work of art and truth might be called, broadly speaking, representative. Whatever truth the work expresses is represented by sounds, paint, a narrative—whatever means the artist uses. In this sense, truth as the content of the work is

there “inside” the work for critics or interpreters to uncover. Against this—and this will become clearer in the discussion of Benjamin’s dissertation on Romanticism—Benjamin poses an understanding of truth not as something to be uncovered “within” the phenomena, but something that becomes manifest when the phenomena are put through a particular process, namely the “destruction” carried out by philosophical criticism.

In its destructive role, philosophy refuses to take works or historical phenomena on their own terms. The phenomena subjected to interpretation must be shorn of their immediate or straightforward conceptual meaning. It is this straightforward meaning—a surface or covering—that is to be burned up to show its truth, rather than peeled away to reveal an inner content. What is left is a smoldering ruin, its initial significance eliminated so that it can serve as an extreme that makes its contribution to the development and presentation of the idea. The philosopher thus belongs in between the scientist, with whom he shares an “interest in the extinguishing [*Verlöschen*] of merely empirical data,” and the artist, with whom he shares “the task of presentation” (*GS* 1:212 / *O* 8).²⁰ He does not extinguish the empirical merely by abstracting from it as does the scientist, but rather removes it from its found context and its given interpretations in order to reinterpret it in light of a whole.

It is for this reason that Benjamin finds the act of quotation and the idea of a text composed entirely of quotations so compelling.²¹ The act of quotation displaces the text, destroying the self-evident understanding of it, and making it capable, in the right configuration, of presenting truth. Philosophical criticism of this kind can be described as a kind of writing with writing. It interprets, configures, and juxtaposes other works in order to shed new light on them. It makes works themselves into a means of presentation.

To lend this description some much-needed concreteness, we can consider the example of *Trauerspiel*. *Trauerspiele* are, in Benjamin’s eyes, misunderstood under a particular conceptual interpretation

²⁰ Eiland has “naïve empiricism” here for “*bloßer Empirie*,” but I think Benjamin is referring to the destruction or mortification of works or phenomena that he finds characteristic of philosophical criticism, the extinguishing, that is, of empirical content rather than of an empirical attitude or method.

²¹ See Friedlander’s discussion of quotation as it figures in the composition of the *Arcades Project*. *Walter Benjamin*, 9–13.

that subsumes the plays under the concept of classical tragedy (and thereby finds them wanting). Benjamin proposes instead to give an account of the *idea* of *Trauerspiel*. This account proceeds not from the top down as the conceptual interpretation does, attempting to fit particular cases under a species or concept, but from the bottom up, from consideration and interpretation of individual plays. This interpretation is necessarily conceptual—it involves human language. However, it does not level down the plays by searching in them for the shared features that make up the concept of tragedy. Instead it looks for what is extreme in each individual play, precisely what is deemed aberrant or in excess of the concept of tragedy. These extremes then become part of the constellation that makes up the idea. They comprise boundary points, which, oriented together, outline the idea of *Trauerspiel*.

Although concepts play an important role in this interpretation and configuration of phenomena through which the idea is developed, the idea is itself, as we've seen, non-conceptual. The difference between the concept and the idea (and the difference between science and philosophy) thus lies in the way in which they go beyond the phenomena. In the presence of both, the phenomena lose their immediate significance, but in very different ways. In the idea, empirical phenomena are described as “entering into” and “being dissolved” (*sich lösen*) and, in the end, “redeemed” (*gerettet*) (*GS* 1:212–13 / *O* 9). In the concept, on the other hand, phenomena are averaged down into the features they share with similar phenomena. Benjamin describes the relations among idea, concept, and phenomena along the lines of the extreme and the average:

The idea can be described as the formation of the nexus, in which what is unique and extreme [*das Einmalig-Extreme*] stands with its like. Hence it is a mistake to understand the most general references of language as concepts, instead of recognizing them as ideas. To insist on explaining the general as an average is wrongheaded. The general is the idea. The empirical, on the other hand, is the more deeply penetrated the more distinctly it can be examined as an extreme. The concept issues out of the extreme. (*GS* 1:215 / *O* 11)

The passage makes three interrelated claims about concepts and ideas: (1) concepts are averages and ideas extremes or, more accurately, groupings of extremes; (2) ideas are more general than concepts, and the idea *is* the general; and (3) although they are averages, concepts come from or are based in the extreme.

The relation between concept and idea modeled here must be understood in terms of the relationship between word and name put forward in the early writings on language, as Benjamin signals by relating both concept and idea to the “references [*Verweisungen*] of language.” In the earlier writings, as we’ve seen, the human word was understood as an externalization of the name. This externalization makes abstraction and the application of one word—now a concept—to several objects possible. The name, by contrast, was understood as having an immediate and necessary connection to its object of intention. It was even understood as an “element in the object of intention which liberates [*sich herauslöst*] itself from it” (*GS* 6:11). This element is what Benjamin here describes as *das Einmalig-Extreme* (the unique-extreme). It is the particular, unique way the object is communicated to a particular human language and translated into that language.²² The externalization of the name forsakes the immediate, necessary connection to the object in favor an arbitrary connection and frees the word from the single object from which it was itself “liberated.” This enables it to refer to a whole class of objects that share certain features that are unrelated to the unique-extreme from which it got its name.

It is in this sense that the transition from name to word is a transition from extreme to average, particular to common, name to concept. With the Fall of language and birth of the human word, the extreme is made to stand for the average.²³ The presentation of truth thus involves a recovery of the extreme—the name—which is lost in a conceptual understanding of the phenomena.²⁴

This recovery is impeded from the beginning by the fact that it can only take place through concepts. In the constellation, phenomena are to be conceptually interpreted, in view of presenting the idea. Concepts

²²This process of translation is described in “On the Mimetic Faculty” (*GS* 2:210–13 / *SW* 2:720–22), where Benjamin speculates about the nonsensuous similarities—available to a more primordial form of perception—from which words get their names. Benjamin describes the construction of constellations or ideas as a return to this way of seeing phenomena.

²³It is also worth once more mentioning Benjamin’s thought experiment in which all the words from all the human languages for a single thing are grouped together. This grouping is a constellation, in which concepts / words are grouped together in such a way as to reveal the unique-extreme in them, the particular element in the object from which they are derived. They thus stand together and in them the name, the idea, is recovered.

²⁴As will become clearer below, this sense of recovery is not a straightforward return, but the recovery of a non-conceptual way of seeing the phenomena.

are not to be deployed here in their usual manner, which subsumes and averages down phenomena into common attributes.²⁵ They are rather used to isolate, remove from ordinary context, and bring out what is extreme in the phenomena and group them together in order to develop or articulate the idea.²⁶ They are thus enlisted in the attempt to reverse the averaging down of phenomena that are part of concepts' very logic.

Concepts—fallen language—must be used because they are the only means of representation available. The notion of “uninterpreted” phenomena is incoherent from Benjamin's perspective. He is not interested in mystical intuition that purports to retrieve experience of concept-free phenomena. Even though, as I will discuss shortly, Benjamin refers to the presentation of ideas as a recovery of a “primordial form of perception,” this form of experience is associated with the realm of ideas itself and not with something like bare phenomena. Redemption or recovery means not a return to intuitive perception, but freeing the phenomena from their averaged understanding under a concept, so that they can be reinterpreted according to what is most unique in them.

Benjamin's earlier criticism of the pursuit of truth through the unification of scientific disciplines comes into clearer view in this light. Conceptual knowledge takes the name, an element of the thing, and turns it into a word that surrenders its necessary connection to the thing and averages the thing down into the properties it shares with things like it. A concept is a container for things. As such, it concerns only those features that make it like other things and not those individual features that make it what it is. Concepts perform the necessary abstraction from particularity to make scientific knowledge—“a having,” as Benjamin

²⁵ Rush points out that this means constellations are at once non-conceptual and “ways of using concepts.” See “Jena Romanticism and Benjamin's Critical Epistemology,” 134.

²⁶ “Articulate” is Friedlander's word for describing this process. He makes this point nicely:

The role of concepts is one of discrimination rather than unification. That is, there is no attempt to bring the phenomena that are necessary to present the idea under a common concept or law; on the contrary, the intention is to make these as articulated as possible. There is a shift from the idea that conceptual work is related to the making of generalizations to the idea that it allows the dissecting of phenomena in such a way as to bring their extreme singularity in detail. [. . .] Concepts, one could then say, allow us to subdivide and articulate phenomena to the extreme, so that between such extremes the constellation can be spanned.

Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin*, 41.

puts it—possible. This gives a subject dominion (or predictive power) over objects.

Scientific theories refine or redefine concepts in order to fit observational data and solve problems in their field, founding new paradigms or new deductive contexts for their practice. As they become more and more specialized, the concepts fall further and further from their origin in experience. Thus, although the means of observation of phenomena become more precise and theories expand in predictive power, the possibility of deriving a unified account of experience from science becomes more and more remote. "The ambition to take possession of the truth [. . .] in an encyclopedic embrace of what is known," takes the truth to be a whole that needs to be patched together from diverse parts. From Benjamin's point of view, this attempt is absurd because the unity Benjamin calls truth makes them possible in the first place. It is the indivisible whole from which they are derived. The unity of science is thus something of an oxymoron, since the logic of science and its successes follow upon the manner in which it is able to fragment experience. Philosophical truth is not a unity to be cobbled together out of a number of disparate conceptualizing systems of knowledge, which each have their own way of conceptualizing the objects of experience, but a unity to be recovered by working against those conceptualizations.

4. "The Death of Intention"

Benjamin's theory of ideas, like his theory of language, is a response to a scientific worldview that takes its understanding of language or knowledge as basic without reflecting on the conditions from which it is derived. However, the theory of ideas cannot be understood as merely the recovery of the original elements embedded, but forgotten in words. The Adamic name, as we've already seen, is not a category of human language but an ideal postulated to serve a specific purpose in Benjamin's theory of language. The idea likewise attempts to theorize the construction of a non-conceptual ideality. Although Adamic name and idea refer to the same ideality, they are not exactly equivalent since they approach it from, as it were, different ends. The Adamic name is the ideal from which language is fallen, whereas the idea is the ideal to which philosophical writing aspires.

Because this kind of writing is aesthetic in a way that science isn't, it is vulnerable to the charge that it will inevitably look, in the end, more like a subjective interpretation of phenomena than the truth. In ideal form, Benjamin writes, the idea will transcend the contribution or intention of its constructor:

Truth is an intentionless being formed from ideas. The comportment appropriate to truth is therefore an entering and disappearing into it, not an intending [*das Meinen*] as in the domain of knowledge. Truth is the death of intention. [. . .] Since it is of the nature of ideas, the being of truth differs from the mode of being associated with appearances. Thus the structure of truth calls for a mode of being [*Sein*] that, in its intentionlessness, resembles the simple being of things, although in its constancy it would be superior. Truth subsists not as an intention or meaning that would find its determination through the empirical world but rather as the power that first stamps the essence of that world. The being—distant from all phenomenality—in which alone this power inheres is that of the name. It is this being that determines the givenness of ideas. They are given, however, not so much in a primal language as in a primal form of apprehending [*Vernehmen*], in which words possess the nobility of their naming power unimpaired by cognitive meaning [*erkennende Bedeutung*]. (GS 1:216 / O 12–13)²⁷

Language as such, which Benjamin posited as an initial structure for epistemology that would overcome the subject-object dichotomy, is this intentionless realm of ideas. The task of philosophy is to recover a more primordial and united form of apprehension, which corresponds to the experience associated with Adamic names.

The fallen fragments of human language—words and concepts—retain a trace of that particularity, but in large part level off the differences in particular phenomena. The construction of constellations or ideas concentrates, therefore, on the particularity of phenomena that is in excess of the concept, and gives an interpretation of the phenomena oriented toward this extreme, which is against or outside of conceptual content. In partially freeing these phenomena from their interpretations under concepts and then orienting them toward a unity in the idea, the idea is a re-creation, made up of words, of a world—a way of

²⁷ *Vernehmen* can also be translated, as Eiland does, as “hearing.” “Apprehending,” I think better captures the general mode of understanding Benjamin means, but it is important to note the linguistic resonances of the word. *Vernehmen* is for Benjamin the kind of listening to speech or creation that is reflected in the Adamic name.

apprehending—in which things have not yet been made subject to the human word and thus fragmented, but rather exist united. Philosophical criticism, in other words, reintegrates human language into language as such. “Just as ideas manifest themselves without intention in the act of naming, so they have to renew themselves in philosophic contemplation” (*GS* 1:217 / *O* 14).

Again, the truth, though it is associated with primordial apprehension and “resembles the simple being of things,” cannot be had by a simple surrender of conceptual thought that enables a return to primordial apprehension of the world. The “structure of truth” is “superior in its permanence” to the fleeting existence of things. The truth is not merely a lack of concepts that reveals things as they are or as they were for some primitive human being; it is what Benjamin will call the essence of these things, the essence of this empirical reality.²⁸ To be “unimpaired by cognitive meaning” is, for Benjamin, not to be unimpaired by linguistic meaning altogether. Such a state is incomprehensible. He is seeking not a state of understanding outside or beyond language, but one that is a product of a different use of language that militates against the limitations of everyday, conceptual understanding.

Of the linguistic character of the idea he writes the following:

The idea is something linguistic and, indeed, in the essence of the word it is in each case that moment in which the word is symbol. In empirical apprehension, in which words have decomposed, there attaches to them, along with their more or less hidden symbolic side, an overt profane meaning. It is the concern of the philosopher, through presentation, to re-establish in its primacy the symbolic character of the word, wherein the idea comes to a self-understanding that is the opposite of all outwardly directed communication [*außen gerichteten Mitteilung*]. Since philosophy may not presume to speak in tones of revelation, this can happen only by recalling in memory the primordial form of apprehension. (*GS* 1:216–17 / *O* 13)

Benjamin puts the task of philosophy in terms of attending or apprehending. In empirical apprehension, the world is understood through the fallen language of leveled-down concepts, which enables the fragmentation and subsequent acquisition in scientific knowledge of the

²⁸ As we will see, for Benjamin origin is not something that is found at a historical starting point but rather an essence that emerges in the unfolding of a historical process.

objects of experience. Philosophy is tasked with reversing this process of fragmentation in light of the unity of experience presupposed by religion.

Benjamin does not write a great deal about the role of the symbol in his philosophy of language, and what he does say is opaque. It leaves unsettled the relationships between symbol and the other concepts central to his philosophy, most importantly idea, name, and sign. At the end of "On Language as Such," for example, he writes of an "antithesis that permeates the whole sphere of language [. . .] namely, that language is in every case not only the communication of the communicable but also, at the same time, a symbol of the noncommunicable" (*GS* 2:156 / *SW* 1: 73–74). His discussion of the "distorted" concept of symbol developed by the Romantics can shed some light here. Against the "profane" concept of the symbol in Romanticism, Benjamin poses a theological concept of the symbol. For the Romantics, as Benjamin puts it, "the 'manifestation' of an 'idea' is looked upon as 'symbol'" (*GS* 1:336 / *O* 166). In this definition, Benjamin writes, "The unity of sensuous and supersensuous object—the paradox of the theological symbol—is distorted into a relationship between appearance and essence." The word "symbol" comes from the Greek *symbolon* meaning, literally, "that which is thrown together."²⁹ In the theological concept of the symbol, the divine and the material are united. The problem here is the Romantic replacement of a paradox or mystery with a correlation between an essence and its material manifestation. The solution, barring the religious "tones of revelation," is recovering a more primordial, immediate way of regarding the world that precedes a two-level metaphysics and the mediated language that generates one.

I think we can therefore understand Benjamin's interpretation of the symbol in parallel with his adaptation of Hamann's concept of condescension, which, as discussed in Chapter 1, offers a replacement for a conventional division between the sensible and supersensible. Benjamin's conception of the theological symbol, in other words, involves seeing language as a trace or mark of an inaccessible whole, "the noncommunicable." The symbol, Benjamin writes, therefore "extends over" (*erstreckt über*) both the name and judgment since it points to the entire sphere

²⁹The word was applied to Christian creed in late antiquity and the middle ages on the basis that the Apostles' Creed was a mark separating Christians from pagans.

of language as such—it makes naming and judging possible—whereas the name itself names an aspect of this creation and the judgment abstracts from it (*GS* 2:156 / *SW* 1:74). The task of the philosopher is, like the task of the translator, to put language back in this “higher and purer linguistic air,” where it will appear as the mark or symbol of the whole (*GS* 4:14 / *SW* 1:257). This holism is, as we’ll see, historical. It is in witnessing the unfolding of language through time that the philosopher is best able to overcome the “obvious, profane” meanings of words in the present and to reorient language toward the whole. The restoration of the name, resurrection of the symbolic character of the word, and the presentation of the idea can thus be regarded as the same thing seen under different aspects.

Still, on the face of it, there appears to be a more significant difference between the name and the idea. The restoration of names, as Benjamin writes in the translation essay, would involve grouping together all the names for a given thing and interpreting these words not as averaged-down concepts for the group of phenomena they stand for but as unique-extremes that capture a particular element of the thing. These words would thus, theoretically, restore our experience of the original name and represent the name through a constellation. The presentation of an idea like *Trauerspiel*, on the other hand, is very different. *Trauerspiel* is not an object of nature; it is difficult to imagine an original or primordial perception of *Trauerspiel* that is to be restored by philosophy. Yet clearly, Benjamin intends the relationship between his philosophy of language and his theory of ideas to be more than merely analogical. Rather, as he goes on to describe it, the process by which the meaning of *Trauerspiel* gets obscured by a leveled-down concept of tragedy is precisely the same as that which obscures the meaning of more commonplace words.

How then should we understand the relationship between the formation of concepts in ordinary language and the overly conceptual criticism of a particular genre of literature? And, most importantly, what does this relationship tell us about philosophical thinking in general?

In the study of *Trauerspiel*, as we’ve seen, Benjamin objects to the application of an inductive method that constructs from what is common to a range of plays an ideal type and calls this the essence of *Trauerspiel*. In most philosophy of art, *Trauerspiel* and genres broadly speaking are

treated as concepts to be defined by shared features. But the essence of *Trauerspiel*, like the essence of a word—the name—lies not in the group of features that permit the application of the word to the objects falling under it, but in the unique and extreme examples of *Trauerspiel*. These serve to define the boundaries of the idea of *Trauerspiel*.

Benjamin's integration of the process of concept-formation in language and the misuse of concepts in art criticism suggests that the pull toward generic conceptual knowledge is as natural to the contemplation of art, history, or any other phenomenon as it is to language itself. This is "generally accepted habit of thinking that turns words into species-concepts in order to better secure them." (*GS* 1:219 / *O* 16). The tendency toward conceptual leveling-down that Benjamin allegorizes through Genesis in the "Language as Such" essay is regarded as intrinsic to human language, not just in its origins but throughout its history. The correct presentation of an idea like *Trauerspiel* can be treated in the same terms as the recovery of an original, Adamic name, if perhaps on a higher and far more complex level. The structure of language imposes itself on thinking and the Fall of language repeats itself in higher-order domains of knowledge. Most philosophy—especially as it becomes enamored of scientific methodology in modernity—serves to eternalize this structure. Benjamin proposes the reverse: for philosophy to remediate the constrained thinking coerced from us by ordinary language.

More work needs to be done to show how Benjamin's theory of ideas can be made to apply to complex historical works like *Trauerspiele*. Restoration of original perception means for Benjamin not some mythical reactivation of lost perceptual capacities (which would in any case be incoherent if applied to something like *Trauerspiel*), but the presentation of the essence of the *Trauerspiel* as it develops through history.

5. Redemption in the Idea

In the idea, as we have seen, phenomena are to be interpreted in such a way that what is extreme in them comes to the fore, their merely factual character fades away, and they are absorbed into a presentation of truth. The image of absorption—where phenomena are extinguished, sapped of their self-evident interpretations, and thereby redeemed—is

central to Benjamin's conception of philosophical history. Just as the constellation is a virtual presentation that absorbs the phenomena into itself, philosophical history as a whole is meant to transform the character of historical events into something virtual. These events are no longer to be understood as they are in *actuality*, but as "virtual" or "unreal" (*uneigentlich*) (GS 1:227 / O 26).

Benjamin is thus in partial agreement with the methodology of Hegel, who (supposedly) responded to the criticism of factual inaccuracy by saying, "so much the worse for the facts" (GS 1:226 / O 25). The sentiment is right insofar as "insight into essential connections is the task of the philosopher, and essential connections remain what they are even if they do not clearly leave their mark in the world of facts" (GS 1:226 / O 25). The presentation of truth involves an idealization of factual occurrences, and it therefore need not be purely or precisely "confirmed" by facts.

For Benjamin, as we've seen, insight into their essence requires that the phenomena are understood within the boundaries established by the interpretation of extremes, rather than as they present themselves to everyday experience—that is, to uncritical conceptual understanding. The presentation of ideas through articulation of extremes does not, however, sanction a departure from the phenomena such as that carried out by Hegel's method in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. What is extreme is discovered through "micrological" investigation of phenomena and attention to what may have been previously ignored (GS 1:208 / O 3). The task of the philosopher begins with the fact, which must be considered "certain only if its inmost structure appears so essential as to reveal that fact as an origin" (GS 1:226 / O 25). I leave aside the question of precisely what Benjamin means by origin for the section to follow, but we can consider it provisionally as a historical essence.

The difference between Hegel's method of idealization and Benjamin's thus lies in the significance granted empirical phenomena. For Hegel, at least on Benjamin's view, dialectical transitions between forms of consciousness are given priority over historical actuality. Thought or spirit is untethered from empirical reality and made to inhabit a realm of intellectual independence, where its forms of consciousness rise and fall on purely logical grounds. These logical collapses and the generation of new forms of consciousness out of collapse find expression in the empirical world, however imperfectly. But the dominant term in that rela-

tionship remains always the ideal and never the real.³⁰ Hegel's system is thus open to criticisms regarding the possibility of reconciling the phenomenology with the actuality—especially in the transitions from one form of consciousness to another—since it seems the relationship between Hegel's logical interpretation and actual, contingent historical development is impossible to authenticate.

For Benjamin—and herein lies an important affinity with dialectical materialism³¹—idealizations in the form of presentations of ideas must be able to answer to reality in a particular way. “Every proof of origin must be prepared for the question of authenticity [*Echtheit*]” (*GS* 1:226 / *O* 25). The idealization should of course not be a simple abstraction from the conceptual phenomena, but must involve a process of “discovery” in which the “most singular and eccentric phenomena, [. . .] the feeblest and clumsiest investigations no less than the overripe manifestations of a late period [*Spätzeit*]” come to the fore (*GS* 1:227 / *O* 25–26). The idea is established through the micrological investigation of the extremes in phenomena and can only be considered complete once “the circle of

³⁰This interpretation of Hegel is by no means uncontroversial, especially given recent “post-metaphysical” interpretations of Hegel. It is, however, broadly speaking, the interpretation Benjamin assumes.

³¹In this regard, Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* has an important influence. Benjamin read the epochal book in Capri in 1924 while at work on the *Trauerspiel* study. He remarked in a letter to Scholem, “While proceeding from political considerations, Lukács arrives at principles that are, at least in part, epistemological and perhaps not entirely as far-reaching as I first assumed. The book astonished me because these principles resonate for me or validate my own thinking” (*Briefe*, 355; *Correspondence*, 248). His relationship with Latvian Bolshevik Asja Lacis, whom he met on Capri, was also important in this regard. See Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989), esp. 11–15. Although Benjamin's interest in Marxism upset Scholem and their friendship suffered because of it, Benjamin insisted to him that his turn was consistent with and internal to the path of his own thinking. Here, in “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” and in the Arcades project, it is clear that the idea in Marx that most intrigues Benjamin is the relationship between the substructure and superstructure. Benjamin regarded it as insufficiently worked out by Marx. Benjamin is likely drawn to the Romantic underpinnings of Lukács's own Marxism (and Marx's own early thought), especially as they appear in “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” the central essay in *History and Class Consciousness*. There, as in Benjamin, the superstructure does not appear as the mere ideological determination of the substructure but gains independence from it and the ability to have a reciprocal impact on it. In the context of Benjamin's linguistic universalism, the relation between substructure and superstructure must be modeled expressively or translationally.

extremes possible in it has [. . .] been virtually inspected [*abgeschritten*]" (*GS* 1:227 / *O* 26).³²

Essence reveals itself in the exaggerations and failures of a given practice, not in its most perfect (its most average) manifestations. In the same way, a person's character, one might think, is not revealed in the everyday but in crisis, loss, success, failure, etc.—in extreme or peculiar actions that seem not to make sense or even seem "out of character." Moreover, the more average behavior will be cast in a new light once the extremes are made evident. New aspects may come into view. Or, to vary the example, the character of an artist's work is often revealed most pointedly not by the paintings that look most like the others, but those that are unique. This inspection (*Abschreiten*)³³ is virtual, Benjamin writes, "because what is grasped in the idea of origin has history now only as content [*Gehalt*], no longer as occurrence which would have befallen it" (*GS* 1:227 / *O* 26). Although Benjamin's ideas are generated out of the historical material itself, in the idea this material becomes virtual. This is, again, a reversal of Hegelian idealism, in so far as the historical material is not regarded as more or less falling under or fitting an ideal form of consciousness, which is independent of it. Rather, the historical material itself is fixed in the ideal, made virtual, and thereby actually loses the character of factual occurrence. This is what Benjamin means when he says the empirical phenomena's facticity is "burned up" as it enters the realm of ideas. It is central to his understanding of philosophical history and hermeneutics.

So, to return to the example of character, we might imagine an account of a life that is made up of a number of unique and extreme episodes. In the presentation of the account, these episodes are lifted out of the everyday flow of the person's life, where their interpretation will be more or less constrained by the everyday, and placed side by side with one another, offering a constellation made up of boundary points of the person's character. In this arrangement, we can imagine, the meaning or content (*Gehalt*) of each of these episodes will go far beyond the un-

³² Benjamin is perhaps drawing on Husserl's phenomenological method here, albeit while placing it in a completely foreign context. In Husserl, phenomena are varied virtually in the mind in order to abstract essences from them.

³³ Eiland, justifiably, has "traversal" for "*Abschreiten*" here. The word comes from the word for "to pace" or "march" and has the sense of a military inspection. Benjamin means an inspection that runs through or traverses all the possibilities.

derstanding of the episodes gained from simply seeing them unfold in the moment. That is, just by virtue of being placed alongside these other extreme episodes, something will emerge from each episode that enhances its significance and gives it its place in the constellation. And, if the account is a good one, particular “extreme” features of each individual episode will come to the fore in their juxtaposition with other episodes. Affinities will come into view. Character will be revealed.

Thus understood, the individual episode is no longer merely an occurrence—its factual nature “burns up” to reveal a more telling and, at the same time, virtual nature. It is virtual because the constellation, by defining the extremes of an idea, will contain all possible factual manifestations of it. In this role of representing the idea, the phenomena, having been freed from a narrow, everyday interpretation, are redeemed. The idea is not here the product of a logic—a phenomenology in Hegel’s sense—that controls the possible manifestations of material reality, but constructed from the bottom-up, out of insight into the phenomena themselves.

This account of the person’s character will differ from both a psychological profile of the person that might offer predictions as to how he or she will respond to a given situation, based on characteristic, average past behavior. It will also differ from a typical biographical narrative of the person’s life, which will be unwilling to tear the facts from their everyday context, or an artistic representation of the person’s character, which is bound to capture only certain features. The philosophical idea, again, shares the task of presentation with the artist, but aspires not just to compelling presentation but to truth that goes beyond the empirical. It thus requires a particular kind of insight on the part of the philosopher that consists not in intuiting Platonic essences, nor in an artistic genius for expression, but in seeing connections, in “insight into essential connections” (*Wesenszusammenhänge*). For it is in establishing what is unique and extreme and in interpreting and arranging these extremes together, in the fashion of the essay or treatise, that the idea consists.

Thus, in his interpretation of *Trauerspiel*, Benjamin criticizes the attempt to look for examples that best conform to a certain conceptual ideal of *Trauerspiel*. The attempt to impose criteria of tragedy onto *Trauerspiel* is what, Benjamin argues, leads to their mistaken devaluation. Rather, he isolates moments in individual *Trauerspiele* that are extreme and interprets them according to the role they play in defining the essence. In this

manner, an image or constellation of *Trauerspiel* is to be developed. Once the essence or origin of the phenomena has been established through a constellation of extremes, the phenomena are transformed. They are no longer to be understood in terms of pure history, but rather in terms of natural history [*natürliche Geschichte*] “unclouded by human life” (*GS* 1:227/O 26). The historical phenomena are no longer to be regarded in their factual being—they are no longer “pragmatically real”—but become something to be “read off of [*ablesen*] the state of completion and rest, the state of essentiality” (*GS* 1:227–28/O 27). In this way the philosophical history represents an essence that exhausts or saps (*aufzehren*) the possibilities of historical phenomena (*GS* 1:228/O 27). Benjamin writes,

The tendency of all philosophic concept-formation [*Begriffsbildung*] is thus determined anew in the old sense: to ascertain the becoming of phenomena in their being. For the concept of being in philosophical science is not satiated by the phenomenon itself but only by the exhaustion [*Aufzehrung*] of its history. (*GS* 1:228/O 27).

An idea is a virtual presentation that outlines the extremes of a given phenomenon and thereby encompasses all its possibilities.

The “redemption” of phenomena consists in precisely their employment in constellations or ideas. They represent their own essence through a conceptual interpretation that acts against the narrowing down under a conceptual interpretation. The phenomenon is absorbed by or made virtual in the idea and thus redeemed. Its particularity is made manifest and its constriction by the concept overcome. The idea—a “resting essence,” which is composed of phenomena—must itself be regarded as an ephemeral and aesthetic formation, while at the same time providing an ideal in reference to which other phenomena can be understood. Since the idea is representative and thus itself ephemeral, subject to historical change and development, Benjamin’s theory involves a radical historicization of essences themselves. He uses the term “origin” to capture this historical nature.

6. “An Eddy in the Stream of Becoming”

Philosophy has been tasked with the recovery of lost essences in language and with the presentation of a realm of ideas whose inhabitants

include historical and cultural forms like *Trauerspiel*. What needs to be shown now is that these two aims are, for Benjamin, consistent with one another. If construction of constellations does not return us to some ur-language, what does it do exactly? What Benjamin suggests is that we are returned to a more *original* form of apprehending the world. The process of representing ideas, again, is a reversal of the Fall of language documented in the 1916 essay, but one that recovers an original way of seeing the world rather than any particular objects seen. A fuller account of how this is meant to be accomplished awaits the next section. First, a discussion of what Benjamin means by “origin” and “original.”

Origin is the process by which essence emerges in the historical development and reception of a given phenomenon. Benjamin describes it at length in an especially difficult passage:

Origin [*Ursprung*], although a thoroughly historical category, nevertheless has nothing in common with source [*Entstehung*]. By “origin” is meant not the becoming [*Werden*] of what has arisen [*Entsprungenen*] but rather what arises [*Entspringendes*] in the becoming and passing away. The origin stands as eddy in the stream of becoming and vigorously draws the emerging material into its rhythm. In the naked, manifest existence of the factual, the original never allows itself to be recognized; its rhythm stands open only to a dual insight. On the one hand, it demands to be recognized as restoration, restitution, and, on the other hand, and precisely on account of this, as something incomplete and unclosed. Determining itself in every origin-phenomenon is the formation in which, again and again, an idea confronts the historical world, until it lies there complete in the totality of its history. The origin, then, does not arise from the facts attested but concerns their fore- and after-history. The principles of philosophical contemplation are inscribed in the dialectic intrinsic to origin. It is by virtue of this dialectic that, in everything essential, singularity and repetition prove to be reciprocally determined. (GS 1:226 / O 24–25)

It will help to isolate a number of theses in this dense passage. (1) Origin does not represent a factual starting point—the historical conditions under which some phenomenon was, in fact, founded—but something that is continuously emerging and passing away in the historical development of a particular phenomenon; (2) there is a dialectic between the form (*Gestalt*) of an idea and the historical world it repeatedly confronts; (3) an idea is complete only in the totality of its history (it is, in point of fact, never complete); (4) origin is always unfinished and fragmentary,

but must at the same time be considered in terms of restoration. I will try to reconstruct and supplement Benjamin's argument by stepping through each of these theses individually.

(1) Benjamin's conception of origin can initially seem an overly stipulative redefinition. If by origin he does not mean the beginning of a temporal development, then perhaps he should simply use another word. However, Benjamin's use of the term does have a basis in ordinary, albeit perhaps non-literal usage, a usage that is better captured in English by "original" than by the noun. What is original is not necessarily the set of conditions present at the birth of an art form, for example; it is rather what is unique in it, what sets it apart. In this sense, the originality of a given object is not the conditions of its founding. This uniqueness is not something intrinsic in the thing, but dependent on reception conditions. Origin, in this sense, emerges through becoming. What is unique in the object is unique *for* a particular era, and can only be seen once that era has past and certain of its features become delineable. Origin arises out of the relationship between the object and its reception. It is an eddy because it does not stand at the beginning of a process that moves forward without friction; it emerges in a process that involves confrontation between source and the conditions it comes to meet—a countercurrent that produces the eddy that is origin.

(2) The singularity and repetition of which Benjamin writes are the singularity of a given cultural object—Benjamin refers to it here as the "form" of the object—and its repeated confrontation with various historical eras.³⁴ The form never appears as it is in itself, but always in history, under particular conditions of reception, as the object of a certain era. Origin, then, is ever unfolding; its completion would entail the end of history. This process is dialectical, though in a way very different from Hegelian dialectic. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, forms of consciousness

³⁴In a book on Benjamin's theory of history, Beatrice Hanssen suggests that singularity here refers to the unrepeatable character of history itself as a whole. But Benjamin is, at least in part, drawing here on Benedetto Croce's criticism of a concept of genre that obscures the singularity of individual works. He agrees with Croce's criticism of the averaging generalization with which art historians treat genres, but is looking, again, for a different kind of generality, controlled by extremes. This he finds in artworks' repeated confrontation with the historical world. See Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) 41–42. See also "Neo-Kantianism and Messianism," in *Walter Benjamin: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*, ed. Peter Osborne (New York: Routledge, 2004), 98n; and Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin*, 61–62.

collapse under the weight of internal contradictions, and new ones rise out of their ruins by solving these contradictions. Hegelian dialectic thus proceeds according to a historical logic, but one that is independent of and controls specific features of empirical phenomena. The relation between the ideal realm of Spirit and the empirical realm of phenomena is not so different in this way from the Platonic relationship between form and appearance. A form of consciousness is a purification or an averaging-down of a historical development and purports to capture the essence of this development. The phenomena themselves can be recognized according to the features they share with the ideal, while their outlying (or extreme) features will be ignored or suppressed. Hegel's dialectic, of course, historicizes the relationship between ideal and real, but the conceptual relation between the two, one could argue, remains basically unchanged. Ideality is reality distilled into what are claimed to be its most characteristic or essential features.

The dialectic Benjamin describes here can be thought of, in a certain sense, as a further historicization of Hegel's own dialectic. In Benjamin's description of origin, essence itself is made historical. Origin is essence that emerges in a dialectic between the past and the ever-renewed present. The word "origin" describes a process in which the essence *for* the present moment of interpretation emerges and passes away. The philosopher's standpoint is thus itself understood as a standpoint immanent in historical development.

(3) The *per impossibile* completion of this dialectical process is at the same time the completion of the idea. A complete idea would be a suprahistorical essence—the integration of all possible historical essences. Benjamin has already referred to the idea in terms of a mythical point of genesis, as creation itself, and now refers to it, in ideal form, as the completion of a historical process. These two conceptions might seem to be incompatible, but I will argue below that they are not.

(4) This concept of totality is vital to Benjamin's framework because it provides him with the perspective with which to conceive of phenomena and even essences as fragmentary. Their claims to truth are radically unstable and limited: essences are never timeless. Yet, for Benjamin, it is necessary to regard them with a view toward a point of timeless completion. As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, this conception of totality is a modification of Kant's conception of the regulative role of

the ideas of reason. The relationship between essences represented in constellations within the process of history or origin and the idea, is thus one of part to whole. Historical essences are fragments of the completed idea. They aim to represent the idea through a constellation of phenomena but because the history of the phenomena is only partial, the constellation is itself destined to be only partial. The presentation of historical essences is thus an attempt at restoration—since the philosopher attempts to represent the idea as a whole—but imperfect and incomplete since what he represents is only a part of the whole.

We can read an otherwise opaque comment of Benjamin's on an affinity between Leibniz's monadology and his founding of calculus in this light. Benjamin writes:

The idea is a monad: the representation of phenomena rests pre-established in it, as in their objective interpretation. The more highly ordered the ideas, the more perfect the representation posited within them. And so the real world could well be a task, in the sense that what matters is to penetrate so deeply into everything real that an objective interpretation of the world would therein disclose itself. In light of such a task of immersion, it does not appear strange that the philosopher of monadology was also the founder of infinitesimal calculus. The idea is a monad—this means, *in nuce*: each idea contains the image of the world. For the task of its presentation nothing less is required than to inscribe, in its abbreviation, this image of the world. (*GS* 1:228 / *O* 27)

In calculus, integrals, integrated wholes, are calculated through the summation of infinitesimally small differences. The monad involves a relationship between micrologically small parts and a whole: each monad contains an image of totality. It can thus be penetrated into and appear as a trace of the rest of reality. Representing ideas is lifting the phenomena that make them up into this register, where they can be seen with a view to this image of the world.

What consequences does this conception of historicized ideals have for Benjamin's vision of philosophy as a whole? Early in the foreword, Benjamin criticizes epistemological attempts to detach philosophy from history and to grasp totality or truth through a systematic or syncretic fusion of knowledge. The implicit or explicit definition of truth in these kinds of projects is a complete system of knowledge toward which humanity is progressing, even if only as a limit. Totality in those projects is conceived of as the totality of human knowledge. History is under-

stood in terms of linear progress wherein human knowledge is constantly being improved upon.

Benjamin's conception of totality explicated here completes that critique by offering an alternative. Totality is instead understood as history from beginning to end. This means no special value is placed on the present or future or any other time in history. It also means that truth and human knowledge are made completely distinct. Benjamin's ideal is thus not a utopian future nor some long-past golden age, but a messianic leap outside of history—an idea he develops in later writings.³⁵ Philosophy is a hermeneutic exercise severely limited by its place within history. It is always again attempting to theorize the essences of phenomena based on their historical appearance, their fore-history, and their after-history. The present provides an epistemic advantage only insofar as it can represent essences from which history of a given object can be read off. This idealization is necessarily incomplete since history is never complete. Nonetheless, philosophy—if it is to pursue truth—must orient itself toward this absolute.

Although Benjamin describes both origin and idea in terms of essence, they are not equivalent terms. Origin is described as a process; it is the becoming of the idea. The process of origin involves the emergence and passing away of historical essences. These essences are constantly changing, requiring reexamination, whereas the idea is complete, suprahistorical, and ideal. Thus, although *Trauerspiel* is an idea, Benjamin's book is on the *origin* of *Trauerspiel*. It is one attempt to represent the idea, limited not just by the truncated history of *Trauerspiel* itself, but also by the historical moment in which Benjamin is writing. The essence of *Trauerspiel* is different today than it was when Benjamin wrote, since the plays which make up the corpus of *Trauerspiel* today confront a new historical world and have, therefore, a new meaning.

The dialectic of singularity and repetition of which Benjamin writes here is neither progressive nor regressive, neither positive nor negative; it is the form of the phenomenon coming face to face with a particular period in its history, its essential significance changing with every new age. Every historical age is likewise conditioned by its experience of the singular phenomenon. The "principles of philosophical contemplation are recorded in this dialectic," Benjamin writes, meaning simply that

³⁵ Especially "On the Concept of History" (GS 1:691–704 / SW 4:389–400).

philosophy consists in coming to grips with this repetition, each new age confronted with the same singular phenomena but their interpretation requiring continual renewal in light of changed conditions. The evident lack of progress in philosophy is no surprise, since it is not engaged in the acquisition of knowledge but in the presentation of ideas, which involve coming to terms with the meaning of historical phenomena for the present. Benjamin is in agreement with Hegel, then, that philosophy proper is its own age comprehended in thought, and, being that, it is also every age before it continually grasped anew.

7. "The Allegorical Way of Seeing"

In his study of *Trauerspiel* in the body of the book, Benjamin writes about how overcoming the conceptual interpretation of *Trauerspiel* as tragedy allows us to really *see* the elements that appeared to betray a poor imitation of Greek tragedy. For example, Benjamin quotes a naïve critic on the ending of *Hamlet*, a play Benjamin regards as a *Trauerspiel*: "Strictly speaking," writes the critic, "this simple death scene of Hamlet's undermines the tragic character of the drama" (*GS* 1:315 / *O* 137).³⁶ By the standards of tragedy, Hamlet's death, which comes at the tip of Laertes's poisoned rapier, should instead come about through the internal logic of the work and Hamlet's own tragic flaw. Hamlet's death has "no relation to the conflict" and comes to pass by "an entirely external contingency" (*GS* 1:315 / *O* 137). An investigation of *Trauerspiel* that pays attention to these moments that escape the concept of tragedy allows us to place the play in a constellation of others that does justice to their historical particularity and brings their significance for the present into view. In particular, it shows *Trauerspiel* to be concerned with existential sadness, lack of meaning, the movement between paralysis and excess in the face of turmoil, and not with classicism's definition of tragedy, according to which the hero must fall victim to the proceedings of an inexorable plot.

This brings *Trauerspiel* and the baroque, Benjamin thinks, closer to the modern than to the classicism between them. His method in

³⁶The critic is Leopold Ziegler. *Zur Metaphysik des Tragischen: Eine Philosophische Studie* (Leipzig: Dürr, 1902), 452.

freeing *Trauerspiel* from classical conceptual standards also make its significance for the present and its relationship to modern art available.³⁷ Benjamin thus emphasizes affinities between the baroque *Trauerspiel* and the expressionism of his own time. “Like Expressionism, the Baroque is an age not so much of genuine artistic practice as of an unremitting will to art.” (GS 1:235–36 / O 37). The baroque and modern share an excess and arbitrariness in expression and a penchant for neologism.

The central consequence of the confrontation of the baroque and the modern in Benjamin’s book is a new understanding of allegory. Like *Trauerspiel* itself, allegory had not been interpreted fairly by literary critics who treated it as parable, a narrative representation of a general lesson or theme. Objects or props within *Trauerspiele* were thus commonly ascribed a multitude of arbitrary meanings. This, for Benjamin, is in contrast to the veneration of the symbol which, again, is meant to be a genuine “manifestation” (*Erscheinung*) of an “idea.” In the symbol the idea shines forth; whereas allegory merely points to it arbitrarily. It is taken as a “mere mode of designation [*Bezeichnung*]” (GS 1:339 / O 169). Benjamin quotes Schopenhauer here, who also denigrates allegory as “the trifling amusement of carving a picture to serve at the same time as an inscription, as a hieroglyphic” (GS 1:338 / O 168). But where Schopenhauer evaluates the arbitrariness and conventionality of allegory negatively, Benjamin sees them positively. For him, allegory is “not a convention of expression but the expression of convention” (GS 1:351 / O 185).

The allegorical techniques of *Trauerspiel*, that is, take as evident the fallen linguistic world described in “On Language as Such.” Its excesses of conventional expression are not a “trifling amusement” but an artistic response to a “profane world” where “any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else” (GS 1:350 / O 184). The attitude of *Trauerspiel* toward this state of affairs is not one of complete despair, however. Benjamin reads it in line with his own philosophical method as a kind of writing or arranging of fragments of language or historical ruins, that “elevates them to a higher plane, indeed can sacralize them” (GS 1:351 / O 184).

³⁷ It also, he thinks, provides an important corrective to both the romantic and neoclassical conceptions of art. See GS 1:352 / O 185–87.

He writes:

It is the object of philosophical criticism to show that the function of artistic form is precisely this: to make historical material contents, such as lie at the basis of every significant work, into philosophical truth contents. This transforming of material contents into truth content entails the weakening of effect [*Verfall der Wirkung*], whereby the attractiveness of earlier charms diminishes decade by decade, providing the basis for a rebirth in which all ephemeral beauty completely falls away and the work asserts itself as ruin. In the allegorical construction of the Baroque *Trauerspiel*, such ruined forms of the redeemed work of art have always stood out clearly. (GS 1:358 / O 194)

The passage of time is productive for criticism not just because it gives us better perspective on the past than the actors had—the benefit of hindsight—but because it loosens the material objects from their immediate meaning, in which context their meaning appeared self-evident, and complete, and makes it clear that their meanings were merely conventional and fragmentary. *Trauerspiel* is exceptional because this conventionality and this attitude toward history and convention is expressed within the artwork, if only artistically or intuitively.³⁸ The failure of traditional art criticism is that it does not take advantage of the ruined work of art being so freed of convention, but merely applies a different convention—in the case of *Trauerspiel* a classicist theory of tragedy—to it. It sees the object, as it were, *only* with the hindsight of its own prejudices and not from perspective of totality that Benjamin deems necessary. Benjamin thus describes allegory as a “way of seeing” (*Anschauungsweise*) that frees fragments from the “false semblance of totality” and makes them available to be integrated into the true totality of the idea or, again, frees them from their immediate conceptual interpretation in fallen language and makes them available to be read in the sphere of a higher language (GS 1:339, 352 / O 169, 186).

8. Origin and Eden

What does all this have to do with our original question about the precise relation between recovery of linguistic essences and presentation of

³⁸ *Trauerspiel* thus proves to be, for Benjamin, not just an object of criticism, but in some sense generative of his methodology itself. Thus, he described the book in a 1935 letter to Scholem as “mobilizing its own theory of knowledge” (*Briefe*, 654; *Correspondence*, 482).

ideas in constellations? If ideas and Adamic names are thought of on equivalent planes, then the recovery of linguistic essences should be interpreted in terms of the theory of origin outlined above. Redemption or *anamnesis* restores not an object per se but a way of seeing or apprehending. Of the relationship between the philosophical presentation of ideas and the recovery of names, Benjamin thus writes:

Just as ideas manifest themselves without intention in the act of naming, so they have to renew themselves in philosophic contemplation. In this renewal, the originary mode of apprehending words [*ursprüngliche Vernehmen der Worte*] is restored. And thus in the course of its history, which has so often been an object of derision, philosophy is rightly seen to be a struggle for the presentation of a limited number of words, which are always the same—a struggle for the presentation of ideas. (GS 1:217/O 14)

As mentioned above, there seem to be two conflicting notions of ideality at work here: one Adamic, where essence comes in a primordial form of perception at the beginning of language, and the other supra-historical, where the idea is conceived of as the completion of a historical development. These two characterizations of the ideal, I will argue, are not incompatible, since the “original mode of apprehending” is in both cases conceived of as both maximally aesthetic, that is, utterly non-conceptual, and suprahistorical. The posit of an Adamic language provides a non-conceptual ideal of the same kind as the God’s-eye-view of history implied by the notion of the suprahistorical completion of the idea.

The problem is that, at first glance, recovery of the name seems to have little to do with the way in which the word confronts subsequent historical periods, and its essence seems fixed in the past at the moment of invention. However, the name, we should recall once again, is a linguistic ideal with no historical existence. The interpretation of the Fall was meant to express a condition of language—namely, the word having both naming and signifying elements, both aesthetic and logical elements. Words are real historical phenomena, which like anything else, repeatedly confront the historical world. Moreover, the idea of a name for Benjamin is to be composed of the words of every human language for a given thing. The semiotic aspects of all these words will of course be historical. The meanings of words change. And the attempt to return to an original mode of apprehending words is always

conditioned by the past and present meanings of the word. The name is presented as the ideal result of an immediate, mimetic experience of the world, whose relation to the object through time became arbitrary, and was thus able to take on a conceptual function.

In "On the Mimetic Faculty," Benjamin speculates about the decay or transformation of the mimetic faculty that was originally involved in the onomatopoeic inventions of words. In language, Benjamin contends, there lies a record of nonsensuous similarities between the spoken or written and the signified that we can no longer recognize. These nonsensuous similarities, Benjamin writes, "flit past" carried along by the "semiotic element" (that which signifies) of the word (*SW* 2:213/*GS* 2:722). He describes language as a fusion of the mimetic and the semiotic (the name and the sign), where the mimetic is inseparable from the semiotic. The attempted investigation of "nonsensuous similarities" and the transformation of the mimetic faculty thus always proceeds through an investigation of words with an ineliminable semiotic aspect. For this reason, the presentation of the name or idea involves concept use that is directed against its standard function, that attempts to reverse the leveling down involved in the word as concept in order to recover a primordial experience of the aesthetic or mimetic found in the act of naming. These constellations, which are conceptually composed, are at the same time historical, the result of a dialectic between an original phenomena and the historical world, whose essence can be imperfectly represented at a given moment, but whose ideal is the completion of this process.

This is just as much true of the presentation of ideas as it is true of the presentation of names. The attempt to understand words as naming extreme elements of the things involves reversing the purely conceptual or means-oriented understanding of the word, grouping the word with words that name other extremes and thus outlining the boundaries of the name. But the attempt to understand the naming-essence of a word is always hindered by the metaphorical and conceptual meaning the word has taken on through history, and by the limited number of human languages we have at our disposal, which all have words naming the given thing. The constellation is an attempt to overcome this historical limitation as much as possible by directing attention to what lies outside the conceptual meaning of the words—the unique-extreme—and constructing an essence in which the phenomena func-

tion as virtual extremes outlining the historical possibilities of a given object.

The original mode of apprehending words is thus an expressive and non-conceptual way of giving mimetic expression to the world. Because words develop conceptual fixity through time, there is certainly a regressive, restorative moment in the attempt to represent linguistic essences. The original mode of apprehending is archived, as it were, in the word and not immediately available to later users of it. It is only by re-orienting the word toward a kind of aesthetically complete experience passed down by religion and grouping it with other words—aesthetic translations of the same object—that something like the name can be constituted. In the same way, the individual works of *Trauerspiel* are regarded as aesthetic translations or expressions of an underlying social order—attempts to name *particular* aspects of social and historical experience. This necessitates vitiating the available conceptual interpretations that occlude these connections; orienting the works toward an ideal, holistic vision of this historical experience; and grouping them together in such a way that they can each serve as fragmentary expressions of this experience and together bring the whole into view. In this way, philosophy aims to name the world.

9. Seeing in to Insight

Benjamin's theory of ideas is obscure, elaborate, idiosyncratic, and ambitious—almost outrageously so. It is a thicket in which the approaching reader must expect to get lost. Headway can only be made if the problem Benjamin confronts is understood. Otherwise the solution is sure to appear needlessly complex and mystifying. I have tried to show that this problem, at its most basic, is the nature of human language itself as it is set out in the earlier writings. The presentation of ideas—philosophy—is understood as an attempt to remediate the (necessary) damage done to our understanding by our very means of expression. Our language gives us a world, but at the same time it narrows it down, essentializes aspects of it, over-privileges certain categories that gain purchase in our own time, and distances us from reality, while rendering invisible that and how that distance is created.

I've already argued that Hamann's religious holism looms over Benjamin's conception of language. This extends to the theory of ideas. In the epigraph to the "Epistemo-Critical Foreword," Benjamin quotes Goethe on the fragmentation endemic to scientific knowledge. Goethe, who was also indebted to Hamann, claims that we need to seek the whole not in general extrapolations, as science does, but in the individual object. That is, each object should, like Leibniz's monads, contain an image of the whole.

Science appears in Benjamin's foreword as the inheritor of designative language itself. Human language involves a movement from name—a figuration or translation of language as such into a new medium—into sign—a transformation of living figurative language into dead markers for objects. To rehearse part of the argument of "On Language as Such," designative language makes knowledge—or as Benjamin puts it there, judgment—possible. The continuous aesthetic intervention in the world represented by names is maximally particular and therefore incapable of the kind of generalization signs make possible. As Nietzsche writes of the impact of the word "leaf" on leaves, individual differences fall away in the interest of the common, the general, the average.

Science not only, of course, needs concepts like leaf in order to offer general knowledge of natural phenomena; it also builds paradigms for knowledge out of certain fundamental concepts. In a way, science is a conceptual leveling writ large, which imposes certain reductive assumptions on an entire domain so that a context for deductive rationality can be set, problems solved, predictions made. Consequently, new problems can reveal the limits of a research paradigm and necessitate new assumptions. These reductive assumptions, Benjamin thinks, account for both the extraordinary successes of the sciences and the failure of attempts to unify them in an "encyclopedia web of knowledge," or to subordinate them to a single master science like physics. It is impossible to bring these unique deductive contexts and the ontological assumptions they implicitly or explicitly contain into a coherent whole.

Science thus leaves the problem of the whole, the problem of truth, untouched. This is not a failure of science, but a failure in its self-conception, a failure of the philosophy of science. Though it seldom recognizes it, science must forsake truth to gain knowledge.

Against the misguided scientific conception of truth, Benjamin poses a genuine philosophical truth, a different kind of generality that has its basis not in abstracted averages but unique extremes. This truth is first and foremost distinguished by the fact that it is continually concerned with the question of presentation. “The mark of genuine *knowledge*,” on the other hand is “the complete elimination of the problem of presentation” (*GS* 1:207 / *O* 1–2). If it matters how it’s said, it isn’t knowledge. Knowledge, then, presupposes designative language, language that presents facts without the facts having any effect on the presentation or vice-versa. Philosophy has to renounce this paradigm completely, not just accepting, in the way of a philosophical pragmatism, that the whole truth is not something we are capable of expressing, but rejecting the notion of truth as knowledge to be captured and expressed by designative language. Instead, truth itself is immanent in expression. The appropriate metaphor, then, does not see philosophy mining reality for truth, but bringing it to language, letting it speak in the presentation of ideas. The question of presentation therefore remains ineliminable because the clean separation between expression and what is expressed that we find available in the sciences is impossible here.

Bringing truth to expression is ultimately a historical endeavor for Benjamin, since the truth of a given thing is never finished, but rather unfolds in the process Benjamin describes through origin. Whereas science—and the disciplines that take science as a model—can see in history only a linear progression leading from a point of genesis to the present (and perhaps to an ideal future), philosophy proper will, as Benjamin puts it in 1940s “On the Concept of History,” “brush history against the grain” (*GS* 1:697 / *SW* 4:392).³⁹ In so doing it frees the phenomena from the straightforward conceptual interpretation under which they have congealed and which frames their history as a linear development.

The kind of philosophical history Benjamin proposes to engage in is illuminated by a passage in the *Arcades Project* on the relation of that manuscript to Marxism:

³⁹In “On the Concept of History,” Benjamin suggests there is a close connection between the methodology of the sciences and the progressive view of history, one that he finds suggested in Meyerson’s work. See *GS* 1:1230 / *SW* 4:401.

This research—which 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—thus becomes important for Marxism in two ways. First, it will demonstrate how the milieu in which Marx's doctrine arose affected that doctrine through its expressive character (which is to say, not only through causal connections); but, second, it will also show in what respects Marxism, too, shares the expressive character of the material products contemporary with it. (*GS* 4:574)⁴⁰

The passage shows, first of all, how far Benjamin's philosophy of history, which attributes explanatory power to expression, lies from Marx's, for which superstructural expression is always determined by conditions in the substructure. It also shows how Benjamin's philosophy proposes to apprehend things differently or to let them speak. This involves interpretations that free the phenomena from their apparent place in a continuous historical development and makes them available for new, previously unseen connections. This is to see them as fallen fragments of a whole, not as the midpoints in a development ending in the present. Here, in the *Arcades Project*, we are meant to see the phenomena of early commodity production—the daguerreotype, the panorama, the flaneur, etc.—allegorically as a fragmentary expression that can be oriented toward something greater than itself. Moreover, the model of intellectual inquiry that sees clear lines of separation between the analysis and thing analyzed is obliterated in favor of an understanding that sees everything expressively related to everything else, media of varying densities and vocabularies translating each other. Marx's writings, no less than photography, are phenomena whose place in the idea of modernity needs to be shown.

Another example of Benjamin's method of philosophical criticism comes in the famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility." Philosophers and critics at the time of film's inception and since have wanted to fit the medium beneath an extant concept of "art" and see it as an art form understandable, *mutatis mutandis*, in a linear development out of the old art. Their conceptual and historical shortsightedness prevents them from seeing the ways in

⁴⁰ Convolute N1a, 7. Translated in *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1999), 460.

which film explodes the concept of art, expresses and is expressive of entirely new ways of relating to experience, politics, ourselves, and each other. Our language, if we let it congeal and repeat itself thoughtlessly, stands in the way of these kinds of insights and imposes continuity on the phenomena where it doesn't exist.

It is allegorical vision or apprehension that, for Benjamin, becomes capable of understanding these conventions *as* conventions and exposing their conventionality—as Benjamin puts it elsewhere, “destroying” or “mortifying” them—while renewing or recovering our experience of the phenomena so they can be redeemed in the presentation of ideas.

The foreword can, then, be read not just as the development of a particular philosophical methodology but as a kind of explanation of, and guide to, insight. Insight requires stripping away particular everyday interpretations imposed on us by our language, convention, habits of thought, and allowing objects to be seen in a higher sphere, with a view to their full expressivity, their relationship to a whole that includes the entirety of their historical development. This destruction makes it possible to see things anew.

Insight does not have the kind of intentional relationship to its objects that knowledge does. It does not grasp its objects in such a way that other approaches are ruled out, and indeed encourages detours that start again and drive toward the truth from a different path—the methodology that characterizes the treatise. There is no endpoint here where the truth is finally grasped, but rather a chain of accumulating insights, each one opening up new paths for understanding, and each itself becoming material for further insight as it withers into the terrain of history. It derives its power from its allegorical recognition of the conventionality and looseness of language. It tries to see the world as Adam did, not structured under a variety of signs, concepts, regularities, and historical progressions, but available to be named. It names not as Adam named the animals, but using the very language and concepts that confined the phenomena to begin with. This form of insight brushes concepts against the grain, relying on analogy, metaphor, and juxtaposition, forever willing to start over again. Insight is language breaking free of itself.

Part II

THE HISTORY OF
LANGUAGE AS SUCH



The Thought of Language

BENJAMIN'S THEORY OF LANGUAGE, and its development into a theory of ideas, appears utterly original and, thereby, all the more perplexing. These ideas are original, of course, but perhaps not so much as they may seem. In my exegesis I drew attention to the Kantian features of Benjamin's theory and to Hamann, especially his understanding of condescension. In this chapter and in Chapter 5, I want to home in more carefully on the latter influence, especially as it relates to two German thinkers influenced by Hamann's ideas, Johann Gottfried Herder and Friedrich Schlegel, the main subject of Benjamin's 1919 dissertation, titled *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*.

Returning to these figures is important for several reasons. First, it will shed further light on a valuable tradition in philosophy of language that has been overshadowed both by twentieth-century developments in the philosophy of language, on the one hand, and by the typical focal points of the history of German philosophy. Second, putting these ideas into dialogue with those of Benjamin will bring further clarity to Benjamin's difficult views and bring some of the more difficult conceptual issues into further relief. Third, given the influence of these figures and Benjamin's sense that these questions were still very much alive, a complete picture of Benjamin's theory cannot be provided without delving at length into these works. And finally, as I will argue in subsequent chapters, Wittgenstein also belongs in this tradition, and this shared historical background will provide the foundation for the discussion of Wittgenstein and Benjamin that occupies me at the end of the book. Among other sources, these two chapters will draw on two recent in-depth historical studies of these issues by Michael Forster and Katie Terezakis, as well as on Charles Taylor's writings on expressivism.

The present chapter will focus on Hamann's and Herder's early writings on language and the question of the relationship between thought and language. From the beginning, expressivism can be divided into an extreme and a tempered form, as Forster's work brings out. One of the ways "broad" and "narrow" expressivism (Forster's terms for them) differ is over the question of the relationship between thought and language. As Forster lays out the taxonomy, both approaches agree on "the dependence of meaning and thought on external expressions," but whereas narrow expressivism limits these external expressions to those of human language, broad expressivism counts non-linguistic expression like art among these expressive media. Chapter 5 will focus on the question of art and art criticism, but in the present chapter I will restrict myself to human language and the question of exactly how thought is dependent on language, for here, too, broad and narrow expressivism differ. As I argue, especially in the chapter's final section drawing on the work of Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky, this dependence of thought on language is better understood as an interdependence admitting of a variety of relationships and pathways.

1. Hamann on *Logos*

There is a degree of truth to Hamann's reputation as an anti-Enlightenment irrationalist.¹ His oblique, allusive writing style is often all but impenetrable—it was even to his contemporaries—and he regarded this obscurity as something of a virtue and his opponents' systematic clarity as something of a sham. Still, a judgment against Hamann depends on one's definitions of "Enlightenment" and "irrationalism." If Enlightenment is to be defined by the spirit of critique, then Hamann, as Terezakis and others have pointed out, is an Enlightenment thinker, albeit an extreme one. But if it is defined as belief in the power of reason over that of tradition or religion, then Hamann is one of the Enlightenment's earliest and strongest opponents. Similarly, if irrationalism is defined as a conviction that reason is limited and eighteenth-century rationalism's all-abiding faith in reason misplaced, then Hamann is

¹ Isaiah Berlin goes as far as to call Hamann "the forgotten source of a movement that in the end engulfed the whole of European culture." *Magus of the North*, 4.

an irrationalist. Yet, if reason's limits are as Hamann takes them to be, then it would be the height of rationality to attend to them.

Hamann's critique of rationalism is grounded in the thesis that reason is dependent on culture and tradition—including religious tradition—especially as these are expressed in language. As we've already seen, Hamann goes as far as to express this relation as an identity: "Reason is language, *logos*."² This formulation is open to a number of criticisms: that, despite getting at something right, it is too extreme and violates our normal conceptions of reason and language (Forster's view); that it leads to a thesis that closes off individual languages from one another epistemically (Christina Lafont's view); and that it is simply unproductive as stated (Benjamin's concern). Terezakis, however, cautions against the attribution to Hamann of a thesis that simply equates reason and language.³ Hamann's concern is rather to demonstrate the dependence of rational thought on language. If reason is dependent on language, then it must be considered immanent in the same way that language is. Although Hamann, throughout his writings, considers language to be divine revelation—"God is a writer and creation is his language" (*HSW* 1:9)—the linguistic being with which God endows the world is, as I've already argued in my reading of Benjamin, not to be understood as something transcendent or external to the world that He creates. That said, Hamann never develops his philosophy of language systematically and nowhere comes close to espousing a clear philosophical program. Still, the indications he does give and his criticisms of Herder and Kant remain of import, both in their own right and in relation to Benjamin's theory of language.

In one of his earliest writings, *Socratic Memorabilia*, Hamann responds to the attempts of his friends, Kant and Christian Berens,⁴ to dissuade

²Johann Georg Hamann, Letter to Herder of August 6, 1784, *Briefwechsel*, ed. Walther Ziesemer and Arthur Henkel (Wiesbaden: Insel Verlag, 1955–1975), vol. 5, 177.

³Terezakis, *Immanent Word*, 13.

⁴Berens was a German merchant and part of an influential family. He sent the 28-year-old Hamann, who was then a devotee of Enlightenment ideals, on a business and diplomatic mission to London. Hamann's mysterious mission was a failure, but he remained in London and fell into dissolution. In personal crisis and out of money, Hamann underwent an intense religious conversion while reading the Old Testament. He returned to Königsberg an opponent of Enlightenment rationalism and began a writing career in his obscure style. Berens enlisted the help of Kant—then a well-regarded but not yet famous professor—to save Hamann from his fervor. This attempt failed, but Kant and Hamann began a correspondence, friendship, and mutual (if largely negative)

him from his mystical anti-rationalism. In his dedication to them—"the two"—Hamann claims, "I have written about Socrates in a Socratic way. Analogy was the soul of his reasoning and he gave it irony for a body" (*HSW* 2:61 / *WP* 7). As Terezakis notes, Hamann chooses to interpret Socrates's irony—his knowing that he does not know—as an avowal of the immanence and limitation of all human knowing. Socrates's ironic avowal of ignorance is to be taken seriously as a positive epistemological principle. Human ignorance and limitation are productive starting points and are interpreted by Hamann as a prelude to, and preparation for, a Christian belief in an unknowable God. Socratic irony is interpreted as the appropriate attitude to the condition of Christian condescension. God is at once wholly inaccessible and present as a trace in His creation, which is his own self-limitation. Creation is, in this way, speech absent a speaker. Socratic irony insists, correspondingly, on philosophical immanence and an epistemological humility.

Terezakis writes:

Hamann's utilization of the concept of condescension is calculatedly epistemological. The lack of completion that marks our understanding of the world tells us something about the fitness of the human mind for comprehensive intellectual command; it tell us essentially nothing about the world, or God, beyond this limitation. What Hamann's Socrates "knows" is that epistemic advancement happens only within this confine, which marks the boundary of human inquiry into first principles for the same reason that it destabilizes our teleological constructions.⁵

One can see in this formulation of Hamann's project already a prefiguration of Kant's proscription against the transcendent use of the ideas. Terezakis even goes so far as to characterize Kant's critical idealism as an attempt to acknowledge Hamann's characterization of the peculiar transcendence of God and the implied limitations of human knowing, while shielding metaphysics from the consequences that Hamann and Herder drew from this epistemological immanence.⁶ The attraction of Hamann's doctrine for Benjamin, who regards every phenomenon in creation as the fragment of an inaccessible totality, is

influence. According to Frederick Beiser, Hamann introduced Kant to both Hume and Rousseau, two vital influences on the critical project. See Beiser, *Fate of Reason*, 19–24.

⁵Terezakis, *Immanent Word*, 31.

⁶*Ibid.*, 148–55.

immediately clear. Indeed, Benjamin's modification or correction of Kantian ideals can be read as a return to some of their roots in Hamann's writing.

Hamann, of course, differs substantially from Kant as regards the role he finds for reason once its transcendent use has been proscribed. Kant set out to limit theoretical reason to its empirical use, conditioned by the sensibility, but thought it possible to ground a "science of knowledge" in a priori knowledge of the conditions for the possibility of experience. In his *Metacritique on the Purism of Reason*, Hamann declares such a priori foundations impossible. He argues that the Kantian project depends on an illicit threefold purification of reason that cleanses it of dependence "on tradition and belief," on "experience and its everyday induction," and, most importantly, on language (*HSW* 3:284 / *WP* 207–08). Immanence for Hamann does not just entail a prohibition of reason's pursuit of the unconditioned independent of anything empirical, but also rejects the independence of reason in general from a foundation in tradition, experience, and language. Despite prohibiting reason from making rationalism's more ambitious leaps, Kant, on Hamann's reading, conceives of reason in the same basic terms, as an independent faculty whose findings and structure can be made completely independent of its material and historical circumstances.

When Hamann writes that "analogy was the soul of [Socrates's] reasoning and he gave it irony for a body," he means, first of all, that Socrates recognized that reasoning proceeds by way of recognizing similarities. Our understanding of the world is based on analogical "everyday induction" that does not follow or even approximate the paths of logical deduction. Our grasp of new or puzzling situations or ideas is always based on analogy with our understandings of familiar situations or ideas. We constantly rely, then, to put the point in hermeneutic terminology, on tradition to form the pre-understandings we require to grapple with the new and foreign.

In articulating new understandings, we likewise have to rely on indirect and analogical means, which transpose or translate particular pre-formed understandings into new contexts. Comparison, metaphor, figurative language, narrative, and quotation, which removes texts from their familiar contexts to juxtapose them with new material, are analogical means in this sense and abound in Hamann's work, as they do in Benjamin's.

Analogy also characterizes humankind's relationship to God. The idea that we are made in his image is given an anti-foundationalist bent by Hamann. We always already find ourselves in a paradoxical situation in which our power of reasoning is ineluctably aimed at transcendence and condemned not to reach it. This is, at the same time, for Hamann, a condition of language. Another way to put this—the way that Schlegel and Benjamin will put it—is that form (in the Platonic sense) is always necessarily aimed at, given as a goal that animates the practice of reasoning, but never reached. Reason is therefore inherently analogical because the inaccessibility of this transcendence—the idea, the ideal, form, the absolute, God—means we can only approximate it by way of analogy to ourselves and other immanent means available to us.⁷

The immanence necessitated by the concept of condescension requires that we reason by way of analogy, and that reasoning never lives up to its literal meaning. Irony is thus primarily a condition of language and reasoning, and only secondarily the (appropriate) attitude of the thinker who recognizes these limitations. Irony, in this sense, is not a simple reversal or undercutting of meaning, but a reflection of the permanently unstable foundations of discursive activity.⁸ Irony (as an attitude) does not necessarily undercut the author's claims to truth but puts them into the appropriate perspective. The methodology of the constellation, which Benjamin develops in the "Epistemo-Critical Foreword," is also ironic in this sense. It is aware that no single approach to the truth can be purified of its historical conditioning and so develops a methodology for approaching the truth asymptotically with various means, always cognizant, like Hamann's Socrates, of the need to continually start over and to reason indirectly. Constellations, as discussed in Chapter 3, are presentations that use immanent means available to them to attempt to present truth, while, through the concept of origin, acknowledging and attempting as far as possible to come to terms with their own historical and therefore limited nature.

In his *Aesthetica in Nuce*, Hamannian immanence takes on a more explicitly linguistic dimension. For Hamann, as for Benjamin, God speaks to man through nature, and man's linguistic being comes by way of his analogy with God. Art or aesthetic experience, furthermore, takes

⁷Terezakis, *Immanent Word*, 42–43.

⁸Or, as Schlegel will call it, "permanent parabasis."

on a vital role as the medium that can provide the immediate, perceptual knowledge that Hamann equates with faith in his *Socratic Memorabilia*.⁹ Hamann understands creation or reality as the word of God. The role of art is to decipher creation through imitation. He writes:

Speak, that I may see you!—This wish was fulfilled by creation, which is a speech to creatures through creatures; for day unto day utters speech, and night unto night shows knowledge. Its watchword traverses every clime to the end of the world, and its voice can be heard in every dialect.—The fault may lie where it will (outside or in us): all we have left in nature for our use are jumbled verses and *disjecti membra poetae*. To gather these together is the scholar's modest part; to interpret them, the philosopher's; to imitate them—or bolder still—bring them into right order, the poet's. (*HSW* 2:198–99 / *WP* 65–66)

The roots of Benjamin's conception of divine language, the relationship between language, knowledge, and history, and the role of philosophy are present here, if only in inchoate form. Creation is conceived of in terms of the fulfillment of an exhortation Socrates is reported to have made to one of his pupils—"speak that I may see you." In the context of divine creation, the quotation becomes a precursor of Benjamin's affirmation that the world and perception are inconceivable in independence of language.

"Speech"—or language broadly understood—is a precondition for perception. Humankind finds nature always already speaking. We express knowledge of nature in human language, but our means for the expression of knowledge are deeply flawed. We find only fragmentary and fragmented languages for our use—both limited in themselves and broken apart from each other. Hamann refers to the fragments of human languages that are left to us as "*disjecti membra poetae*" (the poet's scattered limbs) (*HSW* 2:198 / *WP* 65). He is referring to language here both in the sense of the languages we speak and use to interpret the world, and in the sense of the actual works that are part of the tradition.

For Hamann, philosophy—indeed all intellectual activity—is from the beginning a hermeneutic exercise limited in two related but distinct ways: on the one hand, by the language or languages at our disposal, which can only capture experience in a fragmented, imperfect manner and, on the other hand, by the cultural and linguistic phenomena we

⁹ See Beiser, *Fate of Reason*, 28.

find available to help give us insight into our own conditioning. The figure of the constellation and the concept of origin are Benjamin's attempt to come to grips with this double limitation. Hamann gestures toward such a solution here with his contention that it is the philosopher's role to interpret these fragments.

The conception of translation as basic to language as such is also found first in Hamann. The passage quoted above continues:

To speak is to translate—from an angelic language into a human language, that is, to translate thoughts into words—things into names—images into signs, which can be poetic or curiologal, historic or symbolic or hieroglyphic—and philosophical or characteristic" (*HSW* 2:198–99 / *WP* 66).

In his book *After Herder*, Michael Forster, arguing for the superiority of Herder's philosophy of language to Hamann's, cites this and other passages as evidence that early in his career Hamann held to a standard Enlightenment picture of language according to which words stand for ideas.¹⁰ Forster describes this Enlightenment paradigm as

conceiv[ing] of thought and meaning in a sharply dualistic fashion as (at least in principle) separable and autonomous from whatever material, perceptible expressions they may happen to receive in language, and of language as merely a means to their communication that is quite inessential to their actual existence.¹¹

At first blush, translating from thought into language certainly suggests such a picture and seems to conflict with the thesis—which Forster identifies as the cornerstone of expressivism—that thought is "bounded by" language.¹² Forster also contends that Herder's tempered version of expressionism is superior to Hamann's extreme formulations of the thesis. But the interpretation of these passages ought to be informed by an understanding of Hamann's extreme form of expressivism (which Forster thinks Hamann only arrives at later) and its expanded concepts of language and translation. In this light, it becomes difficult to see how Hamann's view, despite some of the language he uses to express it, could be regarded as a version of the traditional Enlightenment view that cleanly divides ideas from their expression.

¹⁰ Forster, *After Herder*, 56–58.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 55–56.

¹² *Ibid.*, *passim*.

In the passage cited, creation is, first of all, depicted as itself a kind of speech and translation as transition from creation—a divine language—into human language. The translation of thought into words, furthermore, is juxtaposed with that of things into names and images into signs. Things and images are, of course, not abstract or immaterial. By applying the concept of translation to things and images, Hamann affirms his commitment to conceiving of these phenomena—which are not linguistic in the narrow sense—linguistically. The conception of thought here should likewise be interpreted as linguistically conditioned and not as the language-independent thought of the rationalist philosophers. The translation of these three categories into the categories of human language—words, names, and signs—is not the Enlightenment material translation of immaterial, non-linguistic thought or meaning into the concrete expressions of human languages.

Even granting, however, that the relationship between thought and language is not that of an Enlightenment dualism, the question of how precisely Hamann wants to model the relationship is difficult to answer. There are some clues. Translation from thought into language, in keeping with the doctrine of condescension, involves “continua of transformations” of the kind that Benjamin discusses in his theory of translation. Hamann’s text continues:

This kind of translation (I mean, speech), resembles more than anything else the wrong side of a tapestry: “And shows the stuff, but not the workman’s skill”; or can be compared with an eclipse of the sun, which can be looked at in a vessel of water. (*HSW* 2:199 / *WP* 66–67)

Both images—the reversed tapestry and the reflected eclipse—are borrowed from other sources that use these images to refer to the drawbacks of translation from one language into another.¹³ The backside of a tapestry gives us access only to the raw material and not to the image the artisan creates. It suggests translation not from abstract to concrete, but a limitation of an already existent meaning, which is made available only opaquely and in degraded form. It gives us the parts but not the whole. Translation offers the same material as the original, but from an inferior perspective, the wrong side or a flawed reflection. For Hamann,

¹³The first is from the Earl of Roscommon’s “Essay on Translated Verse” and the second from James Howell’s *Familiar Letters*. See Haynes’s note at *WP* 67. The tapestry analogy comes originally from *Don Quixote*.

the analogy applies not just to translation between languages, but also to the transition between thinking and speaking. Words only offer opaque access to the thoughts of a speaker or writer. He or she struggles to articulate them; they remain open to interpretation; their meaning shifts with time and context; and nothing like a complete or closed interpretation is available. It applies also, Hamann suggests, to the human activity of interpreting the world itself—the naming of things—and to the movement of meaning within a given language: the semantic shifts from “images to signs”—from, that is, iconographic language, where the expression shares something with the expressed, to conventional expression, where it doesn’t.

Hamann writes in a footnote, however, that he is using the metaphors “*ad involucrum* (as covering for the bare body)” rather than “*ad illustrationem* (to adorn the garment).” He is referring here to a distinction Bacon makes in *De Augmentis Scientiarum* between two types of parable: those which intend “to demonstrate and illustrate that which is taught or delivered” (*ad illustrationem*), and those which intend to “re-tire or obscure it—that is, when the secrets and mysteries of religion, policy, or philosophy are involved in fables or parables” (HSW 2:199n / WP 67n). Hamann takes himself, in other words, to be employing these metaphors not in order to illustrate a truth that can be straightforwardly represented as well—not to illustrate a difficulty with translation between two human languages—but in order to represent a truth that can only be indirectly gestured toward, not captured like an item of knowledge. Whereas translation between texts leaves both original and rendering available (we can walk around and view the tapestry from the right side), translation of thought or reality leaves only a trace of the whole. This means that what is offered here is not a metaphorical depiction of a truth that can be captured literally as well; rather, the metaphor is the only characterization available, pointing to a truth, that is only obliquely and analogically legible.

It is clear that we are far from the “dead” translation implied by the Enlightenment paradigm, where thought can find material expression in different words. Human language is fallen, a flawed translation of an ideal which can never be recovered. Speech is a transformation of an ideal (thought) into a reality, but this transformation is not the direct expression of the abstract in reality, but the fallenness or immanence of reality that demands that it be fallen *from* some ideal, even though it

can never fully capture that ideal. This kind of translation—language itself—is always caught up in an irony wherein the translation itself establishes the existence of the original as an ideal, thus “retiring” it in the very act of expressing it.

Hamann goes on in the above-cited passage to detail the degree to which language has fallen from creation in terms of three kinds of writing. At the initial level lie poetic or “curiological” signs—where objects are represented immediately by pictures. Following them are hieroglyphic signs, in which pictures stand for objects on the basis of some symbolic relationship. A serpent biting its tail, for example, comes to stand for a year. Finally, writing becomes characteristic or alphabetical: words are composed of letters standing for sounds and there is no relationship between the script and the object. Hamann’s association of philosophy with this latter kind of writing suggests the link between the degree of linguistic mediation and abstraction that Benjamin develops in his essay. Hamann’s conception of creation and poetical language, in other words, already suggests a continuum ranging from creation itself to the highly-mediated, late language of abstraction. Fallen human language is conceived of as a process of incremental decay from the language of creation.

Despite these indications of an account of how abstraction, thinking, and reason itself are derived from language, Hamann never attempts to give a sophisticated account of this dependence. In a letter to Herder, he acknowledges his difficulties in modeling the relationship:

If I were only as eloquent as Demosthenes, I would have to do no more than repeat a single word three times. Reason is language—*logos*. I gnaw on this marrowbone and I will gnaw myself to death over it. It is still always dark over these depths for me: I am still always awaiting an apocalyptic angel with a key to this abyss.¹⁴

It is this abyss of equating intellectual and linguistic being that Benjamin refers to at the beginning of “On Language as Such.” As Benjamin writes, it can serve as a solution if placed at the end of a linguistic theory, but remains an insoluble paradox if placed at the beginning. Herder also recognizes the dangers of this abyss. He responds with an attempt to pro-

¹⁴ Hamann, Letter to Herder of August 6, 1784, *Briefwechsel*, ed. Walther Zieseemer and Arthur Henkel (Wiesbaden: Insel Verlag, 1955–1975), vol. 5, 177.

vide an account of the mutual evolution of reason and language through a naturalistic account of the origin of language.

2. Herder's Treatise

Herder was an enthusiastic student of Kant's at the University of Königs-berg in the 1760s, but he broke with him before Kant awoke from his dogmatic slumber and embarked on the critical project.¹⁵ He also befriended Hamann, 14 years his senior, during this time. In response to an essay competition of the Berlin *Akademie der Wissenschaften*, Herder wrote the prize-winning *Treatise on the Origin of Language* (1772). It answered the academy's question: "If human beings were left with their natural faculties, would they be able to invent language? And by what means could they invent it?" The question arose out of an eighteenth-century debate over the origin of language, which was largely split into two camps—those who thought language had a natural origin and those who believed it could only be made sense of as a divine gift. To the latter camp belonged J. P. Süssmilch, who had written an essay attempting to prove that the first language could only have had its origin in God. Several naturalistic theories of the origin of language had been ventured, including those of Rousseau and the Abbé Condillac.

In his essay, Herder positions his own naturalistic theory against both the divine origin thesis and the theories of Rousseau and Condillac, which, according to Herder, assume what they set out to prove. Herder's theory involves a sophisticated translation of some of Hamann's concepts into a naturalistic framework. Despite the resultant similarities in their views regarding language, the version of expressivism that comes out of Herder's theory and is developed in later writings is incompatible with the foundation sketched in Hamann's writings, as Hamann recognized. Below, I will consider Hamann's response to Herder and argue that Benjamin's theory, though it also draws positively on Herder's work, overcomes some of the limitations of Herder's expressivism and naturalistic theories of its kind. First, I'll set out the main and most relevant of Herder's ideas in *The Treatise*—his critique of the naïve naturalism of Rousseau and especially Condillac, his theory of human awareness (*Besinnung*), and his account of the origin and development of language.

¹⁵ See Beiser, *Fate of Reason*, 149–58, on their stormy relationship.

The naturalistic explanation of the origin of language that Herder espouses is nuanced and ambiguous, and it touches at points closely on Hamann's more mystical views. Herder opens by stating, "Already as an animal, the human being has language." How this sentence is to be interpreted is at issue throughout the essay, but Herder makes it clear that, unlike some naturalistic writers, he regards human language as something exceptional among animals. After briefly considering the suggestion that language developed out of animal cries, he rejects the line of argumentation outright:

All animals, down as far as the dumb fish, sound forth their sensation. But it is still not the case that just because of that any animal, even the most perfect, has the slightest real beginning towards a human language. Let one form and refine and organize this cry however one wants, unless an understanding is added, so as to use this sound with intention, then I do not see how from the preceding natural law human, voluntary language ever comes about. (*HW* 1:708 / *PW* 74–75)

The task Herder sets himself therefore is to give an account that does justice to the understanding and intention behind human language and lacking in animal language without departing from a naturalistic framework. This means that the source of human language and human understanding—which separates us from the other animals—must be present in humankind's most natural and basic state—that is, "already as an animal." Before developing this positive theory, it is necessary for Herder to isolate precisely the point at which naïve naturalism fails.

To this end, Herder engages in a critique of an explanation of the origin of language put forward by Condillac. Herder focuses on Condillac's thought experiment involving two children abandoned in the desert, having no concept whatsoever of language. As a number of commentators have noted, Herder's criticisms of Condillac are not quite fair, since he picks on this example while ignoring the details of Condillac's theory.¹⁶ Still, by pointing out what he takes Condillac to fail to explain, Herder brings out precisely what he takes the *desiderata* of a phi-

¹⁶For an interpretation that emphasizes the positive influence of Condillac and the French tradition on Herder and Humboldt, see Hans Aarsleff, *From Locke to Saussure: Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982) and his Introduction to Wilhelm von Humboldt, *On Language: The Diversity of Human Language-Structure and Its Influence on the Mental Development of Mankind*, trans. Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

losophy of language to be and, consequently, what he takes language to be. Even if short shrift is given Condillac's view, Herder's criticisms are illuminating.

The thought experiment supposes that the children will gradually build up a natural language by coming "to associate with the cries of sensations the thoughts whose natural signs those cries are" (*HW* 1:709 / *PW* 75).¹⁷ In other words, through "reciprocal intercourse," the children eventually come to associate animal expressions like cries of hunger with the relevant thought—"I am hungry"—and soon "are doing with reflection what they previously did merely through instinct" (*HW* 1:709 / *PW* 75).¹⁸ According to Condillac, once, through repeated acquaintance, they associate signs with particular thoughts or ideas, they use this association as a model from which to create a conventional language and begin to designate things with words.

Herder dismisses this picture of language with two sentences. "In short, [according to Condillac] words arose because words existed before they existed. I do not think that it is worth pursuing our explainer's thread any further, since it is—tied to nothing" (*HW* 1:710 / *PW* 76). In an important and influential paper on Herder—which identifies in his critique of Condillac a guiding problem for all subsequent expressivist philosophy of language—Taylor expands on Herder's blunt dismissal:

The problem is that Condillac endows his children from the beginning with the capacity to understand what it means for a word to stand for something, what it means therefore to talk about something with a word. But *that* is the mysterious thing. Anyone can be taught the meaning of a word, or even guess at it, or even invent one, once they have language. But what is this capacity, which we have and animals don't, to endow sounds with meaning, to grasp them as referring to and used to talk about, things?¹⁹

This, of course, is the question we have already seen both Benjamin and Hamann struggle with—how language can become "externalized," used to refer to things, and subsequently to generate conceptual thought.

¹⁷ See Condillac, *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*, trans. Hans Aarsleff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 114.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹⁹ Taylor, "The Importance of Herder," *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 81.

Condillac's error demonstrates that it is difficult to even see this as a question. Once we have language, it can seem that the question of language is how we come to use words to refer to objects. But this is asking the question of how we enter language from a point already within language. We, therefore, end up with an circular explanation of the kind Condillac offers, which completely ignores the mystery of how we got "into" language to begin with. If the question is posed correctly, it has to do not only with how we use words but how we are able to relate to the world the way we do. How do we come to *have* objects? Using a word and having an object become closely intertwined in Herder.

It is important, therefore, to notice the way Herder employs the word "word" in his critique. For Condillac, Herder writes, words arose because they existed before they existed. Herder believes something like a word is already involved in the ability to associate, for example, a cry with the notion of pain. Condillac fails to explain the transition from what might be termed an immanent or instinctual recognition through a cry that another is in pain—the kind of recognition animals are capable of—and the association of the cry with the pain, which requires an external perspective in which the pain and the crying are considered distinct entities and the former, a sign for the latter. In Condillac's state of nature, the animal cry is already viewed as a sign for hunger. Language becomes, for him, just a matter of raising the instinctual recognition of this fact to a reflective level.

There are two problems, by Herder's lights, with this step in Condillac's argument. The first is that if this were all it took to open the door to language, then there would seem to be nothing preventing sophisticated animals from arriving at language. They, after all, engage in the same kind of repeated reciprocal exchange with what look, from the perspective of human language, like signs.²⁰ The second is that Condillac's description assumes an symbolic disjunction between crying and pain—one that is, arguably, created by "crying" and "pain." It assumes, in other words, the external perspective and form in which the sound and the feeling are detached from one another and the former stands for

²⁰ Cf. a comment Wittgenstein makes in the *Investigations* to this effect. "One says, 'The cock calls the hens by crowing'—but isn't all this already based on a comparison with our language?" (*PI* §493). See Chapter 6, section 7, below for further discussion of this remark.

the latter. The achievement of Condillac's children is *grasping* this connection. But, for Herder, the achievement that needs to be described is that of producing the external connection (or, as Benjamin would put it, severing the immanent, Edenic connection between name and thing).

Granted, Condillac doesn't assume that his two children have access to this external perspective before they have access to it—it takes repetition before they recognize signs as signs—but he does seem to assume the perspective is *there* for them to arrive at and need not be generated somehow by them or by their practice. The accomplishment of language is, in other words, designative for Condillac—it designates a structure that is already there—and not, as Taylor puts it, “constitutive.”²¹ Condillac, in effect, treats language as a discovery rather than an invention.²²

Herder's task is as follows then: to explain the origin of language, understood as the possibility of taking something as a sign for something else, within a naturalistic paradigm while avoiding the pitfall of implicitly importing the concept of a sign into his explanation. He must explain, to put it another way, not just how language comes to be in the world, but how the world comes to be in language. Herder's strategy is to describe the origin of language in terms of what he takes to be a characteristic way of attending to the world that separates human-kind from the animals. This means the linguistic capacity immediately involves the manner in which we experience the world, which is to be regarded as evolving together with language use itself.²³

At the same time, Herder does not want to simply posit some special linguistic capacity or instinct in human beings that solves the problem. Such a solution would be no better than Condillac's. Herder, therefore, begins by describing the distinctiveness of humanity not positively, but in terms of what it lacks, namely “sureness of instinct.” “*Each animal,*” Herder writes, “*has its circle to which it belongs from birth, into which it immediately enters, in which it remains all its life, and in which it dies*” (*HW* 1:712 / *PW* 78). For Herder, the size of this circle is coordinated with the particular drives and skills the animal has. The animal's circle or “world,” which is comprised by its senses and its arena of effect, is narrow

²¹ *The Language Animal*, passim.

²² See Taylor, *Language Animal*, 146.

²³ This “co-evolution” thesis finds echoes in Terrence Deacon's book *The Symbolic Species: The Co-Evolution of Language and the Brain* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997).

in proportion to the fineness and concentration of its art or abilities.²⁴ The more specialized and fine its capacities, the smaller its circle. The animals, then, lie on a continuum extending from the very restricted worlds of insects like the spider, whose art is correspondingly sensitive and meticulous, to the relatively broad worlds of human-like animals, who carry out a number of different functions, but whose characteristic circle still remains limited by its physiology and instinct.

By contrast, Herder argues:

The human being has no such uniform and narrow sphere where only a single sort of work awaits him; a world of occupations and destinies surrounds him. His sense and organization are not sharpened for a single thing; he has senses for everything and hence naturally for each particular thing weaker and duller senses. His forces of soul are distributed over the world; there is no direction of his representations on a single thing; hence *no drive to art, no skill for art*—and, one thing which is more especially relevant here, *no animal language*. (HW 1:713 / PW 79)

The foundation for human language thus involves a freedom from instinct and from an instinct-bound determination of behavior. The human being is unabsorbed. Our senses are distributed rather than directed toward a set of particular ends. This keeps us from getting engrossed in any particular circle and gives us a world not bounded by the constraints of a physiology directed toward a particular sphere. Herder argues that the animal's language—the bee's buzzing or the bird's song, for example—cannot be differentiated from its other instinctual behavior. It is communication or expression embedded in the particular way the animal is absorbed in the world. The human being has no instinctual language. (Herder counts a baby's crying not as an instinctual language, but merely as an expression of its absolute dependence and lack of any natural sphere.) The human being is born early, before it can develop the instincts that will give it an immediate place in the world.

Herder next sets out to discover the nature of humankind's shortcomings relative to the other species. This, he claims, will prove to be "the necessary genetic basis for the arising of a [human] language" (HW

²⁴ Cf. Heidegger's concept of world and contention that animals are "poor in world" and humans "world-forming." *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik: Welt, Endlichkeit, Einsamkeit, Gesamtausgabe*, vols. 29 / 30, vol. 29, 274ff. *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1995), 185ff.

1:716 / PW 82). Herder argues that the fundamental human capacity that separates us from animals is *Besinnung*, which can be translated as “awareness,” “taking-awareness,”²⁵ even “consciousness” or “reflection.” The term is not meant to introduce a positive force from which human language is to be derived, if the word “force” is to be understood as an abstract or “higher-level” capacity lacking in the other animals. This “distinctive character of humanity” is simply the mirror image of our lack. *Besinnung* is the perceptual freedom humankind is left with in the absence of any compulsory power of animal instinct. It is the condition of the human being from which reason and language can develop.

The question of whether Herder’s move here is legitimate or ought to be regarded as another—perhaps more nuanced—version of the naïve thesis that man simply has reason (or proto-reason) and invents language out of it will be addressed along with Hamann’s criticisms below. Suffice it to say for now that one might criticize the concept of *Besinnung* by saying that Herder’s argument effectively is as follows: humankind has a world because we had a world before we had a world.

Herder uses this conception of humankind’s characteristic capacity to tell his own idealized story about the origin of language. For Herder, the capacity for taking awareness leads naturally to reflection (*Besonnenheit* or *Reflexion*). He writes:

The human being demonstrates reflection when, out of the whole hovering dream of images which proceed before his senses, he can collect himself into a moment of alertness, freely dwell on a single image, pay it clear, more leisurely heed, and separate off characteristic marks for the fact that this is that object and no other. Thus he demonstrates reflection when he can not only recognize all the properties in a vivid or clear way, but can in his own mind *acknowledge* one or several as distinguishing properties. (HW 1:722 / PW 87)

Humankind’s lack of absorption in a single sphere of activity and consequent ability to take up a standpoint of broad awareness allows us to direct our attention toward whatever features of the world we want to and to isolate particular features of singular objects. These become what Herder calls *identifying* features or characteristic marks. This activity is, for Herder, already linguistic.

²⁵ “Taking-awareness” is Forster’s translation.

He uses the example of a sheep. Herder's early human does not confront a sheep the way a lion does; for the lion the sheep is *immediately* food, an object of instinct. Nor is the sheep simply irrelevant to the human being the way it might be to an insect whose circle of effect simply does not include the sheep (at least not *qua* sheep). Instead, the sheep stands to the human being "exactly as it expresses itself to his senses," and he is able to isolate a characteristic mark—the sheep's bleating, for example—that he can then use to re-identify the sheep when he sees it again. As Benjamin puts it, "the name man gives to language depends on how language is communicated to him." Human language is, at least initially, a translation of particular sensations that appear particularly salient to us for whatever reason.

Herder argues, then, that the only way the sheep can be recognized as *a* sheep is through a characteristic mark. This is the only way we can separate out an object from the stream of sensation. We "must always recognize the difference between two things through a third thing" (*HW* 723–24 / *PW* 91). This characteristic mark, the third thing, for Herder, simply *is* a word. It is by uncritically assuming this relation as something to be discovered through repetition by the deserted children that Condillac assumes "that words existed before they existed." Herder gives a speculative account of how the capacity for cognizing this kind of relation develops out of a metonymic mark—the sheep's bleating—which comes to stand for the whole sheep and, in so doing, also constitutes the sheep as an object available for reflection rather than merely the immediate target of instinct. For Herder, then, word and language are always already present in some fashion in reflection, whether or not a sign is explicitly given.

No matter the scientific feasibility of Herder's account of the difference between human beings and animals, there are a number attractive features of his account of the origin of language. The theory provides the basis both for subsequent accounts of linguistic development and for an account of a closely coordinated relationship between language and reason. These features can be traced back to the translation in Herder of a number of concepts from Hamann's obscure, religious paradigm into a naturalistic one. The linguistic being of all creation in Hamann becomes in the *Treatise* a function of the basic awareness of the human being. (In a way, this is a reversal of Benjamin's overcoming Kant's allegiance to subject-object epistemology by finding a realm

neutral with respect to subject and object.) Nature speaks to man because man's fundamental capacity, awareness, makes him listen. Furthermore, the poetic origins of language and their flattening down in the abstraction of fallen language—a process which is suggested by Hamann and elaborated by Benjamin—are now understood along the lines of a natural-historical, rather than mythical, trajectory. Early humans give words to objects through mimetic or poetic means.

Herder gives a lengthy, speculative account of how experience through the other senses can be translated into sound through synesthesia. The primary example Herder uses is the German word for lighting—*Blitz*. The word sounds the way lighting looks, according to Herder. Herder's account bears on Benjamin's conception of nonsensuous similarities. For Benjamin, our languages are archives of such similarities whose precise source and character is lost to us to varying degrees. Herder's view is slightly different. He has a complicated theory of sensations that places hearing as the middle sense—"the bond connecting the other senses." The capacity to produce similarities between sounds and other sensations or feelings is taken to be an "immediate natural law of the sensing machine" (*HW* 1:746 / *PW* 108).

As language develops, Herder holds, distinct parts of speech emerge,²⁶ more stable conditions of reference are agreed to as a way of facilitating better practical cooperation, and hypothetical reasoning with abstract entities becomes possible. Both reason and language are thus understood to originate and develop out of human awareness. As human language evolves from mimetic roots to take on, first, more general kinds of reference and, later, abstract entities and concepts characterized by ever finer distinctions, it better facilitates the exercise of human reason. As reason develops itself, it in turn influences the more regular, rule-guided, and abstract development of language. Herder's naturalism thus overcomes a reified, Enlightenment conception of reason as a static, complete whole, which finds expression in language but is not constitutively connected to it in any essential way. Herder's narrative allows for reason and language to evolve together under conditions of mutual influence.

²⁶ Herder theorizes that originally all words referred to actions, and from these primordial verbs emerged and, in turn, adjectives and then nouns (*HW* 1: 614–15 / *PW* 63–64). The justification is that sound, itself an action, attempted to replicate the action with which the subject was confronted.

Reason itself is shown to be dependent on language (or characteristic marks), since the having an object requires the mediation of a third thing through which it can be recognized—what Herder calls a word.

3. Reading the *Treatise*

In order to explore in more depth some issues raised by Herder's *Treatise*, I want to delve in more detail into three approaches to the *Treatise*—Taylor's, Forster's, and Terezakis's—especially as they concern the expansion of the concept of language and its relationship to thinking.

Taylor credits Herder's early statement of expressivism with overcoming the designative paradigm operative in Cartesian and empiricist philosophy—including in Condillac—and opening up for philosophical investigation what Taylor dubs the "linguistic dimension."²⁷ In brief, this dimension distinguishes human language use from animal reaction to signals by means of what Taylor calls the issue of "rightness." A characteristic mark interrupts the flow of sensation, focuses our attention, and allows us to recognize the sheep as a sheep. Animal signal use involves no such reflective recognition that this is the right word or mark for a given thing; it is only "responding appropriately," Taylor writes. What's more, whereas signal use can be limited, rightness in the linguistic dimension implies a holism. "There can't be one-word lexica" because the kind of rightness or "recognition" involved is only possible if the word is situated in a web or "skein of terms."²⁸ Although Taylor is ultimately disappointed that Herder's own origin story involves the invention of a single word and construes language as simply "a collection of such words," he deserves credit, according to Taylor, for "putting us on the track to holism."²⁹

The main lesson Taylor draws from Herder's *Treatise* is that to understand language we have to move past the designative facade it presents us and bring into view its deeper, constitutive features. This can naturally involve an expansion of the concept of language since we have to conceive of it as intertwined with—indeed, inextricable from—certain

²⁷ Taylor, *Language Animal*, 17.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 18–20.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

characteristically human features of our experience, whether we group these under the rubric of reflection, rightness, awareness, or having objects *as* objects. Language and this kind of reflection must be thought together. This approach also “brings in forms of enactive meaning, like gesture, stance, body language,” and “claim[s] that the interaction of these with descriptive meanings makes it impossible to understand these latter on their own.”³⁰

Taylor builds on Herder’s insight to develop an expressivism or “expressive-constitutive” viewpoint on language that shares a great deal with Benjamin’s view. It can be described in terms of the following five theses. (1) Language is primarily expressive rather than designative; that is, linguistic meaning is not primarily a matter of correlation between words and objects or states of affairs in the world. (2) The meanings of linguistic expressions cannot be detached from those expressions; meaning is “made manifest,” rather than designated—shown, rather than said.³¹ (3) As a consequence, meaning must be understood holistically—“the method of isolating terms and tracing correlations cannot work for expressive meaning”—and broadly—human language is but one manifestation of a broader human expressive capacity. (4) Language must be understood moreover as, in a sense, inescapable; we are always within the medium and never have access to an overview of the whole. Finally, (5) “language, or expression in general, is constitutive of thought”³²; this means *abstracta* are neither separate nor completely separable from their expression.

Forster, on the other hand, takes issue with the expansion of the concept of language found in the *Treatise* and argues that Herder’s more accurate and historically significant insights come mainly in later works where he restricts his usage of the word “language” to its “everyday” (i.e., narrow) usage. I will have more to say about Forster’s understanding of Herder’s later thought in Chapter 5. Forster’s criticisms of the *Treatise*, in any case, center around Herder’s equation of the recognition of a characteristic mark with a word or language itself.

³⁰ Ibid., 48.

³¹ Compare with Benjamin’s refrain that language is a medium, rather than a means.

³² Taylor, “Language and Human Nature,” *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 215–47, 229.

His reading of Herder's corpus (as well as Hamann's) focuses on the thesis that thought is "essentially dependent on and bounded by language"—one with considerably different implications than Taylor's claim that language is constitutive of thought—and that the two are intertwined with one another. Forster points out that Herder relies in the *Treatise* on an argument originally made by Süssmilch for the connection of thought and language. Instead of arguing, like Herder, that language and reasoning were inextricably bound to one another, Süssmilch makes the weaker claim that only *rational* thought is dependent on language and that this dependence is not essential or necessary but merely empirical. It results from the fact that language is the only means for exercising rational thought.³³ One of Süssmilch's arguments for this claim (following Christian Woolf) is that signs are required for abstraction since without them "it would be too difficult for people to recognize and abstract from the flux of experience the characteristic marks [*Charaktere*] that are required for the formation of general concepts, which are in turn required for any rational thought."³⁴ Forster reads Herder's argument concerning *Merkmale* in the *Treatise* as an attempt to rework Süssmilch's argument so that it can support the stronger thesis that *all* thought is *essentially* bounded by language—that is, as Forster puts it, "one can only think if one has a language, and one can only think what one can express linguistically."³⁵ This is achieved in the *Treatise*, Forster writes, by simply identifying the use of characteristic marks—which Süssmilch had already argued were necessary for rational thought—with language itself. What else is recognition of a characteristic mark, Herder asks, but a word?

Forster regards the move as duplicitous. He writes:

It is merely an unacknowledged stipulative redefinition of the word "language," which, in thus seeming to make possible a justification and explanation of the doctrine that all thought is essentially dependent on language, in reality changes the meaning of that doctrine and deprives it of virtually all its original interest—which depended on "language" being meant in something like its usual sense. (It is, after all, no very great news—though it might not indeed be completely trivial—to be

³³ Forster, *After Herder*, 62.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ *After Herder*, 16.

told that all thought is essentially dependent on certain fundamental aspects of thought!)³⁶

Forster is right that the expansion of the concept of language that Herder engages in here, following Hamann, renders trivial the thesis that thought is essentially bounded by language. In later work, Herder, on Forster's reading, backs off of this expansion and uses the word language according to its ordinary usage. In any event, in reading the *Treatise* itself, given the expanded conception of language Herder employs, we cannot, as Forster shows, regard Herder as arguing for the thesis that thought is essentially bounded by language without at the same time attributing to him the sophisticated strategy of simply expanding the concept of language to include what is ordinarily deemed thought.

Rather, however, than regard the *Treatise* as fundamentally flawed in the manner Forster suggests, we ought to consider the possibility that the central thesis of the work is simply not that thought is essentially bounded by language, and that Herder's expansion of the concept of language is not therefore a justification for that thesis.³⁷

As I've already suggested, Herder, in regarding both thought and language as derivative of a more basic human capacity—*Besinnung* or taking-awareness—is modifying a Hamannian thesis that regards them as both derived from divine meaning or meaning *überhaupt*. It is this awareness that enables this mythical first human to separate a sign for an object out of the stream of sensation and thus to inaugurate the development of both language and thought, which thereafter cannot strictly be separated from one another. Herder's simply identifying a characteristic mark and a word—recognition and language—may be clumsy, but it is not an attempt to justify the claim that we can't think without language, to justify the dependence of thinking on language. It's an attempt, rather, to characterize their interdependence.

In her book, Terezakis describes nicely the relationship between thought and language modeled in the *Treatise*:

[. . .] It is not simply the case that language would not be possible without our innate rationality; the use of reason is also impossible without the use of characteristic marks, from the simplest to the most complex judg-

³⁶Ibid., 64.

³⁷This formulation, after all, does not appear in the *Treatise*, and Forster locates the completed development of the thesis in Herder's later writings.

ments. [. . .] Reason manifests, it emerges from nascence and matures, insofar as it gives itself, by means of signs, boundaries to harness and direct its advance. For Herder, the original generation of words as characteristic marks manifests a basic cognitive composition that is vitalized by the words that it produces and organizes. Language, thought, and world are co-original; this does not mean that they are indistinguishable. For the vicissitudes of their codependency can be made explicit.³⁸

On this reading, language and thought have roots in the same capacity of taking-awareness that for Herder, once it develops out of its nascent state through particular acts of attention, is at once linguistic and rational. Having a world—Taylor’s “linguistic dimension”—consists for human beings in a conscious ability to direct attention independently of the forces of instinct or purely instrumental ends, but out of a free exercise of curiosity. The words of human language develop naturally out of this attention, which isolates characteristic marks from objects, thus making them objects for us. The recognition of an object as an object is, in this sense, indistinguishable from naming it.

On this interpretation of the *Treatise*, Herder’s characterization of characteristic marks as linguistic is not a stipulative redefinition that simply calls Süssmilch’s characteristic marks linguistic in order to speciously justify the thesis that language is essentially bounded by thought. Instead, it is a conscious attempt to blur the lines of the conventional distinction between thought and language maintained in philosophical discussions of language. To equate a characteristic mark and a word is to abjure the commonsense belief that the disjunction between contemplation of a thought and its physical expression tracks a philosophically relevant and clean distinction between “thought” and “language.” It is not, as Terezakis points out, to equate language and thought either, but to attempt to show that they are intertwined in such a way that everyday conceptions of language and thought cannot pass into philosophical discourse uncritically. These conceptions, a Wittgensteinian would point out, are the upshot of language-games that are not directed at the investigation of these problems, so we need to be careful about deploying them in such an investigation. “In order to get clear about the meaning of the word ‘think,’” Wittgenstein writes, for example, “we watch ourselves thinking; what we observe will be what the word means! But

³⁸Terezakis, *Immanent Word*, 87.

that's just not how this concept is used" (*PI* §316). Unintuitive as it is to say so, if light is to be shed on the relationship between what goes on in our minds and what comes out of our mouths, the concept of thinking, as it is employed in everyday uses, will be of limited use.

4. Thinking at the Limits of Language

But what is the precise difference between the thesis that language is bounded by thought and the thesis that language and thought are co-original and even co-constitutive, which better justifies Herder's characterization of the recognition of *Merkmale* as linguistic?

For Forster, the former means, as we saw, "one can think only if one has language, and one can think only what one can express linguistically."³⁹ Language bounds thought in that it sets the conditions for third-party recognition of thought as thought. Language is an ineliminable criterion for attributing thought to another subject, a necessary condition for the presence of the capacity for thought. The concern here is that this formulation of the central thesis of expressivism fails to capture the intimacy of the connection between thought and language. To make "having" language a precondition of thought and to stipulate that nothing is thinkable that cannot be expressed in language is still to admit a degree of independence to thought that is too permissive, at least from the perspective I've been expounding thus far, and prevents the theorizing of the interpenetration of thought and language.

Human thought, the way Forster describes it, may be "essentially dependent on and bounded by language," but not in itself linguistic. That is, even if this boundary is never breached—thought is never recognizable in independence of language—it is given a degree of autonomy as a kind of black box into which language enters and from which it emerges. The risk of this point of view, as I'll try to show in more depth in Chapter 5, is a lapse back into a version of the designative paradigm where language is the material expression of immaterial thought.⁴⁰

³⁹ Forster, *After Herder*, 90.

⁴⁰ One of the apparent virtues of what Forster calls "limited expressivism" is that it employs the word "language" in the "usual" way as strictly referring to human language. Whether or not one regards as philosophically sound the principle of abiding by ordinary usage as much as possible, it is particularly problematic in this case, given that it is arguably the

If, by contrast, language and thought are co-original and the term “word” is applied even to the basic kind of rationality that allows us to recognize an object as an object, we have an explanation—however simplistic—of the intimate connection and interpenetration of thought and language. Language is not the mouthpiece of thought and can be allowed involvement in acts of thought that never actually find material expression. Ontogenetically and phylogenetically, a picture is suggested of co-development where particular thoughts can only be expressed if the language has developed the semantic and grammatical resources to express them, and these resources are only developed through the ingenuity of thought that draws on existing language in various ways in order to create or grasp new concepts analogically and rework old ones. It is this interpenetration of thought and language, their co-origin and co-evolution, that becomes difficult to express if we hew too closely to conventional uses of the words “thought” and “language.”

To Wittgenstein, who goes furthest in describing the philosophical confusions resulting from folk psychological conceptions of phenomena like thought, these pictures of thinking and speaking are ones imposed by certain language-games and by analogy with other kinds of expression. He writes, for example, of a “misleading parallel” between “a cry, an expression of a pain—a sentence, an expression of a thought” (*PI* § 317). “As if the purpose of a sentence were to convey to one person how it is with another: only, so to speak, in his thinking apparatus, and not in his stomach.”

It is just this reified inner and outer conception of thought and language that is encouraged by Forster’s understanding of expressivism. In his book, arguing against the view, imputed to Hamann, that thought is identical to language, Forster poses the following counterexample:

[. . .] [O]ne is sitting upstairs at home expecting Mary to return home first, one hears someone at the front door who subsequently turns out to have been Peter, and one later says quite truly that one thought the person who came in was Mary, even though one had neither uttered not [*sic*] mentally entertained any such little formula as “Mary is here now,” but merely heard the door and felt unsurprised.⁴¹

ordinary usage of words—“thought,” “language,” “meaning,” and others—that suggests the designative paradigm to us.

⁴¹ *After Herder*, 133.

But when I explain to Peter that I stood up quickly with a look of shock because, “I thought it was Mary who’d come in,” am I conveying to Peter how things were in my thinking apparatus a few seconds ago—what I thought? This is the picture that emerges if we treat the expression, “I thought it was Mary,” as a report of an event, but my expectation is not an internal object like that, which I show to Peter in order to explain a causal process. If thought is given the independent space that Forster offers it in the thesis that it is “bounded by language,” however, it is hard to see how we can avoid conceiving of it as an inner object like this.

The alternative that identifies thinking with speaking and insists that the expression “Mary is here now” did, in some fashion, run through my mind, is, of course, no better. Insofar as it encourages such a simplistic identity thesis, Herder’s simple equation of a thought of an object and a word for that object is rightly criticized by Forster.

These difficulties in Herder arise from the translation of Hamann’s conceptual resources into a naturalistic paradigm where they do not necessarily belong. Herder mostly eliminates talk of language in the broad, Hamannian sense, but retains, to a degree that is ultimately unsustainable, something of Hamann’s conception of *logos* and the codependency of thinking and language.

What exactly is lost in Herder’s translation of Hamann? Despite blurring the distinction between thought and language, Herder’s model in the *Treatise* understands language, in its most basic character, not as “language as such,” to use Benjamin’s term, but in modern terms as a subjective capacity unique to humankind. When Herder translates Hamann’s views on language into his naturalistic paradigm, Hamann’s conception of *logos* is lost, integrated into the condition of human awareness. This awareness differs from animal awareness in the generality necessitated by its lack of specialization. It is this general awareness, in effect, that takes over the role occupied in Benjamin’s view by language as such. *Besinnung* is itself proto-linguistic in Herder, rather than merely representing a sensitivity to the extant meaning in nature. Language as such becomes *human* awareness, which is said to generate, at once, both language and, eventually, higher-order conceptualization. But this leaves us with, at best, a question-begging faculty that stands beneath both language and thought or reason, rather than a true explanation of their interplay. At worst, it, as we’ll see in Chapter 5, circumscribes language and separates it off from meaning as such, leading to a backslide into a species of designativism.

But do Hamann and Benjamin really have something better to offer concerning the relationship between thought and language? Neither Benjamin nor Hamann gives a full-fledged account of the subject's experience of thinking and speaking. For Hamann, as we will see, Herder, in the very act of entertaining an origin for human language and thought, distorts his characterization of both. Likewise for Benjamin, beginning with language as such means human language and rationality have their origin not in any specifically human capacity like *Besinnung*, but in the meaning already extant in the world.

Although Benjamin does not deal explicitly in his own writings on philosophy of language with questions about the linguistic nature of subjective thought, he does comment upon sociological and psychological research on the issue in a 1934 review of sociological literature on language for the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. The article deals primarily with twentieth-century research on issues first raised by Herder and eighteenth-century contemporaries: speculation about the onomatopoeic foundations of language, the relationship between animal expression and human language, and the relationship between thought and language. Benjamin commends especially the approach to these problems of Soviet developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky, who picks up on some of the work of Jean Piaget.

This is not the place for a full accounting of these complicated psychological issues, but I do want to suggest that Vygotsky's line of research points to some of the shortcomings of both Herder's *Treatise* and Forster's understanding of the central insight of expressivist philosophy of language. His approach also accords with a broadly Benjaminian understanding of language.

5. Between Thought and Language

In his *Thought and Language*, Vygotsky steers a middle path between a behaviorism—which equates thinking and speaking, simply regarding thought as suppressed “inner speech”—and an idealism (recognizable as what I've been calling a designative theory) that regards language as the material expression of immaterial thought.

Vygotsky's conclusions, though overlapping with some of Herder's insights, do not accord with them perfectly. For one thing, they complicate Herder's hypothesis that thought and language are co-original. For

Vygotsky, thought and language are not *necessarily* connected at all. “Thought and word,” he writes, “are not connected by a primary bond. A connection originates, changes, and grows in the course of the evolution of thinking and speech.”⁴² In primates that express themselves vocally and employ problem-solving strategies or tools in ways similar to human beings, thinking and vocalization are not interrelated at all, Vygotsky posits. The entanglement of thought and speech is characteristically human. It is this entanglement, and not some more essential difference in kind, that distinguishes human thought and human language. Otherwise, we can think of them as continuous with animal thought and language. Thus, although this entanglement may not be primary for thought and language in themselves, for Vygotsky, it does become essential to the functioning of human language and thought.

That said, Vygotsky does, like Herder, see the word itself as “a close amalgam of thought and language.” There is some sense in which the two are united. It is worth quoting Vygotsky at length:

A word without meaning is an empty sound; meaning, therefore, is a criterion of “word,” its indispensable component. It would seem, then, that it may be regarded as a phenomenon of speech. But from the point of view of psychology, the meaning of every word is a generalization or a concept. And since generalization and concepts are undeniably acts of thought, we may regard meaning as a phenomenon of thinking. It does not follow, however, that meaning formally belongs to two different spheres of psychic life. Word meaning is a phenomenon of thought only insofar as thought is embodied in speech, and of speech only insofar as speech is connected with thought and illuminated by it. It is a phenomenon of verbal thought, or meaningful speech—a union of word and thought.⁴³

Vygotsky stakes out here a middle path between Herder’s *Treatise* and Forster’s criticisms of it. Word meaning itself, on his view, requires that thought and language be considered together, since word meaning is evidently present both in thinking and in speech, but not, as it were, twice and in two different ways. Maintaining a strict separation of these domains, as adhering to everyday concepts would require, will, again, make it impossible to unfold this relationship. The everyday concepts

⁴² Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, 224.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 225.

force us to conduct an analysis that breaks the phenomenon of language into discrete elements—thought and word—and rules out the kind of holism necessary to comprehend language.⁴⁴ The simple identity of language and thought suggested by Herder's identification of *Merkmale* with words, though more promising, is not tenable either. It, too, leaves the relationship between thought and language static, not by keeping them separate but by pushing them too close together.

How, then, is the relationship meant to unfold? Vygotsky charts an inverse movement of semantic and vocal development. Vocally, the child moves from “part to whole”—single words to complex sentences—but “semantically, the child starts from the whole, from a meaningful complex, and only later begins to master the separate semantic units, the meanings of words, and to divide his formerly undifferentiated thought into those units.”⁴⁵ The child's thought begins as a “dim, amorphous whole” and, therefore, “must find expression in a single word,” but as she is brought into a language by her parents, semantic differentiation makes possible differentiation or articulation in thought.

The toddler's vocalization “give” in the presence of a bottle and accompanied by grasping is scarcely more articulate than the dog's whining under the dinner table. As vocalization it is partial; but as expression of thought it is as complete as the dog's plea. There is no doubt what either child or dog is after.

The toddler's subsequent ability to form complicated sentences like “give me the bottle” is not only an improvement in vocal expression but also enables the child's better internal articulation of the thought. Whereas the world reflected in the initial “give” is a scarcely differentiated whole of immediate desire, that of “give me the bottle” is one divided into objects, people, and actions relating to one another in complex and variable ways. It does not complete the thought—the thought was already complete—but gives it a form that allows generic comparison to other desires. For example, “give me the spoon,” “give me the answer”—or to other actions with the same object—“take the bottle from me,” “fill the bottle.” Language regiments the thought, as it were; it puts it in place.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 224

⁴⁵ Ibid., 232.

While these two processes develop, the semantic and the phonetic or vocal also differentiate themselves from one another in the mind of the child. To begin with, words and the things they name are integrally related to one another. What a word sounds like is part of what it means. Every word is, in some sense, onomatopoeia to the child. They offer idiosyncratic “explanations” for the names objects have, and they do not permit using the word for one thing to name another. The manner in which we treat words as arbitrary signs is not yet available to them.

Vygotsky interprets this perceived dependence of word-meaning on the aesthetic character of the word as a barrier to developed thought. As this connection between the semantic and phonetic loosens, arbitrary reference becomes possible and the object, now conceived of in complete independence of the word, can truly be thought of in abstract or generalized terms. The separation of meaning from words—or thought from language—is thus an essential part of child development and the development of human language itself. The development of thought involves an internalization of meaning and its detachment from words.

But thought is not therefore an internal reflection of language. Thought, as any writer knows, is not preformed for language, but must bend itself to the pressures of the available means of expression, and thereby often, felicitously or infelicitously, finds itself altered. Vygotsky writes:

The structure of speech does not simply mirror the structure of thought; that is why words cannot be put on by thought like a ready-made garment. Thought undergoes many changes as it turns into speech. It does not merely find expression in speech; it finds its reality and form. The semantic and the phonetic developmental processes are essentially one, precisely because of their opposite directions.⁴⁶

Though one process moves from whole to part and the other from part to whole, they involve the same articulation, the parts of spoken language articulating the initially undifferentiated morass of thought. The sentence becomes whole while breaking the thought into parts. Words shape thought.

How, empirically speaking, does language carry out this operation on thought? Vygotsky’s answer hinges on his interpretation of “egocentric

⁴⁶Ibid., 233.

language,” a phenomenon that plays a role in Piaget’s research on child psychology. Piaget, as Benjamin reports in his survey, found that early in their development children exhibit two kinds of language: socialized language, like that of adults, and “egocentric language,” which is language “only for the speaking subject,” not intelligible outside the context in which it is used, and thus “has no communicative function” (*GS* 3:475/*SW* 3:82). Where for Piaget this language also has no cognitive function but is simply a byproduct of the egocentric phase of development that eventually passes away, for Vygotsky it is crucial. He finds that children use this language much more often when confronted with an obstacle that interrupts the accustomed flow of a given activity—at the moments we would expect an adult to stop and think. The suggestion, Benjamin writes, is that “egocentric language takes exactly the place reserved at a later stage for the thinking process itself” (*GS* 3:475/*SW* 3:82–83). Vygotsky finds, moreover, that even though their egocentric speech is unintelligible to others, children speaking it think it is, and they only use it in social situations.⁴⁷

Vygotsky, therefore, interprets egocentric language as an intermediate stage between the child’s socialized language and inner speech, which is itself a level in between thought and language. Egocentric language, Vygotsky writes, “becomes more and more peculiar and ultimately becomes inner speech.”⁴⁸ As the child’s cognitive ability develops, egocentric speech goes through the process of internalization. It sacrifices subjects—which are dispensable in the child’s speech to herself just as they are sometimes dispensable in social communication where the context is clear to both parties—and becomes strictly predicative. The import of syntax and sound are gradually “reduced to a minimum” leaving “meaning [. . .] more than ever in the forefront.”⁴⁹ Meaning, which in the child’s earlier cognition was inseparable from the word, is conducted through egocentric and then inner speech into thought, leaving the word behind. The games that the child struggled with before—like applying the same word to two different concepts—now become easier.

⁴⁷Ibid., 245–48.

⁴⁸Ibid., 250.

⁴⁹Ibid., 259.

This transition from language to thought, Vygotsky argues, is also characterized by a predominance of what he calls, following Frédéric Paulhan's definitions, sense over meaning:

The sense of a word [. . .] is the sum of all the psychological events aroused in our consciousness by the word. It is a dynamic, fluid, complex whole, which has several zones of unequal stability. Meaning is only one of the zones of sense, the most stable and precise zone. A word acquires its sense from the context in which it appears; in different contexts, it changes its sense. Meaning remains stable throughout the changes of sense. The dictionary meaning of a word is no more than a stone in the edifice of sense, no more than a potentiality that finds diversified realization in speech.⁵⁰

Sense is something like the psychological feeling of a word in a given context, including all the details of that context: the way the word is uttered, the relationships among people and objects present at its utterance, and so forth. Sense is, we might call, the *whole* meaning, of which the word's literal meaning is only a part. Vygotsky marshals literary examples to explain how the sense of a word is far more context-dependent than its meaning. Where meaning remains stable, sense is impacted by the particular the sentence, paragraph, or the work in which the words occur to the subject. Names of famous works like *Hamlet* or *Anna Karenina* absorb the broader sense of a work into themselves—"the whole sense of a work is contained in one name."⁵¹ This more amorphous, changeable, psychological kind of meaning, which appears also in normal speech, begins to predominate in egocentric language as it is submerged into inner speech.

Pure thought itself is, for Vygotsky, a yet "more inward" version of inner speech. "Every thought," he writes, "creates a connection, fulfills a function, solves a problem," but its relationship to outer speech is even more difficult to conceptualize than that of inner to outer speech.⁵² Thought does not share a structure with speech; the transition from thought to speech can misfire or fail entirely. And where a thought occurs to us all at once and all together, the sentence in which the thought comes to expression separates out the elements into discrete units.⁵³

⁵⁰Ibid., 259.

⁵¹Ibid., 261.

⁵²Ibid., 264.

⁵³Ibid., 265–66.

Egocentric and inner speech are thus transitional moments on a continuum between thought and language, and exhibit the enormously complex nature of the relationship between them. Thought and speech, as Vygotsky puts it, “invite a variety of movements to and fro” between thought and words.⁵⁴ “Verbal thought [appears] as a complex, dynamic entity, and the relation of thought and word within it as a movement through a series of planes.”⁵⁵

Although Vygotsky’s research and speculation does not represent anything like settled scientific fact, it does, I think, give some psychological contour to some of the ideas I’ve been discussing, in particular the notion that thought and language interpenetrate one another, or that language can be “constitutive” of thinking.

Vygotsky offers a far more nuanced account of the relationship between thought and language than simply that thought is dependent on and bounded by language. Thought, on Vygotsky’s account, is transformed by language, and in turn transforms it. But thought remains independent of language in such a way that can account for the continuity between human thought (both linguistic and pre-linguistic) and animal thought while still making clear the necessity of language for “higher-order” thought like generalization and abstraction. Vygotsky’s account of the relationships between thinking, inner speech, and outer speech—though far from complete—offer a glimpse of the complicated and variable pathways between thought and language, rather than lapsing into a picture, derived from ordinary language, that sees both thought and language as singular phenomena with abiding, context-independent structures.

All that being said, Vygotsky’s conclusions do not contradict the thesis that thought is essentially bounded by human language. It is true, in a way—according to both Benjamin’s theory and Vygotsky’s theoretical model—that nothing can be thought that can’t be expressed by human language. For Benjamin, of course, there is nothing *at all* that can’t be expressed, in some fashion, in human language. But Forster’s styling of Herder’s expressivist thesis constricts thought in a way that Vygotsky wants to avoid. All thought and all experience can be translated into human language, but always with modification, imprecision,

⁵⁴ Ibid., 268–69.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 268.

inaptness, confusion, and loss. Forster's version of the thesis, in other words, is wrong if we take it to mean that the resources of language put a limit on what it is possible to think. When we say what is thought is bounded by what can be expressed in words, we implicitly give both these things the same form, but thinking, as Vygotsky tries to show, does not have the form of language. Language influences the shape that thought takes, but it does not determine it.

It is the challenge of articulation to put our thoughts as aptly as possible in the form of language. In emphasizing the interpenetration of thought and language, and the manifold and bidirectional pathways between thought and language, Vygotsky provides a framework for theorizing the creativity and innovation involved in language use. Just as language puts pressure on thought, bending thought in certain respects to its form, thought can put pressure on language, extending its resources in previously unimagined ways in order to articulate an as yet unarticulated domain of experience, for example.⁵⁶ Where language utterly determines thought, we find cliché; where thought bends language to its will, poetry.

The movement between thought and language, seen under this aspect, begins to appear very similar to the movement between human languages in Benjamin's theory of translation. Indeed, Hamann's suggestion that we translate thought into speech suggests the same kind of movement. This translation is, of course, linguistic in Hamann and Benjamin's broadened sense, but it is not controlled by human language itself. Thinking, after all, manifests itself outwardly in many actions that are not linguistic (in the limited sense) at all: for example, as Vygotsky emphasizes, the overcoming of obstacles in the course of some physical activity.⁵⁷ These acts of thinking are, of course, translatable into human language, but their expression does not seem to be *essentially* linguistic. The relationship between thought and language changes, however, when we shift attention to acts of abstract or logical thought. These are, Vygotsky suggests, only made possible by an internalization of human language. But, even here, language does not serve to bind thought but to form it, as a sculptor forms clay into a statue. Language can impact

⁵⁶Taylor spends a good deal of space in *The Language Animal* on this phenomenon. See esp. Chapter 6, "The Articulation of Meaning."

⁵⁷Some of these kinds of thinking, like "tool-thinking," are capable of being carried out by animals that lack human language altogether.

thought in much the same way that one human language, on Benjamin's view of translation, can impact another.

Vygotsky's ideas resonate closely with a number of other features of Benjamin's theory as well. As Vygotsky writes—perhaps drawing on Humboldt's dictum that language is not *ergon* (work) but *energeia* (activity)—“the relation of thought to word is not a thing but a process.”⁵⁸ The natural tendency to conceive of language as a thing leads to the theoretical fixity of the relationship between thought and language in designative theories of language. Instead, Vygotsky insists that language and thought are continually in a process of co-development, even in the adult. The picture that emerges here is very similar to Benjamin's conception of language as a medium rather than a means. Different strata of expression impact and influence one another immanently—bleeding into one another—rather than externally, ensuring a fluid and dynamic relationship among not just different languages, but among different expressive strata, including thought, speech, and art. Benjamin's refusal to define language—to insist that everything is language—ensures that the manifold differences between these different kinds of language or strata of meaning remain available to articulate.

Moreover, for both Benjamin and Vygotsky, the process of mutual influence of these different strata is always already underway. The child's initiation into a language cannot be cleanly demarcated from pre-linguistic forms of expression like crying or babbling, nor can pre-linguistic thought be cleanly demarcated from the beginnings of higher-order rational thinking that accompany initiation into a language. This means meaning, for Vygotsky, precedes language in a similar way as it does in Benjamin. Human language gives shape to or articulates the meaning already present in pre-linguistic thought. Benjamin's use of the Genesis narrative, though in other respects diverging markedly from Vygotsky's method, provides a phylogenetic equivalent that insists on seeing language in a narrative or developmental context without searching for an origin of it.⁵⁹ It also, as we've seen, insists on seeing meaning as preceding human language and finding a particular articulation or translation in it.

⁵⁸ *Thought and Language*, 231.

⁵⁹ Benjamin and Vygotsky both regard the ontogenetic and phylogenetic questions of language development as closely related. Benjamin writes that the ontogenetic research into childhood language “is able to throw light on the phylogenetic problems” (GS 3:473 / SW 3:81).

In its holism as well, Vygotsky's approach overlaps with Benjamin's. Previous psychologists have erred, according to Vygotsky, in proceeding by way of analysis into elements—that is, in this case, conceiving of thought and word independently. They thereby break verbal thought “into component elements [. . .] neither of which, taken separately, possesses properties of the whole.”⁶⁰ Having broken up “the living union of sound and meaning that we call the words,” these theorists are driven to the assumption that they must be “held together merely by mechanical associative connections.”⁶¹ They crumble a cookie and take the result as evidence that cookies are composed of adhering crumbs. As we saw, Vygotsky proposes instead an analysis focusing on word meaning, an amalgam of thought and language, which he construes as a “unit.” Units differ from elements in that they “retain and express the essence of that whole being analyzed,” in this case verbal thinking as a whole. In some respects, Vygotsky echoes here Benjamin's critique of scientific atomization in the “Epistemo-Critical Foreword.”⁶² Although the scientific analysis into elements can produce positive results—or knowledge, as Benjamin puts it—the sense of what is lost—truth—is lacking and demonstrated by the syncretic attempts to slap the hopelessly disintegrated whole back together again.

In some more specific features, Vygotsky's holistic, developmental account is also strikingly similar to Benjamin's theory. For Vygotsky, this process is characterized by the gradual extrication of thought, understood as semantic meaning, from words, understood as phonetic units. The designative or “idealist” understanding of language, which sees thought as an independent realm finding expression by means of arbitrary signs, is inaccurate as an empirical account of thinking and speech, but it does function as a kind of ideal endpoint toward which the developmental process aims, without ever reaching it. That is, the sublimation involved in the transition from egocentric language to inner speech sees thought, as it were, peel off of words.⁶³ For Vygotsky, as for Benjamin, this implies, in some form, the priority of immediate, aesthetic meaning. In Vygotsky,

⁶⁰ *Thought and Language*, 224.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶² Like Benjamin, Vygotsky is likely influenced by Goethe here.

⁶³ Cf. Herder's understanding of how words and thoughts adhere: “In all parts of literature thought sticks to the expression, and forms itself according to the latter” (*HW* 1:556–57/*PW* 48).

as in Benjamin, *naming*, or what Vygotsky calls “the nominative function,” must come first, and rational thought depends on a severing of an original connection between the semantic and the phonetic. Logical meaning, in which thoughts gain independence of words and can thus be equally well expressed by arbitrarily chosen signs, must be understood as a separation or disengagement of a prior unity. This places language for Vygotsky, as again for Benjamin, on a sliding scale between signs and names, mathematics and art. “Our daily speech,” Vygotsky writes, “constantly fluctuates between the ideals of mathematical harmony and imaginative harmony”—the factual rightness of correspondence and logical entailment and the affective rightness of aesthetic aptness.⁶⁴

Finally, Vygotsky offers a way toward what Taylor identifies as another *desideratum* of an expressivist theory of language: namely, an account of the “depth-structure” of both language and consciousness.⁶⁵ His thoughts on linguistic development offer a way of modeling the sense that beneath the surface of utterances lie unarticulated thoughts and motivations, which may be conscious or unconscious to varying degrees.⁶⁶ These thoughts do not find straightforward expression in language but very often meanings that can only be excavated, as it were, through a difficult and open-ended interpretive process, during which meanings are capable of shifting with the interpreter, new information, subsequent statements, the passage of time. As Schlegel puts it, “Words often understand themselves better than do those who use them.”⁶⁷

The relationship between thought and language in Vygotsky is translational in Hamann and Benjamin’s sense. It involves the partial and imperfect movement of meaning between strata, in which meaning is often forced to bend itself to the limitations of new media, and is thereby capable of both losing and gaining resonances. In this respect, as Vygotsky was well aware, expression in, and interpretation of, utterances in human language share a great deal with art and art criticism.

⁶⁴ *Thought and Language*, 221.

⁶⁵ “Language and Human Nature,” 240–42. Terezakis, drawing from Taylor, identifies a “depth-structure” model of consciousness in Hamann. See *Immanent Word*, 43.

⁶⁶ *Thought and Language*, 267–68.

⁶⁷ “On Incomprehensibility,” in *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 297–307, 298.

What Art Means

IN CHAPTER 4, I referred to Forster's account of two varieties of expressivism, "limited" (Herder's) and "broad" (Hamann's). For Forster, the former is articulated not in the *Treatise* but in Herder's later works, especially those dealing with aesthetics.¹ In this chapter, I want explore the question of the expressivity of art as it figures in Herder and Hamann's works, Forster's interpretation of them, and Benjamin's 1919 dissertation *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*. In the dissertation, Benjamin attempts to give a systematic account of Schlegel's theory of criticism, which has its origins in Fichte's theory of reflection.

Schlegel, as Forster and others have noted, takes on board many of Herder's insights. He develops them into his own theory of criticism and of the artwork that has a significant influence on Benjamin's subsequent development of his own theory of language into a theory of ideas. In the end, however, Benjamin is critical of Schlegel for his conception of the absolute. Benjamin's criticism turns on Schlegel's mystical delimitation of the medium of reflection, and parallels in some ways Hamann's own criticisms of Herder. Both Schlegel and Herder end up delimiting and thereby distorting, by Hamann's and Benjamin's lights, the medium they want to describe. These criticisms and the example of art help to illustrate the shortcomings of limited expressivism and the manner in which it exposes itself to the risk of backsliding into a designative ac-

¹ Forster's evidence comes from the later parts of *Critical Forests* (1769), where Herder's thought begins to develop toward narrow expressivism but remains inconsistent; *Plastic* (1778), translated as *Sculpture: Some Observations on Shape and Form of Pygmalion's Creative Dream*, ed. J. Gaiger (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); *Theological Letters* (1780–1781); and *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity* (1793–1797).

count of language. They also help to clarify Benjamin's own understanding of the absolute and the expressivity of art.

1. Art, Language, Thought

Art, as Forster makes clear, is an important battleground between the broad expressivism of Hamann (and Benjamin) and Herder's later, tempered expressivism. Unlike standard philosophies of language, expressivism needs to be able to account for expression in general and not just (human) linguistic expression, since it takes the continuity between the two so seriously. This is especially relevant, as Taylor points out, given developments in modern art, which themselves tend to problematize the question of expression. Taylor writes:

The concern for language as a medium links up with the twentieth-century concern with meaning. What is it that makes speech meaningful, or indeed that makes meaningful any of the things that have meaning? For this question has been raised not just in connection with language, which is what philosophical theories of meaning have been concerned with. It has also been raised acutely for the arts, for instance music and painting. It is necessarily posed by the rise of non-representational painting, and of music which stepped outside the seemingly fixed code of the eight-tone scale. The revolution of the beginning of the century, for instance, of Schönberg and cubism, put these questions on the agenda; and they have been kept on it by all the revolutions we have seen since. They have taught us to ask the question, What is meaning?, in a broader context than simply that of language. They induce us to see language as one segment of that range of meaningful media that men can deploy. And this range comes to seem all the more problematic.²

Twentieth-century art parallels twentieth-century philosophy in turning its attention to the means it uses to express itself. In painting, modernism draws our attention to the surface of paintings, the paint itself and the action of painting, and the use of shape and color. And the work of artists like Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol raise questions about what an artwork is and the role context—the “artworld”—plays in defining art.

²Taylor, “Language and Human Nature,” 216.

As Forster presents it, the question is whether to privilege the expressivity of human language in its relationship to the expressivity of non-linguistic art. That is, should we see the expressivity of art as dependent on human language which, in some sense, underlies or grounds non-linguistic art. Or should we instead regard these arts as having their own particular expressivity that—while of course translatable into human language—remains, at least in some sense, independent of it? The question is of fundamental import for expressivism because, as we saw in “On Language as Such,” if we opt for the latter thesis, then it seems we may want to ascribe this broader type of expressivity to the world at large.

Limited expressivism subscribes then, in some form, to the doctrine that human language is separate and differing in kind from other non-linguistic human forms of expression, as well as the expressivity of animals and pre-linguistic children. This is, importantly, already true for the Herder of the *Treatise*. In privileging the recognition of *Merkmale* as parts of objects that can come to stand for them, Herder derives language from a capacity for awareness that separates humans from animals. And, by referring to these *Merkmale* as no less than words of human language, he also draws a line between what we might call pre-linguistic and linguistic experience. The latter is experience that is co-original with and conditioned by language and language use, and therefore strictly separable from the non-linguistic experience that animals or pre-linguistic children have. Another way to put the point: for Herder and limited expressivism, meaning proper begins with human language.

From the broad expressivist point of view, on the other hand, the expressivity of art is importantly not predicated or dependent on a prior (human) linguistic expressivity. There is no thesis here to the effect that art is impossible without language or that it derives its meaning from language. Such a thesis would misleadingly suggest that there is some kind of natural, rather than simply conventional, distinction to be drawn between the two. Such a view is called into question both by the speculation that human language has its origins in a mimetic or aesthetic impulse and is not necessarily distinguishable from art in its earliest instantiations, and the view—to be expanded on below—that art expresses meaning not (wholly) communicable by human language. Both human language and art are regarded as modes of a continuous human capacity for expression. The distinction between them is, of course, not an

illusion, but needs to be seen developmentally, without any essentialism. From this perspective, the broad expressivist position—which otherwise seems obviously more extreme—might actually appear the more sober, since it refuses to let the distinctions present in our developed language prejudice our philosophical interpretation of the phenomena.

From the broad expressivist perspective, what is remarkable about human language is its particular and radical capacity for articulation—that is, its ability to give more definition to already extant expressive phenomena—be they thoughts, perceptions, events, artworks, or things. When human language is understood as a single, albeit unparalleled, power of articulation within a broader expressive medium, it becomes clear that meaningful expression cannot be confined to human language but must be expanded (to begin with) to include the whole range of human cultural practices. Whether we refer to the general communicability or expressivity of these practices as “language” is a matter of semantics. We are perhaps less likely to overlook the continuities if we do grant the word “language” broader scope. The worry, in the end, is that if we confine the capacity to mean to human language, we will have mutilated the capacity we want philosophy of language to attempt to describe.

This is precisely the complaint Hamann makes against Herder. I’ve already argued that Herder’s *Treatise* exhibits a movement away from its roots in Hamann’s broad expressivism simply through the act of translating these concepts into a naturalistic register. In later writings on aesthetics and language, Herder moves even further away from Hamann and develops, as Forster sees it, a sophisticated, more consistent narrow expressivism.³ Herder’s later works resolve the tension between Hamann’s radical expansion of the concept of language and his naturalism in favor of the latter, relying on a conventional distinction between thought and language and abandoning the intriguing, if problematic, undermining of that distinction in the *Treatise*. Herder’s limited expressivism holds, in essence, the same thesis about the meaning communicated by non-linguistic arts as it does about thoughts. The meaning expressible

³Forster regards this development as a return to earlier convictions and the end of the interlude represented by the *Treatise*. This narrative supports Forster’s thesis that Herder, not Hamann, is the originator of expressivism’s central concepts, since he reads Hamann’s criticisms of the *Treatise* as Hamann (disingenuously) criticizing the Herder of the *Treatise* by drawing on the ideas of an earlier Herder (*After Herder*, 307–08).

by music, for example, is bounded by language, and the meanings therefore expressed by music must be articulable in human language.

By contrast, Forster characterizes a broad expressivism along Hamann's lines as expanding the concept of language to include the expression of music (and indeed everything) and holding therefore that music is capable of expressing meanings that cannot be captured and articulated by human language. This characterization is not inaccurate but it is somewhat misleading, as will be explained below. In any case, Forster thinks this broad expressivist thesis is initially attractive since our experience of music often seems to involve meaning that we find human language incapable of expressing. Forster, extrapolating from some of Herder's own comments, suggests, however, that this is an illusion arising from a "peculiar combination of inarticulateness and articulateness." Forster writes:

First, instrumental music often expresses a composer's *linguistically expressible* thoughts and meanings but in ways that are vague, making it hard for a listener to pin down the thoughts and meanings in question with precision (from the music). This genuine presence of definite linguistically expressible thoughts and meanings which, however, the listener finds himself unable to pin down linguistically with any precision easily gets misconstrued by him as a presence of definite thoughts and meanings which cannot be linguistically expressed. Second, music often expresses and communicates more precisely than could be done by language (alone) certain nuances of feeling and emotion—that is, certain psychological states which are other than thoughts and meanings but which can easily be mistaken for them (especially given that they do *involve* them, and that other thoughts and meanings are expressed in the music as well).⁴

Thus, the argument runs, the intuition that music expresses meanings that are inexpressible in human language is illusory. Rather, music vaguely expresses certain thoughts of the composer (that are also linguistically expressible) and articulately expresses non-linguistic emotions (that may nonetheless be tied together with other linguistically-expressible content).

The first issue to clarify in Forster's discussion is the conception of meaning operative here. Forster takes it as a central tenet of Herder's

⁴Forster, *After Herder*, 110.

later philosophy of language that meanings are understood as word-usages—*not* as “items independent of human language,” but as roles established for words in their given and various linguistic contexts. Given this understanding of meaning, strictly tied to word-usage, it would appear on the face of it that non-linguistic art should simply be denied the capacity to express meaning. If meaning is to be defined as narrowly linguistic, music does not express meaning. Herder does hold this position in certain texts.⁵ However, the position Forster takes to be more nuanced and plausible sees Herder grant music the capacity to express meaning but requires that this meaning also be linguistically expressible.

How should we conceive, then, of the meaning expressed by music? There seem to be two options on this view. First, we regard the meaning expressed by music to simply be word-usages as well, of some vague or degraded kind. This is difficult to fathom, since it would then seem hard to avoid the implication that instrumental music itself is made up of vague or degraded words. Second, we regard music as vaguely expressing some kind of word-independent meaning but one that is “bounded by language,” which simply means the meaning expressed by music must be capable of being expressed (more exactly) by language. But this second option seems to commit us to meaning that is independent of any material expression—precisely the commitment expressivism wants to avoid. The meaning expressed by music would seem to have to be independent of its material, since the meaning expressed is word-usages but the material (the music) expressing it is not words.⁶

To be sure, Herder and Forster emphasize that the intellectual content music is supposed to express is “tied to a prior linguistic understanding,” in this example, that of the composer. Still, the suggestion that music is a means that expresses meaning seems unavoidable. The composer is meant to have thoughts that are linguistically bounded, and he then uses music to express them. These thoughts or meanings remain linguistically bounded insofar as they cannot be inexpressible in human language, but this condition still leaves in place a picture of music expressing linguistic meaning, narrowly conceived. To repeat the point,

⁵Namely, *Critical Forests*. See Forster, *After Herder*, 103–04.

⁶That is, even though musical meaning is bounded by language, there would be instances in which vague meaning was communicated by music without the intervention of spoken or written language, when neither musician nor listener put the meaning of the music into words.

on this view either music simply expresses these meanings in the same way as human language, which means it is (absurdly) human language, or it expresses meanings in some other way, which means there is language-independent meaning (even if this meaning must also be expressible by human language).

The example of non-linguistic art points to ambiguities and tensions that any “limited” form of expressivism will fall into. If one limits the concept of language to human language and makes the concept of meaning always dependent on or bounded by human language, expressive contexts that don’t involve human language will have to be analyzed in terms of human language. What they express independently of human language cannot be regarded as meaning except insofar as it is expressible in human language. What is expressed will consequently have to be divided into meaning and non-meaning—that which can consequently be captured by human language and that which cannot. This leads to Forster’s conjecture that a single piece of instrumental contains intertwined in it both non-linguistic emotional content and vague linguistic content. (How are they to be distinguished?) Moreover, its capacity to express linguistic meaning independently of language, is in the first place, difficult to fathom, since it is not granted the status of language. Two theses of limited expressivism—that meaning is word-usages and that artistic meaning is bounded by human language—thus come into tension with one another.

Can a broader expressivism dissolve this tension? Forster attributes to broad expressivism the thesis that music expresses meanings inexpressible by human language, which would seem to lead to as opaque an understanding of meaning as we find in limited expressivism. But the conception of meaning in broad expressivism changes along with the expansion of the concept of language. Once music, along with the rest of nature, is understood as part of a medium of linguistic communicability, it is misleading to say that music, for broad expressivism, expresses meaning understood as something outside the music. The language of music is simply everything communicated by music; that is, it includes every part of the experience of music. The meaning of music is the music itself. There is, then, a trivial sense in which it is correct to say that music expresses meanings that human language cannot express. Human language cannot capture the experience of music perfectly, though it can, of course, offer an interpretation or, as Benjamin

might put it, a translation of the experience; this translation will, of course, be necessarily incomplete and imperfect. Music does not express meanings independent of the music itself that must be bounded by or able to be put into the words of human language. Its capacity to communicate and articulate meaning is in certain respects much richer and in others much poorer than that of human language.

There are thus at least two advantages for broad expressivism with regard to its account of non-linguistic arts. First, it can accommodate quite naturally the intuition that music communicates in a way that cannot be perfectly captured by human language, since music is understood like any other part of nature. The narrow expressivism endorsed by Forster requires not just a conception of meaning that, as noted above, comes close to the designative conception that expressivism rejects, but also requires that the intellectual content expressed by a work of art be derived from "a prior linguistic expression." This seems *prima facie* to be a bad account of artistic production, since we generally think of the non-linguistic artist as expressing something in her music or painting quite distinct from linguistically expressible thoughts she might have had prior to creating the work of art. One might even say that this is one of the central virtues of the creative outlet provided by non-linguistic arts like music and painting.

The second and related advantage of broad expressivism in relation to non-linguistic art is its immanence. The meaning a piece of music communicates is nothing detached or detachable from the music itself. This is not, of course, to say that the music is completely divorced from the meaning expressible in human language. A piece of music is available for linguistic criticism, linguistic explanation of its origins, influences, and so forth. But the transformations that language goes through on the way from musical expression to critical commentary or poetic translation do not require any detached intermediary like "meaning," robustly conceived. Instead, between a musical performance and a poem based on it, for example, are a multitude of continuous transformations, partial and imperfect, that lead from musical expression to human linguistic expression.

We can imagine a composer, for example, trying to convey a sense of a piece she's working on to a friend and finding words not enough, and going to the piano to show what she means. And then perhaps, reaching a point in the composition where she is stuck, she will go back

to explaining the meaning she wants to convey in words. In the same way, we might use our hands or posture to convey something more effectively than we can using words or as accompaniment to words, or we might show something physically we have failed to explain with words. In none of these cases is the meaning conveyed without words inexpressible in words, but neither is the meaning conveyed (or potentially conveyed) exactly the same in the distinct media.

Despite the way we are given to talking, there is no content that the music expresses, which somebody subsequently tries to also express with human language. Music and human language are both already situated within a medium of communicability wherein what they communicate is not detachable from them but is simply themselves insofar as they are communicable (to use Benjamin's language). Narrow expressivism, of course, also hews closely in theory to its own deflationary account of meaning: meanings are word-usages. What I'm trying to suggest is that the exceptional status granted to human language belies such an account and tends toward a more designative theory that construes meaning as content separable from words.

Although Forster's narrow expressivism denies the existence of language-independent meanings, Platonic or otherwise, it seems to be driven quite close to such a conception of meaning when it tries to accommodate the expressiveness of art while insisting that that expressiveness be bounded by human language. If art can express meaning but is not language, meaning must be, to a certain extent, independent of language. The narrow expressivism which Forster attributes to the later Herder thus seems to involve, at least implicitly, a conception of meaning as a third term mediating different kinds of expression—that of human language and that of, for example, art.

Forster's model avoids contradiction by insisting that the meaning expressed by non-linguistic art is derivative of meaning (thoughts of the artist) that are linguistically expressible, but this comes at the cost of denying the sense that an artist's work in her medium involves a direct expression of meaning. The limited expressivist concession of meaning to non-linguistic arts is, in this sense, something of an illusion. Musical meaning that must be expressible by human language is not really musical meaning at all.

Vygotsky's model of the relationship between thought and language can be of use in modeling the expressivity of art as well. As with

language, there is no single fixed relationship that obtains between thinking and artistic expression. The routes, for example, from a composer's first thoughts about a song to the page are manifold. She may simply "hear" a particular musical phrase—the way we seem to "hear" a sentence run through our mind—and race to her piano to play it or to her desk to jot it down in notation. She may articulate it in words or draw inspiration from a poem before composing; she may even see a picture or paint one, and find in that activity somehow a clue to how the song ought to go. Many different forms of expression and thought can interpenetrate one another here. We may be able to untangle how one relates to the other in a particular instance, but we will not find rules for how they relate to one another in every case.

These considerations point, once again, to the importance of language as such as the starting point for Benjamin's theory. Benjamin's account of language as such as an always-present *medium* of communicability through which various modes of expression are possible both eradicates a privileged position for human language and makes all meaning immanent in its expression. Without a broad concept of a communicable medium that makes human language possible, human language is in danger of being made the single expressive media that endows other kinds of expressivity, like art, with meaning. The world is divided in two, into what it is and what it means. Limited expressivism thereby requires that human language underlie non-linguistic expressive media and endow them with meaning. Ultimately, however, we are pushed back here toward a conception of meaning expressivism set out to deny.

2. Hamann's *Herderschriften*

I have suggested that broad expressivity can more satisfactorily model the relationship between art and language. To this end, and in furtherance of the historical aims of this chapter, I will offer an interpretation of Benjamin's 1919 dissertation, *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism* since it is in terms of criticism that he understands the relationship between language and art. But before discussing that work, I want to touch briefly on Hamann's response to Herder's *Treatise*. A discussion of Hamann's criticisms of Herder will help to complete the discussion of the previous section and to connect the issues of expressivism to the

broadier issues in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century German philosophy that inform the Romantic theory of reflection, which is the starting point for Benjamin's dissertation. It will also help to further characterize the medium of language as such, since Hamann's criticisms of Herder foreshadow some of Benjamin's criticisms of Schlegel. In both cases, the problem is an illicit limitation of this medium.

As argued in Chapter 3, Benjamin's conception of language as such is motivated in part by an attempt to overcome what he regards as the unduly subject-centered, empiricist epistemological paradigm that finds its way into Kant's first critique. The expansion of the concept of language thus involves for him a realm "neutral" with respect to subject and object. Clearly, in Herder's version of expressivism, which involves a translation of some of Hamann's ideas into a naturalistic paradigm, there is no such concern for avoiding this division. Herder's account of the origin of language involves only a single mythical subject who invents language by drawing on the free awareness characteristic of us as humans. Moreover, each child is regarded as coming to "invent language for themselves" or coming to this same state of reflective awareness that, for Herder, is the beginning of linguistic competence. Language and meaning are conceived of as a standpoint on the world accomplished by a subject.

There is an important connection between the consideration of thought and language as accomplishments of the subject—a reflective process that works itself up out of a basic physiological capacity for taking-awareness—and the view that the concept of language need be limited to human language. If meaning is entirely generated out of a certain application and development of human faculties and is consequently bounded by (or even identifiable with) human language, then the ascription of meaning to phenomena that are not already those of human language—e.g., music—must depend on human language both in their conception (the thought of the artist) and in their reception (the linguistically conditioned perception of the viewer). Hamann, in his own responses to the *Treatise* (the so-called *Herderschriften*),⁷ recognizes that

⁷These include "The Last Will and Testament of the Knight of Rose-Cross on the Divine and Human Origin of Language," "Philological Ideas and Doubts about an Academic Prize Essay," and two reviews.

Herder's translation of his own expressivism is not harmless, but represents a shift away from the character of language as he conceived of it.

This is not to say that naturalism is *necessarily* incompatible with a Hamannian account that preserves and takes as its starting point the mystery of language. The *Treatise* itself mixes its naturalism with some of Hamann's biblical language and employs the story of Adam's naming of the animals to great effect.⁸ Hamann, for his part, also admits the potential power of naturalistic explanations when he writes in a letter to Herder regarding the *Treatise*, "God throws language *through* people—who doubts it? Who has? [. . .] That he does not throw mystically, but through nature, animals, a pantheon of speaking lutes; that he speaks through the urgency of human needs or wishes—who has taken this up more than I?"⁹

However, these two accounts of language can only remain compatible for Hamann if the appropriate predominance is granted the biblical account. By shifting explanatory weight onto a naturalistic, subject-centered account, Herder endangers the conception of language as a "rationally unassailable mystery," as Terezakis puts it.¹⁰ That is, he endangers the position of a linguistic, hermeneutic, and translational structure that must already be there for human language to be possible. Hamann regards the notion that humankind could invent language on a par with alchemy or the view that humankind could invent walking (*HSW* 3:30–31 / *WP* 106). For Hamann, the Academy's question, even though it doesn't assert that humankind invented language nor that it was bequeathed to us as a divine gift, already presupposes a certain picture of language as the kind of thing that can be layered on top of or added to human life—that is, something that can either theoretically or actually *be absent* from human existence.¹¹

⁸ See Terezakis, *Immanent Word*, 116ff.

⁹ Hamann, *Briefwechsel*, vol. 3, 10. Qtd. in Terezakis, *Immanent Word*, 96.

¹⁰ Terezakis, *Immanent Word*, 111. Terezakis argues that "Herder and Hamann are not at odds over the derivation of language, but over the rhetorical rights to forms of discourse that differently responded to its veritable inscrutability."

¹¹ It is interesting to compare Hamann's criticisms of Herder with those Kant makes. Kant saw Herder as abandoning the calm, cautious use of reason that characterized the critical project for a more literary and illicitly metaphysical understanding of the natural world. He associated Herder's turn away from sober rationality limited by the confines of possible experience with the influence of Hamann. But here we see Hamann also criticizing Herder for overreaching his bounds, albeit in a different way. Whereas Kant faulted Herder, specifically in a review of Herder's *Ideas for a Philosophy*

Hamann is concerned about Herder's response simply insofar as it engages the Academy's question. To speculate about the origin of language, even in the sophisticated manner Herder employs, is to concede that language is the kind of thing capable of having an origin.¹² It makes the question of whether or not this origin is knowable a practical issue and treats language like just another isolable natural phenomenon.

Hamann and Benjamin make the fact that language has no origin, and is, therefore, always already present, the foundation of linguistic theory. Explanations of the origin or mystery of language, like Condillac's, are doomed to tacitly import the perspective they want to explain. If language is granted an origin, it is already distorted, made into a circumscribable phenomenon with definite features—a single element of our relationship to the world. It is natural, from this point, to speculate that language is the phenomenon that separates us from animals and buttresses other distinctively human cultural forms like art. If, however, human language is not viewed as having a distinct origin, but as emerging from and within a medium of communicability without which all of human experience is unimaginable, then it is only isolable from other spheres of human activity by reason's look backward at language. Its isolation is, in other words, not natural, but a product of self-reflexivity.

Human language is not taken to be a foundation from which other human activities like art and social organization emerge, and which are subsequently "bound" by or dependent on human language, as in Forster's reading of Herder. Rather, it is one manifestation of human life that is distinct in terms of the complexity and capacity for reflective thought that it engenders, but not distinct simply insofar as it is expressive. To deny human language has an origin is to deny that it

of the History of Humankind, for positing natural forces that could explain teleological development in nature and history, Hamann faults him for extending the methods of natural science into questions that are the proper domain of religion and that therefore become distorted by naturalistic reason. These critiques, one could argue, are two sides of the same coin. Kant faults Herder for importing faith into the domain of reason, whereas Hamann faults him for importing reason into the domain of faith. To be sure, Kant and Hamann do not draw the line between the two in the same place. See Beiser, *Fate of Reason*, 149–53.

¹²Terezakis argues that Herder may be playing a game with the Academy's question on this score and that Hamann recognizes this to an extent, but still takes issue with the suggestion in Herder that the "progressive character of [the naturalistic] mode of rationalization [is] sure to overcome its interim explanatory gaps." *Immanent Word*, 111.

differs in kind from other expressive techniques used by animals and humans. Human life, in other words, is infused with expressivity not because human language always sits, as it were, beneath human activity. Rather, human language is one particular manifestation of that expressiveness—albeit a distinctive one, especially with respect to its role in the development of thought.

Herder's suggestion that reason and language can be derived from the single foundation of *Besinnung* is, therefore, anathema to Hamann. Herder's concept of awareness—although itself only a precursor to reason—essentially serves the same function, from Hamann's point of view, as a flatfooted Enlightenment picture of reason inventing language from out of itself. The problem in both cases is that what is to be explained—meaning and language—is pushed back onto a structure—human reason or awareness—where meaning and language are already present, even if in inchoate form.

Herder, as I suggested above, thus succumbs to a subtler version of the error he accused Condillac of committing. In Herder's case this structure involves a sophisticated attempt to situate meaning within a naturalistic account of what makes human beings distinct from other animals. But the result is analogous. Language is conceived of as a human capacity independent of the rest of the world. Meaning becomes something projected onto the world by this capacity. Humankind is, through language, granted a privileged place "outside" or above animal life and the rest of creation. The assumption or imported perspective that Herder finds in Condillac is pushed back, but not eliminated. Where for Condillac "words existed before they existed," for Herder linguistic—or proto-linguistic—consciousness exists before it exists.

To sum up, the dangers of Herder's translation of Hamann's expressivism into a naturalistic paradigm are threefold: it threatens (1) to hypostatize the human capacity for language, (2) to subjectivize linguistic structure as something projected onto the world by the individual mind, and (3) to place humankind at the center of the question of language in an overly anthropocentric manner.

Hamann remains himself, however, loath to give a clear or explicit account of how human language relates to meaning in general or, to use Benjamin's term, language as such. Hamann, instead, in a typical passage, writes this of the origin of human language in the garden of Eden:

The creature was not yet made subject, unwillingly, to the vanity and bondage of the corruptible system under which they now yawn, sigh and are dumb [. . .]—Every phenomenon of nature was a word,—and the sign, symbol, and pledge of a new, secret, inexpressible but all the more fervent union, fellowship, and communion of divine energies and ideas. All that man heard at the beginning, saw with his eyes, looked upon, and his hands handled was a living word; for God was this word. With this word in his mouth and in his heart the origin of language was as natural, as close and easy, as a child's game. (*HSW* 3:32 / *WP* 108–09)

Hamann suggests a picture of language near its origins where language has not yet been corrupted and made separate from the world. At the beginning, nature is alive with language, and human language is a kind of participation or communion with linguistic nature. Language is not, in this context, invented by humankind but natural to us insofar as we are human. It is not, in other words, something that we can be without—not something that needs to be invented by employing pre-existent capacities in a certain way. The sense of human language as the invention of something separate from nature is replaced by that of human language as a “corruption” of nature's or God's already extant language, and moreover, a vanity that places human language and the human subject in a realm somehow “outside of” or “above” creation.

This very corruption is at the same time the value of human language: without this vanity, its power of articulation would not far exceed that of animal languages, but it means that human language is doomed to misunderstand itself. It, in a sense, requires this misunderstanding. Anticipating Wittgenstein, Hamann attributes this confusion to a temptation natural or automatic to reason—to hypostatize language. “The confusion of language, by which [. . .] they [philosophers] seduce and are seduced, is of course a very natural magic of automatic reason, to which it comes at little cost to transfigure itself into a star of the first magnitude, especially for the pranksters of like blindness” (*HSW* 3:31 / *WP* 106). In “On Language as Such,” as we saw, Benjamin takes Hamann's suggestions in earnest and attempts through the biblical language of vanity and shame to show how language develops and expresses this misunderstanding of itself in “bourgeois” or designative theories of language.

The limited expressivist position that Herder moves toward in later writings confirms Hamann's concerns about Herder's speculation on the origin of language. Herder's position in the *Treatise* is nuanced in a

number of ways. It offers plausible naturalistic accounts of many of the features of language that Hamann only expresses obliquely—for example, on the mimetic origins of language, its grammatical development from pure expression or intervention in nature to sophisticated logical deduction, and the co-original and co-developing structures of thought and language. However, by subscribing to the position that language can have an origin in the natural attributes of humankind—whether this origin is discoverable or not—Herder makes certain implicit assumptions about the nature of language that seem to bear fruit in later writings. He assumes that human language is different in kind from animal language, that the meaning on offer in human language is of a different order than its basis in mimesis. To treat language as having a natural, human origin of the kind Herder assumes is implicitly to deny what Hamann takes to be a central feature of language, namely that it is a medium that conditions all of our experience, even the supposed origin or ground of language (or anything else).

Terezakis puts this point nicely:

The point, for Hamann, is not just that we cannot help but use signs to mark “Being,” “identity,” or “ground” in a way that is secondary to our more primary experience of them, but that our experience of Being, identity, or ground manifests in and through essentially linguistic structures.¹³

It is the very concept of origin, then, that is uncritically adopted by theories of Herder’s kind since they attempt to grasp an inescapable linguistic structure as if from outside, thereby theoretically delimiting and distorting it.¹⁴ On Hamann’s view, language doesn’t come along and fundamentally and irrevocably alter a non-linguistic relationship to the world; language is always already there, involved in the way we relate to the world. Human language does, of course, radically alter that relationship, but it does not inaugurate meaning as such.

The threat of Herder’s narrow expressivism backsliding into questionable conceptions of meaning and language is made good in the

¹³Terezakis, *Immanent Word*, 113.

¹⁴It is no accident that Benjamin develops a theory of origin in the “Epistemo-Critical Foreword” that tries to take into account the linguistic conditionedness of concepts both as they emerge in the past and take on new meaning in the present, and thereby recognizes the radically limited nature of our epistemological access to the past and to “original” phenomena.

example of artistic meaning. Since the expression of human linguistic meaning is conceived of as separate from meaning as such and conceived of as an entirely subjective capacity, artworks are only permitted meaning derivative of the former; they are bearers of a linguistic content that is essentially grounded in subjective thought and bounded by the condition that it be expressible in human language.

3. Reflection in the World

For expressivism in general, the artwork exists on an expressive level in between the natural object of experience and the human word. For a narrow expressivist, it has neither the full, determinate expressivity of human language, nor does it completely lack expressivity like a mere natural object. The challenge for a narrow expressivist is thus to give an account of the artwork as lacking immanent expression, but still able to bear or act as the conduit for expression that is grounded in human language. For the broad expressivist, by contrast, the example of the artwork can provide an opportunity to bridge the conventional gap between the kind of meaning attributed to human thought and language and a non-linguistic natural world. Benjamin's theory of the artwork and art criticism is heavily indebted to the conception of reflection in early Romanticism, especially as it is expounded in the writings of Friedrich Schlegel.

In his dissertation, *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*, Benjamin offers what might be called a "strong reading" of Schlegel's conception of reflection, one that is controlled by Benjamin's earlier thought on language.¹⁵ What follows is a discussion of Benjamin's interpreta-

¹⁵ Benjamin's interpretation—as noted by Winfried Menninghaus ("Walter Benjamin's Exposition of the Romantic Theory of Reflection," *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism*, ed. Beatrice Hanssen and Andrew Benjamin (New York: Continuum, 2002) 19–50) and Rodolphe Gasché ("The Sober Absolute: On Benjamin and the Early Romantics," *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism*, 58–61)—has an agenda. It pushes the Romantics in a direction consistent with his own philosophy of language and neglects textual evidence that contradicts his reading. (In some cases, this evidence was not available to Benjamin at the time.) Still, as Benjamin notes, his interpretation attempts to analyze the "systematic" role of reflection in Romantic thought, which is avowedly anti-systematic. Textual evidence inconsistent with Benjamin's interpretation is not necessarily damning to Benjamin's project, which is to draw out implications of the Romantic theory of criticism that were not drawn out by the Romantics themselves.

tion and criticism of the Romantic view of the artwork that attempts, first of all, to show Benjamin on the way to developing a theory of the artwork and art criticism both consistent with his early philosophy of language and eventually finding its fullest expression in the "Epistemo-Critical Foreword," and, secondly, to demonstrate the advantages of a broad expressivist account of art and criticism vis-à-vis narrow expressivism. Benjamin's reading of Romantic criticism breaks down barriers, showing continuity between criticism and the artwork and, thereby, between language and art.

Benjamin's dissertation is notably different in style from the majority of his writings. It finds him making concessions to conventional academic standards, absent even in the *Trauerspiel*, a book also ostensibly written to fulfill an academic requirement. Benjamin's analysis of the Romantics is a sensitive and astute historical and conceptual analysis of the Romantic concepts of reflection and criticism. At the same time, however, he uses the occasion to identify the shortcomings of these concepts and suggest a reformulation that will conform to his own expressivism and critical methodology. The monograph is at once an analysis of Romanticism and a reinvention of it.

Benjamin begins by identifying the origins of the Romantic concept of reflection in Fichte and showing where the Romantics part company with him. In his 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre*, Fichte attempts to overcome Kant's division between the practical and the theoretical, while adhering in general to Kant's system, by founding both in a basic form of self-consciousness. In pursuing such a ground for subjectivity, he follows K. L. Reinhold, but Fichte hopes to avoid an infinite regress that he thinks damns Reinhold's account.¹⁶ Reinhold's failure, roughly speaking, consists in grounding the subject's ability to ascribe the representation of an object to himself or herself in the subject's own self-representation.¹⁷ If the sense of the word "representation" is the same in both this basic self-awareness and the representation of an object, the self-representation cannot be well-founded unless it is itself grounded in an antecedent subjective self-representation, and so on *ad infinitum*.

¹⁶ See Fichte's review of a book by G. E. Schulze, *Aenesidemus, oder über die Fundamente der von dem Herrn Prof. Reinhold in Jena gelieferten Elementar-Philosophie* (Jena, 1792). See Fred Rush, "Irony and Romantic Subjectivity," in *Philosophical Romanticism* ed. Nicholas Kompridis (Routledge: London, 2006), 173–95, 175.

¹⁷ Rush, "Irony and Romantic Subjectivity," 175.

Reflection is infinite, to put it another way, because in self-conscious thought a distinction always arises between the “I” that is thinking and the “I” that is consciousness of the thinking of the first “I.” Thus, every consciousness gives rise to a new consciousness. To avoid this infinite regress—as Benjamin interprets him, at least—Fichte opts for a *formal* and *unconscious* conception of reflection. The immediate, always present act of reflection is not reflection on some content but is that which makes that reflection, or knowledge, possible. Fichte’s immediate self-consciousness is not separate from the thinking subject—“it is indivisible from my thinking.”¹⁸ This immediate ground of self-consciousness both arrests reflection—it puts an end to its infinite regress—and provides us with intuitive knowledge of an absolute: the form of knowing.

Benjamin writes:

The absolute subject, the only thing to which the action of freedom has relation, is the center of this reflection and thus is to be known by immediate cognition. It is a question *not* of the cognition of an object through intuition, but of the self-cognition of a method, of something formal—and the absolute represents nothing other than this. (*GS* 1:21 / *SW* 1:122)

For Fichte, then, this formal self-reflection, along with halting the infinite regress of reflection, serves as the ground for any subsequent reflection on an actual object (*GS* 1:23 / *SW* 1:124).

The Romantics, on the other hand, are, according to Benjamin, impressed both by the immediacy of reflection and by its infinity. In these two elements, we can already see an affinity with Benjamin’s conception of the medium of language. They do not, with Fichte, regard the immediacy of reflection as arresting or precluding its infinite character. That infinite character is not, however, understood as the infinity of reflection. It is understood, as Benjamin puts it, not in terms of “an infinity of process, but an infinity of connectedness [*Zusammenhanges*]” (*GS* 1:26 / *SW* 1:126).

Of this infinity Benjamin writes in a complicated passage:

This connectedness can be captured mediately from out of the infinite stages of reflection, as by degrees the totality of the remaining reflec-

¹⁸ *Johann Gottliebs sämtliche Werke*, ed. I. H. Fichte (Berlin: Veit, 1845–1846), 8 vols., volume 1, 527. Qtd. in *GS* 1:25 / *SW* 1:125.

tions are run through on all sides. However, in the mediation through reflections on all sides lies no principle opposition to the immediacy of thinking comprehension, because each reflection is immediately in itself. It thus involves a mediation through immediacies; Friedrich Schlegel knew no other sort, and he speaks occasionally in this sense of a “transition which must always be a leap.” This basic immediacy—not absolute, but mediated—is that on which the vitality of the connectedness rests. An absolute immediacy in the capturing of the connectedness of reflection (*Reflexionszusammenhanges*) is, to be sure, virtually thinkable; with this would the connectedness capture itself in absolute reflection. (*GS* 1:26–27 / *SW* 1:126)

Benjamin establishes here the beginning of a connection between the Romantic concept of reflection and his own conception of language. Or, perhaps more accurately, he begins to interpret Romantic reflection in terms of his philosophy of language.¹⁹ Both reflection and language are conceived of in terms of mediated immediacy. Here, Benjamin suggests that Romantic reflective infinity be understood in terms of the interconnection of an infinity of stages of reflection. Each of these reflections is immediate in itself, but their connectedness is to be understood as a “running through” (*durchlaufen*) of an infinity of different points of reflection, the points of reflection on all sides of a given object. Benjamin refers to the same idea in the “Epistemo-Critical Foreword” in terms of Leibniz’s monadology and his calculus.²⁰ The absolute is analogous to an integral summation of these various monadological points of reflection. Here, Romantic reflection is immediate in all of its various instantiations, but mediated when considered in terms of the infinite number of points of reflection that constitute, for Benjamin and the Romantics, the absolute.

It is clear then that the infinity of reflection that interests the Romantics is very different from the infinity that, for Fichte, plagued Reinhold’s theory. Benjamin explains the connection in terms of the third level of self-conscious reflection: the thinking of thinking of thinking. As we saw above, the problem Fichte sees with the unchecked infinity of reflection is that every successive form of reflection requires a new subject or new consciousness. So the content at the third level (thinking of thinking of thinking) is the subject who is thinking of thinking. But there is an

¹⁹ Menninghaus judges this reading more harshly. See “Benjamin’s Exposition,” 26ff.

²⁰ See Chapter 3, section 6.

ambiguity here, since the content of reflection could either be construed as the subject (the thinker of thinking), or the activity (the *thinking* of thinking). This ambiguity is not available at the second level, which is the “canonical form” of reflection. In thinking of thinking, or, as Fichte puts it, “the form that takes the form as its content,” a distinction between thinking subject and thinking itself is not yet available, since the thinking of thinking inaugurates the self-conscious subject. Form and content are the same. When I think of my own thinking, I am at the same time thinking of myself as the thinker. Third-level reflection entails, on the other hand, “the dissolution of the proper form of reflection in the face of the absolute.”

Benjamin writes:

This dissolution of the strict form of reflection [the canonical second-level form of reflection], which is identical with the diminution of its immediacy, is admittedly dissolution only for circumscribed thinking. It was already indicated above that the absolute can grasp itself reflexively without mediation, in closed reflection, whereas lower reflections can approximate the highest only in mediation by way of immediacy; what is mediated must for its part give way to complete immediacy in turn, as soon as it arrives at absolute reflection. (*GS* 1:31 / *SW* 1:129)

Again, Benjamin’s theory of language is behind his interpretation of Romantic reflection and the beginning of the combination of these elements into a theory of knowledge. The Romantic interpretation of reflection complicates the picture and the problem of infinity in Reinhold and Fichte, where infinity results from a regress into different levels of subjective consciousness. On Schlegel’s view, as Benjamin represents it, this is just a particular type of reflection—“*Urreflexion*” Benjamin calls it, or the “strict form of reflection.” This form of reflection is, as we saw, completely formal; it involves reflection on the form of thinking (and the form of the form of thinking, and so on). For the Romantics, as reflection ascends to the third and higher levels, it is no longer clear that what is being reflected upon is simply the form of thinking—the thinking subject. The content of thinking—the thinking of thinking itself—is also available to reflection. This kind of reflection, as it continues *ad infinitum*, does not proceed into increasingly formal, “empty” levels of self-consciousness, but involves a deepening of the content of thinking. This is reflection as an intensification of thinking rather than a regression on the thinking subject.

This ambiguity in reflection leads to a continuum between two poles: complete intensification, or the absolute itself—"the maximum of reality"—and original, formal reflection. Reflection as intensification dissolves the immediacy of original or self-conscious reflection and begins a movement toward the absolute, which is understood as a mediated integration of these different points of reflection that are immediate in themselves. If this integration is completed (*per impossibile*) what results is the immediate, closed-off reflection of the absolute. The integration of the infinity of mediated immediacies dissolves their mediacy.

Benjamin thus understands Romantic reflection, roughly, as an analogue of the medium of language as he outlined it in "On Language as Such." The absolute is understood as an immediacy reflecting on itself that is able to break itself apart and mediate itself. Reality is conceived of as being composed of centers of reflection that are interconnected in "an infinitely manifold [*vielfache*] way" (*GS* 1:26 / *SW* 1:126). This realm of infinite interconnection is the medium of language. Benjamin thus defines Schlegel's absolute as the "medium of reflection" itself, and writes,

The double-sense of the designation [of the absolute as the medium of reflection] in this case entails no lack of clarity. For, on the one hand, reflection itself is a medium by virtue of its continuous interconnectedness; and on the other hand, the medium in question is one such that reflection moves within it—for reflection, as the absolute, moves within itself. (*GS* 1:36n / *SW* 1:189n)

Reflection is thus both the medium itself and what moves within the medium. This is the "magic of language," an immediacy that mediates itself. Language, like reflection for the Romantics, is both the medium itself and what varies within the medium.

In driving Fichtean reflection away from consciousness as self-consciousness and toward intensification and the endpoint of the absolute, Schlegel and the Romantics eliminate Fichte's understanding of reality as conditioned by the "I" and the action of self-positing. The reflection of self-consciousness is, for the Romantics, just one pole on a reflective continuum that ranges from the absolute to the subject, whose reflection "comprises the minimum of reality" since it involves only reflection on the thinking of thinking, or the form of thinking (*GS* 1:31 / *SW* 1:130). The paradigmatic "middle point" of reflection for the

Romantics becomes, instead of the “I,” the work of art (*GS* 1:39 / *SW* 1:134). The Fichtean schematic is not abandoned altogether; it is just that reflection—the thinking of thinking is understood not as the “I” but as “the ur-cell of the idea of art” (*GS* 1:40 / *SW* 1:135).

This can be understood as an inversion of the Fichtean reflection on the thinking subject. Instead of regressing on the form of thinking, Romantic reflection *progresses* on its content, intensifying consciousness *in* the work of art. Reflection is put in the world instead of in the subject. Art is the ideal object for this kind of reflection since its content is already reflective. Criticism, which intensifies this reflection, becomes the paradigmatic form of philosophical knowledge for the Romantics. However, the relevance of this reflective medium is by no means limited to art or art criticism; rather, the work of art and criticism are paradigms and their example can be generalized to cover objects and knowledge in general, according to Benjamin.

4. How the World Comes to Know Itself

Just as the theory of language implies an ontology in Benjamin’s own work, so too does the Romantic epistemological methodology—the theory of reflection. Despite Schlegel’s anti-systematic comments and the tendency of the Romantic writers to avoid any systematic development of their insights, Benjamin sees a tendency toward systematic thought present in the concept of reflection as an absolute medium. The question of systematicity is important for Benjamin, since he wants to show the conceptual centrality of reflection in the Romantic theory of criticism.²¹ This means he needs to develop a coherent set of connections from the adaption of Fichtean reflection to the Romantic theory of criticism. Since the theory of criticism also involves a theory about what an artwork *is*, this conceptual path must include an ontology.

Schlegel is himself conscious of the ambiguous relationship of his philosophy to systematic thinking: “It is equally fatal,” he writes, “for the mind both to have a system and to have none—hence it will have

²¹ As Menninghaus puts it, Benjamin wants in essence to “derive” the other basic elements of Romanticism from the theory of reflection. “Benjamin’s Exposition,” 19.

to decide to combine both.”²² Schlegel interprets his own bent toward mysticism, at times, as anti-systematic. Benjamin writes, however, “[Schlegel’s] thinking did not unfold systematically, although it was indeed systematically oriented throughout” (*GS* 1:47 / *SW* 1:139). As we’ve already seen, for Benjamin, adapting Hamann’s interpretation of condescension, a certain kind of mysticism is compatible with systematic—though anti-foundationalist—thought. One could say that Benjamin makes mysticism the starting point for a systematic philosophy. Thus, whereas for Schlegel positing reflection as an absolute medium is a move toward anti-systematic mysticism, for Benjamin it remains “a basic systematic conception,” at least in Schlegel’s *Athenaeum* period (*GS* 1:44 / *SW* 1:137–38). Benjamin suggests, as we will see, that Schlegel’s own mistaken metaphilosophical reflections lead him to the principal mistake of his anti-systematic system, which is to place the absolute within the medium of reflection. One can thus interpret Schlegel’s failure to give an adequate account of the idea as part and parcel of a failure to understand the systematic character of his own thought.

In pushing Schlegel’s thought toward a more coherent system, then, Benjamin is also pushing it toward his own theory, which makes use of mysticism in such a way that it acts as a controlling and regulative element in his theory without overwhelming the theory’s content. Benjamin’s interpretation of the systematic nature of Schlegel’s theory involves, again, emphasis on the linguistic elements. Benjamin writes:

[Schlegel] searches for a noneidetic [*unanschaulich*] intuition of the system, and he finds this in language. Terminology is the sphere in which his thought moves beyond discursivity and evidentness [*An-schaulichkeit*]. For the term, the concept, contained for him the seed of the system; it was, at bottom, nothing other than a preformed system itself. Schlegel’s thinking is *absolutely conceptual*—that is, it is linguistic thinking. Reflection is the intentional act of the absolute comprehension of the system, and the adequate form of expression for this act is the concept. In this intuition lies the motive for Friedrich Schlegel’s numerous terminological innovations and the deepest reason for the continually new names he devises for the absolute. (*GS* 1:47–48 / *SW* 1:139–40)

²²Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, eds. E. Behler et al., 35 vols. (Munich: F. Schöningh, 1958–2002), vol. 2, 173.

Schlegel's mysticism is combined with a Kantian rejection of any philosophical attempt to grasp the absolute beyond thinking. Usually, mysticism engages some kind of intuitive, direct acquaintance that enables insight into the absolute beyond experience—a "vision"—but Schlegel abjures that route in favor of a noneidetic, or non-perceptual, intuition of the system. Like every mystic, he seeks to transcend simple discursivity, but he does not claim that transcendence through an insight that appears to the seer, but rather, Benjamin argues, linguistically, through the term or concept itself. In that sense, reflection has become wholly linguistic. Reflection is an intensification of consciousness that attempts to wholly capture its object. It enables the conception of the "real world" in the "Epistemo-Critical Foreword" as "a task, in the sense that what matters is to penetrate so deeply in everything real that an objective interpretation of the world would therein disclose itself." For Benjamin, this task is carried out in an idealized form of linguistic apprehension that transcends concepts, the presentation of the idea. It is important, however, that Benjamin does not directly attribute this notion of the idea to Schlegel. It is precisely the lack of a proper conception of the idea that Benjamin regards as Schlegel's shortcoming; Schlegel, instead, as we'll see, conflates concept and idea.

The centrality of literature in Romantic philosophy arises out of this attempt to name the absolute. Every linguistic innovation is an attempt to find a proper, if partial, name for the absolute. Benjamin writes:

At bottom, this theory is nothing other than the theory of mystical terminology. It is the attempt to call the system by its name—that is, to grasp it in a mystical individual concept in such a way that the systematic interconnections are comprised [*inbegriffen*] within it. The presupposition of a continuous, medial context [*Zusammenhanges*], of a reflective medium of concepts, is operative here. This conceptual medium makes its appearance in the witty observation, as it does in the mystical term, like a bolt of lightning. (GS 1:48–49 / SW 1:140)

Two meanings of the word "insight" come together here: one that momentarily grasps the absolute and one that sees affinities in overlooked details. It is the latter that, for Benjamin and Schlegel, lights up the former. The singular observation, in blazing a path across a wide terrain unavailable to ordinary or clichéd thought, shows the terrain is there. Poetic innovation is always an attempt to glimpse the whole or the absolute in the particular. The Romantic system, as Benjamin inter-

prets and develops it, involves just this relationship between language and the absolute.

Benjamin employs these remarks to further push the reflective medium of early Romanticism toward the linguistic medium operative in his own work. Schlegel emphasizes in particular the capacity of wit to instantaneously—like a flash of lightning—illuminate the absolute through its own insight. This is a clear precursor to Benjamin's own theory of the constellation. The difference is that, for Benjamin, the reflection of the absolute cannot be contained in a mystical concept in the way Schlegel suggests but must attempt to transcend conceptual thinking through the complex arrangement of conceptually interpreted phenomena outlined in the "Epistemo-Critical Foreword." Benjamin's theory is skeptical about grasping the absolute, which plays a regulative role in Benjamin's theory and an immanent role in Schlegel's. In this light, Benjamin quotes Novalis, who writes of the "poverty of words, their inability to strike several ideas with a single stroke" and of the "advantage" it is "for an idea to have several names" (*GS* 1:48 / *SW* 1:140). Benjamin clearly shares the Romantic sense for the inadequacy and limitations of language, and his attempt to overcome this limitation can be seen as a modification of Schlegel's absolute, although Benjamin's is a much more "sober" one, to use Rodolphe Gasché's phrasing.

This Romantic methodology also entails a particular ontology on Benjamin's view. The theory of reflection becomes a theory of what there is. Benjamin describes this process in a long but important passage, which I quote here in two parts:

The theory of object-knowledge is determined by the development of the concept of reflection in its meaning for the object. The object, like everything real, lies within the medium of reflection. Considered methodologically or epistemologically, however, the medium of reflection is the medium of thinking, for it is formed according to the schema of reflection in thinking, which is canonical reflection. The reflection of thinking assumes its place as canonical reflection because in it the two basic moments of all reflection are most fully manifest: self-activity and knowing. For in it, the very thing that is reflected, that is thought, is the only thing which can reflect: thinking itself. Thus, it is self-actively thought. And because it is thought as reflecting itself, it is thought as immediately knowing itself. In this knowledge of thinking through itself, as was noted, all knowledge in general is included. (*GS* 1:54 / *SW* 1:144)

The Romantic theory of knowledge takes up the medium of reflection in terms of thinking. From an epistemological point of view, the medium of reflection must be thought of in terms of the reflection of the knowing subject, or thinking. Thinking is epistemologically paradigmatic reflection since, in thinking, the object of reflection is the act of thinking itself. In the thinking of thinking, reflection is capable of knowledge since it immediately knows itself. In fact, for the Romantics, *there is no other true knowledge* but this kind of thinking of thinking, or self-knowledge.

The passage continues:

That this simple reflection, however, this thinking of thinking, is a priori conceived by the Romantics as a knowledge of thinking rests on the fact that they presuppose the initial, original, material thinking—that is, sense—as already fulfilled. On the basis of this axiom, the medium of reflection turns into the system, the methodological absolute into the ontological absolute. This can be understood as determined in several ways: as nature, as art, as religion, and so on. Never, however, will it lose its character as the medium of thought, as an interconnection of thinking relations [*eines Zusammenhanges denkender Beziehung*]. In all its determinations the absolute remains, therefore, a thinking, and a thinking essence is all that fills it. With this, the basic principle of the Romantic theory of object-knowledge is given. Everything that is in the absolute, everything real, thinks; because this thinking is that of reflection, it can think only itself, or, more precisely, only its own thinking; and because its own thinking is full and substantial, it knows itself at the same time that it thinks itself. (*GS* 1:54–55 / *SW* 1:144)

The Romantic epistemological and methodological principles of reflection and thinking presuppose, Benjamin argues, a first-level thinking as material for reflection. This presupposition gives the theory of reflection an ontological weight, since what matter or sense is, for the Romantics, is just that which is reflected or thought at the first level and becomes matter for second-order thinking. An incomplete regressive argument for this point might run as follows. If knowledge, which is a thinking about or of thinking, is possible, and all objects are, at least in principle, knowable—all that is can be thought about—then everything is a thinking, or an always already fulfilled material thinking.

The form of the argument is the same as that of the one Benjamin makes for language as such. Where for the Romantics, reflection cannot be excluded from anything since nothing can be known of or thought about independent of reflection—not the self-reflection of a subject in

isolation from the world, but reflection as intensification of consciousness in the object—for Benjamin language cannot be excluded from anything, since there is no knowledge not expressed linguistically. In this way Romantic methodology or epistemology—which attempts to understand knowledge as a thinking of thinking—becomes ontology. The Romantic definition of knowledge requires that the objects of knowledge be themselves reflective.

The analogy or even equivalency suggested here between Benjaminian language and Romantic reflection might seem inapt at first glance, especially since language is completely absent from Fichte's analysis of reflection, but, as we already saw with Herder's *Treatise*, a close connection between these two concepts is not necessarily surprising. Of course, Herder considered both to be merely limited human capacities and not ontological features of nature itself. In the *Treatise*, reflection is regarded as co-original with language—recognizing something as an object is the same as naming it—and both are regarded as conditions of human knowledge. Here, likewise, both reflection and language are regarded as necessary conditions for knowledge—not, however, as subjective structures ordering sensation, but rather as a basic reflective or linguistic structure in the world.

One peculiar consequence of this ontology is that knowledge is in fact impossible—at least the knowledge a subject might be thought to have of an object. “Where there is no self-knowledge,” Benjamin writes, “there is no knowing at all; where there is self-knowledge, there the subject-object correlation is abrogated [*aufgehoben*]*—there is a subject, if you will, without an object-correlate given*” (*GS* 1:56 / *SW* 1:146). The world is understood as a medium of reflection comprised of various, monad-like centers of reflection, the paradigm being the self-conscious reflection of a human being, but this conception extends also to objects of nature. Given that reflection is the thinking of thinking, each of these centers is capable only of self-knowledge. This does not mean that they are completely closed off from one another, however.

Benjamin writes:

The human being can participate in this self-knowledge of other beings. [. . .] Everything that presents itself to man as his knowledge of a being is the reflex in him of the self-knowledge of the thinking in that very being. Thus, there exists no mere being-known of the thing; just as little, however, is the thing or being limited to a mere being-known through

itself. Rather, the intensification of reflection in it suspends the boundary that separates its being-known by itself from its being-known by another; in the medium of reflection, moreover, the thing and the knowing being merge into each other. Both are only relative unities of reflection. Thus, there is in fact no knowledge of an object by a subject. Every instance of knowing is an immanent connection in the absolute, or, if one prefers, in the subject. (*GS* 1:57–58 / *SW* 1:146)

Benjamin thus finds in the Romantics a precursor to his own skepticism about the Kantian and empiricist definitions of knowledge. Knowledge is not thought of by the Romantics as a relationship between a subject and an object, nor as something acquired by the subject from the experience of an object. The reinterpretation of reflection in terms of intensification of consciousness in the object, rather than regression into the subject, entails a radical shift in the picture of knowledge. Knowledge is no longer pictured as a refinement of subjective experience, but instead becomes a merging of human reflection with the reflection of things. Despite his objections to this theory of knowledge,²³ Benjamin's translational conception of the philosophical enterprise in the "Epistemo-Critical Foreword" and his differentiation of philosophical truth from scientific knowledge clearly draw inspiration from the Romantic theory.

5. "The Impossibility and Necessity of Complete Communication"

Within this medium of reflection that abrogates the subject-object epistemological model, art and criticism play vital roles as paradigmatic cases, respectively, of object and knowledge. Art, and specifically Romantic poetry, is easily thought of as reflective since its objects open them-

²³ Benjamin objects, first of all, that the theory permits only an intensification of consciousness in objects and never a diminution, which, he thinks, is contrary to our experience of knowing. Secondly, he believes, understandably, that there remain unresolved contradictions within the Romantic concept of reflection itself, specifically between reflection as intensification and reflection as primordial self-consciousness, or ur-reflection (*GS* 1:57–58n / *SW* 1:191–92n). Among other things, the move from a reflection-based medium of all existence to a medium characterized by language eliminates some of the potential contradictions that result from making thinking or reflection present in all beings.

selves to reflective interpretation and thereby to an intensification of consciousness. As Schlegel puts it:

[Art] can [. . .]—more than any other form—hover at the midpoint between the portrayed and the portrayer free of all real and ideal self-interest, on the wings of poetic reflection and can raise that reflection again and again to a higher power, can multiply it in an endless succession of mirrors.²⁴

Every object dwells in the medium of reflection, but the artwork—in particular poetry—is elevated since it not only dwells in this medium but also contains the reflective content placed in it by the artist. It is a reflective object within a reflective medium and, in this sense, attains a higher form of reflection without escaping or transcending the medium. Knowledge of art, or art criticism, likewise remains immanent in the medium of reflection. It is not judgment of the work but rather another level of intensification—the completion or “consummation of the work” (*GS* 1:69 / *SW* 1:153). Criticism completes or attempts to complete the work and, in this sense, it must itself be a work of art (*GS* 1:69–70 / *SW* 1:153–54). The expressivity of art is thus no different than that of human language but differs only in its degree of articulacy, or, as Benjamin might put it, “density.” Criticism attempts “to grasp the universal,” Schlegel writes, and, as Benjamin puts it, “this grasping of the universal [. . .] is a matter of infinitely rising reflection that never settles into an enduring point of view” (*GS* 1:68 / *SW* 1:153).

At the same time, this attempt to grasp the universal is deeply situated within the particular work of art in question. Criticism attempts to complete the significance of the work on the basis of the tendency expressed in the work itself (*GS* 1:69 / *SW* 1:153). Romantic aesthetics thus does not rely on any predetermined concept of form or harmony to judge works but rather requires a reflective intention, a concept of form that is immanent in the work. (This idea has a strong influence on the method of Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel* book.) “Form,” for the Romantics, Benjamin writes, “is the possibility of reflection in the work” (*GS* 1:73 / *SW* 1:156). Benjamin interprets this concept of form as an orientation in the work toward the absolute, or toward the idea of art. Every proper work of art contains a partial and implicit conception of the idea of art. (If it does

²⁴ Qtd. in *GS* 1:63 / *SW* 1:150.

not, it is not a work of art.) It is the role of criticism to make explicit the relationship between work and the idea of art, and, in this way, to work toward the completion of the work, to bring out what is implicit in it, to intensify consciousness *in* the work. Criticism's role, then, is to bring the work more fully into its relation to the universal or the absolute. It involves what Benjamin calls here and in the "Epistemo-Critical Foreword," the destruction of the work, by which he means the dissolution of the work as a distinct entity in the absolute. The ideal (impossible) completion of the work is at the same time its destruction since the finite work is dissolved in the infinite absolute, in the totality that comprises the idea of art.

Benjamin interprets Romantic irony in terms of this relationship between the work and the absolute as well. Just as the work of art is not understood as the vessel of the artist's expressive content, irony is not, for the Romantics, primarily a subjective attitude.²⁵ It is, rather, "an objective moment in the work itself" (*GS* 1:84 / *SW* 1:165). Benjamin defines it by way of its relation to criticism:

Criticism sacrifices the whole work willingly for the sake of a single sphere of interconnection. The procedure, on the other hand, which, while preserving the work itself is yet still in a position to demonstrate its full relationship to the idea of art, is (formal) irony. Not only does it not destroy the work on which it fastens, but it draws the work nearer to indestructibility. Through the destruction of the particular form of representation of the work in irony, the relative unity of the single work is pushed back deeper into art as the universal work; without getting lost in it, it is related to this universal work completely. For only by degrees is the unity of the single work differentiated from that of art, into which it is continually being displaced in irony and criticism. The Romantics themselves could not have regarded irony as something artistic, if they had seen in it the absolute disintegration of the work. (*GS* 1:86 / *SW* 1:164)

²⁵ Benjamin does, however, grant that there is for the Romantics "subjective irony," which can be defined as "resting on a demeanor of the subject" by which the artist "elevates himself above the materiality of the work by despising it" (*GS* 1:83 / *SW* 1:162–63). This is irony in relation to the material, whereas objective irony is irony of form. In subjective irony the artist elevates himself above the content of the work; in objective irony the idea of art—or, the absolute form of art—asserts its priority over the work's form, dissolving the form and thus bringing the work into the absolute, but without dissolving the material.

Irony is an objective understanding of the work itself in that, while dissolving the particular presentational form of the work, maintains the integrity of the work and does not allow it to be completely extinguished in the absolute. Irony is the work seen from a particular point of view—not as a play or painting or novel, still less a “tragedy” or work of a particular school—but as a partial manifestation of the idea or absolute totality of art. Irony is thus the condition of the work that makes it exploitable by criticism, which completes the partial destruction of the work carried out by formal irony. The dissolution of the work’s form brings the work into closer relation to the idea of art because it removes the work from the context of its particular conditions of creation and reveals its orientation toward the idea of art itself:

The ironization of the presentational form is, as it were, the storm blast that raises the curtain on the transcendental order of art, disclosing this order and in it the immediate existence of the work as a mystery. The work is not, as Herder regarded it, essentially a revelation and a mystery of creative genius, which one could well call a mystery of substance; it is a mystery of order, the revelation of its absolute dependence on the idea of art, its eternal, indestructible sublation in that idea. (*GS* 1:86 / *SW* 1:164–65)

In other words, irony, formal and objective rather than subjective, reveals the work not as an object that derives its meaning from the activity of a subject but as a partial expression of the absolute or idea of art, whose meaning is derived from this participation in the absolute. The critic’s role is to illuminate this participation.

This reversal of a conventional, subject-oriented understanding of the production and meaning of the artwork prefigures Benjamin’s own reversal of the understanding of human language as a particular kind of expression embedded in an absolute medium of expression. Just as Romantic irony is an expression of the relationship between the individual work and the idea of art, irony inheres in the distance between human language and the medium of language as such.

Irony is a condition of language. Human language always communicates something, but its means for doing so are partial and translational, never living up to what they attempt to name, here identified with the Romantic absolute and in “On Language as Such” and the “Epistemo-Critical Foreword” with an idea or Adamic name—full expression. Philosophy proper, which is conscious of this fact, takes up

language critically, aware that the ideal of full communication is at once the foundation of all language and an impossibility—that is, with full knowledge of the irony that conditions all linguistic expression. Schlegel calls this “the insoluble antagonism between the conditioned and the absolute, between the impossibility and necessity of complete communication.”²⁶

Irony is a disconnect between the promise of human expressive capacities and their actual capability. We can think of it as tragic irony writ large. A tragic hero’s words communicate a meaning to the audience unavailable to the hero himself. His words, to use Schlegel’s locution, “understand themselves better” than he does.²⁷ This is possible because two planes of meaning or two perspectives are available to the audience—that of the hero’s experience and that of the play itself. The audience is aware at once what the hero’s language aims at, what it actually means, and how little he understands what it means. In an analogous way, all human language aims to communicate fully, falls far short of its intended meaning, and, in criticism, can be shown to have a meaning different and unavailable to the initial users of the language. It is the role of criticism to reveal that meaning, to raise it closer to the level of the absolute, through an intensification of consciousness in these words. As Benjamin shows in his writing on origin and history in the “Epistemo-Critical Foreword,” this meaning unfolds over time and is never completed. Criticism is itself subject to criticism in the same way that art is, and the absolute is to be approached through a series of adumbrative iterations.

Despite the evident importance of the Romantic absolute to Benjamin’s views on language, criticism, and art, Benjamin breaks with Schlegel over his characterization of the absolute. Schlegel conceives of the absolute—or the idea of art—as a single work. Benjamin finds Schlegel’s impulse valid but its execution in error:

This was the effort to secure the concept of the idea of art from the misunderstanding of those who would see it as an abstraction from empirical artworks. He wanted to define this concept as an idea in the Platonic sense, as a *proteron té phusei*, as the real ground of all empirical artworks, and he committed the old error of confounding “abstract”

²⁶ *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, vol. 2, p. 160.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 364. Qtd. in *GS* 1:49/*SW* 1:141.

and “universal” when he believed he had to make that ground into an individual. It is only with this in view that Schlegel repeatedly and emphatically designates the unity of art, the continuum of forms itself, as one work. (*GS* 1:89–90 / *SW* 1:167)

Given the role it plays in the theory of criticism, the idea cannot be understood as a set of characteristics abstracted from individual artworks. The idea of art is present in every work of art and is the attempt to express the absolute, understood in terms of the medium of reflection. Schlegel, not wanting the idea to be abstract, goes too far and makes it not just not abstract but also not universal, defining the idea of art as an individual, as the totality of all works of art. Benjamin takes issue with this characterization of the absolute or idea of art because it solves the paradox of the immanent transcendence of the idea on the side of immanence. He agrees with Schlegel that every work of art can be understood as aiming at the idea and that the critical interpretation of profane works seeks to elevate them in the direction of this absolute. That, however, does not mean that the idea ought to be understood as the totality of these completed acts of reflection, that is, as an individuality comprised by all works.

The Romantic idea of art, Benjamin writes, “is defined as the medium of reflection of forms” (*GS* 1:89 / *SW* 1:165). This idea, or the medium of reflection itself—as Benjamin will make clear of the medium of language in the “Epistemo-Critical Foreword”—is neither individual nor abstract. In order to correct Schlegel’s error and characterize the universality of the idea, he will have to conceive of the relationship between the individual phenomenon and the universal idea in entirely new terms, as we saw. He will have to “redeem induction,” as Adorno puts it.²⁸ Gasché helpfully describes Benjamin’s position on the concept of critique as an “agnosticism” in contrast to Romantic “epistemological optimism”:

It is a critique, however, and as such, it must take its aim at the Absolute which it severs from itself in absolute purity. Hence, of that Absolute nothing can be known, and least of all that the Absolute has authenticated the critical relation to begin with.²⁹

²⁸ Adorno, Letter to Benjamin of December 5, 1934 (Frankfurt am Main, Adorno Estate). See Buck-Morss, *Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 94.

²⁹ Gasché, “The Sober Absolute,” 67.

The absolute gives an indication to criticism to seek the unconditioned aimed at in the work of art and to attempt to elevate it, through interpretation and criticism, toward the absolute, but the absolute can never be conceived of as the simple aggregation of works, of conditioned attempts to express the absolute. Indeed, all we have is the indication itself; there is no evidence that it was even provided by the absolute.

The entire critical project (or philosophy), for Benjamin, is defined by its orientation toward a transcendent absolute that it can never fully grasp, yet that also does not fully elude it.³⁰ Schlegel's error, can, then be put in terms of Hamann's understanding of condescension. The medium of reflection or language is the product of the self-limitation of the absolute (or God). In condescension, God makes himself known to such a limited and, at the same time, all-encompassing extent that even his own existence cannot be known. To define this medium as an individual totality is to pretend we can get "outside" this medium; it brings "the Absolute into the intellect's range," as Gasché puts it, and thus violates its regulative and transcendent role within a proper theory of criticism.³¹

Schlegel's failure, in Benjamin's eyes, is a failure to control the mystical inclinations of his theory. Mysticism can function as a regulative starting point for a systematic theory of criticism, but once the absolute is made an individual, immanent element in the theory, continuous with artworks themselves, it contradicts the power the absolute is meant to have to begin with. On Benjamin's Hamann-inspired theory, the unknowable character of the absolute is precisely what gives the medium of language or reflection its character of an immediacy capable of self-mediation. To identify it with an individual work of art is both to deny the infinite nature of the critical task and to distort the nature of the medium itself.

Benjamin's rejection of the idea of art in Romantic criticism echoes, in certain ways, Hamann's complaint against Herder. Whereas Hamann objected to Herder's attempt to grasp a first principle of language, Benjamin finds fault with Schlegel's attempt to grasp a final principle of art in the absolute. Herder's naturalism and Schlegel's mysticism, as for-

³⁰ Benjamin's attraction to messianic thought can be thought of in these terms. As in Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," transcendence is thought of in terms of a miraculous step outside of history.

³¹ Gasché, "Sober Absolute," 165.

eign to one another as they are, share a misunderstanding of the ungraspable character of the expressive medium of which both human language and art are but parts. Making this mistake at different ends, as it were, of the spectrum, with very different methodologies—natural science and a systematically ambivalent mysticism—as well as with very different paradigms for expressivity—a designating term for Herder and art for Schlegel—their examples still prove instructive in delimiting the middle path Benjamin is trying to tread.

In characterizing this idea as itself a work of art, Schlegel errs and makes the absolute intellectually graspable. This is an inversion of Herder's error, which assumes a natural origin for language and thereby detaches it from its basis in general communicability and leads it on a path back toward "means" and away from "medium." Schlegel rightly understands reflection—and through it art, language, and criticism—as a medium, but expects too much from criticism and lets the notion of a mystical intuition of the system infiltrate this medium itself. Whereas for Benjamin the idea or absolute always remains not just contingently but intrinsically unknowable as is expressed in the paradox of condescension. In making the absolute individual, Schlegel ignores the possibility of thinking the absolute as something universal that is not a mere abstraction (an idea in Benjamin's sense). Schlegel thus illicitly delimits the medium through mysticism where Herder delimited it through naturalism. Both indulge a philosophical ambition that overestimates our capacity to grasp expression. The danger of the former is a scientism that reduces language to a sophisticated means of expression; the danger of the latter is an unrestricted mysticism that takes itself to outrun the limits of a condescending world. A proper point of view on the expressivity of art in Benjamin's view resists both the urge to see it as a means for subjective expression bounded by human language, on the one hand, and the urge to see it as an intuitable objective totality, on the other.

The Linguistic U-Turn

ONE OF THE CENTRAL theses of this book is that far from having “no ancestors in philosophy,” as von Wright puts it, Wittgenstein’s philosophy is indebted to the same expressivist tradition that informs Benjamin’s theory of language. Others, especially Forster and Hans Sluga, have already established that Wittgenstein’s connection to this tradition comes in large part by way of Fritz Mauthner.¹ The present

¹ See for example: Forster, *German Philosophy of Language*; Hans Sluga, *Frege* (London: Routledge, 1980); Sluga, “Wittgenstein and Pyrrhonism,” *Pyrrhonian Skepticism*, ed. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Hermann J. Cloeren, *Language and Thought* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1988). In his book, Cloeren seeks to draw close connections between the thought of language-critical (*sprachkritisch*) German philosophers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and twentieth-century analytic thought. He thus differs from Sluga who clearly separates the language-critical philosophy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries from the formal-logical analysis of language initiated by Frege. For Sluga, Frege stands at the beginning of analytic philosophy, and his attempts to formalize natural language actually represent a reaction against the naturalism dominant in the second half of the nineteenth century and represented by thinkers like Gruppe and Mauthner. Cloeren wants to describe analytic philosophy, however, as influenced by both the formalism of Frege and the naturalism of his predecessors, especially Gruppe. Cloeren has in mind especially Wittgenstein, the logical empiricists, and ordinary language philosophers like A. J. Ayer. This contention verges on the merely verbal, and Cloeren’s use of the term “analytic” to describe nineteenth-century language-critical naturalism is forced. Of course, scientific naturalism does play an important role in analytic philosophy both through American pragmatism and the empiricism of Mach and the Vienna Circle. However, the Herder-inspired naturalism of Humboldt, Gruppe, and Mauthner is aligned with the emerging social sciences and, thus, more closely related to elements of the Vienna Circle (including prominently Otto Neurath’s work), that were not nearly as influential in British or American philosophy. The thinkers of the Vienna Circle (Schlick, Carnap), who were quite influential in Anglo-American thought, were more closely associated with mathematical sciences, especially physics, and thus more given to the formal treatment of language favored by Frege and the early Wittgenstein. It is misleading,

chapter will focus on putting some characteristic Wittgensteinian ideas in dialogue with Mauthner's "critique of language." Wittgenstein refers negatively to this critique in the *Tractatus* (TLP 4.0031), but his later work exhibits unmistakable evidence of a positive influence from Mauthner, in both general orientation and rhetorical detail, as will be shown below.

I will argue in Chapter 7 that light can be shed on some salient features of Wittgenstein's later work—including the private language argument—by reading them as part of a confrontation with Mauthner's project. There, I will present Wittgenstein's critique of the idea of the concept of private sensation as an extension of the impulse behind Mauthner's critique of language to its own empiricist foundations. Like Benjamin in his critique of Schlegel and Hamann in his critique of Herder, Wittgenstein locates in a philosophy of language that otherwise has many affinities to his own a lapse into an uncritical employment of reference and, thereby, into an illicit and distorting circumscription of the concept of language.

It is in part because of the specter of this lapse, as I have argued in earlier chapters, that Benjamin develops his concept of *Sprache überhaupt*. Wittgenstein is also acutely aware of the possibility of such a lapse, and I will therefore read him here as a member of the "Hamann wing" of the expressivist tradition, albeit a unique member with roots in the early analytic tradition and its logical analyses of language. Although these roots are largely repudiated, they have an ongoing impact on the form of Wittgenstein's later thought.

As a result, Wittgenstein occupies a curious place in the history of analytic philosophy. With the *Tractatus*—which developed elements of Russell and Frege's formal approach to language into an idiosyncratic theory of logical form (albeit one meant to be traversed and discarded, rather than adopted)—he stands at the foundation of analytic philosophy. At the same time, with the *Investigations*, he attempts to bring

then, to call thinkers like Gruppe and Mauthner analytic or "proto-analytic" and seems to depend, for Cloeren, largely on viewing the thought of the late Wittgenstein as "analytic," which is misleading. The treatment that follows in this chapter is thus in agreement with Sluga's characterization, which sees the late Wittgenstein confronting the formal linguistic philosophy of Frege (and the early Wittgenstein) with a version of the naturalistic linguistic philosophy that Frege was in part reacting against and which is quite distinct, both in terms of content and lineage, from logical empiricism.

the edifice the *Tractatus* helped erect back down to earth. The analytic tradition has reconciled itself uneasily to Wittgenstein's later philosophy. Either it isolates some of Wittgenstein's examples and arguments from the whole and runs them through a formal analysis, or, increasingly, ignores him altogether.² On the other side of the divide, Wittgenstein's affinity with a number of continental thinkers has been noted, though seldom developed.³ The value and validity of these comparisons is clear—even if they may appear forced. The affinity of Wittgenstein with, for example, Heidegger can appear to be a matter of mere happenstance (and perhaps therefore more suggestive because of this), when, in actual fact, there are good historical reasons for it.

Wittgenstein—though he may have preferred it—did not live in a vacuum. He acknowledges debts to, among others, Schopenhauer, Frege, Russell, Karl Kraus, and Otto Weininger,⁴ but he is also clearly indebted to nineteenth-century naturalism, including the empiricism of Mach and the linguistic philosophy of Otto Gruppe and Mauthner. It is to this influence that his later philosophy tends to revert, although it has evident influence on the latter parts of the *Tractatus* as well. Wittgenstein may not have read Herder or Schlegel, but he did read Hamann, and was influenced by Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Mauthner, and, possibly, Nietzsche, all of whom were in turn influenced by Hamann.⁵ Many of Mauthner's ideas, as we will see, come quite close to those expressed by the late Wittgenstein, making Mauthner the most important figure connecting Wittgenstein to the expressivist tradition.

The present chapter will therefore read the turn in Wittgenstein's thought against the background of Mauthner's writings. Following a brief introduction to the general German tradition in philosophy of language in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, I will discuss some

²Sluga, *Frege*, 186. Kripke's reading of Wittgenstein on rule-following and private language, to be discussed below, is one example of this.

³See, for example, Richard Rorty, "Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and the Reification of Language," *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, ed. Charles B. Guignon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 337–58; Stephen Mulhall, *On Being in the World: Wittgenstein and Heidegger on Seeing Aspects* (London: Routledge, 1990); and Mulhall, *Inheritance and Originality: Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2001).

⁴Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 19. The much-cited list also includes Ludwig Boltzmann, Heinrich Hertz, Adolf Loos, Oswald Spengler, and Piero Sraffa.

⁵See Chapter 9, section 4 below for Wittgenstein on Hamann. See Sluga, "Family Resemblance," *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 71 (2006), 1–21.

central concepts in Mauthner's philosophy that make their way into Wittgenstein's work. The latter sections of the chapter center around Mauthner's and Wittgenstein's respective critiques of the hypostatization of meaning and their use of the concepts of grammar and language-game. In general, Wittgenstein's adaptation of Mauthner's ideas involves setting them against some of Mauthner's own empiricist assumptions. This echoes in certain respects Benjamin's response to Kant and neo-Kantianism. In rejecting the view that knowledge and language have their foundation in sensation, Wittgenstein pushes Mauthner's thought toward a view of language and its pervasiveness closer to that found in Hamann and Benjamin. Benjamin, too, read Mauthner's work with interest,⁶ and I will refer to Benjamin at points throughout the chapter, but an in-depth discussion of Benjamin's relation to the ideas introduced awaits in the book's final section.

1. Mauthner and Expressivism in the Nineteenth Century

The landscape of German philosophy at the turn of the nineteenth century was dominated by Kant and reactions to his thought. Prominent among these reactions are the Kantianism of Reinhold and Fichte, the Romanticism of Schlegel—which continues the language-based critique of Kant begun by Hamann—and the development of new systematic philosophies, which seek to move beyond Kant, most prominently those of Schelling and Hegel. By the time of his death in 1831, however, Hegel's brand of idealism, and idealism in general, were in decline, and the standing of philosophy, relative to the sciences, was under threat. Sluga argues that philosophy regained its standing by century's end by taking up the task "of the investigation of the logical structure of mathematics, science, and language."⁷ This solution to the crisis in philosophy, of course, remains influential to this day, but during the mid-century period, before it took hold and became the foundation of the analytic tradition, the dominant reaction against idealism was not inspired by the formal successes of mathematics and logic, but by the

⁶ Benjamin describes Mauthner's book *Die Sprache* as "frightfully difficult." Letter to Herbert Belmore, July 22, 1910, *Briefe*, vol. 1, 28.

⁷ Sluga, *Frege*, 9. Sluga credits Foucault for recognizing this in *The Order of Things*.

natural sciences.⁸ Hegel's philosophy was criticized for an alleged authoritarian political alignment, for its inconsistency with the natural sciences, and for its a priori, deductive method of reasoning.⁹ Against this was set an empiricism inspired by the successes of the natural sciences. Philosophy came to be viewed as continuous with them, if not to be completely absorbed by them.¹⁰ Among the new sciences that played a role in this general intellectual development was linguistics. Here, the work of Hamann, Herder, and Schlegel is again of import. Herder's writings on language and Schlegel's study of Sanskrit, *On the Language of the Indians*, are crucial points of origin for Humboldt's work, which is often taken to be foundational in the science of linguistics.¹¹

Just as language played a central role in certain epistemological critiques of Kant descended from Hamann, it played an important role in the critique of Hegel, although the influence of Herder's naturalism was more decisive than Hamann's mysticism. Gruppe's linguistic critique of Hegel deserves special mention in this light.¹² Gruppe's critique of Hegel relies on

⁸Sluga points out that the foundations of analytic philosophy in England can obscure this fact, since Russell turned from the peculiar Hegelian idealism of F. H. Bradley to a philosophy based on formal reasoning and mathematical logic. See Peter Hylton, *Russell, Idealism, and the Emergence of Analytic Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), as well as Hylton, "Frege and Russell," in *The Cambridge Companion to Frege*, ed. Michael Potter and Tom Ricketts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 509–49. Hylton argues that a good deal of the impulse behind Russell's "direct realism" and consequent resistance to Frege's accounts of concepts, sense (*Sinn*), and reference (*Bedeutung*) can be attributed to his reaction against F. H. Bradley and British idealism.

⁹Sluga, *Frege*, 17.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 17–19.

¹¹See Forster, "Herder, Schlegel, Humboldt, and the Birth of Modern Linguistics," *German Philosophy of Language*. Hans Aarsleff, on the other hand, argues that the decisive influence on Humboldt comes from the French tradition, especially Condillac and Diderot ("Introduction," Wilhelm von Humboldt, *On Language: the Diversity of Human Language Structure and its Influence on the Mental Development of Mankind*, trans. Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), vii–lxv, xxxii ff.). Forster responds to Aarsleff's view in *German Philosophy of Language*, 131–32.

¹²In 1831, the year of Hegel's death, Gruppe published *Antäus: A Correspondence on Speculative Philosophy in Conflict with Science and Language*. (Antaios is the son of Gea, the earth, in Greek mythology. He is invincible but only if he keeps his feet on the earth.) The work consists of a dialogue between a young Hegelian and an older empiricist who eventually persuades his interlocutor of the merits of his linguistic critique of Hegel's philosophy. Gruppe develops his critique of Hegel and speculative philosophy in general in later works, and owes a substantial debt to Hamann and Herder in this regard. His work also anticipates that of Mauthner and Wittgenstein, and the former read Gruppe with attention and credited his insights, editing and introducing a new edition (1914) of Gruppe's *Antäus*. See Cloeren, *Language and Thought*, 82, 107; Sluga, *Frege*, 19–26.

the codependency of thought or reason and language modeled by Herder and Hamann.¹³ He follows Herder especially in the view that logic develops out of language.¹⁴ For Gruppe, this means that the apparent timelessness of certain concepts like, for example, substance and accident of Aristotelian logic are actually outgrowths of a particular language—in this case ancient Greek. Mauthner picks up this view from Gruppe and, as Cloeren and Sluga have noted, it anticipates the linguistic relativity of twentieth-century linguists like Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf. The ills of speculative philosophy in general and Hegel's *Science of Logic* in particular, for Gruppe, lie in treating concepts like "being," "time," "nothingness" as disembodied and separate from their linguistic manifestation. Gruppe writes, "Philosophers fell over the word and ripped it out of its roots through which it was attached to the ground of language and from which it gains its living and healthy meaning."¹⁵ Idealism is bankrupt, for Gruppe, because it cleaves to an essentially designative view of language that separates thought from language and gives thought priority. Gruppe identifies Aristotelian logic as the culprit that initiates this separation.¹⁶

¹³ It is worth noting that Hegel demonstrates a greater sensitivity to linguistic issues than Gruppe gives him credit for—especially in the "Sense-Certainty" chapter of the *Phenomenology*—and was at least aware of the value of Herder's contributions in this regard.

¹⁴ Herder writes in *On Diligence in Several Learned Languages*: "The first words that we mumble are the most important foundation stones of the understanding, and our nursemaids are our first teachers of logic." (HW 1:27).

¹⁵ *Antäus: Ein Briefwechsel über speculative Philosophie in ihrem Conflict mit Wissenschaft und Sprache* (Berlin: Rauck, 1831), 352. Qtd. in Sluga, *Frege*, 23.

¹⁶ Gruppe writes:

The basic evil lies in logic and in particular in a false theory of abstract concepts. Traditional logic consists essentially of three parts: namely, the doctrines of concepts, of judgment, and of syllogism. It regards concepts as the simplest elements out of which judgments are composed, and out of those, in turn, syllogisms. The proper investigation must go quite a different route; for the judgment is the simplest; concepts originate only in judgments and only there is the act of concept formation to be sought and found. (*Gegenwart und Zukunft der Philosophie in Deutschland* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1855), 191)

His complaint is that philosophy following the model of Aristotelian logic sees concepts as the most basic atoms out of which judgments are composed. This leads to a false view of concepts as existing independently of their expression, both in judgments and in particular languages. Gruppe advocates for an investigation, therefore, that begins with the whole judgment and treats concept formation in context. Frege explicitly states with his "context principle" that the meanings of individual terms depend on the role they play in judgments, and he and others eventually do carry out a reformation of logic. But, as Sluga points out, this reformation is very different from the one Gruppe

Mauthner is largely in agreement with Gruppe's opposition to metaphysics and speculative philosophy, his relativization of logic, a metaphorical account of language and concept formation, and an account of meaning based on practical need. Born to a Jewish family in Prague in 1849, Mauthner credited his interest in language to the fact that his early life in the Austro-Hungarian empire involved familiarity with a number of different languages: German, Czech, Hebrew, as well as Jewish-German and Czech-German dialects.¹⁷ The diversity of human languages is important for Mauthner because the different means they employ to facilitate practical ends fail to support the pure use words are put to in philosophy. Mauthner's theoretical interest in language lead him to interrupt a career in journalism, criticism, and fiction, for a decades-long investigation into the philosophy of language. Its main products were the three-volume *Contributions to a Critique of Language* and a two-volume *Dictionary of Philosophy*, which defines philosophical concepts from a language-critical perspective. Mauthner's works were widely read in Germany and Vienna in their day, although they were panned or ignored by academic philosophers, who generally regarded Mauthner as a dilettante. The most central influence on his work was perhaps Ernst Mach, but he also owes debts to Schopenhauer, Kant, Hamann, Herder, Gruppe, and Nietzsche, among others.¹⁸

Little-read today, Mauthner would likely be even less well-known if not for the parenthetical mention he receives in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, where Wittgenstein refers to "all philosophy" as "critique of language (but not in Mauthner's sense)" (*TLP* 4.0031). There, as I discussed in the introduction, Wittgenstein is weighing in on exactly the question of how

called for. "For Frege," Sluga writes, "this reform involves the construction of a formal language of objective conceptual contents" (*Frege*, 25). For Gruppe, recognition of the neglected role of natural language in concept formation means that concepts can never break completely free of their expression in a particular language and that objective conceptual content is an illusion. This relativism is, of course, rejected by Frege.

¹⁷ Mauthner, *Erinnerungen*, vol. 1: *Prager Jugendjahre* (Munich: G. Müller, 1918), 30–31. Qtd. in Elizabeth Bredeck, *Metaphors of Knowledge: Language and Thought in Mauthner's Critique* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), 17.

¹⁸ It seems likely that Nietzsche's influence on Wittgenstein also comes, at least in part, through Mauthner, although Sluga suspects a direct connection between Nietzsche and Wittgenstein. See Sluga "Family Resemblance," *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 71 (2006), 1–21, 9–12. In the article, Sluga draws a connection between Nietzsche's use of the example of the word and concept "leaf" in his "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense" to Wittgenstein's use of the same example in the *Blue Book*. See Chapter 9, section 2 for further discussion of the example.

to model the relationship between logic and natural language. Critique of language in Mauthner's sense means critique of an unreflective use of concepts that neglects their foundation in a particular language and culture, their particular history, and their origin in relation to particular practical ends. A critique of language is thus therapeutic for Mauthner (as well as for Gruppe and the late Wittgenstein) because it leads us away from the abstractions of speculative philosophy (for the late Wittgenstein, the formal analyses of analytic philosophy) and back toward the rough, variegated ground of everyday use.

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein opposes critique of language in Mauthner's sense with Russell's understanding of "logical form." For Russell, as Wittgenstein understands him, critique of language leads not back to natural language but penetrates beneath the "apparent logical form" of natural language to its real one. Critique of language subjects natural language to logical scrutiny, revealing the form of thought that is disguised by the contingencies of everyday language. The theory of meaning expounded in the *Tractatus* is a model of the way logical form underlies all language. Still, as Sluga points out, the simple fact that Wittgenstein mentions Mauthner's *Critique* in the *Tractatus* indicates its relevance for his own philosophy.¹⁹ The skeptical, quietist, and mystical elements of the *Tractatus*—which urge us to throw away its strictly speaking "senseless" propositions once we have climbed them to reach a perspective from which we can "see the world aright" (*TLP* 6.54)—are evidence of a Mauthner-style skepticism that, during the period of the *Tractatus*, is mixed, perhaps not entirely consistently, with a Russellian and Fregean faith in logical form.²⁰

In order to gain greater clarity on the relationship between Mauthner and Wittgenstein and Wittgenstein's relationship to the expressivist tradition, I turn now to a discussion of a number of themes in Mauthner's critique: *Wortaberglaube* or "word-superstition," the role of metaphor in language development, philosophical grammar, and the relationship between meaning and use. I will draw attention to their roots in the

¹⁹ Hans Sluga, "Wittgenstein and Pyrrhonism," 104–05. See also Forster, *German Philosophy of Language*, 269.

²⁰ In Chapter 7, in my discussion of the "resolute reading," I deal more extensively with the later sections of the *Tractatus*.

eighteenth-century expressivism of Hamann and Herder, and to their adaptation in Wittgenstein's post-*Tractatus* writings.

2. Wortaberglaube

Mauthner's critique of language can be characterized, albeit somewhat bluntly, as an application of Mach's theory of sensations to the field of language. In 1886's *Analysis of Sensations*, Mach attempts to develop a nuanced, scientific, and naturalistic empiricism that does not fall prey to a simple, reductive phenomenalism (like that often attributed to Hume). Mach's exposure to the new field of psychophysics persuaded him that we don't have direct acquaintance with reality. In the *Analysis of Sensations*, he posits a basic unit of perception—an "element"—that is formed by the interaction between our cognitive structure and the environment. From these elements, according to Mach, we build up concepts. But our formal cognitive structure is adaptive, a product of evolution, and subject to change based on subsequent experience. The epistemological results of his analysis of sensation are rather skeptical. Representational theories of truth hold no water because our sensations are not truth-apt. They are not the kinds of things that can be true or false, but only suitable or unsuitable guides for our practical engagement with the world. Likewise, the value of science lies, for Mach, in its *economy*. It is judged based on the ability of its pictures to efficiently orient us in the world and aid in our practical activity.²¹

Language, for Mach, is itself an "economical contrivance."²² A word for a thing is an abstraction from the always changing elements of sensation. Philosophers are tempted, when faced with the truth that there is no permanent object corresponding to the word, to take "recourse to the conception of the thing-in-itself, or other suchlike absurdity."²³ In doing so they forget, of course, the manner in which the thing desig-

²¹ See Mach, *Analysis of Sensations*, trans. C. M. Williams and Sydney Waterlow (New York: Dover, 1959), 49ff. Also Mach, "Die ökonomische Natur der physikalischen Forschung," a lecture delivered at the Academy of Sciences in Vienna, May 24, 1882. Thomas J. McCormack's translation was published in *Popular Scientific Lectures* (Chicago: Open Court, 1895).

²² Mach, *Science of Mechanics: A Critical and Historical Account of Its Development*, trans. Thomas J. McCormack (Chicago: Open Court, 1919), 481.

²³ Ibid.

nated by the word was actually conceived of through an abstraction from mutable sensation. There are similarities with Herder's *Merkmale* here. For Mach, the word separates the object off from its surroundings, thereby concealing its mutability.²⁴ He writes:

No inalterable thing exists. The thing is an abstraction, the name a symbol, for a compound of elements from whose changes we abstract. The reason we assign a single word to a whole compound is that we need to suggest all the constituent sensations at once.²⁵

The word arises out of a practical need to designate a group of sensations that occur regularly together, but never in exactly the same way and never permanently. In a hypothetical language that could accurately name sensation, no word would ever recur, since no sensation ever does. This—minus the focus on sensation—is something like what Benjamin means by Adamic language—maximally particular, non-abstractive, impossible.

For Mach, when we look back at nature through language, it appears as if our sensations indicate the presence of the thing, but this gets things backwards. He writes:

Sensations are not signs of things; but, on the contrary, a thing is a thought-symbol for a compound sensation of relative fixedness. Properly speaking the world is not composed of "things" as its elements, but of colors, tones, pressures, spaces, times, in short what we ordinary call individual sensations.²⁶

Continually constructing *things* out of thin air, language is inherently misleading for philosophical cognition. Nouns, in particular, though necessary economical contrivances, impose on us an ontology inconsistent with the way our senses actually operate and the access they give us to nature.

Early in his education, Mauthner attended a series of lectures by Mach and later carried on a correspondence with him.²⁷ He picks up on precisely the weakness of language identified by Mach in his critique and develops Mach's nominalism into a full-fledged critique of meta-

²⁴ Ibid., 482

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 482–83.

²⁷ See Bredeck, *Metaphors of Knowledge*, 13–14, 67–68.

physical language and the claims of science to truth. Although he also adopts and develops many of the insights of the expressivist tradition about the social character of language, its inescapability, and the primacy of metaphorical or poetic language, he remains committed to Mach's view that language has its basis in an abstraction from sensation. Mauthner's radical views about the epistemological inadequacy of language are grounded in its inability to capture sensory experience.

As I suggested above, Herder, in his *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, also weds a naturalist and empiricist theory about the formation of concepts to expressivism about meaning and the development of language. As I'll suggest below, Mauthner is subject, from a Wittgensteinian point of view, to some of the same criticisms Hamann makes of Herder.

Perhaps the most important concept in Mauthner's philosophy of language has to do with the damage caused by the hypostatization or reification of nouns. Mauthner calls this phenomenon "word-superstition" (*Wortaberglaube*) because we are drawn by the power of language into thinking there must exist something real corresponding to nouns or substantives. For Mauthner, the phenomenon is as damaging in the realms of politics and religion as it is in philosophy. Words like "nation," "race," "language," "God," produce the same metaphysical distortions as "time," "will," "being," and "nothing," and are more deleterious in their effects.

"Most men," Mauthner writes, "suffer from this intellectual weakness: they believe because a word is there, it must also be the word *for* something; because a word is there, there must be something real corresponding to the word" (*B* 1:159). Here, Mauthner follows not just Mach but also Hamann's critique of words like "the public" and "metaphysics."²⁸ As we saw, for Hamann, belief in objects corresponding to these words is no less superstitious or mystical than the excesses of religion or scholasticism.²⁹ For Mauthner and Mach, even nouns that do appear to have solid, physical objects corresponding to them are fictions. That is, their foundation lies not in the physical reality of the objects in question but in sensory experience and practical ends.

²⁸ See "Socratic Memorabilia," *HSW* 2:57–60 / *WP* 3–6, as well as "Metacritique on the Purism of Reason," *HSW* 3:285ff. / *WP* 209ff.

²⁹ Mauthner quotes Hamann at length in the *Critique* and writes of him, "He was the first to sense in language the presence of the enemy, but in the struggle against this enemy the writer Hamann was defeated" (*B* 1:335).

Just like our concepts of various properties—"blue," "round," "flat"—nouns collect and level off a fund of sensations and memories, received through our contingent senses (*Zufallsinne*). The noun elevates this fund to the status of an object, but in so doing effectively and falsely eternalizes these sensations, ignoring or flattening out variance, in the interest of reidentification and practical economy. Unlike adjectives, which do not pretend to name the contents of the world (though they can be construed that way by, for example, taking the adjective "round" to be referring to the idea of "roundness"), nouns are engaged in a systematic reification of the elements of sensation. The tragic paradox of language, as Mauthner construes it, is that the very medium that gives us an objective world necessarily falsifies it.³⁰ Language is like the Midas touch, encasing the world and giving it a solidity that allows it to be discussed and more easily manipulated, but at the same time sealing us off from an immediate, sensory connection to it.

There are, to be sure, varying degrees to which language departs from its sensory foundation. Mauthner gives epistemological pride of place to adjectives, which come closest to capturing the qualitative, mutable character of sensation, and resist the reifying tendency of nouns. But adjectives, too, transform sensation beyond recovery. They remain abstractive and are intertwined with the reifying tendency of nouns since they describe the properties of the thing.

Despite the rhetoric of a "critique of language" and moments when this critique appears to be addressed toward the inadequacies of language itself, Mauthner in point of fact targets a misapprehension of language's limitations. The problem is not language itself, but a false view of it that leads to its uncritical employment. Thus, for Mauthner, our reifying language, generated as it is according to our needs, is really suitable only for those needs.³¹ It is no good for expressing philosophical or scientific knowledge.

Our senses themselves are already contingent, and their development tends toward fitness for practical, and not epistemological, goals. The

³⁰This is, in many respects, an empiricist version of the Romantic account of irony discussed above. Language raises the possibility of "complete communication" in the act of rendering it impossible. See Chapter 5, section 5.

³¹Mauthner, *Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (Munich: George Müller, 1910) vol. 1, 175. See Weiler, *Mauthner's Critique of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 153.

world of sensation is already produced with the help of particular evolutionary physiological adaptations, which become philosophical and epistemological biases. We go on, in naming the objects of our experience, to abstract from these sensations and memories by way, especially, of substantives that obscure the mutability and transience of phenomena and present us with fictional objects of thought.

Moreover, over the course of time, these names transform themselves by means of metaphor or metonymy to apply to new objects of thought or to cross into new domains, further obscuring any already tenuous referential relationship between language and reality. Language is thus metaphorical in both its origin—since Mauthner interprets the acts of abstraction as metaphorical—and its development.³² This means, for Mauthner, who regards human language and human thought as essentially identical, that “human language or thinking is metaphorical through and through” (*B* 2:463). Words are originally poetic interpretations of a part of the stream of sensation that through regular use in social intercourse become signs for objects, which are only made cognizable through names.

In one passage, Mauthner provides an account of the metaphorical development of a word from its invention, through its regular use in a language, into its old age—its senile and senseless use in academic philosophy. The passage is worth quoting at length since it offers a good example of Mauthner’s literary style and demonstrates the manner in which social, political, and theological concerns motivate and remain integral to his critique of language:

The way the rich and the poor do not understand one another, so also the masters of rich and poor words do not. And the language of the people [*die Volkssprachen*] and their words have the following similarity too with men. They (words and men) become rich and old at the same time, but they are also impoverished by age, and impoverished in the use to which they put their wealth. The age of words and languages is often remarked upon. It can be noted, that the great words, for whose sake thousands of brains are racked in peace and in war are smashed to pieces, have gone through three clear periods. These great abstracta: God, eternity, creation, power and so on, are first posed symbolically by poetic minds. As metaphors they mean something, often some-

³² See Mauthner, *B* 1:35–36 and 1:113ff. “Language came into being through metaphor and through metaphor grows [. . .].”

thing relatively clever in comparison with their moribund progeny [*Wortgeschlecht*]. [. . .] In the second period, the great word becomes a philistine. It becomes something conventional. No one doubts it, because no one really believes in it. In the third period, the word is so depleted by its philistinism, it becomes so withered, that it is now called philosophy. The former symbol was good for a game; now the word is taken literally. One has lost its sense and therefore senselessly takes it seriously. As when the wife of a mathematician takes one of the formulas written by her husband as a grocery bill. Or as when present-day clerics argue over the Trinity. (*B* 1:51)

The analogy Mauthner draws between aging words, on the one hand, and people and their wealth, on the other, is not merely expository. He thinks word-superstition plays a crucial role in establishing the authority vested in long-standing political and religious institutions. Mauthner uses the term “philistine” here, which in German university towns was originally used to refer to people not affiliated with the university (meaning something like “townie” in addition to its usual sense). The suggestion is that real, living language thrives outside of the university, where the question whether there is some real thing actually corresponding to the word never arises. Living words do not have robust referents that are independent of their roles in a game. Here, in inchoate form, lies a central strategy of the *Investigations*: drawing attention away from the question of whether there is *really* some object corresponding to a word like “pain” or “meaning” and toward the role the words play in human activity.

It is only, Mauthner writes, when words are “used up” that they accumulate authority (or wealth), become feckless and semantically impoverished, and enter the academy to be dissected to no end by philosophers neglecting the metaphorical history of the word. Theologians, likewise, lose the meaning of religious language when they try to analyze the referent of particular terms outside their use in the context of a living religious practice.³³ In both cases, a word has lost its metaphorical meaning, been pulled out of its living context and historical associations, and made to answer for an object in a way that was never intended.

³³ For Wittgenstein’s own discussion of analyses of theological language outside its context of religious practice, see his *Lectures & Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 59ff.

In regarding language as an initially poetic insight that becomes mundane, conventional, and, later, feebly philosophical, Mauthner is following not just Hamann and Herder, but also Nietzsche. Like Mauthner, Nietzsche is convinced that language is an inappropriate and illusory means for the expression of truth. He writes in a famous passage from “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense”:

What is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms, in short a sum of human relations which are poetically and rhetorically intensified, passed down, and embellished, and which, after long use, strike a people as firm, canonical, and binding; truths are illusions we have forgotten are illusions, metaphors which have become worn by frequent use and have lost all sensuous vigor, coins which, having lost their stamp, are now regarded as metal and no longer as coins.³⁴

Here, Nietzsche goes so far as to present the concept of truth as a product of word-superstition or the forgetfulness of the metaphorical character of language. Philosophical language is currency that is taken “out of circulation,” to use Wittgenstein’s formulation, and presents itself as natural—as metal—when it is really conventional.

Forster suggests that Mauthner’s and Nietzsche’s strong accounts of the metaphorical character of all language and their subsequent epistemological skepticism rely on a distinction between the illusion suggested by language and an extra-linguistic reality.³⁵ Both, Forster writes, carry out their critiques of language on the basis of an “assumption of a deeper non-linguistic insight into the chaos of sensations.”³⁶ Mauthner associates this insight with “a godless mysticism.” The illusions forced on us by language rely in this sense on the contrast term of an extra-linguistic reality. “What we cannot grasp with the coarse tongs of language remains for us ungraspable,” Mauthner writes (B 1:502).

³⁴Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense,” *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1980), vol. 1, 880–81. Translated in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, trans. Ronald Speirs, eds. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 146. This analogy between money and language can also be found in Hamann, Mauthner, and Wittgenstein, as will be discussed below.

³⁵Michael Forster, “Language,” *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in the Nineteenth Century (1790–1870)*, ed. Allen W. Wood and Songsuk Susan Hahn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 279–80.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 280.

It is precisely this contrast that Hamann and Benjamin avoid in developing a linguistic universalism. To truly understand language as inescapable is not necessarily to regard it as an arena of human experience and activity sealed off from the “real” or extra-linguistic world. Mauthner, like Benjamin and Hamann, asserts the inescapability of language, but he does not have an equivalent of the concepts of condescension or language *überhaupt* that Hamann and Benjamin, respectively, do and remains therefore, despite his skepticism, indebted to an empiricist epistemological framework and extra-linguistic concept of sensation. In other words, for Mauthner, we are trapped inside language, but there is an outside. Where for Hamann, Benjamin—and, as I’ll try to show below, for Wittgenstein—there is no outside.

It is this debt to empiricism and its characterization of an extra-linguistic reality that, I’ll argue, most strongly separates Mauthner from Wittgenstein. Whereas Mauthner’s critique of language, despite all his criticisms of philosophical dogma, remains grounded in a Machian empiricism, in Wittgenstein’s work, Mauthner’s critique of language is detached from its empiricist foundations and turns on empiricist language itself. The result is a philosophical attitude closer to that of Hamann and Benjamin, aware of the manifold dangers of circumscribing language and developing philosophical means to combat them.

3. The “Magic Reach of Language”

Wittgenstein’s famous return to philosophy was, at least in part, occasioned by a 1928 lecture he attended given by the Dutch intuitionist mathematician and logician L. E. J. Brouwer.³⁷ Brouwer’s lecture was critical of the treatment of ordinary language by formalist schools of logic and mathematics. Like Gruppe and Mauthner, Brouwer was suspicious of the self-image of logic as “cleaning up” natural language and

³⁷ Herbert Feigl, “The Wiener Kreis in America,” *Inquiries and Provocations: Selected Writings 1929–1974*, ed. R. S. Cohen (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1980), 57–94, 64. See also Mathieu Marion, “Wittgenstein and Brouwer,” *Synthese*, 137:1/2 (Nov., 2003), 103–27; Sluga, *Frege*, 184–85; and Sluga, “Ludwig Wittgenstein: Life and Work,” *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein*, ed. Sluga and David G. Stern (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1–33, 15.

providing a precise notation for the expression of abstract concepts. In the lecture, Brouwer argued as follows:

For transmission of the will mediated by speech, there exists neither exactness nor certainty. And this state of affairs remains unaltered if the transmission of the will is concerned with the construction of systems of pure mathematics. Thus for pure mathematics as well there exists no certain language, i.e. no language that excludes misunderstandings [. . .]. The efforts of the formalist school (whose origin [. . .] can be traced back to the false belief in a magic reach of language—or, at least, in a reach that exceeds its character as a means for transmission of the will) can be explained from this point of view as the natural consequence of a much older, more primal, more consequential and more deeply rooted error, namely, the reckless trust in classical logic.³⁸

Although Brouwer is responding to later developments in logic, his contention is closely related to Gruppe's and Mauthner's view that logic is a construction of language that appears misleadingly to be the foundation of it. Brouwer goes further here, as part of his intuitionist project, claiming that, even in the domain of mathematics, formalisms can never be ideal or complete. The mistaken formalist understanding of logic arises, for Brouwer, from the magical literalism of language, which tends to believe in its own creations. Although Wittgenstein is not tempted by a constructivism of the intuitionist type Brouwer espouses, which regards mathematic objects as the construction of the subject or "will," it is possible Brouwer's contention that intuitionism could provide a viable constructivist alternative to formalist approaches to the philosophy of mathematics, like Russell's, provided some of the impetus for Wittgenstein's new thoughts.³⁹ If mathematics indeed has no "certain language," then Russell's notion of a critique of language laying bare the certain structure of factual, logical "language" underlying natural language, would seem to be subject to surrender as well.

³⁸L. E. J. Brouwer, "Mathematik, Wissenschaft und Sprache," *Monatshefte für Mathematik* 36 (1929), 153–64. Translated as "Mathematics, Science, and Language," *From Kant to Hilbert: A Source Book in the Foundations of Mathematics*, ed. William Ewald (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 2 vols., vol. 2, 1170–85, 1180–81.

³⁹P. M. S. Hacker gives a fuller account of the possible positive and negative influence of Brouwer on Wittgenstein's return to philosophy. He ultimately argues convincingly that although both Brouwer's and the late Wittgenstein's philosophies of mathematics have constructivist elements, for the former these constructions are "mental objects" while for the latter they are "grammatical rules." Hacker, *Insight and Illusion*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 120–28.

In the writings that follow his return to Cambridge in 1929, it is clear that Wittgenstein has turned away from a critique of language of the Russellian kind he viewed as the model for philosophy in the *Tractatus* and toward critique of language in Mauthner's sense—critique which takes as its target the “magic reach of language.” Wittgenstein begins the *Blue Book* (1933–1934) in precisely this vein, identifying “one of the great sources of philosophical bewilderment: a substantive makes us look for a thing that corresponds to it.”⁴⁰ Throughout the book, Wittgenstein is given to comments that come very close to Mauthner's own comments on word-superstition and explores our confusion over the use of metaphysical words like, for example, “thinking” or “time.”⁴¹

During this period, Wittgenstein is also in agreement with Mauthner's account of the manner in which the words “meaning” and “language” itself are themselves subject to hypostatization. In this, Mauthner follows Humboldt's famous declaration that language is an *energeia* (activity) rather than an *ergon* (work), but accuses Humboldt of betraying the idea through his concept of the “inner form” of language, a set of universal grammatical conditions every language must meet—the forefather of Chomsky's conception of generative grammar.⁴² For Mauthner, this notion of inner form requires that we think of language itself as an entity having particular characteristics that must be instantiated somehow in each individual language. We again lose sight of the fact that the very concept of “language” becomes a substance or work when

⁴⁰ Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for the 'Philosophical Investigations'*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), 1.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 6. He writes:

[. . .] When we are worried about the nature of thinking, the puzzlement which we wrongly interpret to be one about the nature of the medium is a puzzlement caused by the mystifying use of our language. This kind of mistake recurs again and again in philosophy; e.g., when we are puzzled about the nature of time, when time seems to us a *queer thing*. We are most strongly tempted to think that here are things hidden, something we can see from the outside but which we can't look into. And yet nothing of the sort is the case. It is not new facts about time which we want to know. All the facts that concern us lie open before us. But it is the substantive “time” which mystifies us. If we look into the grammar of that word, we shall feel that it is no less astounding that man should have conceived of a deity of time than it would be to conceive of a deity of negation or disjunction.

⁴² See Noam Chomsky, *Cartesian Linguistics: A Chapter in the History of Rationalist Thought*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 105–06.

taken too literally in this way. If language is purely activity, inseparable from its use, then it has no inner form.⁴³

On this issue, Wittgenstein writes in the *Investigations*:

Thought, language now appear to us as the unique correlate, picture, of the world. These concepts: proposition, language, thought, world, stand in line one behind the other, each equivalent to the other. (But what are these words to be used for now? The language-game in which they are to be applied is missing.) (*PI* §96)

The hypostatization of “language” separates it from its history and the range of contexts in which it is used. It wrenches language out of the world and makes it into a map or correlate of it, rather than an imperfectly connected, immanent series of practices—language-games—in the world. As a correlate or picture of the world, language appears as an abstract phenomenon, a *thing* with an essence lying beneath its surface, whether in its connection to logical form or to universal grammar (*PI* §92). In reality, Wittgenstein writes, “If the words ‘language,’ ‘experience,’ ‘world’ have a use, it must be as humble a one as that of the words ‘table,’ ‘lamp,’ ‘door’” (*PI* §97).

Crucially, Wittgenstein does not combine this critique of language sensitive to the use of words with a Machian empiricism like the one Mauthner supports. This means Wittgenstein does not see certain uses of language—those of concrete substantives or adjectives—as more epistemologically legitimate than others because they come closer to sensory experience. It also means the entire foundation of Mauthner’s epistemological skepticism—the concept of private sensory experience—is, for Wittgenstein, not at all secure from the criticisms that Mauthner makes of concrete and abstract substantives. Wittgenstein extends the critique of language to Mauthner’s own empiricism.

⁴³ One of the main arguments that Chomsky makes for his version of innate grammar—that only some kind of innate linguistic or grammatical capacity could account for the extraordinary strides human beings make in language use early in life—is also perhaps vulnerable to a version of Mauthner’s objection. The argument artificially isolates “language,” leading us to consider a child’s *acquisition* as roughly on a par with an adult’s acquisition of a second language. We seem to see them build up to it so quickly that it must already have been there before. But, if we refuse to think of language as a thing, the startling progress in the children’s facility with words will be seen more continuously with their startling progress in every other arena of human life. Childhood linguistic development tells us no more about human beings’ fitness for language than it tells us about human fitness for board games or sports—which is not to say it tells us nothing.

In the *Blue Book*, Wittgenstein writes:

When we think about the relation of the objects surrounding us to our personal experiences of them, we are sometimes tempted to say that these personal experiences are the material of which reality consists. [. . .] When we think in this way we seem to lose our firm hold on the objects surrounding us. And instead we are left with a lot of separate personal experiences of different individuals. These personal experiences again seem vague and seem to be in constant flux. Our language seems not to have been made to describe them. We are tempted to think that in order to clear up such matters philosophically our ordinary language is too coarse, that we need a more subtle one.⁴⁴

Despite his sensitivity to the power of language, this is precisely the temptation to which Mauthner succumbs. For Wittgenstein, there are two philosophical errors, broadly speaking, that one can make when one judges natural language inadequate to philosophical purposes: the formalist and the empiricist. The formalist approaches (including the *Tractatus*) see logic as a reflection of the structure of the world or of thought and treat natural language as an inadequate scientific instrument for manipulating concepts. Through logical analysis and representation in formal language, the rough and practical concepts of natural language can be sharpened and thought thereby clarified. In the critique of these kinds of views, Wittgenstein is largely in agreement with Mauthner. They mistake the purpose and reach of language, and consequently the relationship between language and logic.

Mauthner, however, still regards natural language as deficient insofar as it is not adequate to the sense experience that actually makes up reality. Even though Mauthner despairs of the possibility of actually creating a “language of sensation” that would be adequate to our perceptual experience—such a language would be a contradiction in terms since language is definitionally abstractive in the way documented above—he still holds on to the idea that perceptual experience is “the material of which reality consists.” Mauthner’s extreme skepticism is generated by a tension in his philosophy between an empiricist theory of knowledge according to which all knowledge must be traced back to sensations and an expressivist theory of language according to which language is developed metaphorically and effective in practical circum-

⁴⁴ *Blue Book*, 45.

stances (as well as in expressing emotion and aesthetic qualities), but not in communicating the perceptual contents of consciousness, which are ever-changing and infinitely complex. Despite the fact that he finds these contents and, therefore, knowledge incommunicable, Mauthner never doubts their language-independent existence.

Accordingly, from Wittgenstein's point of view, Mauthner has only overcome half of an ill-begotten picture of the relationship between language, mind, and world.⁴⁵ Whereas formalisms deem human language not logical enough—too particular and contingently developed to meet the demands of thought—empiricism, in Mauthner's vein, sees it as too abstractive and therefore not able to take the measure of particular and fluctuating sense experience.⁴⁶

But empiricism's notion of private sensation is, for Wittgenstein, just the obverse of reified abstracta. The picture of language Wittgenstein wants to combat conceives of words connecting meaning as the contents of consciousness (what I intend or mean when I speak) to states of affairs or objects in the external world. Mauthner rids himself of both the idea that words refer to objects in this way and of the idea that language can capture the contents of consciousness. But whereas he rightly identifies the conventional picture of reference as a kind of useful fiction we are led to by language itself, he stops well short of giving up on the notion of private sensation. Wittgenstein's return to philosophy thus occasions a return to many of the insights of Mauthner's critique of language, but also a movement beyond them. The former accord with Mauthner is found, for example, in Wittgenstein's discussion of rule-following, while the latter departure, as will be discussed further below, comes out in his reflections on private language.

⁴⁵ Compare this to Benjamin's contention that empiricist epistemological biases are only partially overcome in Kant through the notion of a thing-in-itself. Just as Benjamin accuses Kantianism of overcoming only the object-side of an empiricist epistemology, from Wittgenstein's perspective, as I am reading him, Mauthner's critique of language is unfinished, having overcome the tendency to reify physical and abstract objects but not the tendency to reify subjective experience.

⁴⁶ These two extremes can also be thought of as two external limits to language or two attempts to transcend the realm of linguistic usage—an upper and lower bound, so to speak. It will be argued below that the rule-following sections of the *Investigations* and its discussion of a private language represent Wittgenstein's attempt to demonstrate the failure of these respective attempts at transcendence.

4. "(Theology as Grammar)"

Before moving into a discussion of Wittgenstein's ideas about private expression, it is necessary to show, in this section and the next, the positive influence of Mauthner as it relates to the concept of grammar, which Wittgenstein draws from Mauthner and develops. Wittgenstein often discusses the hypostatization of words—their detachment from a use-based meaning—with reference to their grammar. A good example of this is a passage in the *Blue Book* that connects a number of related features of language-critique important to both Wittgenstein and Mauthner. Wittgenstein writes:

If [. . .] we talk about the locality where thinking takes place we have a right to say that this locality is the paper on which we write or the mouth which speaks. And if we talk of the head or the brain as the locality of thought, this is using the expression "locality of thinking" in a different sense. Let us examine what are the reasons for calling the head the place of thinking. It is not our intention to criticize this form of expression, or to show that it is not appropriate. What we must do is: understand its workings, its grammar, e.g. see what relation this grammar has to that of the expression "we think with our mouth," or "we think with a pencil on a piece of paper."

Perhaps the main reason why we are so strongly inclined to talk of the head as the locality of our thoughts is this: the existence of the words "thinking" and "thought" alongside of the words denoting (bodily) activities, such as writing, speaking, etc., make us look for an activity, different from these but analogous to them, corresponding to the word "thinking." When words in our ordinary language have *prima facie* analogous grammars we are inclined to interpret them analogously; that is, we try to make the analogy hold throughout.⁴⁷

We are not sufficiently critical, Wittgenstein contends, when we take up the word "thinking" in philosophy. We immediately begin to speak about it as if it were a process like writing or speaking, because the words, on their surface, behave the same way in our sentences. In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein calls this "surface grammar." But a deeper look at the way the word "thinking" works—its "depth grammar"—will show that the way the word is used is quite different.

⁴⁷ *Blue Book*, 7.

Wittgenstein is modifying Russell and Frege's conception of "logical grammar," which was operative in the *Tractatus*. There it meant the underlying logical structure of propositions, which it was the role of Russellian critique of language to uncover.⁴⁸ Here, depth grammar means something very different. Wittgenstein has rejected the idea that there exists a logical form of propositions "beneath" their surface grammar, but not the idea that surface grammar can be misleading and requires further investigation to be made clear. Now, however, depth grammar is not logical form but *use* ("workings") in all its complexity. There is nothing in itself wrong with saying "thought takes place in our heads," if it is accompanied by a context and use that gives it a definite sense, that is, a way forward. But absent such a context, the statement, interpreted in analogy with other statements having the same surface grammar—for example, "orientation takes place in room 401"—leads to confusion. The latter statement involves an intersubjective practice and its setting, and we can easily imagine a use for it. The depth grammar that might accompany "thought takes place in our heads" is not so clear. We could imagine contexts in which its use would be unproblematic—for example, dissuading a child who thinks her brain is in her foot—but the way it is taken up in philosophy, as a report of an event, can lead to confusion. The grammatical form of other kinds of expressions is imposed onto uses of the word "thinking."

Wittgenstein imagines a psychological experiment in which the word "thinking" is used in two ways: first, to apply to an observable physiological process taking place in our brain (seen on a scan) and second, with reference to certain phenomenal experiences we (or given subjects) have. The analogy with other kinds of processes leads us to think of the former as the "outside" and latter as the "inside" of the same phenomenon. But it is not clear what the criteria for identifying these two phenomena would be, or how we are to make use of the phrase "this is thinking" applied to each phenomenon. It is not like noticing that the revolutions of a car engine make the wheels turn. The word "thinking" here is torn from everyday uses—letting someone know what to expect, weighing options, expressing doubt, explaining a misunderstanding, etc.—and turned into an item that we expect to have a discoverable

⁴⁸ See, for example, Russell, *Principles of Mathematics* (London: Routledge, 2010), §46, 43–44.

structure. The error here is to regard thinking as analogous to certain corporeal processes—as the immaterial correlate of speaking or acting, for example—without having sufficiently distinguished this use of the words “thinking” or “thought” from those words’ everyday uses or from the depth grammar of words like “speaking” or “speech” (*PI* §339). The meaning of the word “thinking” has a sense in the contexts where it has an evolved use. When language ages, retires, “goes on holiday,” (*PI* §38) it is torn from that context and loses its sense, despite the picture it continues to force on us.

Wittgenstein uses the concept of grammar here to designate the “workings” of a particular word or phrase and to encourage attention to these workings, rather than a conceptual understanding of the word that implicitly or explicitly regards it as having a meaning detachable from its use. Grammatical analysis is the way words are brought “back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” (*PI* §116).

This later usage of the term “grammar” is related to and likely derived from Mauthner, whose conception of grammar, in turn, owes a debt to Hamann. This lineage is in especial evidence at §373 of the *Investigations*, where Wittgenstein writes, “Grammar tells what kind of object anything is. (Theology as grammar.)” Wittgenstein expresses the same idea in both his notebooks and a set of lectures. In his notebooks, he attributes it to Luther: “Theology is the grammar of the word ‘God’.” Of the source for the remark, Wittgenstein writes only that he “read it somewhere.”⁴⁹ In his lectures, he expands:

I interpret this [Luther’s claim] to mean that an investigation of the word [“God”] would be a grammatical one. For example, people might dispute about how many arms God had, and someone might enter the dispute by denying that one could talk about the arms of God. This would throw light on the use of the word. What is ridiculous or blasphemous also shows the grammar of the word.⁵⁰

The phrase appears also in the writings of Hamann, who makes two notable mentions of Luther’s apparent claim. In a letter to Jacobi he

⁴⁹ *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Public and Private Occasions*, ed. James C. Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 211. See also Hacker and Schulte’s note on the remark, *Philosophical Investigations*, 256.

⁵⁰ *Wittgenstein’s Lectures, Cambridge 1932–1935*, ed. Alice Ambrose (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979), 32.

writes, “Do you now understand my language-principle of reason and that with Luther I turn all philosophy into a grammar?”⁵¹ And in his “Miscellaneous Notes on Word Order in the French Language,” Hamann makes reference to Luther’s claim that “theology [is] a grammar of the language of Holy Writ” (*HSW* 2:129 / *WP* 22).⁵²

There is, however, some difficulty in actually tracing this comment back to Luther,⁵³ which means Wittgenstein likely found it either in Mauthner’s or Hamann’s work. Given that Mauthner alludes in his writings to the former reference to Luther, which equates philosophy rather than theology with grammar, it is possible that Wittgenstein found the reference to theology as grammar in Hamann’s word-order essay directly, especially in light of another comment Wittgenstein makes in the *Investigations* on French word order (*PI* §336).⁵⁴ In any case, there is

⁵¹ Letter to Jacobi of April 27, 1787, *Briefwechsel*, vol. 7, 169. Qtd. in Haynes, *Writings on Philosophy and Language*, xiiin. Mauthner quotes the letter as an epigraph to the first section of the first volume of the *Beiträge*.

⁵² In the essay, Hamann mocks the idea, held by some, that French word order most closely approximates the order of thought. He also mocks the attempts of the French Academy to preserve the purity of the French language. This is the product of an unhealthy, reified, and nationalistic conception of language that, for Hamann, artificially constrains it and prevents its development. “The purity of a language disposes it of its wealth,” he writes (*HSW* 2:136 / *WP* 31).

⁵³ According to Kenneth Haynes, Hamann finds the quote in Johann Albrecht Bengel’s 1742 *Index of the New Testament* (*Writings on Philosophy and Language*, 22n). (Haynes also points to some relevant passages in Luther.) In a book on Wittgenstein and religion, Gordon Graham notes the difficulty tracing Wittgenstein’s Luther reference back to Luther, and speculates that Wittgenstein picked up the idea of theology as grammar from a footnote in William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience*, where religious creeds are compared to grammar. See Gordon Graham, *Wittgenstein and Natural Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 47. However, given that James’s note doesn’t refer to Luther (and Hamann does), it seems more likely the source for Wittgenstein’s remark is Hamann.

⁵⁴ This reference is also difficult to trace. In §336, against an overly simplistic and reified conception of the relationship between thought and speech, Wittgenstein writes, “(A French politician once wrote that it was a peculiarity of the French language that in its words occur in the order in which one thinks them.)” Hacker and Schulte write that evidence suggests “the politician was [Aristide] Briand” (*PI*, 255), but it is difficult to find Briand saying or writing anything of the kind. It is possible that Wittgenstein is referring instead to Denis Diderot’s “Letter on the Deaf and Mute for the Use of Those Who Hear and Speak,” which concerns Hamann in both his essay on French word order and his “Essay on an Academic Question” (*HSW* 2:130 / *WP* 24, *HSW* 2:124–25 / *WP* 16). Diderot writes in the letter, “We express things in French in the order the mind has to consider them” (Denis Diderot, *Diderot’s Early Philosophical Works*, trans. Margaret Jourdain (Chicago: Open Court, 1916, 190). It seems plausible that Wittgenstein became acquainted with Diderot’s view and Luther’s alleged equation of theology and grammar through Hamann’s essay, to which a reading of Mauthner—who cites Ha-

a clear line of thought from Hamann through Mauthner to Wittgenstein that holds that philosophy (and theology) can and ought to be conducted as a kind of grammatical analysis. The manner in which this analysis is conducted differs from thinker to thinker. Hamann's conception of grammar is, like the rest of his philosophy, not systematically developed, but a look at the essay on French word order will still be useful.

Hamann's essay employs an extended analogy between money and language.⁵⁵ Hamann quotes the *Nicomachean Ethics* and Plutarch in this regard. Aristotle writes, "There must therefore be some one standard, and this accepted by agreement, which is why it is called *nomisma*,⁵⁶ customary currency; for such a standard makes all things commensurable, since all things can be measured by money."⁵⁷ And Plutarch compares "the use of language" to "the exchange of money."⁵⁸ As we saw earlier, Hamann regards human language as a translation of God's language—creation. God's creation is an act of condescension, meaning that in creation God made himself knowable through an act of self-limitation. We experience creation as an infinite linguistic medium that includes us among its creations. The attempts of human language to name this creation by fragmentary, imperfect means constitute human knowledge. This theological picture describes essential features of human language, which is at once infinite—having no limit to how it can be combined in itself nor to what it can name or describe—and radically finite, manifesting itself in particular and constrained material means that make a mockery of its attempts to name an infinite creation.

Money, in a similar way, is unlimited in principle and can be made to apply to anything.⁵⁹ Everything has a price (at least potentially). Yet

mann heavily and also comments on the rigidity of French word order—might have directed him. See Chapter 9, section 4, for further discussion of Wittgenstein's reading of Hamann. In a book on Wittgenstein, Charles Travis identifies Wittgenstein's "French politician" as Diderot. See Travis, *Thought's Footing: A Theme in Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 99.

⁵⁵ Hamann draws the analogy from Leibniz's "Modest Thoughts Concerning the Use and Improvement of the German Language."

⁵⁶ The ancient Greek word for money is derived from *nomos*, meaning "usage," "custom," or "law."

⁵⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, Mass.: Loeb Classical Library, 1926), 1133a19–22.

⁵⁸ Plutarch, "The Oracles at Delphi No Longer Given in Verse," *Moralia*, 406b, ch. 24, trans. Frank Cole Babbitt (Cambridge, Mass.: Loeb Classical Library, 1936), vol. 5, 325.

⁵⁹ Cf. *PI* §120: "People say: it's not the word that counts, but its meaning, thinking of the meaning as a thing of the same kind as the word, even though different from the

money itself, as a medium of exchange, is finite, conditioned, contingent. Furthermore, both money and language are conventional—bound to the context in which they are taken to be effective, to have sense—and yet easily mistaken or illusively taken for the essential character of the thing they purport to describe.⁶⁰ The same way money can reduce a thing to its exchange value, language can reduce a thing to nomenclature or some other linguistic feature. (In cliché, for example, words overwhelm the things they name.) This, for Hamann, is just the error French academics make when they confuse the word order of French for the order of thought and attempt to reform Latin—a highly inflected language that allows for greater variation of word order—so that it conforms to this order.⁶¹

Hamann writes, “The wealth of all human knowledge rests on the exchange of words; and it was a theologian of penetrating wit [Luther] who pronounced theology,—the oldest sister of the higher sciences,—to be a grammar of the language of Holy Writ.” As Wittgenstein interprets this, such a grammar would tell us how biblical language is used. It would indicate what can be said about God and what not. In a similar way, Hamann sees philosophy as a study of the regularities of the exchange of words, whose value or meaning is not independent of this exchange but wholly determined by it.

To this end, Hamann conducts a grammatical analysis of the French language, and, in particular, its relatively fixed word order. He attempts to show, by way of comparison with German and Latin, how the peculiarities of French—its abstention from certain word endings, its use of pronouns, articles, and prepositions—contribute to the rigidity of its

word. Here the word, there the meaning. The money, and the cow one can buy with it. (On the other hand, however: money, and what can be done with it.)”

⁶⁰ Lukács’s concept of reification, an expansion of Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism, identifies the same process. See esp. *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971), 84–86. One could compare Marx on use-value and Wittgenstein on use in this regard. Some commentators have speculated on the influence of Piero Sraffa, Italian economist and friend of Antonio Gramsci. (For example, Rupert Read, “Wittgenstein and Marx on ‘Philosophical Language,’” *Essays in Philosophy*, 1:2 (2000); and John B. Davis, “Grasci, Sraffa, Wittgenstein: philosophical linkages,” *European Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, 9:3 (Autumn 2002), 384–401.) But it’s important to note that similarities in Wittgenstein and Marx may not come only by way of Sraffa’s influence, but also from the common influence of Romanticism.

⁶¹ Where, for example, Latin can convey the agreement of words by case endings and thus let them flow apart from each other in the sentence, French usually requires that they stick together.

word order. In so doing, he demonstrates the absurdity of Diderot's claim that the language somehow reflects the order of thought. Here, it is not simply individual words that detach from the contexts in which they have sense and seem to acquire a metaphysical meaning, but the entire grammatical structure of a language (its surface grammar). This surface grammar imposes a picture on us, as Wittgenstein will put it. Hamann combats this mystification by pointing out the contingency of that structure, its uses, and its limitations. The further efforts of French academicians to regulate the use of French are the upshot of this grammatical reification and stifle the development of the language. Grammatical analysis here shows that what seemed to be essential was just one way of looking at things—a very parochial one, given the diversity of human languages, their contingent development, and the distance of each from the absolute truth they aim at.

This understanding of the impact of grammar on our conception of thought brings us close to the territory of Humboldt's view that every language is a worldview and theories, like Whorf's, that attempt to locate the origin of cultural norms and beliefs in grammatical structure. In her book, Christina Lafont makes an explicit connection between Hamann and Whorf.⁶² But the simplicity of those views are, in fact, given a (preemptory) correction here by Hamann. Every language is not a worldview but rather tempts us to take it as such. A language can lead us to attend to certain features of the world and ignore others, but languages are not prisons. The claim that every language is a worldview, like Humboldt's doctrine of inner form, itself falls victim to a hypostatization of the concept of language.

This view construes a language as a lens through which we see the world, one which, so to speak, preforms the world for us. This is no less an illusion than the kind that leads a philosopher to claim that French

⁶² Lafont, *Linguistic Turn*, 37–39n. Lafont associates Hamann's claim in the *Metacritique of the Purism of Reason* that a "word-sign [. . .] is a priori arbitrary and indifferent and a posteriori necessary and indispensable" (*HSW* 3:288 / *WP* 216) with Whorf's claim that the grammar of a particular language is intimately connected with the world experienced by its speakers. Hamann's claim here, however, is directed not at world disclosure but the connection between concepts of the understanding and words, which Hamann finds too neatly divided in Kant's system. Kant, as philosophy in general is wont to do, perpetrates "a violent, unjustified, willful divorce of that which nature has joined together!" (*HSW* 3:286 / *WP* 212). See also "Philological Ideas and Doubts about an Academic Prize Essay," *HSW* 3:40 / *WP* 117.

word order mimics the order of thought. Views in the tradition of Humboldt and Whorf are perhaps on firmer ground since they can, in a way, explain the hypostatization that leads Diderot to call French word order the order of thought. Diderot is “held captive” by the picture suggested by his own language. But Diderot’s error was philosophical, the product of reflection on his own language, *not* the matter of an ineluctable worldview built into his language. Strong versions of linguistic relativity thus make the same error as Diderot, but, as it were, from the outside instead of from within. Instead of elevating their own language to the status of eternal form, they posit that this elevation is something that language does on its own. But in both cases the word “language” has been hypostatized and correlated with “thought” in a way that does not do justice to the contingent development of language, its continuity with other languages and dialects—as well as with human world of practical activity itself—and the fact that it cannot be so neatly delimited.

Views of these two kinds, of course, appear on their face to be diametrically opposed to each other. Diderot conceives of language, in line with the classical paradigm, as an instrument of language-independent thought that can therefore express this thought with varying degrees of success. Whorf denies that thought has such independence. He conceives of his version of linguistic relativity explicitly in opposition to this classical paradigm:

[T]he background linguistic system (in other words, the grammar) of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual’s mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his mental stock in trade.⁶³

Whorf’s relativity thus makes language both a means for the expression of ideas and a mental set that orders the raw material of sensation into a coherent conceptual schema. These schemata are roughly shared by closely related languages, like those of the Indo-European family, whose grammars are closely related. The European metaphysics that results from the world disclosed by these grammars thus appears universally valid, but a study of American Indian languages like Hopi demonstrates

⁶³ Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1956), 212.

the arbitrariness and limitations of Western experiential and metaphysical presuppositions. (In Whorf's eyes, the metaphysical upshots of Hopi grammar are in fact better aligned with reality.)

From Hamann's point of view, Whorf's relativity, however, partakes in the same fetishization of language as that which plagued Diderot's conception of French. In Whorf, the thesis that language is inescapable is falsely conceived because it is construed as applying to languages individually. In his view, each particular language or grammar discloses a world or, at least, suggests a metaphysics. But the constriction of this thesis to a particular language immediately undermines it, since it delimits language from a perspective outside it. It instrumentalizes language no less than a designative theory, not as means for the expression of thought but as a means through which the world is experienced. It exaggerates the differences between languages and the conceptual understandings of the world meant to be determined by them. Finally, it gives us the false sense of discovering the essence or character of a particular language.

Wittgenstein writes about this kind of mistake—which falsely circumscribes language or a language—in a famous passage in the *Investigations*:

A main source of our failure to understand is that we don't have an overview of the use of our words. Our grammar is deficient in surveyability [*Übersichtlichkeit*]. A surveyable representation produces precisely that kind of understanding which consists in "seeing connections." Hence the importance of finding and inventing intermediate links.

The concept of a surveyable representation is of fundamental significance for us. It characterizes the way we represent things, how we look at matters. (Is this a "Weltanschauung"?) (*PI* §122)⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Mauthner uses the same word, "overview" or "survey" (*Übersicht*), to refer to the impossibility of a complete philosophical grammar:

We are today no more "enlightened" than J. B. Meiner (his general language doctrine appears in the same year as Kant's critique of reason), who in all languages saw only copies of one and the same original, namely thinking. Even the newest attempts at a philosophical grammar confess unwillingly to the impossibility of the undertaking. A. Stöhr never gives in his "Algebra of Grammar" [. . .] a complete overview of all possible relationships, but in the best case only rich and perspicacious [*übersichtlich*] examples. There is no philosophy, only philosophies. There is no grammar, only grammars. There is no logic, only logics. And living reality springs from the shackles of philosophies, of grammars, and of logics, the way living water crystallized in crevices ruptures ancient, dead rocks. (*B* 3:258)

One of Wittgenstein's main hermeneutical strategies in the *Investigations* is to artificially constrict a domain of language through thought experiments that ask us to imagine, for example, a language or language-game consisting only of orders (*PI* §2). This allows us to look at language as it facilitates a particular activity or as it is learned, without the temptation of an overgeneralizing pursuit of the "logical form" behind propositions. It also helps us to imagine what a surveyable grammar might look like and how far away we are from having one. A surveyable grammar would give us a compendium of all the uses to which we put words from the outside. It would give us our entire form of life—Wittgenstein's version of the absolute. Linguistic relativity makes the mistake of thinking it has a surveyable representation of a language that shows how that language dictates experience of the world—how, for example, the absence of tenses in Hopi supposedly produces a cyclical metaphysics of time.⁶⁵ But this amounts to a fetishization of a particular language and pays insufficient attention to the diversity of word use, the historical contingency of language development, and facts of translatability. It mistakes a particular language for a whole, when it is only a fragment.

Wittgenstein, though he doesn't have Humboldt explicitly in mind, hits here upon Humboldt's dictum, which heavily influenced Whorf, that every language is a worldview. Wittgenstein uses the word in Oswald Spengler's sense.⁶⁶ For Spengler, a worldview is a comprehensive vision of reality characteristic of a particular time. Wittgenstein suggests that the requirement that we gain an overview of the phenomena under question is itself the product of a particular worldview. The problem is that such an overview is impossible with respect to language, "our use of words." Views like Humboldt's and Whorf's, insofar as they artificially delimit a particular language and purport to give an account of its essence or the worldview it expresses, are doomed to provide us with a false overview. That said, Wittgenstein sees no alternative philosophical

⁶⁵ Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality*, 217. Subsequent commentators have argued that Whorf's account of Hopi grammar is misleading and that the language does have tense indicators. See Ekkehart Malotki, *Hopi Time: A Linguistic Analysis of the Temporal Concepts in the Hopi Language* (Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1983).

⁶⁶ See "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*" in *Philosophical Occasions, 1912–1951*, ed. James C. Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993), 119–55, 132–33. See Chapter 8 for more on Wittgenstein and Spengler.

paradigm to employ.⁶⁷ The idea of a surveyable representation is fundamental to our conception of what it means to understand something. His solution is to artificially constrict grammatical analysis to domains—invented or childhood language-games, “intermediate links”—where such an overview is possible. These findings are then not expanded to cover a more general range of phenomena, but rather used to demonstrate how inadequate a conventional and generalizing philosophical investigation into these phenomena is—how the apparently deep or metaphysical meaning of words grows out of a particular use that is open to view when we think about how we learned particular words or how they are employed in more primitive language-games.

The suggestion that this very need to have an overview of a phenomenon in order to understand it is an element of a particular worldview must be posed in the form of a question because to assert it would be to take up a falsely external position relative to it. Not only can we not see our way of seeing, but to conceive of it that way—that is, as something that, though we happen not to be able to see it, could in principle be seen—is already to deform it. Wittgenstein’s philosophical grammar is thus, as I’ll bring out in more detail below, a response to a condition very much like that of Hamannian condescension, where God’s self-limitation in the act of creation means that He is not just beyond our comprehension but beyond comprehending. “The great difficulty here,” Wittgenstein writes in a different context, “is not to present the matter as if there were something one couldn’t do” (*PI* §374).⁶⁸

Philosophical grammar affords us not an external overview, but immanent glimpses into the workings of our language. Grammar, like blasphemy and jokes, estranges us from our language-games in order to show their limits and aspects of their structure, but we must not imagine this estrangement is ever, or could ever be, complete, as Diderot, Whorf, and Herder do in varying ways.

⁶⁷ Cf. *PI* §374 where Wittgenstein admits there is no alternative to the picture of inner objects we employ when discussing pain or thinking—“inner” states—but suggests that even though we can “yield to the temptation to use this picture,” we must then “investigate what the *application* of the picture looks like” (*PI* §374).

⁶⁸ This comment is also closely related to the difference in the role of regulative ideals in Benjamin and Kant discussed above. See Chapter 3, section 2.

5. Grammar and Language-Games

Mauthner picks up and develops a number of Hamann's ideas about the contingency of grammar and the therapeutic effect attention to that arbitrariness can have. In so doing, he invents many of the tools and rhetorical strategies that become central parts of the *Investigations*.

Mauthner's line of argument also often takes the form of an attack on conceptions of philosophical grammar as a general grammar that provides logically valid categories that all particular languages must accommodate. Humboldt's notion of inner form is found particularly wanting. Humboldt rejected a biased approach to universal grammar that judged non-Western languages by the standard of the general grammatical plan of Indo-European languages, but he did regard all languages as manifesting a basic set of features or categories common to all. These categories—conceived by Humboldt along Kantian lines—comprise an “inner form” that generates linguistic activity.⁶⁹ “Language's true definition,” Humboldt writes, “can only be a genetic one.”⁷⁰ Thus, Humboldt argues for the essentiality of certain grammatical categories like the verb and a system of grammatical cases that all languages must, to some extent, generate in order to express anything at all. Individual languages can then be evaluated by their felicity in accommodating these universal categories.⁷¹

Mauthner rejects Humboldt's notion that languages develop according to some kind of inner law and instead insists on their historical and cultural contingency and on the necessity of attention to ordinary

⁶⁹ See Forster, *German Philosophy of Language*, 124.

⁷⁰ Humboldt, “The Diversity of Human Language Structure and its Influence on the Mental Development of Mankind,” *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Carl Brandes (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1841–1852), 7 vols., vol. 6, 1–425, 42. Translated by Peter Heath in Humboldt, *On Language*, 49.

⁷¹ In *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians*, Schlegel's analysis of language as a structural whole with grammatical variation applied only to inflected languages with their roots in Sanskrit. Humboldt generalized the principle to cover the study of all languages. Yet he retains Schlegel's bias toward inflected languages by contending that Sanskritic, Indo-European languages best replicate an “inner form” of ideal language. Schlegel described uninflected languages like Chinese as “mechanical,” functioning merely by “aggregating” words. Humboldt acknowledged that Chinese had a grammar, though he retained the distinction between aggregating and inflected languages, and added a further category—agglutinating—to categorize the native languages of the Americas. Forster characterizes Humboldt's conception of inner form as a regression to an old seventeenth-century notion of universal grammar (*German Philosophy of Language*, 127).

language. “Language is the use of language” (B 1:24). Mauthner, furthermore, rejects the notion entailed by inner form that different languages can express the same thoughts or meanings. It is not proper, writes Mauthner anticipating Vygotsky, to consider the material aspects of speech—its physical vibrations—separately from its signifying use. “Language is nothing real [*Wirkliches*] and yet it can be something active [*Wirksames*],” Mauthner writes, altering Humboldt’s own dictum that language is not an *ergon* (work) but an *energeia* (activity) to suit his own needs (N 1:49).⁷² From Mauthner’s point of view, Humboldt has betrayed the spirit of the view that language is an activity by positing an inner grammatical form of language. For Mauthner, grammar is nothing more than the norms of language-use as they are read off of linguistic practices. We are misled when we understand language in terms of the picture of reality it generates instead of the practical activity it effectuates.

Putting language back in place involves, first of all, broadening our understanding of grammar beyond its ordinary scope. Grammar is not just the grammar of words and sentences, speech and writing, but the structure of human activity in which human language plays merely a part, albeit a central one. Once language is no longer conceived of as a systematic entity with a delineable, basic structure hidden within its manifold instantiations (i.e., natural languages), but rather a medium of exchange defined by the role it plays in the wealth of different forms of human behavior, its grammatical features—in the strict sense of the word “grammatical” (case, tense, syntax, and so on)—can no longer be regarded as potentially reflecting either the structure of reality or thought, nor even the structure or “inner form” of “language” itself. Nor can these grammatical features be regarded as determining the “world-view” of a particular culture. They are rather, like words themselves, contingently developed and developing contrivances that function in various ways within various kinds of interaction we have with each other and our environment. Language is what it does. We could say, then, if language does have a form, it is more like that of an imperative than anything else.

It is no mistake, then, that Mauthner and Wittgenstein take the example of commands as one of the most “primitive” or basic and, therefore, useful examples. Commands—especially one-word commands like

⁷² See Weiler, *Mauthner’s Critique of Language*, 97.

“slab”—are, of course, not promising candidates for an analysis along the lines of logical form.⁷³ Especially when we restrict a language to just these words, it becomes ridiculous to speak of a propositional meaning outside their use. Mauthner suggests this strategy, and Wittgenstein’s “block-pillar-slab” language-game consisting only of orders (*PI* §2), when he writes:

Let us place ourselves with our complicated language back in the simplest circumstances, where the relevant considerations are altogether transparent, where emphasis [*Betonung*] takes effect immediately, and we once again use single-word sentences by themselves. One can now attend to the manner in which a whole, closely-knit and self-contained group comes to an understanding. [. . .] Only the polysemy of the life of our culture has made the analogical development of complicated syntactic forms necessary. (*B* 2:145–46)⁷⁴

Mauthner’s suggestion here is more speculative than Wittgenstein’s slab language-game, since it suggests a genetic story about a primitive language being composed naturally of these one-word imperatives and later developing complexity. Wittgenstein’s imagined slab language-game strips away this phylogenetic sense, but the point is the same: to look at how one-word commands function in order to win perspective on how language as a whole functions.⁷⁵ The slab language affords us the kind of overview or survey of a very limited language-game that it is impossible to gain over our own language. Mauthner also identifies here a close connection between language development and “the life of our culture”—what Wittgenstein might call a “form of life.” The meaning of language is always immanent to the activities for which it is developed.

In §18 of the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein argues for the legitimacy of the method of these imperative language-games with recourse to another piece of rhetoric he may have borrowed from Mauthner: an analogy between a city and language (*B* 1:27):

⁷³ Of course we can translate it into the sentence “Bring me a slab” (*PI* §§19–20) and then run the sentence through such an analysis, but Wittgenstein argues, there are no grounds for such a translation.

⁷⁴ See also Weiler, *Mauthner’s Critique of Language*, 110.

⁷⁵ This stripping away of phylogenetic implications is characteristic of Wittgenstein’s relationship to Mauthner. Wittgenstein is interested only in bringing our language into view, not in tracing its actual development. A “fictitious natural history” will do just as well. See esp. *PPF* §365 and Chapter 9, section 1, below.

Don't let it bother you that languages (2) and (8) [the slab and the more complicated shopkeeper's language-games] consist only of orders. If you want to say that they are therefore incomplete, ask yourself whether our own language is complete—whether it was so before the symbolism of chemistry and the notation of the infinitesimal calculus were incorporated into it; for these are, so to speak, suburbs of our language. (And how many houses or streets does it take before a town begins to be a town?) Our language can be regarded as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, of houses with extensions from various periods, and all this surrounded by a multitude of new suburbs with straight and regular streets and uniform houses.

A sense of completeness is an important part of the reification of the word "language" that leads to philosophical positions like universal grammar and strong versions of linguistic relativity. The imagined completeness of a language not only gives it the sense of an entity with a definite structure but separates it from its own history and from other languages. The paragraph still might not seem to answer the charge that a language consisting only of orders can't tell us anything about language in general. But the point of the example is not to establish generality but to turn us away from it. It was meant to test Augustine's conception of language as consisting of words correlated with meanings or objects. Such a conception, if it is at all applicable to language in general, should be applicable to a language consisting only of nouns. But when we actually look at a truncated language and see how the word "slab" functions in it—that is, when we look at the grammar of the word—it is not clear where its "meaning" comes into play. The child who is trained in the language is never taught the *meaning* of the word—understood as some mental association between the word and the object—but rather is taught to do something with it.⁷⁶ Far from showing how words function in a sentence to create meaning, grammatical analysis, in this expanded sense, shows how the words function *outside* the sentence and how their meaning is derived from the role they play in the world at large.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Here, as Taylor points out, Wittgenstein is making a similar criticism of Augustine to the one Herder makes of Condillac. See Taylor, *Language Animal*, 13.

⁷⁷ During a series of lectures Wittgenstein gave at Cambridge in the 1931–1932 academic year, G. E. Moore read a brief paper questioning Wittgenstein's expanded sense of the concept of grammar (G. E. Moore, "Wittgenstein's Lectures," *Philosophical Occasions*, 46–114). Moore questions Wittgenstein's expanded concept of grammar, which includes not

Despite these close similarities, Wittgenstein and Mauthner part company over the role of mental association in language use. As we've already seen, Mauthner traces back the hypostatization of nouns to roots in our sensory experience. The object is created out of sensation. In a monograph titled *Language*, Mauthner explains:

Language is that which carves the world into observer and his object [*Gegenstand*]: into things in and for themselves and things in and for myself. The world, however, does not exist twice. The world is only there once. I am nothing if I am not my object. But I do not have an object. The object is nothing if it is not in me. The object is not outside me. The "object," apparently the most graspable [*handgreiflichste*] thing in the world, is actually the loan-translation [*Lehnübersetzung*] of a thorny philosophical concept [*Begriff*]; the object is ungrasped [*unbegriffen*], the object [*das Objekt*] is subjective.⁷⁸

In the passage, Mauthner plays on the etymology of the German words for concept (*Begriff*)—literally what is grasped—and object (*Gegenstand*)—literally something standing against or opposite. The mythology embedded in our language seems to require two worlds: one out there that stands against us and one within created by grasping that world through concepts. There are some similarities here to Benjamin's own attempt to overcome subject-object epistemology, but whereas Benjamin over-

just standardly grammatical rules but also apparently empirical facts like that expressed by the sentence, "Different colors cannot be in the same place in a visual field at the same time." In his reply, Wittgenstein relies on the notion of sense. "The right expression," read John King's notes on the lectures, "is, 'It does not have sense to say—'; but we usually express it badly by speaking of a rule of grammar." If we turn Moore's example into an example of error instead of a rule—"the ball is both completely green and completely red," for instance—we are meant to see that both cases come under Wittgenstein's notion of nonsense; they fail—or might fail—to move a language-game forward. "Compare," Wittgenstein says further, "using the same pieces as we use for chess, but making moves which the rules do not provide for" (*Philosophical Occasions*, 97). In each case, the utterance is in danger of falling outside the conventions governing any language-game we can imagine as a context. There is no language-game—though there certainly could be—where identifying a ball as completely green and completely red can play a recognizable and productive role, where it can move the game forward. Likewise, a simple solecism like "three men was working" might contribute perfectly well to a particular language-game, or it might cause the game to stall. Someone might ask, "Did you mean three men were working or just one of them was working?" This question would be similar to, "Did you mean to say there was one green ball and one red or that a ball that was half-red and half-green?" These questions would be of the same kind—attempts to put the game back on track, so to speak, so that it could go forward again.

⁷⁸ *Die Sprache*, vol. 9 of *Die Gesellschaft: Sammlung Sozialpsychologischer Monographien*, ed. Martin Buber (Frankfurt am Main: Rütten & Loening, 1906), 72–73.

comes this dualism with language as such and a shift to a theological perspective, Mauthner, like Kant on Benjamin's interpretation, simply resolves it in favor of the subject. Following Mach, Mauthner admits that we need the conventional language of internal and external objects.⁷⁹ But language-critique shows that that language is a useful fiction. Despite recognition that language "carves up the world into observer and object," Mauthner's subject is, at least in some sense, language-independent. The subject builds a fictional world of objects out of his or her own sensation, which is real.

Mauthner holds these thoughts in uneasy tension with the dictum that "language is the use of language." Meaning is taken to be nothing outside of its use, yet when subjects use words there is still a fund of sensation connected to them. An image comes before their mind. Mauthner does not call this the meaning of the word, but he relies on such a conception of meaning in a negative sense in order to deny the possibility of knowledge and communication, strictly conceived. Given the contingencies of language training and sensation, Mauthner claims that the composition of this fund of sensation connected with a word differs from person to person. But a well-regulated and efficient use of language does not require that interlocutors share the exact same memories or sensory correlates of words. This means that communication conceived of as transmission of mental contents often—even usually—fails (*B* 2:256).

In other words, despite his skepticism over reified understandings of knowledge, communication, and meaning, these concepts still cast their shadow over his analysis. Language, from Mauthner's point of view, is good for artistic expression and practical exchanges but little else. It fails in the presumed role it plays in science and philosophy. But these failures of language are being judged by just the criteria of knowledge and meaning that attention to the use of language and grammatical analysis is intended, at least by Wittgenstein, to deny. Mauthner's loyalty to Machian empiricism, on the one hand, and Hamannian expressivism, on the other, lead to what Cloeren calls a "love-hate" relationship with language.⁸⁰ Mauthner's critique of language, in other words, appears to

⁷⁹Eighteenth-century aphorist Georg Christian Lichtenberg is also likely an influence on Mauthner in this regard. See Cloeren, *Language and Thought*, 222ff.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 219.

be insufficiently self-critical and abortive when it comes to subjecting empiricist concepts to the grammatical analysis that destroyed metaphysical and idealist ones.

One example of this tension comes when Mauthner is insisting on the role of context in determining how the meaning of a potentially ambiguous word is established between two interlocutors. He is attempting to demonstrate the absurdity of the view that words themselves have meanings independent of their usage. Mauthner's example involves a metalworker asking his assistant for a special variety of tongs, but only using the generic term "tongs." If we held to a strictly designative account of words, we would not be able to explain how the assistant could interpret the utterance correctly.

The metalworker calls out "tongs" to his assistant, while thinking in his imagination of particular tongs. Through the circumstances, the shared soul-situation, the assistant awakens the same association, and hands his master the right tongs. (*B* 2:255)⁸¹

The example shows Mauthner rejecting the idea that words really *mean* things in the flatfooted designative sense, but retaining the idea that they are associated with mental contents. Despite his functionalism, the context and the use to which the word is put do not exhaust the concept of meaning for Mauthner as it does for Wittgenstein. Context, rather, helps to determine the relevant association in the mind of the language users. Mental states still play an important, albeit attenuated role in his conception of language. The word, in Mauthner's view, is not correlated with an object or an abstract thought, but it is correlated with a particular memory or sensation, or an amalgamation of such sensations.

In §2 of the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein does not set out to deny the existence of an association of this kind, but he clearly thinks that such an associating, if it exists, is secondary to the use of words. Focusing on the possibility of such an association obscures the facts of language training and use. The builder does not teach his assistant in the "slab" game to associate a given word with the object or their memory or sensation of the object. He teaches him to bring the slab, when the word "slab" is called. Time and again in the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein asks the reader to ask what purpose the language of private sensation is

⁸¹ See also Weiler's discussion of this passage, *Mauthner's Critique*, 110ff.

serving in a given context. This is, again, not with the goal of showing that such sensation doesn't exist, but to show that this language, just as much as the language of reified objects or metaphysics, must be made subject to grammatical analysis. Wittgenstein's most sustained discussion of this point is in the parts of the *Investigations* known as the private language argument, to which I will now turn.

6. "My Tongue Tastes Good"

Mauthner's empiricist commitments lead him at a certain point in the *Critique* to pose a peculiar question about pain. He asks why we don't think of ourselves as having a sense of pain the same way we think of ourselves as having a sense of smell (*B* 1:348). Mauthner sees no biological reason for this since our sensation of pain relates to our skin or muscles in the same way that the sensation of smell relates to nasal mucosa. He speculates that this is because we are often not pained by any particular object, but simply have pain, whereas with the other senses, what is sensed is almost always a part of the external world. What impresses Mauthner about the example of pain, then, is its potential to provide epistemological insight. Unlike the language of our other exteroceptive senses, the language of pain makes no reifying foray into the external world. We smell *flowers*, taste *food*, feel *the wind* at our backs, and so on, but the language of pain remains internal. We merely feel the pain itself. Mauthner writes:

A language, which corresponded to the level of knowledge of nature we have in the present day, would have to form the designations of the sense of pain and those of the remaining senses in an analogous manner. The way we say, "my head aches," so would we have to say, my tongue "tastes good." We laugh at this, because language never corresponds to the newest knowledge. [. . .] A finer feeling for language [*Sprachgefühl*] will not let it go unnoticed that the verbs taste, smell, see, hear are used transitively in a completely different way than when I say: I feel a headache. By means of these verbs language projects out beyond the sense organs. (*B* 1:352)⁸²

⁸² See Weiler's discussion of this passage. *Mauthner's Critique of Language*, 84.

Because “all our knowledge of the world—meaning our language—traces back to our sense impressions,” Mauthner will always prefer language that remains modestly within the bounds of our sensory apparatus (*B* 1:348). The language of pain provides a model in this regard, since it is internal. Mauthner, in a manner reminiscent of Condillac, even goes as far as to say that the precursors of pain language—“screaming and crying, moaning and groaning,”—“belong to the most original language” (*B* 1:348). These are immediate expressions of sensation, regarded by Mauthner as more pure because of their intimate connection with sensation. A truly scientific language would likewise always restrict itself to inner sensation.

Mauthner ends the passage cited above by making a grammatical point that distinguishes surface grammar from depth grammar. A “finer feeling for language” doesn’t stop at the fact that the phrases “to feel pain” and “to see fire” have the same transitive verb structure, but looks more closely at how the phrases are used. The same inadequacy of ordinary grammar occupies Wittgenstein in the *Blue Book* when he discusses “the fascination which the analogy between two similar structures in our language can exert on us.”⁸³ But, again, because Mauthner prizes the epistemological value of sensation over that of the “objects” in the external world that are purportedly picked out by most nouns, Mauthner does not seem to consider the possibility that he himself has been misled by the analogy between “to see fire” and “to feel pain.” That is, his militant opposition to the linguistic reification that produces the external world and all its objects may obscure the possibility that the world of inner sensation—the apparent foundation of his critique—might be produced by a similar reification and might be subject to a similar critique. Mauthner, therefore, does not conduct an analysis of the grammar of feeling pain that might cast doubt on his empiricist beliefs; he instead takes its immediate and obvious truth as a given.

Like Kant on Benjamin’s reading, Mauthner has overcome a problematic conception of the object—the thing-in-itself—but maintained a problematic picture of the subject, and so, in effect, internalized a subject-

⁸³ Wittgenstein, *Blue Book*, 26.

object metaphysics. Just as Benjamin sets out to complete Kant's critique, Wittgenstein can be read as completing Mauthner's. As I've argued, two approaches toward language coexist uneasily in Mauthner: first, that it has its origins in sensation and second, that it tends to impose its grammatical structure on the world in a philosophically misleading manner. These theses are shown to be in outright contradiction in Wittgenstein's discussion of private language.

Like Mauthner, Wittgenstein gives the example of pain pride of place in his discussion of private sensation. Again, it is the internal character of pain—its exemplary privacy—that makes it an attractive example for Wittgenstein's purposes. However, where for Mauthner this internality gave pain epistemological capital, for Wittgenstein the uncompromised privacy of pain makes it an ideal candidate to explore the very idea of sensation. No inner sensation appears more obviously *mine* than pain. No sensory experience is, as Mauthner points out, as divorced from the external world. If Wittgenstein can therefore show us that it is problematic in a philosophical context to call pain an "inner sensation" the way we are tempted to, then we will come to see all inner sensation as subject to the same dangers.

Before moving into Wittgenstein's argument, it is worth remembering that Mauthner warns us against allowing language to mislead us into thinking even of our sensations as real *things*. His mistake is, then, not precisely that he reifies sensations in a straightforward sense. They are, for him, qualitative, always changing, and differ from subject to subject. They are only brought to a halt, as it were, by language. When Mauthner refers to sensations with nouns, it is always with the implicit caveat that this reference is flawed. Nonetheless, because sensations are given a language-independent existence in Mauthner's empiricist system, they are granted a certain immunity from language-critique as Mauthner practices it. He acknowledges that our language fails to capture sensation but it remains *there*, something extra-linguistic, to go "uncaptured" and to be inadequately referred to. This undefined and indefinable concept of sensation thus serves as a limit to the reach of language. Wittgenstein, writing in a passage I've already quoted, offers a good way of thinking about the failure I'm trying to elucidate:

The great difficulty here is not to present the matter as if there were something one couldn't do. As if there really were an object from which

I extract a description, but I am not in a position to show it to anyone.
(*PI* §374).⁸⁴

It is precisely this difficulty to which Mauthner succumbs. Sensation is regarded as an object that we can never grasp nor even adequately describe, and it is in conceiving of sensation this way that Mauthner falls short of philosophical grammar as Wittgenstein conceives of it. Inner sensation, as Mauthner conceives of it, proves to be useless and, therefore, senseless.

7. Stepping Between Sensation and Expression

At §242 of the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein presents the possibility of a private language of sensation, which will occupy him for much of this portion of the text. He then immediately turns to the familiar example of pain language in relation to the cries of the pre-linguistic child (*PI* §244). Instead of dwelling on how words refer to, describe, or are otherwise connected to the sensation of pain, he speculates simply that “the verbal expression of pain *replaces* crying” (my italics). Here, the grammatical analysis of pain resists the urge to step outside of or, as David Pears puts it, to “over-intellectualize” the given context.⁸⁵ The child screams in pain and then, once she has begun to learn a language, she says, for example, “my leg hurts.” At no point—repeating the point made in the “slab” language-game—does she need to be able to *associate* the pain with the sign. This associative picture is the one Herder accuses Condillac of imposing on his thought experiment when the latter calls crying the “natural sign” that is eventually, through conscious attention, turned into a human word. Wittgenstein hastens to add that he does not mean to deny that she does this or something like it, but merely that the “act of association”—whatever that might be—plays no role in the use of pain language. Even if her parents tell her in a moment of pain, when she is crying, that what she is feeling is “pain,” this functions only as instruction in how to use the word “pain,” not as a proposition that

⁸⁴ Wittgenstein also refers to this kind of error in his famous “beetle in a box” example at *PI* §293.

⁸⁵ Pears, *The False Prison* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), vol. 2, 331.

the child then files away so she knows what word to associate with the pain the next time it flashes before her mind.

When Wittgenstein asks abruptly in the next remark (*PI* §254) how we can “even want to step between the expression of pain and the pain with language,” he is trying to get the reader to see that a step that seems very natural to us is actually a peculiar one to take. Dividing the pain from the crying is something we do naturally because we have learned other kinds of pain behavior—announcing that we have a pain, describing the pain, saying it has gotten better or worse. Crying, then, looks like something that relates to pain in a similar way to the way our language does—it looks like a rudimentary or incipient form of language. Benjamin gets at the same point by depicting reference as an achievement of language, which is at its most basic an immanent replacement for expressions like crying, rather than a map or overlay that designates objects like pain. The difference, which I will expound in more detail below, is that where Wittgenstein uses the more immanent example (crying) to dissuade us from misinterpreting the “externalized” use of language, Benjamin is prepared to see the former as the foundation out of which the latter emerges. Language, in Benjamin, detaches itself from the thing named and thereby refers to it; it is able to “externalize” itself. The error that Condillac makes—and which both Herder and Wittgenstein see—is precisely that of reading the structure of our later utterances back onto the child’s cries.

Wittgenstein makes a similar point about the our descriptions of the language of animals:

One says, “The cock calls the hens by crowing”—but isn’t all this already based on a comparison with our language?—Don’t we see all this quite differently if we imagine the crowing to set the hens in motion by some kind of physical causation? (*PI* §493)

Wittgenstein doesn’t want to endorse either of these descriptions, just to show that the former, just as much as the latter, imposes a certain form onto the phenomenon. In the same way, Condillac’s description interposes language between pain and crying, and, in so doing, sets up a designative relation. The “natural sign” is not natural at all but simply the imposition of the human concept of sign onto nature. Crying is regarded as an external sign of pain, the same way an over-literal rendering of the sentence, “The cock calls the hens by crowing,” turns

crowling into an externalized sign. There should be an uneasiness when we reflect philosophically on the description because the form of the expression seems to suggest a kind of distance or mediation we don't actually believe there to be. We don't think the cock uses signs or has intentions in any robust sense—we don't think he uses crowing as a means or tool to call the hens—and in the same way, we shouldn't think crying is a sign for pain.

The trouble with Condillac's theory is that it assumes a connection between sensation and language that is actually produced by language, a "pictorial representation of our grammar," as Wittgenstein calls it (*PI* §295). A grammatical analysis of reference is required—one that recognizes that the question of how "the connection of the name with the thing is established" is better understood as the question of how "a human being learns the meaning of the names of sensations" (*PI* §244).

In reformulating the question of reference as a question of human development, Wittgenstein suggests that the grammar of this learned language—the rules for employing it—produces in us an image involving a referential connection between sensation and words, but only later, when we look back at the child and her pain. That picture causes us to forget or to not give sufficient weight to the fact that the linguistic pain behavior was and needed to be taught. This "conjuring trick" happens immediately because our way of describing and conceiving of the situation of the pre-linguistic child crying out in pain, just like our way of describing the cock calling the hens, already imposes a referential structure on the phenomenon. But Wittgenstein wants, at the same time, to avoid the conclusion that the phenomenon is somehow distorted or occluded—that there is something that one can't describe. There is no standpoint from which we would be able to get hold of the phenomenon that would then make things clear. Thinking of our language as somehow not good enough is also to misrepresent its relationship with the world.

Given this therapeutic aim, Wittgenstein begins by indulging the natural suspicion that the connection between sensation and language is more robust. The private language argument—which starts in earnest at §258 with the story of a diary written by a subject about the "recurrence of a sensation 'S'"—is sometimes taken to be a demonstration of the implausibility of a language that is communicated only by and to oneself. Under interpretations in this vein, it is the privacy of the lan-

guage that is taken to be absurd or impossible, and Wittgenstein's point is taken to revolve around the necessary sociality of language, since only a community can provide the criterion of correctness lacking in the private language model.⁸⁶ But, while the necessary sociality of language is certainly an upshot of Wittgenstein's discussion, he is using the impossibility of private language to target the philosophical idea of private sensation itself; the notion of a robust referential connection between sensation and language; and the possibility, endorsed by Mauthner, that language somehow tries (and fails) to grasp sensation.

In brief, Wittgenstein's argument—though he is unwilling to put it in these terms—is as follows. If private sensation is *something*—even just something I can never fully describe or communicate to others—I should be able to refer to it, if only imperfectly and privately. But this reference to private sensation (private language) is absurd. Either it has no use in any language-game or, if it is given a use, the private sensation becomes irrelevant to the game. Therefore, our conception of private sensation as *something* is philosophically senseless and useless.

Mauthner perhaps provides at least some of the impetus for the private language argument when he writes the following, referring back to the eighteenth-century debate about the origin of language to which Herder and Hamann contributed:

The language-movements [*Sprachbewegungen*] of a single speaking individual among a group of speechless human beings would be no language at all. A single speaking person among speechless companions is as imaginable as a speaking God, who gifted men language. A single speaker would be like the participant in an extended telephone network that had no second participant. His goal-directed movements would not be language. These movements become language first through a peculiarity that goes beyond the individual and beyond reality—that is, that the movements are the same within a single group, that they are in this way comprehensible, that they are useful. As a social factor, language, which before the invention of the art of printing was never collected all together in a dictionary, first becomes something real. It is a social reality; apart from that it is only an abstraction of certain movements. (B 1:17–18)

⁸⁶ Saul Kripke's treatment of the private language argument in *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language: an Elementary Exposition* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), to be discussed in Chapter 7, is the most prominent example.

Mauthner takes a position relatively close to that taken up by Herder against both naturalistic explanations of the origin of language like Condillac's and divine ones like Süssmilch's. In so doing, he provides a suggestion for the basic set-up of Wittgenstein's private language argument: the notion of an individual being able to use language without the support of a community. The notion that a language could be invented this way is no better than the divine origin thesis since both confuse our abstracted concept of language with the real thing and therefore see it as something that can be invented or acquired. For Wittgenstein, as for Mauthner, sociality and use are crucial from dissuading us from the sense that language is a substantive entity, something that could function separately from the social context in which it emerged and which gives it life.

Sensation, however, is notably absent from Mauthner's version of private language. Wittgenstein's addition—that the hypothetical single speaker of a language be referring to her own sensation—represents an effort to combat subjectivist biases of the kind still present in Mauthner's critique. Even though Mauthner contends that sensation cannot be captured by language, part of Wittgenstein's point is that the very act of claiming language *cannot* capture sensation underwrites a view of sensation as some independently existing phenomenon akin to a physical object. It assumes the existence of a private sensation that is initially independent of language and so can be associated with an arbitrary placeholder, the sign "S" in Wittgenstein's example. The sign, of course, doesn't enable me to communicate the nature of my sensation with others, but if the sensation is *there* in the robust sense the empiricist assumes, then I should be able to give it a provisional name.

Mauthner is, of course, not Wittgenstein's only target here. Empiricist designative theories in general that draw a referential connection between objects and utterances in normal, public language are also put to the test. If words in our public language refer to private objects in the way a designative theorist might assume, it seems I should be able to name one of these private objects without the name being communicable to anyone else. It is, after all, *my* object independently of whether or not I successfully communicate it.

It is a consequence of the possibility of private language of the kind developed in Wittgenstein's thought experiment that the bond between

pain and its natural expression is broken. For, Wittgenstein argues, if my words for sensations were “tied up with my natural expressions of sensation [. . .] my language would not be private,” and “someone else might understand it as well as I” (*PI* §256). To use Benjamin’s language, Wittgenstein’s private language must be purely external and not at all connected to immanent “naming language,” or natural expressions. The only way to test the hypothesis of the true privacy of sensation is to make its naming independent of natural expression. The suggestion is that an empiricist theory of meaning amounts to nothing more than an elaborate version of Condillac’s error. Its very conception of sensation depends on a structure of naming that is established by language and so cannot serve as the foundation of language.

Purely private reference to sensation quickly leads to a number of absurdities. A grammatical analysis of private language can never get underway because the sign “S” cannot be given a use. Wittgenstein shows this by trying out a number of possible uses. Perhaps I refer to the sensation “S” by concentrating my attention on it, but there is no possible criterion for judging whether I am actually experiencing “S” (*PI* §258). Even construing “S” as a sensation, in our sense of the word, would require recourse to a public context of justification since the word “sensation” is obviously not part of the private language, but a word whose sense is derived from its various public uses (*PI* §261).

Finally, at §270, Wittgenstein goes as far as to invent an actual use for the sensation—whenever the subject feels—or thinks he’s feeling—“S,” he notices, using a manometer, that his blood pressure rises. Now he can keep track of spikes in his blood pressure without the manometer, just using his record of sensation “S.” Now the sensation has its utility, but, Wittgenstein notes, the notion of correctly or incorrectly perceiving the sensation still makes no sense. Whether the subject perceives it or merely seems to perceive it, his blood pressure spikes. It remains senseless to talk of the correctness or incorrectness of perceiving the sensation and thus senseless to think of my sensation as *something* I can name or identify. The sensation itself still plays no role in the language-game, since its *really* being there or not has no impact on the utility of the sign “S.”

Without a use, we cannot make sense of the correctness or incorrectness of recording “S” in my diary when I feel it—and so cannot make

sense of the language at all (*PI* §258). With a use, the sign “S” becomes significant (it documents elevated blood pressure), but the sensation itself plays no role in the language-game. Whether or not it is, in some deep sense, *there* makes no difference. It would therefore be wrong to claim that “S” refers to the sensation; “S” indicates, in the context of a particular language-game, that my blood pressure has risen. Our subject doesn’t have an inner sensation to which she alone can refer; rather, she has the ability to sense that her blood pressure is elevated without the use of a machine. We can, of course, say that she uses “S” to refer to this feeling of her blood pressure going up, but now the language is no longer private.

In the following paragraph, Wittgenstein asks us to imagine someone who has forgotten the word “pain” and so constantly calls or names things “pain,” yet who still manages to use the word in the normal contexts, who uses the word “as we all do.” “Here,” Wittgenstein writes, “I’d like to say a wheel that can be turned though nothing else moves with it is not part of the mechanism” (*PI* §271). Naming our pains without putting those acts of naming to recognizable use is, Wittgenstein suggests, no different than calling a fire hydrant “pain.” The sign only has a sense in a context of use, and the description of any possible context of use will invariably not depend on the actual existence of the sensation. Truly private sensation is, at best, irrelevant to the philosophical analysis of meaning.

Consequently, the claim that sensation could be the foundation of knowledge and language that Mauthner and many others have made, is a reification that serves as the basis for an empiricist foundationalism as unwarranted as idealisms. We have no privileged access to the contents of our own consciousness, private objects, that can serve as solid epistemological ground, or, in Mauthner’s case, might serve as this ground if our language were capable of describing them. In fact, Wittgenstein’s discussion tries to show that reference to private sensation is even less promising as such a foundation than the objects of the external world since our reference to private sensation cannot even draw on the publicity that would be necessary to establish the recurrence of a sensation.

Still, there is nothing special about our inability to refer to sensation in the way the private linguist wants to. All acts of mere “referring” that

have no use in a language-game are equally bankrupt for Wittgenstein. The example of private language is, in this sense, closely related to the block-pillar-slab of §2. There, too, it was shown that whatever association between word and thing that learning and playing the language-game produces, this “is *not* the purpose of the words” (*PI* §6). Our sense of a robust referential connection between word and thing is a byproduct of language training and use, not its essence.

The critique of Mauthner I’ve tried to draw out of Wittgenstein here can be thought along the same lines as Hamann’s critique of Herder. Hamann worried that even entertaining a notion of the origin of language would serve to obscure the hermeneutical, anti-foundationalist, and translational understanding of language that he had sketched using the concept of condescension. In a similar vein, Mauthner asserts the foundation of language in physiological features of the human being and, in so doing, opens the door to an account of reference that betrays the claim that we cannot get outside language. Mauthner, like Herder, falls victim to this notion in a subtle and therefore instructive way. Even though he is aware of the reifying dangers of language and its inescapability, his loyalty to a version of empiricist foundationalism—even if the foundation is, like the origin of language, one that we can’t reach—still manages to generate a misleading and false picture of language and of our place in the world.

Private Language and Other Nonsense

THE PRESENT CHAPTER DIGRESSES somewhat from the main thrust of my argument to explore some consequences of my reading of Wittgenstein for the vast secondary literature on his work. I will focus in particular on prominent readings of the private language argument, including Saul Kripke's well-known book *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, and the question of the character of the transition in Wittgenstein's thought—the subject of much recent interpretation.

Kripke understands Wittgenstein's private language argument as a specification of his argument against the possibility of following a rule privately. While Wittgenstein's discussion in these two instances are certainly related, Kripke's coupling of them obscures important differences. The remarks on rule-following and those on private language target two distinctly misguided attempts to ground the meanings of words in some structure or object outside of language. Seeing how these attempts are distinct sheds light on Wittgenstein's understanding of "form of life" and the relationship of that concept to the linguist universalism of Hamann and Benjamin.

It also sheds light on Wittgenstein's shifting understanding of the notion of the "limits of language." This is an issue central to the "resolute" readings of Cora Diamond and James Conant, who have emphasized points of continuity in Wittgenstein's philosophical trajectory. They controversially take the theory of language expounded in the *Tractatus* to be meant as "nonsense" (*Unsinn*) in an absolute sense. Although this approach clashes with my understanding of the transition, the resolute

reading does shed light on the notion of the limits of language. Whereas resolute readings suggest that the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* has already discarded the notion of there being something beyond language that we *cannot* think or express, I will argue that such a notion is central to the *Tractatus* and that the true significance of discarding it is central to the *Investigations*. Locating this view as already present in the *Tractatus*, as resolute readers do, obscures its significance in the *Investigations*. Mauthner's influence on Wittgenstein and the latter's connection to the expressivist tradition outlined in the previous chapters can help untangle interpretive problems in the *Investigations* and in the *Tractatus*.

1. Kripke on Rules and Private Language

As I argued in Chapter 6, Wittgenstein's "private language argument" is only the application of the strategy of grammatical analysis used throughout the *Investigations* to a particular domain and a particular philosophical impulse, namely sensation and the empiricist intuition that sensation is the most basic element of reality. It is therefore not isolable from the book as a whole. The secondary literature often frames the argument as offering a particular philosophical problem that needs to be solved. Kripke, reading the discussion of private language as a specific example of the paradox of rule-following presented in the previous sections (*PI* §§184–242), understands private language as posing a paradox that requires "a skeptical solution."¹ While Kripke draws out connections between the private language argument and Wittgenstein's thoughts on rule-following, the form he imposes on Wittgenstein's thoughts is misleading. The paradox of rule-following is taken to be that "any action can brought in accord with a rule" (*PI* §201). Therefore, a common philosophical intuition about meaning is false: namely, our

¹ For Kripke, Wittgenstein's essential thought here comes in §202: "[. . .] 'Following a rule' is a practice. And to *think* one is following a rule is not to follow a rule. And that's why it's not possible to follow a rule 'privately'; otherwise, thinking one was following a rule would be the same thing as following it" (*Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, 109–10). This is, for Kripke, already an expression of the paradox of private language, even though Wittgenstein mentions nothing of sensation. See Pears, *False Prison*, vol. 2, 500–01 for a response to Kripke's interpretation on this point.

sense that in using terms in the ordinary way or in continuing a mathematical sequence correctly, we are applying a rule or meaning that we have learned, that is present (in some sense) in our minds, and that guides our usage.² The private language argument and the discussion of the impossibility of private rule-following show this model of meaning is false, since, were it true, these would be genuine possibilities.

Moreover, according to Kripke, Wittgenstein here offers a “skeptical solution” to this “new form of skepticism.”³ Namely, in order to ascribe meaning or rule-following to a person we must appeal to the broader community and its “assertability conditions.”⁴ “Wittgenstein’s skeptical solution consists,” for Kripke, in “a description of the game of concept attribution.”⁵ Although Kripke admits that his overtly theoretical description of Wittgenstein’s position would make the latter uncomfortable, the interpretation, Kripke thinks, stands as an accurate representation of Wittgenstein’s thoughts. The private language argument is an “application” of the prior insights gleaned about rule-following to the problem of sensation. The upshot is that, despite our intuitions, it is only by appealing to the assertability conditions of a community that can we offer a convincing philosophical picture of rules and the language of sensation.

What the discussion of Mauthner and the private language argument shows is that Wittgenstein is not interested in offering a convincing philosophical picture.⁶ For Kripke, the structure of Wittgenstein’s argument is (1) to present an account of rules, meanings, or concepts, including sensation; (2) to show that a common-sense empiricist way of understanding them cannot be right because it implies an incoherent picture of *private* rule-following or private sensation; (3) to replace that picture with an account of how the words under question are used—that is, in a community practice regulated by the ascent of a group. On Kripke’s reading the appeal to community practices and methods of verification solves the problem—albeit skeptically. That is, Wittgenstein’s appeal to

² Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, 21–22.

³ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 89–95.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁶ Here I am largely in agreement with David G. Stern’s construal of Wittgenstein’s aversion to philosophical theses and its application to rule-following and the private language argument as it is expressed in his “Review Essay: Recent Work on Wittgenstein, 1980–1990,” *Synthese* 98 (1994), 415–58.

the community does not show skepticism about meaning to be false, but simply shows that what looked like some deep structure of meaning within the subject is actually no more than the regularities generated and enforced through communal practice. But, as others have pointed out, Wittgenstein never takes up the skeptical position as straightforwardly as Kripke suggests.⁷ And the appeal to communal practice here is meant to *dissolve* the problem, not to solve it. Wittgenstein does not appeal to communal practice, in other words, to show what structure in fact regulates concept use, but to dissolve the mode of thought that requires some structure to regulate concept use.

Wittgenstein voices the skeptic's concern that no rules can be said to govern language use since every action "can be brought in accord" with such a rule (*PI* §201) not in order to endorse it but in order to demonstrate that a rigorous application of a literalist philosophical conception of rule-following must eventually succumb to it. The skeptic's is but the final interpretation in a chain of interpretations that we set off on when we begin to philosophize about rules—it is the one that reveals definitively that "there is a misunderstanding here." It is the dead-end that encourages us to turn around and see where we made a wrong turn. It shows "that there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an interpretation, but which, from case to case of application, expresses itself [*sich äußert*] in what we call 'following the rule' and 'going against it.'"⁸ We were compelled to think of a rule in the course of a philosophical inquiry as *something*. We bear witness here to the senility of language, as Mauthner might put it, torn from its original usage and context and made to correspond to something rather than play its role in a given language-game.

⁷ See esp. Goldfarb, "Kripke on Wittgenstein on Rules," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 82:9 (Sept., 1985), 471–88, 475–76, as well as Stern, "Review Essay," 428–29.

⁸ See Stern, "Review Essay," 428 for a discussion of this passage. Also see John Koethe, *The Continuity of Wittgenstein's Thought* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 14. Koethe argues for an altered version of Kripke's view that Wittgenstein is after a positive and social account of rule-following here, and thus takes issue with the translation of *äußern* as "expressed," preferring Anscombe's "exhibited" or "shown" or "manifested." These translations better accommodate Koethe's suggestion that the action of following a rule does actually *show* something and his reading of the continuity in Wittgenstein's thought as centered around a persistent use of the idea of "showing" (*zeigen*) throughout his work. (The latter idea is discussed further below.)

It looks as if a rule for using a word or completing a series must be present somewhere, grasped and deployed by the user. This leads to the paradoxes associated with our intuition that the future use of the rule must be somehow present already in the mind of the person who understands (*PI* §§187–97). We look for interpretations or construals [*Deutungen*] of the rule that support its future use, but, Wittgenstein writes, “Interpretations by themselves do not determine meaning”; they “hang in the air together with what they interpret” and “cannot serve as supports for it” (*PI* §198). Whatever philosophical accounts of rule-following or meaning we provide, it is mistaken to think these will explain or serve as a foundation for the *use* of these words. The interpretation is not something *deeper* than or *beneath* the use of the rule. It exists on the same level as what it interprets. We should only use the word “interpretation,” Wittgenstein writes, when “one expression of the rule is replaced by another” (*PI* §201). This way, we might be liberated from the suspicion that an interpretation somehow lies beneath the rule. Interpretations are simply articulations of the rule or practice and they can—or must—change with the practice. They are not in any sense grasped by, or present in, the mind of the rule-follower.

The pull toward an architectonic understanding of meaning, concept use, and rule-following is shown to lead nowhere.⁹ At a certain point we reach bedrock and our spade turns (*PI* §217). This bedrock, he suggests, is not a logical ground that can be deduced through painstaking reasoning but rather “an agreement in judgments” or “in form of life” (*PI* §§241–42). This agreement is also not the kind that could be explicitly spelled out through assertability conditions or something of the kind. It is instead “in their *language* that human beings agree” (*PI* §241). Wittgenstein’s appeals to verification or assertability conditions in the private language argument are intended to show how the private linguist’s apparent reference to sensation does not have any use and therefore lacks meaning as well. Wittgenstein is not attempting to argue that the

⁹On this architectonic drive see Horkheimer’s characterization of “traditional theory” in “Traditional and Critical Theory,” *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 188–243. “Bourgeois thought is essentially abstract, and its principle is an individuality which inflatedly believes itself to be the ground of the world or even to be the world without qualification, an individuality separated off from events” (210). Wittgenstein’s assessment of this “tendency” in modern philosophy, while perhaps less polemical, overlaps a great deal with Horkheimer’s (*Blue Book*, 17–18).

language of sensation functions by means of social assent. Such a theory would leave intact the problematic concept of sensation and merely place a different foundational structure beneath it, namely social checks. Wittgenstein's goal is rather to show, as with the reflections on rule-following, that our attempts to ground language use in a secure foundation, this time private sensation rather than a rule, are again misguided and again dependent on a prior agreement not susceptible to analytical dissection. His remarks on sociality are intended to pull us away from the search for a foundation rather than providing a new one.

Though rule-following and private language are connected, Kripke's construal of their connection leads him to obscure some of the more salient points of the private language argument. For example, he dismisses the emphasis placed on Wittgenstein's private language being one "that is logically impossible for anyone else to understand," since, for him, the private language is but a specific example of the possibility of private rule-following denied in §202.¹⁰ In other words, the idea of referring privately to an inner sensation is a specification for Kripke of the more general notion that we could privately invent and follow a rule. It is a specific domain where we have failed to take into account the need to appeal to community standards necessary to actually give our rule-following and our language meaning.

But the relation of these two portions of the text is not one of general to specific. Rather, a tendency to take language hyper-literally when philosophizing leads to two distinctly misguided accounts of meaning, which Pears helpfully identifies as Platonist (rule-following) and phenomenalist (private language).¹¹ Wittgenstein dismisses both with a similar strategy, grammatical analysis, which makes use in both cases of a social criteria of usefulness, but the types of theories he wants to dissuade us from are distinct, and the strategy is not meant to replace these theories.

The transposition of the language of "following a rule" and "expressing a pain" into a philosophical context gives them an air of depth or mystery they do not have in their ordinary use. In philosophy we are led to hypostatize the words "rule" and "pain" and begin to look for or posit something corresponding to these words. In the former case, we posit an abstract entity that somehow determines the way we use the word

¹⁰ Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules*, 109.

¹¹ Pears, *The False Prison*, vol. 2, *passim*.

in advance. To know a meaning or concept is to know this rule and future rule-abiding uses of the word. But this leads to the rule-following paradox that Kripke picks up on: any action can be brought in accord with the rule. As noted above, Wittgenstein does not sanction the paradox as Kripke suggests; the skeptic's is but another misleading philosophical position wrought by the hypostatization of a rule, albeit perhaps a more telling one.¹² It shows the misunderstanding. We were taken in by the sense that following the rule had to proceed by way of an interpretation, that is by an almost mechanical process like that carried out by the shopkeeper in §1. The skeptical conclusion Wittgenstein drives us to shows us that the initial conception of rule-following was flawed, not that there is some gaping hole in our account of meaning that assertability conditions can fill.

In the case of private language, we see another phenomena, "sensation," that appears, like the rule before it, suitable for logical or scientific analysis, suitable to be made subject to the tools of "bourgeois thought," as Benjamin or Horkheimer would call them.¹³ But allowing language to pass into this context where it has no use is a "conjuring trick." The problem is, again, not solved by finding a new criterion in the social world, but dissolved by an appeal to use. Finding a mechanism—sociality—for ascribing sensations to an individual leaves untouched the problematic notion that subjects have sensations in the context-free manner empiricist philosophy takes them to. Rather, once this language is put back to work, as in the manometer example, the notion of a subject really *having* private sensations is shown to be irrelevant (*PI* §270). The deep sense that a subject does have sensations turns out to be nothing more than a metaphysical shadow cast by our grammar. This is not to say this picture is incorrect per se; rather, the idea of the picture being either correct or incorrect is meaningless—it has no application (*PI* §424).

2. Bedrock, Scaffolding, and Form of Life

By conflating rule-following and private language, Kripke misconstrues the empiricist target of the private language argument. Whereas the

¹² See Pears, Goldfarb, and Stern.

¹³ See "Traditional and Critical Theory," 210.

foundationalist impulse of the rule-following argument sought to ground language use and the process of following a rule Platonically, the phenomenalist like Mauthner wants to ground human language materially, in bare unconceptualized sensation. What the private language argument shows is that the phenomenalist's effort to describe the generation of language out of this initial position always borrows illicitly from the fully developed linguistic structures whose generation it purports to be describing. Pears writes:

The effect of the restriction imposed by the classical phenomenalist is, according to Wittgenstein, a devastating disability, and [. . .] he does not mean that, if the subject was cut off from all the resources that might have allowed him to check the success of his efforts to set up a language, he would not be clever enough to bring it off, but, rather, that we could not even call them "efforts" or say that he was acquiring and exercising a skill.¹⁴

The phenomenalist as presented by Wittgenstein thinks it possible to "simply *associate* names with sensations," neglecting the fact that "much must be prepared in the language for mere naming to make sense" (*PI* §§256–57). In supposing the naming of a sensation (or any object) to be basic, he or she presumes that the surrounding linguistic, cultural, and historical context of language can be stripped away and the bare act of naming an object or feeling will remain. What Wittgenstein is trying to show is that the act of naming rests upon and depends on this context, so that when the phenomenalist tries to describe the sensation corresponding to "S" as *something* completely private that the subject has, Wittgenstein responds by saying:

But "has" and "something" also belong to our common language.—So in the end, when one is doing philosophy, one gets to the point where one would like just to emit an inarticulate sound.—But such a sound is an expression only in a particular language-game, which now has to be described. (*PI* §261)

Despite his attempts to give language a foundation in sensation, every attempt to describe such a foundation makes illicit use of linguistic meaning already erected by custom and use. Even "an inarticulate sound"—an attempt to say something independent of any context—will

¹⁴Pears, *False Prison*, vol. 2, 395.

inevitably derive an expressive meaning from its context. Philosophy—at least of a certain kind—wants access to an independent ground from which our life and language can be built up, but it is never able to describe that ground without presupposing it.

If private language is to be language, it must be understandable and therefore borrow from publicly established language-games. If it is to remain private, it will play no role in any language-game; it won't engage the mechanism of use through which it could acquire meaning. The Platonic conception of a rule runs into distinct problems and so, *pace* Kripke, is defeated in a distinct way, although the problem is again the independence of the proposed criterion for meaning from the realm of use. The rule is an ideal meant to determine subsequent acts of rule-following. This picture—of independent, isolable *meaning* that can be grasped by its user all at once and guide future usage—leads to irresolvable interpretive ambiguities that show that the rule doesn't "hook up," to use Meredith Williams's phrase, with the usage at all.¹⁵ Wittgenstein's two arguments dissuade us, then, from two impulses to leave the realm of use: the phenomenalist's impulse to ground language practice in the matter of sensation and the idealist's or Platonist's impulse to ground it in the some meaning or rule that determines use. Combined, these arguments defend the immanence of linguistic practice from transcendence from below (sensation) and above (Platonic rules).

In the sections in between these two arguments (*PI* §§240–42), Wittgenstein appeals to the notion of "form of life" to account for rule-following without resorting to the essentialism of the ideal conception of a rule. In the *Investigations*, form of life marks a limit to the reach of philosophical reasoning and the possibility of transcending or thinking outside of language-games.

240. Disputes do not break out (among mathematicians, say) over the question of whether or not a rule has been followed. People don't come to blows over it, for example. This belongs to the scaffolding from which our language operates (for example, gives a description).

241. "So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?"—True and false is what people *say*; and in *language*

¹⁵ Meredith Williams, "Blind Obedience: Rules, Community, and the Individual," *Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations: Critical Essays*, ed. Meredith Williams (Lanham, Md.: Roman & Littlefield, 2007), 61–92, 64.

people concur [*übereinstimmen*]. This is not concurrence [*Übereinstimmung*] in opinions, but rather in form of life.

242. To understanding through language belongs not only concurrence in definitions but (as strange as it may sound) concurrence in judgments. This appears to abolish logic but it does not abolish it. It is one thing to describe the method of measurement, and another thing to obtain and state results of measurement. But what we call “measuring” is also determined by a certain constancy in results of measurement.

§240 spells out one of the lessons of the rule-following passages. In practice, an instance of addition might be contested, but if its correctness were verified by a group, say, we would not then need to make sure the *rule* of addition had been followed. And even if we were to “look at the rule” to make sure it had been followed, “looking at the rule” would only amount to conducting other, perhaps more rudimentary, exercises of addition. If someone makes a mistake, we will try to find some basis of agreement in another related domain of the practice and then return to the mistake and see if she now sees the mistake. This is not, for Wittgenstein, checking the rule through examples. Teaching through examples just is the background of the practice. The ability of the initiate to express her practice in the game in terms of a rule is an accompaniment to her practice and not the foundation of it. “What a mathematician is inclined to say about the objectivity and reality of mathematical facts is not a philosophy of mathematics, but something for philosophical treatment” (*PI* §254).

Wittgenstein refers to rule-following as part of the “scaffolding from which our language operates” and compares it to giving a description. The operation of our language relies on support or structure provided from outside it in some sense, on which we agree not by consent but simply by participating in the language. Without this agreement, participation would be impossible. In order to be able to use the language, one must be able to continue a series and describe experiences or objects. But one never learns how to continue a series in general, only how to continue individual series; nor does one learn what it is to describe an object. These forms of discourse are, in some sense, outside particular uses of language like addition or writing a memoir. They are not analyzable in terms of the interpretations discussed in §201—no matter how intuitively susceptible to such interpretations they might seem—but simply express themselves, as Wittgenstein puts it there, in individual cases.

This bedrock, scaffolding, or form of life requires agreement—concord in language itself, which makes individual instances of agreement or disagreement possible. Wittgenstein’s conception of form of life returns us to familiar territory. With Hamann on condescension and Benjamin on the omnipresence of language as such, we have already seen the difficulty of preventing the domain of language from being unduly restricted by a particular theory, whether it be Herder’s naturalistic speculation on the origin of language or Schlegel’s conception of the absolute. The phenomenalism of Mauthner and the private linguist, as well as essentialism about rules, both restrict language in this way, by locating meaning outside language, whether in the absolutely material—private sensation—or the absolutely ideal—the rule. On both of these models, language becomes a bounded region that refers to, enacts, or embodies meanings outside it. When Wittgenstein shows that neither rules nor sensations actually play the role they’re taken to in our language-games, he shows both delimitations of language to be incoherent. His appeal to form of life, though it differs in important respects from the linguistic universalism we find in Hamann and Benjamin—as I’ll go into in Chapter 9—is like it insofar as it counsels against the impulse to transcendence behind designative theories of reference, speculation on the origin of language, and the hypostatization of meaning. It also locates this impulse toward transcendence, as Hamann and Benjamin do, in language itself.

Form of life thus serves Wittgenstein as a concept that limits not language itself, but rational speculation on the structure and functioning of language. It is thus closely related to the notion of the “limits of language” as they are discussed in the *Tractatus*. In the earlier work, Wittgenstein draws a sharp limit to factual language—or *saying*—that makes determinant statements about states of affairs obtaining in the world. Beyond that limit, he writes, somewhat confusingly, lie both “nonsense” as well as everything of importance in human life, including aesthetics, ethics, and religion. He also consigns the main text of the *Tractatus* itself to the wrong (nonsensical) side of this limit. By contrast, language is limited in the *Investigations* not according to a particular type of language that pictures reality, but, as we’ve seen, according to its use. Language on the other side of this latter conception of the limit does not fail to picture the world; rather, it becomes disengaged from it.

In order to draw out this difference more explicitly, I turn now to the resolute reading of Wittgenstein's philosophical trajectory.

3. Resolving Nonsense

My reading of Mauthner's influence, both positive and negative, on Wittgenstein after his return to philosophy clearly sees a division between his thinking during the period of the *Tractatus* and that during the period of the *Investigations*. A good deal of recent, influential Wittgenstein interpretation has insisted on a much stronger continuity between Wittgenstein's thought early and late. This reading, propounded by James Conant and Cora Diamond, among others, is based on a strong or "resolute" reading of the concept of nonsense (*Unsinn*) as it is deployed in the *Tractatus*, especially at 6.54, where Wittgenstein writes:

My propositions elucidate insofar as those who understand me in the end recognize them as nonsensical, once they have climbed through them, on them, over them. (They must so to speak throw the ladder away, after they have climbed up it.) They must overcome these sentences; then they see the world rightly.

Resolute readers regard this passage as informing readers that they ought to regard the apparent theory of meaning that has been expounded in earlier parts of the *Tractatus* not as "substantial" nonsense—capable of expressing something despite being nonsense—but as austere—that is, bare, utter, complete—nonsense. The conventional or "substantial" reading was first put forward by Wittgenstein's contemporaries like G. E. M. Anscombe, David Pears, and Norman Malcolm and is defended in various forms by interpreters such as P. M. S. Hacker, Gordon Baker, Ian Proops, and many others. It ascribes to Wittgenstein in this final move the view that the propositions put forward in the *Tractatus* that seem to be espousing a positive philosophical theory—which holds that the logical form of a proposition *pictures* a state of affairs in the world—are in fact elucidating something that cannot be said in human language. *Saying*, it should be noted, takes on a limited, technical sense under this interpretation, meaning something like "factually stating."¹⁶

¹⁶ See David Pears, *Ludwig Wittgenstein* (New York: Viking Press, 1969), 52.

Wittgenstein associates saying with the expression of thoughts, which have senses.

Ultimately, the *Tractatus* admits that the propositions that appear to be *saying* what the structures of logic and language are could not in fact *say* what they purport to, and are therefore nonsense. That is, they do not express senses, which must be either true or false states of affairs. But, for the irresolute reader, this does not make them nonsense on the order of the statement “the Good is more identical than the Beautiful” (*TLP* 4.003), the kind of nonsense Wittgenstein attributes to most philosophy. Rather, Tractarian nonsense, despite being unable to say it, is, on the conventional reading, capable of demonstrating or elucidating—showing—where the limit of the sayable lies.

In the preface, Wittgenstein writes of the goal of the *Tractatus* as follows:

[. . .] [T]he aim of the book is to draw a limit to thought, or rather—not to thought, but to the expression of thoughts: for in order to be able to draw a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable (i.e., we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought).

It will therefore only be in language that the limit can be drawn, and what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense.

For the substantial reader, the picture theory, by “running up against the limits of language,” shows us where that limit lies and allows us, in Kantian fashion, to take up the right point of view and give up the metaphysical temptation to try to philosophize beyond that limit. On this reading, however, the *Tractatus* is subject to the criticism that just as a limit to thought cannot be drawn by thinking the unthinkable, a limit to language cannot be drawn by expressing the inexpressible, even if the expression of the limit is averred to be itself nonsensical. As F. P. Ramsey puts the criticism in an oft-cited quip, “What we can’t say, we can’t say, and we can’t whistle it either.”¹⁷ The *Tractatus* seems to depend

¹⁷Ramsey, “General Propositions and Causality,” *F. P. Ramsey: The Foundation of Mathematics*, ed. R. B. Braithwaite (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1931), 238. P. M. S. Hacker takes the quote as the title of a convincing paper that marshals textual evidence both internal and external to the *Tractatus* (correspondence and reported conversations) against the resolute reading (“Was He Trying to Whistle It?” *The New Wittgenstein*, ed. Alice Crary and Rupert Read (London: Routledge, 2000), 353–88, 355). Hacker also cites Otto Neurath’s similar criticism of the *Tractatus*: “One should indeed

on this dubious ability of nonsense to be elucidating insofar as it shows us where the limit of the expression of thought lies.

James Conant and Cora Diamond argue, motivated in part by this weakness, that this could not be Wittgenstein's view and that the nonsense of these propositions is actually *mere* nonsense, incapable of showing anything. The role of these propositions is elucidatory instead in the sense that they merely represent the kind of philosophical view we might be tempted by—one that we are meant to completely discard. Furthermore, the view that they do show something (the structure of language) that they are incapable of saying or asserting is likewise a view we are meant to throw away, one rung up the ladder from the view that takes them as part of a legitimately asserted philosophical theory. The view ascribed to Wittgenstein by standard readings of the *Tractatus* Diamond thus calls “chickening out.”¹⁸ It takes a step past traditional philosophical theorizing, but not past the equally seductive and illusory idea that there is still some structure there, only one that cannot be stated. There is no logical structure *there* that can be shown but not said. At the end of the *Tractatus*, Conant remarks, “I grasp that there has been no ‘it’ in my grasp all along.”¹⁹

On the resolute reading, then, there is greater continuity—at least of a certain kind—in the relationship between Wittgenstein's early thought and his later thought. Already in the *Tractatus*, he has rejected the idea that there is something like a structural relationship between language and the world (even one that cannot be stated). On Conant and Diamond's view, Wittgenstein's return to philosophy is fueled instead by a reassessment of how best to express this anti-dogmatic, meta-philosophical point and by the realization that the *Tractatus*'s focus on a particular kind of language (one that states facts about the world) itself

be silent but not *about* anything” (Neurath, in *Logical Positivism*, ed. A. J. Ayer (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1959), 284.

¹⁸ Diamond, “Throwing Away the Ladder,” *The Realistic Spirit* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), 181–82. Diamond presents her view in this essay in opposition to that of P. T. Geach, who ascribes to *The Tractatus* a distinction between saying and showing analogous to the one found in Frege's writings, especially “On Concept and Object.” See Geach, “Saying and Showing in Frege and Wittgenstein,” *Essays on Wittgenstein in Honour of G. H. von Wright*, ed. J. Hintikka (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1977).

¹⁹ Conant, “Elucidation and Nonsense in Frege and Early Wittgenstein,” *The New Wittgenstein*, 174–217, 196.

includes metaphysical assumptions and thus falls prey to some of the philosophical temptations the *Tractatus* seeks to avoid.²⁰

Along with 6.54, Wittgenstein's comments in the preface are the object of much contention in the disagreement over how to read the *Tractatus*. The preface lies outside the intricate structure of the text proper and therefore seems to offer instruction on how to read it. Conant interprets the passage cited above on the "limits of the expression of thought" as evidence for the resolute reading:

We imagine ourselves able to do what the preface warns we will fall into imagining ourselves able to do (once we imagine ourselves able to draw a limit to thought): we imagine ourselves able "to think both sides of the limit" (and hence "able to think what cannot be thought"). The aim of the work is to show us that beyond "the limits of language" lies—not ineffable truth, but rather—(as the preface of the *Tractatus* warns) *ein-fach Unsinn*, simply nonsense.²¹

One obvious thing to note is that Wittgenstein does not state, as Conant does here, that the *aim of the work* is to show us that beyond the limits of language lies simply nonsense—and, I want to add, were that his aim, it would not have been hard to say so.²² Instead he simply states that what lies beyond the limits of the expression of thought *is* nonsense. Moreover, he writes that the book's aim *is* "to draw a limit to the expression

²⁰ Diamond writes, "I see the *Tractatus* as a great first expression of an idea that is deepened in Wittgenstein's later work and never given up: of the link between misunderstandings of 'the truth of logic' and our attachment to philosophy thought of as doctrines and theses and theories" (Postscript to "Throwing Away the Ladder," *The Realistic Spirit*, 202). Conant dedicates a paper to trying to distinguish between the substantive propositions about the structure of logic that are meant to be overcome in the *Tractatus* (like the idea that a proposition pictures the world and that limits of my language are the limits of my world) and those assumptions about logic that remain unpurged in the *Tractatus* but are targeted in later writings (like that every proposition can be analyzed and that "a logically perspicuous notation is the essential tool of philosophical clarification"). There is, in the *Tractatus*, "an entire metaphysics of language tacitly embodied in [its] method of clarification" (Conant, "Wittgenstein's Later Criticism of the *Tractatus*," *Wittgenstein: The Philosopher and his Works*, eds. A. Pichler and S. Säätelä (Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag, 2006), 172–204.

²¹ Conant, "Elucidations and Nonsense," 197–98.

²² The resolute reader might reply that to state so baldly that this was the function of the book would prevent the reader from "entering into" the propositions in the way Wittgenstein's process of elucidation requires. Conant, for example, writes, "The assumption underlying Tractarian elucidation is that the only way to free oneself from such illusions is to fully enter into them and explore them from the inside" ("Elucidation and Nonsense," 197). This threatens to turn the entire book into a *trompe l'oeil*.

of thought.”²³ Unless the preface is read as representing a view Wittgenstein wants us to throw away—and neither Conant nor Diamond suggest that it is—it is clear that the author of the *Tractatus* thinks (1) there is a limit to the expression of thought, and (2) that this limit can be drawn. The limit, Wittgenstein goes on to say, “can only be drawn in language,” and on the “other side of the limit will be simply nonsense.” If the limit can be drawn, as Wittgenstein seems to think, it is reasonable to conclude that—just as the limit to thinking requires that both sides of the limit be thinkable (which, alas, they are not)—the limit to the expression (*Ausdruck*) of thought will require that both sides of the limit be expressible. If this is right, then Wittgenstein thinks there is a sense in which we can express what it is that cannot be expressed in a way that we cannot think what it is that cannot be thought.²⁴ Thus, 6.522: “There is indeed the inexpressible. This shows itself. It is the mystical.” Even though what lies on the other side of the limit is simply nonsense, even though it *says* nothing, it can show something. It can express the limit. This is, of course, exactly what the conventional reading expects: nonsense that marks a limit.

Wittgenstein’s view here depends on a very definite distinction between thought and language (the expression of thought) that is sketched in section 4 of the *Tractatus*. “A thought is a proposition with a sense (*der sinnvolle Satz*)” (TLP 4). “The totality of propositions is language” (TLP 4.001). Language includes both propositions with senses (thoughts) and those without (nonsense). Most philosophy is nonsense passing itself off as sense. The goal of the *Tractatus* is *with* self-avowed nonsense to allow this distinction between thought (propositions with senses) and nonsense to show itself.

²³ Conant fails to note this positive statement of the goal of the *Tractatus* in the body of his text. John Koethe argues convincingly that the resolute reading is unable to account for this stated goal of the *Tractatus* (“On the Resolute Reading of the *Tractatus*,” *Philosophical Investigations* 26:3, July 2003, 199–200).

²⁴ This possibility is supported further in the text of the *Tractatus* by the understanding of the relation between thought and language, developed by Frege and Russell and taken up by Wittgenstein (TLP 4.002).

4. What Can Be Said

By stressing a programmatic continuity between the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*, the resolute approach not only obscures the point of the *Tractatus*, but that of the *Investigations* as well. To Conant and Diamond it looks like Wittgenstein's basic approach to philosophy is already found in the *Tractatus*. He has already understood that philosophy can provide no insight into the structure of language and its relation to the world. The theory detailed in the *Tractatus* is simply an example of a kind of theorizing we need to overcome, rather than an attempt to mark the limit between the sayable and unsayable. There are, however, for the resolute reader, discontinuities in *how* precisely Wittgenstein goes about carrying out this project.

Specifically, Conant locates the main point of discontinuity in Wittgenstein's giving up the view that there is "something like a final analysis of our linguistic expressions, [. . .] a single completely analyzed form of every expression" (*PI* §91).²⁵ This, of course, involves the shift, discussed above, from a conception of critique in Russell's sense back in the direction of one in Mauthner's sense. Conant wants to cordon off Wittgenstein's Tractarian view, that all propositions have a completely analyzed form, from the standard reading's interpretation that the limit on the expression of thought can be shown through the propositions of the picture theory (but are nonetheless nonsense). The later Wittgenstein, on Conant's view, recognizes that, despite the attempts of the *Tractatus* to demonstrate the bankruptcy and nonsense of philosophical theory building, the manner in which this project is carried out is itself plagued by an "undissolved metaphysical residue." Conant's idea is that "elucidation" in the *Tractatus* involves the dissolution of the picture theory through an "uncovering of hidden structure," which requires the Russell-inspired view of analysis described above.²⁶ Aside from the exegetical problems this view raises—deciding which propositions Wittgenstein means to affirm and which are part of the theory being dissolved—it conceals a connection between Russellian logical

²⁵ Conant, "Wittgenstein's Later Criticism," 187.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 187–88.

analysis and Wittgenstein's understanding of the limits of the expression of thought.

The idea of "saying" stands behind both of these impulses. The form of the proposition is to say something about the world, to picture it. The tools of logical analysis allow us to see how the proposition is able to say what it says in such a way that is often not accessible to the user of the proposition (*TLP* 4.002). Logical analysis also allows us to see when our propositions say nothing, as in most of the propositions of philosophy (*TLP* 4.003). Understanding saying as the primary and privileged function of language entails, in other words, the analyzability of propositions with a view toward their most basic logical form. It also entails a very definite limit to the sayable. "No proposition can say [*aus-sagen*] anything about itself, because the propositional sign cannot be contained in itself [. . .] A function cannot be its own argument, because the functional sign already contains the prototype of its own argument, and it cannot contain itself" (*TLP* 3.332–3.333).

Logic can analyze how propositions signify, how they say what they say about the world, but it cannot treat its own means as furniture in that world. Russell falls into error in his theory of types "because he had to mention the meaning of signs when establishing the rules for them." When we attempt to say something about logic, we violate its analyticity. "The propositions of logic *say* nothing" (*TLP* 6.11, my italics). Despite the fact that the limits of language cannot be said, Wittgenstein does see, in the failures of Russell and Frege, where the boundary lies in the attempt to treat logic as a substantive instead of something purely formal. Language reaches its limit precisely when it begins to attempt to delineate its own structure and ceases picturing a world in some sense outside it. Recognition of this is not recognition of a fact but the recognition of a limit to the expression of facts. We can come to this correct way of seeing things, however, only by initially treating these claims as propositions in the ordinary sense, as propositions about a substantive reality. This is the effect the intricate structure of the *Tractatus*, and its final ladder-disposing move, is intended to achieve.

Critique of language in Russell's sense involves the assumption of a logical form that Wittgenstein later realizes is metaphysically suspect. This entails, on the one hand, the failure of Wittgenstein's view that all propositions are analyzable into their most basic elements, and, on the other, the failure of his view that there are definite boundaries to the

domain where assertive language (saying) holds sway, and, consequently, the failure of the view that the propositions of the *Tractatus* can hover at those boundaries and show where they are.

Thus, the central shift between the two main periods of Wittgenstein's philosophical development—and this is an idea Wittgenstein comes back to time and again in the *Investigations*—is surrendering the centrality of saying. Wittgenstein comes to understand saying not as the privileged form of language, but rather one function language carries out among many others. This loss of privilege entails a loss of character. These assertoric, factual propositions do not contain their meaning in an analyzable logical structure but—as with all usages of words—their meaning is typically to be found in their use in language-games, which are not connected by essential or even consistently shared features.

The notion that there might be some limit to the sayable is also dissolved by the turn toward use in the *Investigations*. Philosophy errs not by trying to say what cannot be said—not because it fails to ascribe meanings in the world to its words—but because it uses language without regard to its function in possible language-games. It uses language as if it had meanings independent of these functions. This drastic shift in Wittgenstein's thought is covered over by the resolute reading. It, in effect, separates Wittgenstein's concern with language-games and the diversity of linguistic practices from his understanding of the limits of language.

Furthermore, by claiming that Wittgenstein never *really* has any robust concept of “showing” in the *Tractatus*—the notion that the limits of language can be shown is, at most, a temptation he wants us to feel—the resolute reading actually obscures a major point of continuity between these two periods.²⁷ Once he gives up the idea that the fundamental feature of a proposition is that it *says* that things stand in such and such a way, Wittgenstein is left with only the idea that a proposition shows its sense. This idea of showing, though transformed by the new philosophical practice Wittgenstein adopts, remains important in his later work, as I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 8 and Chapter 9. Here, it suffices to say that it is precisely the expansion of Wittgenstein's

²⁷ My interpretation here follows that of Koethe in both his “On the Resolute Reading of the *Tractatus*” (see esp. 204) and *The Continuity of Wittgenstein's Thought*. See esp. the latter's fifth chapter, “The Pervasiveness of Showing and Seeing.”

understanding of the form and function of language that allows him to give up both the notion of the “sayable” and the notion that there must be a limit to the “sayable” that together plague the *Tractatus*.

In his essay “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Thought,” Stanley Cavell makes a similar point in the context of discussing the later Wittgenstein’s relationship to Kant. Cavell notes parallels between Kant’s doctrine of transcendental illusion and Wittgenstein’s critique of philosophical language whose words play no role in any discernible language-game. Cavell goes on:

If his similarity to Kant is seen, the differences light up the nature of the problems Wittgenstein sets himself. For Wittgenstein it would be an illusion not only that we do know things-in-themselves, but equally an illusion that we do not (crudely, because the concept of “knowing something as it really is” is being used without a clear sense, apart from its ordinary language game).²⁸

This contrast with Kant is instructive because the way the early Wittgenstein conceives of the “limits of language” is comparable to the way Kant understands transcendental illusion and the limitation of human knowledge to the realm of experience. In the first critique, as I’ve already discussed, Kant proscribes the substantial use of the ideas of reason and limits them to a regulative use. Since the limit that interests Kant is not linguistic, he does not face the problems of ineffability that Wittgenstein does in marking this limit; still, both Kant and the early Wittgenstein force philosophy to abide by strict limitations in order to be meaningful, and both, as a result, divide philosophical statements into those capable of making sense and those consigned to nonsense.

As Cavell notes, Wittgenstein retains a conception of nonsense, broadly understood, in the *Investigations*. What he means by nonsense there, however, is no longer language that fails to picture a state of affairs that may or may not obtain in the world, but rather language that plays no role in a language-game, language used “outside language games.”²⁹ This suggests a very different understanding of the limits of language than the one that Wittgenstein attempts to mark in the *Tractatus*. There, the limit was to the sayable—what states of affairs can be

²⁸ Cavell, “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Thought,” in *Must We Mean What We Say* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 44–72, 65.

²⁹ Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 207.

ascribed truly or falsely to the world. Here, we find ourselves running up against this limit not when proper meaning is not being ascribed to terms in our propositions, but when language is disengaged from practically oriented activity and becomes merely ornamental (§271) or goes on holiday (§38). As in Benjamin's own Hamann-inspired reform of Kantianism, this means we are more limited than Kant thinks: an understanding of our limitations that includes a conception of "something one couldn't do" misses the manner in which our limitation is intrinsic or constitutive, and cannot admit of an outside.

One important point of continuity with the *Tractatus* is that Wittgenstein again uses nonsense to mark this limit. Time and again the interlocutor in the *Investigations* poses traditional philosophical positions and time and again the main voice of the *Investigations* tries to lead him or her out of the fly bottle by showing that in expressing these positions the interlocutor has failed to provide his or her words with the context of use necessary to make them meaningful. Such a context can often be imagined, but it is not the purely philosophical context in which the interlocutor wants to use these terms; the new context inevitably scuttles their philosophical use.

At §119, Wittgenstein thus remarks, "The results of philosophy are the discovery of some plain nonsense and the bumps that the understanding has got by running up against the limits of language. They—the bumps—let us recognize the worth of each discovery." Whereas in the *Tractatus*, the demarcation of the limit depended on a very strict conception of the logic underlying language—and most instances of nonsense were the result of a misunderstanding of the logic of our language—in the *Investigations* this limit is fluid and determined on a case by case basis. It has nothing to do with syntactic properties of propositions but on the effect (or lack of effect) of word use in practice. Certain philosophical uses of language fail to be meaningful, not because we have failed to refer with our terms, but precisely because we think of words as the kinds of things that refer—that *have* meanings. "Here the word, there the meaning," Wittgenstein writes of this view. "The money, and the cow one can buy with it. (On the other hand, however: money, and what can be done with it)" (*PI* §120). Philosophy, including the picture theory of meaning, is regarded as a kind of deranged accounting, where currency is removed from circulation and then analyzed *ad nauseam* as if its value were somehow still attached to it, when in reality its

value, of course, lay in its circulation. Philosophy speculates with defunct currency.

In the *Investigations*, there are no longer limits to language in the strict sense there were in the *Tractatus*, only places, as in Mauthner's accounting of the lifespan of a word, where language has withered and needs to be revived—or clipped. On this conception of the limits of language, we are no longer plagued by the feeling “that there is something we cannot do”—or that we can do only obliquely—as we were in the *Tractatus*. The *Investigations* returns us to a linguistic register where language interacts with the world, rather than picturing it from a distance.

One further advantage of the kind of interpretation I have supported here is that it can do justice to the unsettled character of the *Tractatus*. The resolute interpretation forces the reader to take up one of two positions—to either chicken out or stand firm. But the challenge of interpreting the *Tractatus* is not a dilemma. It is evident from the text as well as Wittgenstein's contemporary and subsequent philosophical development that his own thoughts were in some upheaval. The resolute reader is right, I think, to locate in the latter stages of the *Tractatus* a self-destructive impulse, but it is not one under the author's control but rather one, as Ramsey saw, that undermines the unity of the text. Hans Sluga suggests that the specter of Mauthner haunts these stages of the text and that the negative reference to Mauthner at 4.0031 in fact represents “a preemptive strike against [Wittgenstein's] own later views.”³⁰ Sluga concludes “that the *Tractatus* is trying to weld together two very different things: namely, Mauthner's neo-Pyrrhonism and Russell's belief in logical form.”³¹

Sluga's interpretation is attractive for a few reasons. First of all, it can account for some of the passages the resolute reader wants to regard as evidence that the views of the late Wittgenstein are in basic structure already present in the *Tractatus*. There is an impulse in the direction of these views in the *Tractatus*, but it is not decisive, and the interpretive difficulties it engenders ought not be explained away by the totalizing force of the resolute interpretation but instead be allowed to stand as evidence of a mind in flux. Secondly, it provides an anchor, so to speak, for the project of tracking the continuities actually present in

³⁰ Sluga, “Wittgenstein and Pyrrhonism,” 107.

³¹ Ibid., 113.

Wittgenstein's thought. The reference to Mauthner shows that Wittgenstein was already, in the 1910s, cognizant of and likely struggling with the ideas of the expressivist tradition that would become crucial to his later thought. Wittgenstein's return to philosophy can be interpreted, as I've done here, as a turn that accepts many of the main strains in Mauthner's thought and, in certain ways, radicalizes them.

In particular, this view of the *Tractatus* allows one to isolate Wittgenstein's interest in expressive uses of language in the *Tractatus* and to show how this interest comes more and more to grip him in later work, eventually overwhelming the *Tractatus*'s conception of saying and its pictorial understanding of the relationship between language and world.³² In the *Tractatus*, *saying* is a feature of particular sentences, namely propositions, which are capable of modeling the world and stand in a structural relation to what they model. But all uses of language—propositions and non-propositions—even for the early Wittgenstein, show. A proposition *shows* its sense: it shows what obtains in the world if it is true and *says* that it does obtain (*TLP* 4.022). Other things—like the structure of logic itself (6.22), solipsism (5.62), the law of causality (6.36), the ethical (6.422), the mystical (6.522)—cannot be said but only be shown or “show themselves.”

Of showing and saying as it applies to logic, Wittgenstein writes in wording strongly reminiscent of Benjamin's distinction between language as means and language as medium: “That which expresses *itself* in language, we cannot express by means of [*durch*] language. The propositions *show* [*zeigen*] the logical form of reality. They exhibit it [*weist sie auf*]” (*TLP* 4.121). The expressive form of language that becomes important in the *Investigations* is already present in the *Tractatus*. Indeed, it is revealed in the end to have been the mode of expression of the *Tractatus* itself. As Koethe points out, in denying this form to the *Tractatus*, the resolute reading, which sought to stress the continuity of Wittgenstein's thought, ends up obscuring a central point of continuity.³³ The turn in Wittgenstein's thought can thus be regarded as an abandonment of a strict conception of expression *by means of* language and a fuller development of the notion of expression *in* language.

³² Koethe emphasizes this point in *The Continuity of Wittgenstein's Thought*.

³³ Koethe, “On the Resolute Reading of the *Tractatus*,” 204.

Part III

BENJAMIN AND
WITTGENSTEIN



The Word and the Deed

ATTENDING TO EXPRESSION *in* language means for both Wittgenstein and Benjamin a focus on what I've been calling its aesthetic dimension. However, despite a number of areas of overlap that will be detailed in what follows, Wittgenstein does not follow Benjamin's aesthetic understanding of the foundation of meaning, instead preferring an analysis of meaning in terms of the application or effect of words: meaning as use. At the outset, we might term these different understandings of the medium of meaning as an "aesthetic" and a "practical" expressivism. Whereas Benjamin follows Hamann in crediting the biblical priority of the Word, for Wittgenstein, as for Goethe, "In the beginning there was the deed."¹

Nonetheless, Wittgenstein and Benjamin share common ground in their insistence that meaning manifests itself, in their respective critiques of designative theories, in their understandings of the relationship between linguistic meaning and other distinctively human practices and expressive media, and in their understandings of concepts. I begin the chapter by focusing on their respective critiques of a particular philosophical paradigm. Although both Wittgenstein and Benjamin have specific philosophical targets in mind—at least particular movements—they also both conceive of the tendency against which they are arguing in far broader terms, as one of the times themselves, on the one hand, and of language itself, on the other. The second section will pick up on the suggestion made in Chapter 7 that the transition in Wittgenstein's thought

¹ *On Certainty / Über Gewißheit* ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. Wright, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), §402.

could, in significant respects, be understood as an expansion of the *Tractatus's* notion of showing. The idea that the meaning of both “propositional” sentences and language in domains like ethics, religion, and aesthetics shows itself, returns in later stages of the *Investigations*, especially in Wittgenstein’s discussions of pictorial experience. It is here that Wittgenstein comes closest to Benjamin’s understanding of aesthetic meaning. Showing and saying are related to a distinction Wittgenstein draws in the *investigations* between two aspects of the concept of linguistic understanding (*PI* §§531–32), which occupies me in the third section. This distinction can be productively compared to the distinction Benjamin draws between the aesthetic (the name) and logical (the sign) elements of human language and his translational account of meaning.

The remainder of the chapter explores the importance of aspect-seeing in Wittgenstein’s understanding of meaning. It centers around a comparison between two thought experiments: remarks Wittgenstein makes on “meaning-blindness”—the ability to use words without experiencing their meaning—which grow out of his concern with seeing aspects, and the idea of a word-skeleton in Benjamin, which was briefly touched on in Chapter 2. Here emerge important differences between aesthetic and practical expressivism.

1. Decline and Fall

As I argued in Chapter 6, Wittgenstein extends Mauthner’s critique of language to its own empiricist foundations. This means that he follows Mauthner’s critique of abstract terms and their hypostatized, correspondent meanings in words like “rule” and “meaning”—that is, words that, at least in their philosophical usage, seem to support a Platonic conception of meaning. But Wittgenstein also sees the danger of succumbing to the “seas of language” in the terms of empiricism—“sensation,” “sense data,” “perception,” “seeing,” “pain,” etc.—whereas Mauthner, following Mach in regarding the elements of sensation as basic, is far less critical of this vocabulary. Given his early mistaken conception of the relationship between mathematical logic and natural language, Wittgenstein is more concerned than Benjamin to avoid the pitfalls of traditional philosophical conceptions of language. To put it bluntly, the picture of language that held Wittgenstein “captive” never tempted Benjamin. That said, there is a great deal of overlap in Wittgenstein’s and Benjamin’s

respective diagnoses of the philosophical ailment that leads to designative theories. Both diagnoses proceed along two lines—one that sees our misunderstanding of language as the product of a scientistic worldview, and the other that regards the problem as, in some sense, inhering in language itself. The upshots of these critiques are ultimately quite different. Wittgenstein comes to harbor a suspicion of all robust philosophical theorizing, while Benjamin searches for an alternative understanding of concepts and ideas that militates against their natural tendency toward philosophical distortion.

In the discussion of private language, as we saw, Wittgenstein assembles an array of examples and reminders to dissuade us from the empiricist conception of an inner object. His argument hinges on the fact that an inner object plays no role in the language-games that involve the language of sensation. His critique targets a similar picture to the empiricist conception of knowledge Benjamin finds plaguing Kant's first critique. Experience is conceived of as an object acquired through our perceptual faculties and worked up into knowledge by our cognitive faculties. The "bourgeois" or designative conception of language follows naturally from this epistemological approach, since knowledge and experience are, at least in principle, detachable from language. Language, on the empiricist picture, merely provides a means for the expression of sensory knowledge. The words for inner objects like "a pain" are thus conceived of as operating just like the designation of objects in the external world, and it becomes natural to say something like, "Only I myself can know whether I am feeling pain," even though the words "serve no purpose" (*PI* §251, §398). In both Wittgenstein and Benjamin, the language-game of experiencing and designating objects in the external world plays a dominant and untoward role in defining our philosophical conceptions of language, knowledge, and the relationship between the two.

For both Wittgenstein and Benjamin, the error of empiricism is but a species of a greater tendency, one perhaps endemic to philosophy and even language itself. Wittgenstein is ambivalent about the sources of philosophical confusion. In notes, he writes:

Have we to do with mistakes and difficulties that are as old as language? Are they, so to speak, diseases that are bound up with the use of a language, or are they of a more special nature, characteristic of our civilization? Or also: Is the pre-occupation with the medium of language that runs through all our philosophy an ancient trend of all

philosophizing / / of all philosophy / / , an ancient struggle? Or is it new, like our science? Or also thus: does philosophy always waver between metaphysics and critique of language?²

In the *Blue Book* he attributes this misunderstanding of language more definitely to a number of different factors: desire for scientific applicability, the tendency to treat all words as names for something, and the overextension of grammars for analogous words.³ There is no single identifiable source of our confusion over language, but a multitude of reasons—some cultural, some suggested by language itself—that conspire to lead us astray. That said, it is clear that Wittgenstein regards at least some elements of this conspiracy as characteristic of his time. In the preface to the *Investigations* Wittgenstein provocatively remarks, “It is not impossible that it should fall to the lot of this work, in its poverty and in the darkness of this time, to bring light into one brain or another, but, of course, it is not likely” (PI 4). And though the *Investigations* touches not at all on human progress—or even human history—he chooses as the book’s epigram a quote from Nestroy: “In general progress has the quality that it always appears much greater than it really is.”

Wittgenstein does not develop these thoughts in anything like a systematic direction, but it is clear that he viewed his own reflections on language as combatting a strain of thought characteristic of his time, which leads to the single-minded philosophical neglect of the features of language and human life to which Wittgenstein wants to draw our attention.⁴ He remarks, “My type of thinking is not wanted in this present age; I have to swim strongly against the tide.”⁵ And in *Culture and Value* he writes that he cannot identify with, or understand, contemporary culture’s values or its lack thereof; he imagines himself to be writing either for a radical minority in the present or a future readership relieved

²Unpublished Manuscript, ed. G. H. von Wright, no. 132, 7. Qtd. in Hacker, “Gordon Baker’s Late Interpretation of Wittgenstein,” in *Wittgenstein and His Interpreters: Essays in Memory of Gordon Baker*, ed. Guy Kahane et al. (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007) 88–122, 99.

³*Blue Book*, 17–19. See also Sluga, “Family Resemblance,” 7–8.

⁴See Jacques Bouveresse, “‘The Darkness of this Time’: Wittgenstein and the Modern World,” in *Wittgenstein Centenary Essays*, ed. A. P. Griffiths (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 11–39.

⁵*Philosophical Remarks*, ed. Rush Rhees, trans. R. Hargraves and R. White (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975), 94.

of our contemporary prejudices.⁶ Wittgenstein is no doubt influenced in this conception of his own work by Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Spengler, and Karl Kraus. But how, precisely, are we to understand this general sense of decline in relation to the substance of his philosophical project?

In attempting to understand the connection between Wittgenstein's remarks on culture and his philosophy of language, Stanley Cavell and G. H. von Wright emphasize the connection to Spengler.⁷ Spengler's theory of history centers on two concepts, those of culture and civilization. A culture, like ancient Greece, flourishes, authentically and organically maintaining a natural connection to its origin and to the earth. As part of its natural evolution and decay, it becomes a civilization. In the period of civilization, the culture becomes "petrified"; it is no longer experienced, so to speak, from within, but becomes an external object for its purported inhabitants. The people are no longer a *Volk*, Spengler writes, but "a mob."⁸ Cavell suggests that the *Investigations* can be read as a "diurnalization" of Spengler's theory of history.⁹ Wittgenstein makes the theory part of the everyday, divesting Spengler's views of their grand historical narrative, but retaining aspects of their general form.

Cavell writes, "What Wittgenstein means by speaking outside language games, which is to say, repudiating our shared criteria, is a kind of interpretation of, or a homologous form of, what Spengler means in picturing the decline of culture as a process of externalization."¹⁰ This is a diurnalization of Spengler's theory because it no longer tries to impose a shape on history, but simply to chart a decline—the step outside of language—that is part of everyday life and, at least to a degree, reversible. Where, in other words, for Spengler the antagonism between culture and civilization is charted historically, in Wittgenstein the antagonism is part of daily life and represented in the move from language

⁶ Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 6.

⁷ Stanley Cavell, "Declining Decline: Wittgenstein as a Philosopher of Culture," *Inquiry* 31:3, 253–64. G. H. von Wright, "Wittgenstein in Relation to His Times," in *Wittgenstein and His Times*, ed. Brian McGuinness (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982).

⁸ Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (New York: Modern Library, 1965), 24–25. Qtd. in Cavell, "Declining Decline," 261.

⁹ Cavell, "Declining Decline," 263.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 261. Nietzsche deserves mention here as well, as he takes a similar view of decline, for example, in *The Birth of Tragedy*. There, Socratic rationalism destroys tragedy and paves the way for inferior, intellectualized, and externalized Euripidean tragedy.

in the everyday to language on holiday.¹¹ For Mauthner, too, as we saw in Chapter 7, language was interpreted as the locus of this decline, which can both be charted historically and is in evidence in the everyday use and misuse of words. This declinism and the conviction that it shows itself most clearly in language is a common trope in German-language, and particularly Austrian, philosophy of this time.

Wittgenstein at once places this linguistic declinism more in the everyday and closer to the heart of philosophy itself. At *PI* §111, he puts the point in terms of the notion of philosophical depth:

The problems arising through a misinterpretation of our forms of language have the character of *depth*. They are deep disquietudes; they are as deeply rooted in us as the forms of our language, and their significance is as great as the importance of our language. —Let’s ask ourselves: why do we feel a grammatical joke to be deep? (And that is what the depth of philosophy is.)

I take it that we feel a grammatical joke or pun to be deep because of a particular kind of dislocation or removal. The depth—and the humor—comes from feeling unmoored for a moment by an ambiguity about the context of use to be applied to the utterance. A grammatical joke makes a break with a practically oriented language-game; it is not typically a recognizable move in one. We laugh and then go back to the game or start a new one. In a very similar way—with confusion taking the place of humor—we dislocate a philosophical word like “meaning” from the context that gives it life and feel with the dislocation a depth, as if we just recognized a particular structure beneath the word that needs to be analyzed. The “depth” is the same; it comes from looking at words from the outside. But in the latter case, instead of laughing, as perhaps we should, we philosophize.

This echoes closely Benjamin’s own understanding of the externalization and Fall of language:

The word as externally communicative, a parody as it were by the explicitly mediate word of the explicitly immediate word, the creative word

¹¹ This is not to say that Wittgenstein didn’t also think of culture and civilization in Spengler’s own terms. He wrote, for example, hopefully, “Perhaps one day a culture will arise from this civilization” (*Culture and Value*, 64). It was readers of this future culture that Wittgenstein imagined he was writing for. See Klagge, *Wittgenstein in Exile*, 77–80.

of God, and the decline of the blessed, Adamic spirit of language that stands between them. (*GS* 2:153 / *SW* 1:71)

The externalization of language, its function as a sign, and the illusory “bourgeois” theory that results from essentializing this “late” designative function of language are all concerns of Benjamin’s as well. For him, the designative use of language and the depth it produces are also understood as a kind of parody or joke, produced by a disengagement from immanent language. Benjamin blames the predominance of the external view not just on the allure of scientific explanation but on certain aspects of bourgeois capitalism and the Enlightenment renunciation of religion.¹² But the same ambiguity exists in Benjamin as in Wittgenstein; our misunderstanding of language is not merely blamed on certain strains in our culture but on the structure of language itself. The externalization of language in Benjamin is represented, more explicitly than in Wittgenstein, as inextricably bound to the most basic functions of human language. Our ability to conceive of words as signs is a condition for the possibility of instrumental thought—but one that, taken in a certain way, obscures our sense of what language is and even of what our own experience is.

Given Benjamin’s and Wittgenstein’s respective starting points, the difference in their respective conceptions of externalization are unsurprising. For Wittgenstein, the “inside” of language has less to do with its expressive connection to nature than with how it engages the practical context and human activity in it. To step outside of language is to disengage it from its functioning. The designative view fails to recognize the origins of designation in particular kinds of language-games and thus hypostatizes the designative connection as something present in the structure or logic of language itself, when its meaning really lies in what it does. For Benjamin, the designative connection involves something far more robust than the role it plays in particular language-games. Although it is misleading and prone to philosophical misapprehension, for Benjamin, it depends on and, in certain ways, distorts a genuine connection—the more fundamental expressive and translational connection between thing and word. Externalization is more structurally

¹²The latter concern is especially prevalent in “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy.”

endemic to language than it is in Wittgenstein's thought—or at least there is a more robust explanation for it—and language therefore remains ever vulnerable to the designative view.

These differences also inform the respective roles Benjamin and Wittgenstein entrust to the philosophy of language. Both conceive of their projects as involving a restoration and return to immanence and, at the same time, to a holistic view of our language. For Wittgenstein, this involves going “back to the rough ground” of use and considering the total situation in which particular words are used. He argues against claims about abstract entities by construing them, like Mauthner, as philosophical statements only made by language after it has become disengaged from any use it had in a language-game. And he offers a wide-ranging critique in the *Investigations* that shows in general how empiricist language of the “inner” becomes confused when made to operate in philosophical contexts. Wittgenstein understands his role to be to pull language away from its externalized, philosophical use outside language-games back to its everyday use by giving it concrete context in which to function (or perspicuously fail to function).

Wittgenstein tells us to look at the grammar of the words we are using—the role they play in the language-game, how they move it forward. Once we have a perspicuous view of the language-game we will see no need, Wittgenstein thinks, to posit or search for objects corresponding to individual terms. Wittgenstein thus shows that an inner object corresponding to the phrase “a pain” plays no role in the language-game and that the empiricist picture is one produced by our language and the “experience of meaning,” rather than a justifiable theory of an actually occurring phenomenon. It is like “a pictorial representation of our grammar” (*PI* §295). The outcome of this critique is therapeutic insofar as it gives us, to the extent possible, an overview of our use of words and releases us from the tendency to hypostatize substantives.

Wittgenstein's therapy often takes the form of artificially abbreviated language-games, perhaps most iconically the slab game of §2. Analyses of these games, of course, do not give us the essence of language, but point toward that domain “within” language-games where the use of words is “at home” (*PI* §116). Language is at home in its everyday uses, where an analysis of its meaning can only be a description of its relation to other words and other activities in the language-game. The philosophical conception of meaning is a late reflection on this usage that

disengages words from their place in the language but still takes itself to be using them with their “original” meanings. The move between culture and civilization, or language at home and on holiday, is, in this way, fluid in Wittgenstein. He “brings words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” (*PI* §116), but the danger of words floating back to their metaphysical use, once we let our guard down, remains always present, and even in accord with an alienated and instrumental tendency in our age. Wittgenstein’s *Investigations* strive not only to pull us back to everyday use but to enable us to see where and how we have been seduced into using words metaphysically. What we are tempted to hypostatize in our civilized moments as “meaning” is shown to be simply an aftereffect or picture produced by the genuine usage in culture.

Like Wittgenstein, Benjamin wants to combat Platonic and empiricist biases by restoring a particular immanence to philosophical language. Benjamin, however, despite his critique of the empiricist epistemology infecting Kant’s project, remains convinced of a certain methodological correctness in Kant. He still wants to investigate the conditions for the possibility of knowledge, although his concept of knowledge is much broader than Kant’s, including all expression in human language in general. This means that Benjamin does not give up on the idea of the centrality of the relationship between knowledge, or human language, and experience, even if that relationship is now conceived of more aesthetically than logically. For Wittgenstein, once the Tractarian picturing relation between language and world is surrendered, we need only focus on the use of words, on what language *does*. This approach to language not only repudiates the primacy of factual language that characterizes the *Tractatus* and the work of Russell and Frege but also, in effect, the primacy of aesthetic language in Benjamin. Benjamin’s notion that human language is, in its most basic character, a reflection or distillation of a communicable reality, in other words, violates Wittgenstein’s resolute refusal to give any use of language priority but only to see how language functions in various real and imagined language-games.

For Benjamin, as for Wittgenstein, the manner in which distorted pictures of language are combatted is through imaginative explorations of a more basic form of language, from which the externalized use of language declines. Benjamin’s imaginative interpretation of Genesis tries, like Wittgenstein’s various imaginative methods, to bring into view

a more immediate relationship to language. Like Wittgenstein, Benjamin sees a continuum between uses where language is “at home” and uses where it has become estranged from itself and misunderstands itself. He allegorizes this as the vanity of language after the Fall. Adamic naming-language is torn from this aesthetic unity with nature in the Fall, inaugurating language as an externalized sign, suitable for logical and conceptual use. The “metaphysical” use of language, as Wittgenstein calls it, is thus always present, at least potentially, in language itself. The “bourgeois” tendency takes this metaphysical use as the essence of language. Benjamin’s project is to return us to what he takes to be the home of language in its aesthetic dimension. In the “Epistemo-Critical Foreword” this becomes a complete philosophical methodology, one that involves redeeming phenomena by divesting them—to the extent possible—of our reductive conceptual cognition of them and thereby redeeming them in the idea. Language is thus, in a very different way, drawn back to a more original relationship to the world. In Wittgenstein, the prioritization of use means that this move is therapeutic—“the real discovery is the one that enables me to break off philosophizing when I want to” (*PI* §133); in Benjamin it is still very much theoretical.

Decline for both Wittgenstein and Benjamin has an ambiguity that they do not attempt to resolve but instead find productive. A certain kind of vulnerability is a condition of language, and the exploitation of this condition is characteristic of a cultural decline. Externalization is always something available in language in general, not because of the bankruptcy of the present (or any particular age), but due to the structure of language itself. It is always possible to take it externally, as a sign; it is always possible to withdraw language from language-games.

As I’ll detail below, Benjamin and Wittgenstein both gloss this externalization, or our removal from the life of our culture, as a loss of religiosity, as well as of moral and aesthetic value.¹³ This latter decline can be described as the expansion, to put it in Wittgensteinian terms, of that domain where the Augustinian description of language is basically correct. The further we fall from the life of our culture, the harder it becomes to conceive of words in anything but their externalized,

¹³ Wittgenstein’s otherwise confusing remark that he was concerned the *Investigations* wouldn’t show readers “all that music has meant to me” can perhaps be read in this light. See Monk, *The Duty of Genius* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 537.

scientistic use. Under these conditions, religion and culture become over-civilized parodies of themselves. Both indebted to Karl Kraus, Wittgenstein and Benjamin see this alienation from language also manifesting itself prevalently in contemporary literature and journalism, which comes to operate in a cool, detached mode that pretends at a clear-eyed objectivity that sees through the “clichés” of its own culture. In reality, this kind of writing has simply abandoned the concrete, taking the words for more than the objects and fiddling with them to no real end, save the self-satisfied amusement of the reader. Benjamin documents this, as I’ll discuss Chapter 9, in the work of Weimar writers, in whose prose language “withers” in the same way Mauthner documented in philosophy.

Not only does this decline lead to externalized misunderstandings of language and language-games both within and outside of philosophy, but “civilization” increasingly pursues its goals in the technological domains amenable to externalized language and recasts the domains less amenable to it. Technological and scientific progress thus seems to be accompanied by expressive deterioration. It becomes increasingly difficult to even find the language—without sounding antiquated, clichéd, or naïve—to describe experience, meaning, and value that belong outside this domain. In his lectures on aesthetics and religion, for example, Wittgenstein cautions against a pervasive drive to understand the language of religion and value in terms of evidence, justification, and opinion.

Thus, though I have been characterizing Wittgenstein’s attempts at restoration mostly in practical terms, he did conceive of the return to use at the same time as a return to the expressive or aesthetic dimension of language. This has consequences not just for his reflections on culture, but for his conception of what, precisely, the use of language consists in and how it relates to the aesthetic elements of expression. This question also comes to the fore in the *Investigations* and other late writings, where the analogy between art and language and between pictorial and linguistic experience play an important role in his attempts to return language from its ill-considered metaphysical use.

2. Inside Language

The analogy between visual experience and language is of interest to Wittgenstein throughout the *Investigations*, but comes to the fore in later

sections, as well as in *Philosophy of Psychology—A Fragment* (formerly known as “Part II” of the *Investigations*), in his *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, and in what has been published as *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*.¹⁴ In these remarks, Wittgenstein explores the importance of aesthetic meaning to linguistic meaning, testing the extent to which meaning can be understandable solely in terms of use.

Wittgenstein’s interest in the relationship between aesthetic and linguistic expressivity can be traced back to the *Tractatus*, most obviously with respect to the picture theory of meaning. His view there turned on the idea of a structural homology between the proposition and a state of affairs. Wittgenstein, therefore, can even ask us to envision the proposition as being made up of tables, chair, and books instead of words (*TLP* 3.1431). The sense of the proposition would be shown or expressed by the “mutual spatial position” of these objects. Importantly, Wittgenstein also characterizes non-propositional uses of language as *showing*—for example, tautologies (*TLP* 6.127) and solipsism (*TLP* 5.62). As we saw above, these uses do not show their *sense*—since only propositions have senses—and, for that reason, cannot *say* that any particular state of affairs obtains in the world; rather, they simply show themselves. In the *Tractatus*, then, language is divided up into that which expresses something external to it—a thought or picture of a fact—and that which doesn’t—in other words, into sense and nonsense.

What do such senseless uses of language show, how do they show, and how does showing relate to the late-period construal of meaning as use? In Wittgenstein’s middle and late period, the importance of an analogy between pictures and language does not disappear but dramatically changes form. In the *Blue Book*, for example, he writes, “A sentence is [. . .] a picture which hasn’t the slightest similarity with what it represents.”¹⁵ In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein comments at length on the similarity between our understanding of language and pictorial or

¹⁴ *Bemerkungen über die Philosophie der Psychologie / Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); *Letzte Schriften über die Philosophie der Psychologie / Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*, ed. G. H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman, trans. C. G. Luckhardt and Maximilian A. E. Aue, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1982.

¹⁵ *Blue Book*, 37.

visual experience. In some passages, Wittgenstein is interested in the pictures language seems to produce in our minds. The language of sensation, for example, comes to be accompanied by particular mental images, which we tend to associate with the meaning of that language.

In the private language argument, Wittgenstein refers to the idea that everyone knows what pain is only from his or her own case as “a picture.” He writes:

[. . .] Even if it gives no information, still, it is a picture; and why should we not want to call such a picture before our mind? Imagine a painted, allegorical picture instead of the words.

Indeed, as we look into ourselves as we do philosophy, we often get to see just such a picture. Virtually a pictorial representation of our grammar. Not facts; but, as it were, illustrated turns of speech. (*PI* §295)

The difficulty in doing philosophy is to not accept this picture as the correlated meaning of our words. This model of meaning, Wittgenstein shows in his reflections on rule-following, cannot be right since our attempts to give it explanatory power always fail. A new “method of projection” (*PI* §140) or interpretation (*PI* §201) can always be found to make the picture conform to, or contradict, the actual customary employment of the word. These pictures are rather, for Wittgenstein, an aftereffect of customary usage. At most, they can serve as a guide for usage, but nothing about them necessarily guides us in the right direction (*PI* §213). They are, in this sense, more like mnemonics than rules and function allegorically rather than literally. Thus, Wittgenstein asks us to think of a physical picture instead of our mental image. By imagining this image externalized, Wittgenstein thinks, we will be able to move past the notion that our internal images correspond to something like meaning and accept his grammatical analyses of meaning as use.

Another way pictures figure in the *Investigations* is in terms of an analogy between our experience of words and language and the experience of actual pictures, as well as aesthetic experience more broadly speaking. Wittgenstein here engages in a kind of modification of the Tractarian picture theory of meaning. As he suggests in the passage from the *Blue Book* quoted above, he wants to hold on to the idea that sentences are like pictures but give up the idea that they have some similarity to what they represent. Towards the end of the *Investigations*,

Wittgenstein writes about how language is integrated with other forms of human expression, action, and feeling. Referring back to the Tractarian theory, he writes:

If we compare a proposition to a picture, we must consider whether we are comparing it to a portrait (a historical representation) or to a genre-picture. And both comparisons make sense.

When I look at a genre-picture, it "tells me something," even though I don't believe (imagine) for a moment that the people I see in it really exist, or that there have really been people in that situation. For suppose I ask, "*What* does it tell me then?"

"The picture tells me itself" is what I'd like to say. That is, its telling me something consists in its own structure, in *its* own forms and colors. (What would it mean to say "A musical theme tells me itself"? (*PI* §§522–23)

Wittgenstein replaces his former conception of propositions picturing states of affairs in reality with a comparison of pictures and language that does justice to the variety of uses to which pictures can be put and the variety of practices in which they are embedded. Picturing reality is but one function a proposition or a picture might have. A genre picture conveys no information about the external world, but a certain mode of thinking demands an answer to the question, what is its propositional content? With this kind of aesthetic experience, Wittgenstein implies, the picture does not communicate any content "outside" of itself.

His impulse to say simply, "The picture tells me itself," recalls Benjamin's own apparently tautologous description of the communication involved in the experience of reality in general. Benjamin writes: "The answer to the question 'What does language communicate?' is [. . .] 'All language communicates itself'" (*GS* 2:142 / *SW* 1:63). A lamp, recall, communicates "the language-lamp, the lamp in communication, the lamp in expression." For Benjamin, the tautology is only apparent because it means, "That which in a spiritual entity is communicable *is* its language" (*GS* 2:142 / *SW* 1:63). It is not meaningless or self-evident to say that a lamp or picture communicates itself because it establishes what Benjamin calls communicability or the capacity for communication as that in the object which it is possible to experience, to interpret, to translate into human language.

This communicative immediacy is relatively easy to see in a genre painting or a piece of music, since they occupy a space in between a mere

thing, like a rock (which we are tempted to say does not communicate at all) and an item of human language, which seems to communicate some content beyond itself. As we saw, the Romantics, on Benjamin's interpretation, regard the artwork as a paradigmatic case of the material embodiment of reflection or expression. Wittgenstein, to be sure, grants the work of art no such paradigmatic status, nor does he ontologize the expressivity of the work of art the way Schlegel or Benjamin do. Still, he clearly finds in the manner in which we engage with non-linguistic aesthetic works an aid to seeing the uses of human language aright.

There are two main ways Wittgenstein finds these comparisons helpful. The first is negative. If we recognize that understanding a drawing or piece of music does not involve grasping some content that can be expressed through an interpretation or some other third term, he hopes we will come to see certain uses of language in the same way. The second is more positive: the comparison of these art forms to human language serves to demonstrate continuity between these expressive media.

On the analogy with music, Wittgenstein therefore writes:

The understanding of a sentence of language is much more closely related to the understanding of a theme in music than one usually thinks. I mean this in the following way: the understanding of a sentence of language lies closer than one thinks to what one ordinarily calls the understanding of a musical theme. Why should the intensity and tempo develop in precisely this way? One would like to say: "Because I know what it all means." But what does it mean? I don't know how to say. As an 'explanation,' I could compare it with something else which has the same rhythm (I mean the same pattern). One says, "Don't you see, this is as if a conclusion were being drawn" or "This is, as it were, a parenthesis," and so on. How does one justify such comparisons?—There are very different kinds of justification here. (*PI* §527)

The passage begins with an odd repetition of the comparison. What does the rephrasing of the point in the second quoted sentence tell us? It serves, first of all, to make it clear that Wittgenstein does not mean to compare two *kinds* of understanding. It's not that the kind of understanding involved in linguistic competence—grasping propositional content, for example—and the kind of understanding involved in the interpretation of music are similar. Later on (*PI* §532), Wittgenstein explicitly refuses the idea of different kinds of understanding. Rather,

he wants to compare “what one ordinarily calls the understanding of a musical theme” to linguistic understanding. We are not dealing with the grasping of content or any deeper kind of understanding, but an everyday phenomenon and its everyday description. Secondly, Wittgenstein rephrases what he means by “more related” (*verwandter*) by glossing one as “*lying* closer” to the other than we might expect. This, in line with Wittgenstein’s idea of family resemblances, suggests a continuum of understanding on which different phenomena, rather than being filed under a general concept according to a set of shared features, run a gamut of overlapping relationships.

What exactly does (what we call) understanding a musical theme share with our understanding a sentence? Someone is said to understand a musical theme if he or she demonstrates understanding in any number of ways: through attention to detail, outward signs of appreciation, expressed insights into instrumentation, music history, melody, etc. Importantly, there are also greater and lesser degrees of understanding here; a musical quotation or subtlety of expression might be available to an initiate and not to a novice, even if we would concede, generally speaking, that the novice understands the theme. The task of understanding a musical expression, in this way, can never be said to come to completion. Even the expert’s grasp cannot be regarded as the final word, and, as Benjamin makes clear in the *Trauerspiel* book, the meaning of any given act of expression changes each time it meets a new historical moment.

Understanding a sentence involves similar criteria. It requires education in a particular language, an education attuned and applied to a given sentence, which is, after all, very often a sentence the listener has never heard before. It may require adjustment or interpretive imagination depending on the relative foreignness of the milieu in which the sentence is uttered. Explanations will often take analogical and not deductive form. My understanding may appear to be well-established but actually turn out to be limited when tested against a new context. I can fake understanding. Finally, very often understanding music and a sentence happens in a flash. It seems to come over us all at once rather than us having to call particular interpretive resources to mind in order to decode the phenomena presented. It is this fact, and the analogy between aesthetic and linguistic experience it engenders, that occupies Wittgenstein in his discussion of aspect-seeing.

Wittgenstein's comparison of linguistic understanding and musical understanding thus serves to reintegrate language into human expressive practices and capacities more broadly speaking and to reveal the shortcomings of a model of understanding that sees meaning as a disembodied version of a sentence. This model necessarily abstracts from and eliminates the shades of nuance of ordinary understanding, as well as the gesture, intonation, and personality that don't merely accompany human uses of language but make semantic contributions to utterances that can only be separated from the propositional content at the cost of obscuring or oversimplifying their meaning. Wittgenstein here begins to drive what I described above as two competing characterizations of the inside of language—practical and aesthetic—closer together.

3. The Movement of Meaning

The fluid, continuous relations among different instances of understanding also serve as the foundation for analogies among differing media. When asked to explain the understanding of a musical passage, we resort, very often, to analogous structures in human language: phrasing, conclusion, call and response. Clearly there is no formal apparatus according to which we would be able to provide an airtight justification for these comparisons; yet it is at the same time difficult to deny that they are well-founded.¹⁶ This depiction of the fluidity between artistic expression and linguistic expression is mirrored in Benjamin's translational model of meaning. Music and human language are, like human languages, to be treated as "media of varying densities" (*GS* 2:151 / *SW* 1:70). Comparison and analogy between them is not based on one-to-one equivalences between elements in a language and elements in music, but on a continuity existing between these media and what we might call general features of expression and understanding as such. The end of a musical phrase is not merely "like" the definitive

¹⁶The expressivist contention that language has its origin in music is relevant here and perhaps has oblique influence on Wittgenstein. See also Mauthner's discussion of the relationships between painting, music, and poetry or *Wortkunst* (*B* 1:100–06).

end of a declarative statement. They are more like different versions of the same thing.

This expressive continuum is also in evidence within the domain of human language itself. Thus we could imagine, on one end of this continuum, a people with something approaching a language that had only “vocal gestures, without vocabulary or grammar” (*PI* §528). Their “words” would not correspond to anything in reality or combine to form propositions, commands, reports, but they would still have an expressive quality and practical effects. Such a language would not be unlike the expressive behavior of many non-human animals. Just as we are unable to give a direct answer to the question about what musical phrases mean, we would be unable to directly answer the question, what do the sounds of this primitive language mean? (*PI* §529). And yet we would again be reluctant to say they mean nothing.

The language described here is completely expressive and immanent insofar as the meaning of its utterances always fail to transcend the particular utterance itself. We will always have to resort to either analogical or tautological “explanations” when asked the meaning of the sounds in this language, and of course complex forms of expression, language-games, and abstraction will be impossible in the language. We will not be able, in other words, to gain access to the logical form lying “beneath” these utterances (*PI* §92). The concept would not occur to us in this context. Explanation or elucidation will quite clearly “hang in the air with what it interprets” (*PI* §198). This language of vocal gestures is, of course, recognizable in many aspects of our own language. Wittgenstein mentions, for example, emotional utterances where a word or words only serve as a vehicle for expressive intonation.

At the other end of an expressive continuum opposite the one just described, Wittgenstein writes, “There might also be a language in whose use the ‘soul’ of words played no role. In which, for example, it meant nothing to us to replace a word with a new, arbitrarily invented one” (*PI* §530). In this sort of language, words would function merely as signs, directing activity in particular directions but not at all seeming to bear their meaning. It is this kind of language, as we’ll see, that Wittgenstein also imagines the “meaning-blind” using. They have no trouble using language in the way we all do, but they don’t *experience* the meaning of words. Without this experience, the meaning of the word is not sedimented in the word’s aesthetic qualities—its sound, written shape,

spelling. The physical word is instead simply a sign and in no other way connected to the word's use.

Wittgenstein hereby demonstrates two aspects of understanding. On one end lies a language of feeling only, the kind of aesthetic intervention in reality that Benjamin idealizes in his conception of the Adamic name. On the other lies a language whose words are devoid of any aesthetic element, whose materiality is inconsequential and can be replaced by anything whatsoever—a condition exemplified, for Benjamin, by the mathematical sign. These two extremes of human language are correlated with the two extremes that “make up” the concept of understanding language for Wittgenstein. “We speak of understanding a sentence,” he writes, “in the sense in which it can be replaced by another which says the same; but also in the sense in which it cannot be replaced by any other” (*PI* §152). In other words, we speak of understanding the logical meaning of an utterance and understanding its particular aesthetic form, something like “understanding a poem” (*PI* §531).

Importantly, Wittgenstein describes what I've been calling logical understanding in terms of the act of the replacement of sentences rather than by the apprehension or expression of disembodied content, a picture the act of replacement is prone to instill in us. Wittgenstein also resists the temptation to carve understanding up into particular kinds. He “would rather say that these kinds of use of ‘understanding’ make up its meaning, make up my *concept* of understanding” (*PI* §532).

Wittgenstein thus describes a continuum of understanding between aesthetic and logical poles. In a poem, replacement of all the words by near synonyms or equivalent words in another language would result in an entirely different object; understanding it would have almost nothing to do with understanding the original. In language-learning and in using invented languages, codes, and arbitrary mathematical signs, understanding seems to consist in something entirely separate from the materiality of the words or signs. For example, a person learns on the first day of French class that “*livre*” means book. (As we progress in learning a foreign language, the words begin to embody their meanings: if we are successful, they evolve from dead signs to living words.)

The great majority of acts of linguistic understanding lie between the poles. When my friend describes her day to me, in order to understand I will both need to be able to paraphrase what she's said and be attuned to the nuances of intonation, volume, word choice, facial

expression, gesture, affect—the irreplaceable aesthetic aspects of expression that also contribute to her meaning. If either one of these aspects is missing—logical understanding might, for example, be lacking in a foreign speaker with a limited grasp of the language or aesthetic understanding in someone suffering from a cognitive deficit or simply not paying attention—the understanding of a sentence will be radically limited.

These two different aspects of understanding, which for Wittgenstein cannot be completely divorced from one another, correspond to Benjamin's conceptions of name and sign. The crucial difference is that for Benjamin the name has priority, where for Wittgenstein it does not. One can think of the region of human language, on both views, however, as bounded on one side by the example of instrumental music and on the other by the mathematical sign. These examples serve the same function for Benjamin as they do for Wittgenstein—to reveal the two different ends of the expressive medium that is human language. The understanding of language involves at times an interpretive capacity that can treat words as arbitrary signs and replace one expression with an equivalent, and at other times an immediate reaction or response to experience that brings what is experienced into another register without replacement but, as Benjamin puts it, "through continua of transformation" (*GS* 2:151 / *SW* 1:70).

Wittgenstein's discussion of the understanding of music, in particular, offers a sense of the background conditions and associated practices involved in aesthetic-linguistic understanding. It fills in, so to speak, interstices between different expressive media. Thus, in an important passage, Wittgenstein writes of an affinity we might find in human language in trying to express the meaning of a musical phrase: "It might perhaps be possible to find a phrase in a poem which corresponds to this expression of the language of music. And that would give me great satisfaction."¹⁷ For Benjamin, movement between these media, poetic language and the language of instrumental music is "translation," understood in his broad sense. Such a correspondence is not the product of a structural homology between two distinct media. It is not as if one were laid over the other and correspondences were found at points of

¹⁷ Wittgenstein, Unpublished Manuscript, no. 130, 62. Quoted and translated in Joachim Schulte, *Experience and Expression* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 39.

contact. This would involve understanding that operates via replacement. Here, one does not replace the musical phrase with a phrase in a poem but sees an affinity between them. The music is transformed continuously into the poetry. There is something, as Joachim Schulte puts it, “particularly basic or immediate” about the connection.¹⁸ He explains the response that interests Wittgenstein as follows: “By means of accompanying a phrase or finding a parallel to it we react in an immediate way to a direct stimulus, even if the particular case, such as an example from music, involves highly culture-specific information.”¹⁹ These kinds of connections are immediate because they do not involve overt acts of interpretation or analysis; they do not involve a mediating detour into a conceptual sphere, which provides the third term connecting two media. They do not function the way we might think the concept *book* acts as a mediating term between the words “book,” “*Buch*,” “*livre*.” Instead, they involve an immediate insight made possible by an experiential familiarity with the given phenomena and the entire cultural world in which it is embedded. In connecting a piece of music to a piece of verse we divert, distill, transform the phenomenon in question into another register.

Wittgenstein is, in general, impressed by such instances of synesthesia, connections among different domains, and analogical extension of terms from one domain to the other.²⁰ Examples of the latter, which also occupy Herder and Mauthner among others, include “*deep sorrow*,” which I’ll return to below, and “*searching*” for something in memory.²¹ These extensions cannot be regarded as metaphorical, according to Wittgenstein, because it is not as if a more exact description exists or another equally valid term could be used to represent the same idea. Oswald Hanfling writes, “These are expressions that we need in order to describe our world and to communicate with others [. . .] Many people aware of the ‘rightness’ of these uses, will feel an almost irresistible need

¹⁸ Schulte, *Experience and Expression*, 39.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ See Oswald Hanfling, “Non-Family Resemblance Concepts,” in *Wittgenstein and His Impact on Contemporary Thought: Proceedings of the Second International Wittgenstein Symposium*, eds. Elisabeth Leinfeller et al., (Vienna: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1978); and Peter Kuzmann, *Dimensionen von Analogie: Wittgensteins Neuentdeckung eines klassischen Prinzips* (Berlin: Parerga, 1998).

²¹ *Brown Book*, 137. Qtd. in Hanfling, “Non-Family Resemblance Concepts,” 316.

to find a rationale for them.”²² Their rightness, however, is not deducible or open to exact replacement terms. If someone were to ask me to explain to them why we use the word “search” to refer to an attempt to recall something, I can at most describe what I regard as similarities between two phenomena—searching for lost keys, for example, and for a lost memory—but, in attempting to explain it, I will likely resort to more terms that assume the analogy, “scanning,” “looking back through,” “trying to find,” etc.

In the end, if someone does not see what I’m getting at, I will have to conclude that they simply lack an experience of the world that I have. This kind of description will have the same form as description of the meaning of a painting, an analogy between words and music, or the place where the justifications for a language-game run out. Examples like these, and their resistance to strictly logical explanation, shed light on the expressive continuum that is human language. As Wittgenstein puts it at one point, “Meaning *moves*, whereas a process stands still.”²³ The comment serves as a warning against understanding meaning as a process—which, even if it is active, for Wittgenstein is always “dead,” in contrast to the actual life of meaning. It is the role of philosophy to track this movement, to guard against its artificial arrest and essentialization, and to exploit the allegorical connections inhering within it when they serve the purpose of elucidation.

We can think of this movement in terms of Benjamin’s distinction between living and dead translation, which also parallels the expressive-designative distinction. As I discussed above, Benjamin describes words like the German *Brot* and the French *pain* as intending the same object, but differing in their mode of intention, in other words agreeing in their designation but disagreeing in *how* they designate, how they relate to the thing designated. Dead translation takes no account of this: *Brot* and *pain* are two material signs for the object bread. Living translation, by contrast, involves the mode of intending, the aesthetic manner in which *Brot* means bread. Living translation involves partial movement toward the ideal of Adamic language, since in translation we conceive of the

²²Hanfling, “Non-Family Resemblance Concepts,” 317.

²³Zettel, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), §237. Wittgenstein writes, “*Meinung geht, während ein Vorgang steht.*” A play on “moves” or “goes” [*geht*] and process (*Vorgang*), literally “pre-going,” is lost in English (as is the fact that Wittgenstein’s couplet rhymes).

thing, not as determined by a single sign, but from two perspectives—two modes of intention—at once. The act of living or literary translation “points the way” toward “a higher and purer linguistic atmosphere” (*GS* 4:14/*SW* 1:257). It points the way, in other words, to a more original way of grasping a given object of experience by passing through this purer aesthetic experience and demonstrating that that experience has “fallen” in two different ways to two different languages.

As in the case of analogical description of the kind Wittgenstein writes of above, there is no shared object of intention in living translation. Neither the poetic description nor the musical expression designates an object outside of itself. Translation or the allegorical movement from one to the other, then, obviously does not pass through an identifiable concept or object. Rather, for Benjamin and for Wittgenstein, the possibility of translation of the former kind depends on an aesthetic continuity between the experience of the poetic passage and the experience of the musical phrase. It is this kind of translation that, for Benjamin, must be “founded at the deepest level of linguistic theory,” since it is involved in every aspect of language use. The two kinds of translation here are roughly equivalent to the two different “types” of understanding Wittgenstein charts above. The former consists of replacement by semantically equivalent terms, the latter of an aesthetic “feeling” for, or grasp of, the expression, which is demonstrated, for example, by producing a particularly apt comparison.

The difference, again, is that, for Benjamin, living translation must be regarded as having a privilege over dead translation in the same manner the name has priority over the sign, expressivity over designation. Dead translation makes it look like languages relate to each other like tables of equivalences. As in the philosophy of language, more broadly speaking, the apparent exemplarity of ostensibly defined terms is misleading. On this view, what are often called “untranslatable” words or phrases, or words with no strict equivalent in the target language, are viewed as outliers. For Benjamin, if we adopt this conventional definition of “untranslatable” as something like “has no strict equivalent in the target language,” then every word is “untranslatable.” The kind of translation that we resort to when trying to translate “untranslatable” words or phrases—employing longer explanations, marshaling analogies, making use of gestures—must be regarded as more characteristic than dead translation.

This, again, is the kind of translation involved in insights like those comparing lines from a poem to a musical phrase and the kind of translation involved in everyday acts of interpretation. This is why Benjamin bemoans the “overprecision that obtains in the tragic relationship between the languages of human speakers”—because it makes it appear that one language is just a different encoding of the same content as another (*GS* 2:156/*SW* 1:73). Languages become static and the relationships between them are codified, facilitating dead translation between them, but this does not change the fact that their internal development and relationships to one another are foundationally aesthetic.²⁴ Dead translation, for Benjamin, depends on living translation the way death depends on life. Only meaning that is already given to transforming itself in particular ways can see these transformations “die”—be ar-

²⁴Translation, therefore, also always has a historical element for Benjamin. A crucial empirical fact about literary translations is that while a classic original remains unchanged, translation needs regularly to be renewed. This requirement is, for Benjamin, due not only to the fact that translations become dated, suffer from errors, or impose dubious interpretations on the original, but because both the original and target language, as well as the relationship between them change over time. Benjamin thus writes:

Just as the tenor and the significance of the great works of literature undergo a complete transformation over the centuries, the mother tongue of the translator is transformed as well. While a poet's words endure in his own language, even the greatest translation is destined to become part of the growth of its own language and eventually to perish with its renewal. Translation is so far removed from being the sterile equation of two dead languages that of all literary forms it is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own. (*GS* 4:13/*SW* 1:256)

Translation of literary works is intricately involved in the reception of a historical work in the present. It is a snapshot of the way the passage of time has conditioned the meaning of the historical work. At the same time, by testing itself against the relative stability of the original text, it demonstrates the changes that the target language has undergone since the work was last translated. Translation is a locus where two expressive media momentarily come together and the expressive power of the original is allowed to shape the target language, however fragmentarily. This process involves a great deal of stability, especially between closely related languages, where long histories of interaction create a wealth of equivalences among terms. More paradigmatic for Benjamin are Hölderlin's famous and extremely literal translations of Sophocles (*GS* 4:17–18/*SW* 1:260). They attempted to make modern German speak classic Greek. Such translations do not serve at all the seamless communication of the content of the works, but instead as a linguistic exercise wherein the original text swerves into the target language and raises both languages into a higher linguistic sphere by representing both as fragments of “pure language.” This exercise sheds light on the infinite shades of meaning between words of separate languages (and the historically shifting shades within a single language) and thereby points to a concept of meaning not detachable from the words but irreducibly entangled in their expressivity.

rested, regularized, and repeated in the manner of dead translation. In the same way, the mimetic translation of language as such into human language must precede the late conceptual language of signs.

For the Wittgenstein of the *Investigations*, who had already made the mistake of prioritizing one domain of language above others, the notion that one power of understanding might have priority over the other is to be avoided. Both are to be analyzed, according to Wittgenstein, in terms of their use—what paths lead to their employment and what paths lead away. Importantly, however, for Wittgenstein, as for Benjamin, there is a close relationship between aesthetic-linguistic understanding and non-linguistic experience. This manifests itself not just in the experience of arts like music or painting, but in perception in general. In the case of logical understanding, what is understood can be explained via an interpretation that puts the content of understanding into different words. For Wittgenstein, the self-image, we might say, of this kind of understanding is wrong. It does not consist in the grasping of some abstract content that can be put into certain words, but instead just in the very act of replacing one set of words with another, and going on from there.

Wittgenstein explains aesthetic understanding by way of the same method: looking at what comes before and after what we are tempted to call the *moment* of understanding. So we are meant to ask ourselves, “How does one *lead* someone to understand a poem or a theme? The answer to this tells us how one explains the sense here” (*PI* §533). As is typical for Wittgenstein, the method of explanation does not involve positing or looking for an explanatory power above or below the phenomenon, as it were, but simply looking at the context in which the utterance is made—in this case the aesthetic education that led to the utterance. Still, Wittgenstein allows himself to be astonished by the momentary grasp we have of the meaning of a word. “*Hearing* a word as having this meaning. How curious that there should be such a thing?” (*PI* §534). Wittgenstein groups this phenomenon of experiencing the meaning of a word together with aesthetic experiences (the understanding of a poem, “the feeling of the ending of a church mode” [*PI* §535], the way a genre painting “tells” me something [*PI* §522]) and with certain perceptual experiences in which a particular aspect is seen, missed, or added to a representation. The analogy between the experience of the meaning of a word and aspect-seeing allows Wittgenstein to

explore the connection between language and experience, the possibility or impossibility of disentangling the two, and the relationship between the two ways of understanding. It also brings into further relief the question as to the priority of one way over the other.

4. Life with Pictures

In his remarks on aspect-seeing, Wittgenstein lingers, in particular, on the possibility of the “aspect-blind,” people unable to experience the switch from, for example, the duck aspect of Joseph Jastrow’s famous duck-rabbit to the rabbit aspect. As he writes in *Philosophy of Psychology*, “The importance of this concept [aspect-blindness] lies in the connection between the concepts of seeing an aspect and of experiencing the meaning of a word” (*PPF* §261). Simply put, Wittgenstein sees an important analogy between phenomena like seeing the duck-rabbit as a rabbit and not a duck, and experiencing the word “bank” as referring to a riverbank and not a piggy bank. His interest in this analogy is an important part of a general concern with the relationship between linguistic experience and aesthetic experience broadly construed.

Just as there might be aspect-blind people who don’t see pictorial representations *immediately* in a picture the way we do, there might be meaning-blind people who don’t experience meaning in a word. Rush Rhees suggests convincingly that Wittgenstein was worried that the example of the meaning-blind illuminates a possible tension in the strategy of analyzing meaning in terms of use. The meaning-blind would be able to use language successfully but never relate to it in anything more than a mechanical way. “The objection,” Rhees writes, “is that someone might [. . .] make the signs correctly in the ‘game’ with other people and get along all right [. . .] even if he were ‘meaning-blind.’”²⁵ Here, Wittgenstein’s accounting for meaning in terms of use would seem to come into conflict with another central tenet of his late thought, namely that language is more than the manipulation and interpretation of “dead” signs. Aspect- and meaning-blindness thus become, for Wittgenstein, test cases for the possibility of what Stephen Mulhall has called the “interpretive model,” where a post-hoc, externalized interpretation of given

²⁵ “Preface,” *Blue and Brown Books*, xiii.

phenomena, like the perception of meaning or pictures, is taken as a viable description of these experiences *inside* language-games.²⁶ The problem is that the usual device Wittgenstein's relies on—analyzing the use of language in language-games—is rendered inadequate by the nature of the thought experiment, which stipulates that the meaning-blind use language without difficulty. "The method has to be somewhat different," Rhees writes.²⁷

Drawing on Benjamin's philosophy of language, I will make an argument in the section to follow for the impossibility of meaning-blindness. Benjamin's "word-skeleton" thought experiment, discussed in Chapter 2 above, is strikingly similar to Wittgenstein's. The priority of the aesthetic experience of meaning brought out in the thought experiment and in Benjamin's philosophy of language in general can resolve the tension in Wittgenstein's discussion of meaning-blindness without hypostatizing meaning in a way Wittgenstein rightly feared. Before constructing the Benjaminian solution, it is necessary to bring out with more clarity the precise nature of aspect-seeing and meaning-blindness.

In his remarks on aspect-seeing, Wittgenstein's aim is, at least in part, to dissuade us from the belief that certain visual experiences are inflected with interpretations that are conceptually detachable from the experiences. Most iconically, in reference to the duck-rabbit illustration (*PPF* §118), we are dissuaded from an intellectual account of a given phenomenon that imposes a philosophically puzzling form on it. In this case, we are given to explain our various viewings of the duck-rabbit in terms that separate bare seeing from an interpretation that makes the bare image look like one object or another. But, Wittgenstein counters, if we do not notice the duck-aspect of the duck-rabbit, we will not say of the figure that, "I see it as a picture-rabbit" (*PPF* §121).²⁸ We simply see a picture of a rabbit or a "picture-rabbit," not a figure that we *take* a particular way. Wittgenstein compares the idea of adding an interpretation here to the idea of *taking* a fork for a fork at a meal or *trying* "to move one's mouth as one eats" (*PPF* §§122–123).

²⁶ Stephen Mulhall, *Inheritance and Originality*, 265.

²⁷ "Preface," *Blue and Brown Books*, xiv.

²⁸ Wittgenstein calls a "picture-object" a picture of a given object, for example a "picture-face." "In some respects," he writes, "I engage with it as with a human face" (*PPF* §119).

The point of these comparisons is not that the perceptual experience of cutlery or chewing is identical to that of a picture-rabbit but that the language of seeing-as only crops up in contexts where some differentiation is needed, whether it be because of ambiguity, confusion, or imaginative play.²⁹ I don't say, "Now I see it as . . ." unless there is more than one option available. This language only has purchase in those contexts and does not tell us something general about our inner experience the way that the language might, on philosophical reflection, seem to. Despite its declarative, descriptive form, the sentence, "Now, I see it as a duck," does not describe a shifting inner picture. Wittgenstein is contesting the very natural move we make in philosophy from ordinary language to phenomenological description. This is a "conjuring trick" made behind our backs that seems "quite innocent" but produces a misleading account of the given phenomena (*PI* §308).

The absurdity is of a piece with the general concern Wittgenstein has in the *Investigations* with the way externalized language—language removed from everyday contexts and made to serve philosophical purposes—skews our understanding. Externalized language imposes a form that distinguishes between the meaningful and the material aspects of human expressive behavior, and therefore requires something—here an interpretation, in the sections on rule-following a "rule," in the private language argument an inner sensation—that links them together. Meaning is thereby regarded as a process that "stands still." We remove ourselves from a given language-game and see it from the outside but don't, in our explanation, account for the fact that we have been so removed. Instead we begin to ask how the "process" could work—how its various parts can engage with one another to achieve the given effects. Instead of a simple description of how language is engaged in the environment and activity around it, we end up with an alienated and distorted "explanation."

²⁹ Wittgenstein writes, for example, of children who, in the context of a game, see a chest as a house (*PPF* §§205–07) or a person listening to a composition played at different tempos until it is finally "right" (*PPF* §209). The language of "seeing-as" normally functions not as a description of a particular visual experience but as an indication of a practical orientation or "attitude" (*Einstellung*) toward a figure (*PPF* §193). He contrasts it with, for example, treating a "picture as a working drawing." There, one "reads it like a blueprint," and we might therefore call this "knowing" rather than "seeing" (*PPF* §192). It is this more mediated relationship to pictures that he allows the aspect-blind, while denying them the former immediate relation (*PPF* §258).

Before examining how the discussion of perception extends into the experience of meaning, we need further clarity on how broadly Wittgenstein means to apply the concept of aspect-seeing. Because of the complex and unfinished nature of his reflections on the issue, there remains a great deal of interpretive disagreement. I've already suggested that Wittgenstein's discussion of aspect-seeing is closely connected to his views about how we can misunderstand our relationship to the world, not just visually or perceptually, but in all kinds of meaningful contexts. But there is a question as to whether Wittgenstein regards aspect-seeing as an isolable or pervasive perceptual phenomenon.

The importance Wittgenstein attributes to aspect-shifts, like that involved in our experience of the duck-rabbit, suggests the former. Aspect-shifts are connected to characteristic utterances like, "Now, I'm seeing it as a rabbit." These would not accompany a perceptual experience in which aspect-shifting was not operative, whether I am simply unaware of an alternative aspect to be seen (*PPF* §§120–21), or an alternative does not seem to be afforded by the context, as in the fork example (*PPF* §§122–23). Hans-Johann Glock, among others, takes this as evidence that the phenomenon is not meant to be considered pervasive.³⁰

Mulhall argues, *pace* Glock, to the effect that aspect-shifting is but a particularly perspicuous example of what Wittgenstein calls "'continuous seeing' of an aspect" (*PPF* §118)—as when I only see the duck-rabbit as a duck—or what Mulhall refers to as "continuous aspect perception."³¹ Pictures, in general, are always seen with a particular depictive or symbolic attitude; they exhibit, according to Mulhall, "our capacity directly to perceive the symbolic in the material."³² The language of "seeing as," which, again, only crops up in examples like that of the ambiguous duck-rabbit, suggests that perception here consists of an interpretation layered atop an independently existing, purely material visual image. Instead of taking this language literally, we should see it as a manifestation of a certain attitude toward the picture in this or

³⁰ See Glock, "Aspect-Perception," in *A Wittgenstein Dictionary*, ed. Hans-Johann Glock (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); and Glock, "Aspect-Perception, Perception and Animals: Wittgenstein and Beyond," in *Wollheim, Wittgenstein, and Pictorial Representation: Seeing-as and Seeing-in*, eds. Gary Kemp and Gabriele M. Mras (London: Routledge, 2016), 77–100.

³¹ "Seeing Aspects," in *Wittgenstein: A Critical Reader*, ed. Hans-Johann Glock (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2001), 246–67, 250–55.

³² *Ibid.*, 265.

that context of use. Seen against the background of the “wider context of our life with pictures,” Mulhall writes, “the seemingly paradoxical experience of aspect-dawning can be seen as entirely unsurprising—as simply one specific manifestation of that broader relation to representational objects.”³³

We are tempted to apply the “interpretive model” to the duck-rabbit in a way we aren’t with the fork on the table or the action of chewing, and it is in order to shed light on this temptation, and not on some more essential difference between these two kinds of examples, that Wittgenstein employs the contrast. For Mulhall, aspect-shifting brings attention to the meaningful character of perception present in all perceptual contexts.³⁴ Wittgenstein’s remarks can, in this context, be compared with Heidegger’s readiness-to-hand, James Gibson’s affordances, and Benjamin’s language as such: we always confront a world that is pre-interpreted according to the meanings or possibilities objects afford us.³⁵

Although I think there is much to be said for it, Mulhall’s interpretation is controversial.³⁶ It may simply be, as Mulhall, Von Wright, and Rhees all suggest, that Wittgenstein’s own view of the matter is unresolved.³⁷ So it’s unclear that a correct or faithful interpretation of Wittgenstein is available here, certainly not to the extent it is available in the *Investigations* proper. I think Mulhall’s approach does latch on to an important direction in which certain of Wittgenstein’s comments tend, but there are other ways to interpret these passages. I’ll mention one other here that I think brings out the tension in Wittgenstein’s thought.

Avner Baz takes issue with Mulhall’s notion that Wittgenstein’s remarks are intended to dissolve a paradox.³⁸ The paradox—that when

³³ *Inheritance and Originality*, 158.

³⁴ Mulhall compares this concept to Heidegger’s “readiness-to-hand,” which is similar insofar as both suggest a more primary engagement with objects obscured by our scientific tendency to see things according to the “interpretive model” or in terms of “presence-at-hand.” Mulhall, “Seeing Aspects,” 265–66. See also Mulhall, *On Being in the World: Wittgenstein and Heidegger on Seeing Aspects* (London: Routledge, 1993).

³⁵ *Inheritance and Originality*, 181–82; James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979).

³⁶ See Mulhall’s defense in *Inheritance and Originality* and “The Work of Wittgenstein’s Words: A Reply to Baz,” in *Seeing Wittgenstein Anew: New Essays on Aspect-Seeing*, eds. William Day and Victor J. Krebs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 249–67).

³⁷ Mulhall, “The Work of Wittgenstein’s Words,” 252.

³⁸ Baz, “On Learning from Wittgenstein, or What Does It Take to See the Grammar of Seeing Aspects?” in *Seeing Wittgenstein Anew*, 227–48, 230.

an aspect lights up it seems “half visual experience, half thought” (*PPF* §140)—is dissolved, on Mulhall’s view, once we see it in relation to other characteristic language-games involving perception. We are meant to see that our distinction between visual experience and interpretation is based on absolutizing one language-game: reporting a perception. Thus, Wittgenstein contrasts the phrase “a rabbit” used by someone looking at the animal and responding to the question “what do you see?” and “a rabbit!” elicited by one running past us. He writes:

Both things, both the report and the exclamation, are expressions of perception and of visual experience. But the exclamation is so in a different sense from the report: it is forced from us.—It stands to the experience somewhat as a cry to pain. (*PPF* §138)

We have only the former language-game in mind when we reflect on perception and so impose its structure on the phenomenon. Aspect-changes appear paradoxical from this perspective since the interpretation seems present in the visual experience. But, seen continuously with the latter example, they seem a far less puzzling part of our immediate interaction with our environment.³⁹

Mulhall’s interpretation reaches here, however, insofar as it assumes that Wittgenstein takes the latter language-game to be more characteristic of our actual experience than the former. Wittgenstein, as Baz’s criticism of Mulhall brings out, does not go this far. On Baz’s reading, the aspect-seeing puzzle need not be “dissolved.”⁴⁰ His broader approach to Wittgenstein seeks to deemphasize the goal of dissolving metaphysical puzzles and to emphasize the goal of better articulating experience that “present[s] itself as ordinary and familiar.”⁴¹ He thinks Mulhall’s solution ultimately conflates “seeing as” with “responding to or regarding as.” According to Baz, if they were as closely related as Mulhall suggests they are, “the dawning of an aspect would not be the philosophically puzzling phenomenon that it is.”⁴² We wouldn’t be struck by the ap-

³⁹ “What else,” Mulhall asks, referring to aspect-dawning, “would one expect from people who relate to pictures and picture-objects in terms of what they depict?” *Inheritance and Originality*, 162.

⁴⁰ Baz, “On Learning from Wittgenstein,” 230.

⁴¹ Baz, “What’s the Point of Seeing Aspects?” *Philosophical Investigations* 23, no. 2 (2000): 97–121, 98. This is, of course, a central goal of Benjamin’s own philosophy as I’ve explicated it.

⁴² Baz, “On Learning from Wittgenstein,” 244.

parent intermixture of an interpretation and a perception—the perceptual experience that is at once “like seeing” and “not like seeing” (*PPF* §137). Mulhall’s “dissolution” thus ultimately leaves this paradox “untouched,” according to Baz.⁴³ For Baz, this dissolution is far from the kind of “peace” Wittgenstein is after; it is indeed yet another philosophical explanation of the kind Wittgenstein wants to put an end to, in favor of offering an “unobstructed overview of the conceptual domain” of aspect-seeing and other related (but not identical) experiences. The real danger Wittgenstein wants to forestall, on Baz’s view, “is that, succumbing to habitual and convenient ways of treating, or regarding, things, we will lose our ability to *see* them.”⁴⁴

But the way of treating things that troubles Wittgenstein here is philosophical, and not habitual or convenient, even if these puzzles are generated by elevating habitual modes of expression to the level of philosophy. And, while he does not want to dissuade us from the surprise or wonder produced by aspect-shifts, part of the overview he hopes to provide *is* meant to dissolve a philosophical strangeness. This strangeness results from an attitude that requires a disconnect between seeing and interpreting. According to it, aspect-dawning appears as a “strange fact,” which requires philosophical theorizing to explain. We ask, “How is it possible to *see* an object according to an *interpretation*?” (*PPF* §164). Baz is nonetheless, I think, partially right. Wittgenstein’s remarks do abjure the kind of generalizations about perception that Mulhall attributes to them in favor of careful grammatical description of various language-games.

Still, the danger Wittgenstein identifies is not that this picture-thinking will make aspect-dawning seem mundane—it is mundane—but that it will make it seem astonishing in such a way that seems to require explanations like those of an empiricism that divides bare seeing from interpreting. “We find certain things about seeing puzzling,” Wittgenstein writes, “because we do not find the whole business of seeing puzzling enough” (*PPF* §251). The puzzling thing is not that an interpretation seems to be intermixed with a perception in this particular case, but the meaningful character of all perception. Wittgenstein may not give this character the theoretical contour that Mulhall does, but in the

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 245.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 248.

context of this broader “puzzle” of the “whole business of seeing,” the particular “puzzle” of aspect-seeing *is to be dissolved*.

The dispute between Mulhall and Baz reflects a tension that is present in Wittgenstein’s remarks themselves. He is committed, on the one hand, to a careful grammatical investigation of use in specific contexts that repudiates misguided theoretical speculation and, on the other, to combatting a particular misapprehension about the division between the material and the meaningful that is characteristic of modern philosophy, psychology, and epistemology. The latter leads Wittgenstein to at least verge on the positive, holistic thesis about continuous aspect perception that Mulhall attributes to him, while the former provides grist for Baz’s charges against Mulhall. This tension comes into starker relief in Wittgenstein’s discussion of aspect- and meaning-blindness.

5. Aspects of Meaning

How would people who were aspect-blind get along? For Wittgenstein, the significance of this kind of blindness goes beyond the domain of visual perception. Just as we “feel,” in instances of aspect-dawning, as if we are applying two different interpretations to an independent visual image, with ambiguous words we feel different interpretations are applied to the same sounds or set of written letters. We can “hear” a word wrong. If I am a passenger in a rowboat in troubled waters and my friend rowing tells me he needs “to get to the bank,” I might wonder why he’s concerned about his finances at a time like this. Just as Wittgenstein attempts to persuade us that the use of images is not in any sense contained in the perception of aspects, he argues that the experience of meaning does not *contain* the meaning of words. This sense of meaning as an “intangible Something” or “something private” is “as it were, a dream of our language” (*PI* §358).

“The ‘aspect-blind,’” Wittgenstein writes, “will have an altogether different attitude to pictures from ours” (*PPF* §258). The aspect-blind person would not be able to take a certain drawing of a cube now as one thing, now as another. She would not really *see* the symbolic immediately in the material, but she would still, Wittgenstein argues, be able to “recognize [the drawing] as a representation (a working drawing, for instance) of a cube” (*PPF* §258). She would not, however, be able to

“switch from one aspect to another,” and she would not have the imaginative capacity to play with the image—to intentionally see the duck-rabbit as a duck or a rabbit. The image will amount, in effect, to an arbitrary sign that can be applied in two different ways.⁴⁵

Still, by and large, according to Wittgenstein, the aspect-blind will be able to engage with and use pictures as we do. Their aspect-blindness will become apparent in a more “automatic” relationship to pictures and in a certain lack of imagination. They will only be able to use pictures for the things they are meant to represent in a disengaged, distanced way, like we might imagine a robot would.⁴⁶ They will have to “process” images in a way that we don’t have to.

Wittgenstein seems, at least at certain junctures, to think this possibility is imaginable. “(Anomalies of this kind are easy for us to imagine),” he comments. And, “aspect-blindness will be akin to the lack of a ‘musical ear’” (*PPF* §§259–60), or perhaps, one imagines, to someone who has difficulty identifying irony, or to a nearly paralyzed person who has to relearn how to walk as a mechanical process. But is the situation as easy to imagine as Wittgenstein suggests?⁴⁷ One is tempted to say something stronger: that the aspect-blind lack something essential and won’t be able to recognize and use images at all—or, at least, that the handicap is more serious than Wittgenstein’s musical-ear analogy suggests.

The nature of the handicap, I think, comes into clearer view once Wittgenstein expands the concept of aspect-blindness to language and the experience of words. He asks:

[. . .] “What would someone be missing if he did not experience the meaning of a word?”

⁴⁵ See Mulhall, *On Being in the World*, 35–40; Rhees, “Preface,” *Blue and Brown Books*, xii–xiv; Schulte, *Experience and Expression*, 65–74; Severin Schroeder, “A Tale of Two Problems: Wittgenstein’s Discussion of Aspect Perception,” in *Mind, Method, and Morality: Essays in Honour of Anthony Kenny*, eds. John Cottingham and P. M. S. Hacker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 352–71, 365–70; and William Day, “Wanting to Say Something: Aspect-Blindness and Language,” in *Seeing Wittgenstein Anew*, 204–24, 207.

⁴⁶ See Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, vol. 1, §§198–206, and vol. 2, §§478–79. Here Wittgenstein refers to the phenomenon as “gestalt-blindness.”

⁴⁷ On this question see esp. Schroeder, “A Tale of Two Problems,” 365ff.

What would someone be missing, who, for example, did not understand the request to pronounce the word “till”⁴⁸ and to mean it as a verb—or someone who did not feel that a word lost its meaning for him and became a mere sound if it was repeated ten times over? (*PPF* §261)

Meaning-blindness would manifest itself in particular situations in which the ambiguity or aesthetic qualities of words come to the fore. The meaning-blind would thus struggle with figurative uses of language, ambiguity, word-play, poetry, and the notion of words uttered “meaningfully” or with feeling (*PPF* §§262–265).

Interpreters are divided, too, on the precise significance of meaning-blindness. As to the question of whether we can actually imagine the meaning-blind, Rhees writes, “Wittgenstein was not sure, I think.”⁴⁹ The importance, for Rhees, lies in Wittgenstein’s attempt to combat a mechanistic view of language that sees it as a mere “operating with signs.” Wittgenstein’s customary appeal to use, Rhees notes, goes far in undermining this possibility, but it does not go all the way. The meaning-blind would use language successfully but never relate to it in anything more than a mechanical way. The problem is that, given Wittgenstein’s strategy of construing meaning in terms of use, the experience of meaning begins to look extraneous, and the very notion of language being alive, and not a “dead” process, seems to be put in jeopardy.

Wittgenstein encourages this interpretation by continual wariness of the robust conception of meaning we tend to associate with the experience of meaning. As he puts it at the beginning of the *Investigations*, “The general concept of the meaning of a word surrounds the working of language with a haze which makes clear vision impossible” (*PI* §5). Wittgenstein is at pains to disabuse us of the feeling of a connection between how a word is experienced by us and its meaning. He points out that we “often don’t experience the word *at all*” and speculates that our sense that a word’s meaning is present in our experience of it results from another confusion of language-games (*PPF* §272–73). Of a game in which we pronounce a word with multiple meanings like “march” differently depending on what meaning we intend, he writes:

⁴⁸ Wittgenstein’s German word is “*sondern*” which means “but (also)” as a conjunction and “to separate” as a verb.

⁴⁹ Rhees, “Preface,” *Blue and Brown Books*, xiii.

[. . .] [T]he question then remains why, in connection with this *game* of experiencing a word, we also speak of “the meaning” and of “meaning it.”—This is a different kind of question.—It is a characteristic feature of this language-game that in *this* situation we use the expression “We pronounced the word with *this* meaning” and take this expression over from that other language-game.

Call it a dream. It does not change anything. (*PPF* §273)

The different feelings we might have of the sound “march” meaning, at one moment, an imperative (“March on!”) and, at another, the name of the month is conflated with a strictly semantic use of the word “meaning.” This is no more than a peculiarity of the former language-game, according to Wittgenstein, and not evidence that something like *the* meaning is present in our experience or pronunciation. Just as the moment of aspect-dawning suggests to us that an interpretation is integrated with an image, the experience of meaning suggests to us that sound or script, or our experience of them, is imbued with a particular meaning. But this experience has no real impact on the functioning of the language-game in which the meaning of the word manifests itself.

This experience of meaning is connected with another phenomenon that Wittgenstein dubs secondary meaning. We might feel a strong inclination, he writes, that Wednesday (the day, not the word) is “fat” and Tuesday “lean” (*PPF* §274–75). Wittgenstein refers to these as “secondary meanings” of “fat” and “lean” and writes, “Only someone for whom the word has the (primary) meaning uses it with this (secondary) meaning” (*PPF* §276).

This sense of primary and secondary meaning is applied in the following section to what might seem to be a distinct phenomenon. “Only to someone who has learned to calculate—on paper or out loud—can one render intelligible, by means of this concept of calculating, what calculating in the head is” (*PPF* §277). The concept of calculating in the head is secondary for Wittgenstein in the same way as the “lean” feeling associated with Tuesday is because it is only acquired by those capable of using the word with its primary meaning. To associate these secondary meanings, which have more to do with the repeated experience of the word than its primary use, with substantive inner processes is, for Wittgenstein, one of the pitfalls of philosophy (*PPF* §§271–73). With feelings like the “fatness” of Wednesday, there is nothing to worry about. We are not in danger of trying to explain the uses or meanings

of “fat” and “lean” by using “Tuesday” and “Wednesday” as examples. But with calculating in the head or uttering a word “with meaning,” we are in danger of confusing primary and secondary meanings. That is, we may be tempted to take the calculation “in the head,” or the “meaning” imbued in the utterance as primary.

Wittgenstein faces a dilemma here. On the one hand, taking the experience of the meaning of a word too seriously leads us to a tempting conception of meaning as somehow present or embodied in the experience. On the other hand, downplaying the significance of this experience—as the active possibility of meaning-blindness does—seems to sanction a behaviorist theory of meaning, since it apparently denies the relevance of inner experience.⁵⁰ In certain respects, Wittgenstein is back in the territory of the private language argument here, trying to negotiate the relationship between sensation and expression. In those sections, Wittgenstein uses the private linguist and his sensation “S” to disabuse us of the empiricist’s clean separation of sensation and expression and the assumption of a referential relationship between language—“interposing” language between them (*PI* §245). With private language, sensation was severed from expression in the use of language; with the meaning-blind, sensation and expression are severed from one another in the understanding of language. But Wittgenstein doesn’t argue against the possibility of meaning-blindness the way he argues against private language.

One would expect Wittgenstein to marshal analogies and examples to lead us out of the apparent struggle here, and his comments do tend in that direction, but they do not reach the settled dissolution of a problem we find in other sections. Questions remain. Rhees writes:

[D]oes the perception of meaning fall outside the use of language? There is something wrong about that [. . .] question; something wrong about asking it. But it seems to show there is still something unclear in our notion of “the use of language.” Or again, if we simply emphasize that signs belong to intercourse with people, what are we going to say about the role of “insight” in connection with mathematics and the discovery of proofs for instance?⁵¹

⁵⁰ See Wittgenstein, *PI* §§306–08; Rhees, “Preface,” *Blue and Brown Books*, xv–xvi; and Minar, *The Philosophical Significance of Meaning-Blindness*, in *Seeing Wittgenstein Anew*, 183–203, 189–90.

⁵¹ Rhees, “Preface,” *Blue and Brown Books*, xiii–xiv.

Rhees suggests convincingly that Wittgenstein's discussion of aspect-perception and blindness are entered into precisely to deal with these questions and that Wittgenstein's usual methods of imagining language-games and offering grammatical descriptions of them will not do. It is the scope of that very strategy that is at issue here, since for the meaning-blind words are nothing but their use.

Rhees's reference to "insight" here points toward another feature of language that seems marginalized if we admit the possibility of meaning-blindness—namely, originality. The meaning-blind, consigned to using language as a mere system of signs, will not, as I'll argue in more detail below, be able to invent new words or repurpose words and use them in new contexts or language-games. They won't be able to come to the kinds of insights that fundamentally change the character of language-games, nor, it seems, will they be able to draw the kind of connections, for example between a piece of music and a poem (*PI* §527) that we might regard as part of linguistic competence. They will lack *Sprachgefühl*. "So long as there are such difficulties," Rhees continues, "people will still think that there must be something like an interpretation. They will still think if it is language then it must mean something to *me*."⁵²

Wittgenstein must steer (or dissolve an apparent conflict) between two positions. The first is a view where the aesthetic experience of meaning is regarded as philosophically insignificant, genuine meaning-blindness is possible, and the strategy of accounting for meaning in terms of use leaves itself vulnerable to a behaviorist interpretation. The second is one where this aesthetic experience is given too much weight and thought to harbor or signal the presence of meaningful interpretive content separate from the use of the word. What is required, in other words, is an account of the experience of meaning that does justice to the sense that this experience is linguistically fundamental without taking it as a bearer of linguistic content.

6. "The Familiar Face of a Word"

I want to suggest now that Benjamin's characterization of the aesthetic foundation of meaning can provide a way forward here. Benjamin's

⁵²Rhees, "Preface," *Blue and Brown Books*, xiv.

thought experiment in two fragments on “word-skeletons” (*Wortskelette*), discussed (and quoted in full) in Chapter 2, is closely related to Wittgenstein’s meaning-blindness. These fragments are concerned with the idea of meaning and closely connected to issues raised in “On Language as Such and the Language of Man.” Benjamin’s positive conception of meaning, of course, would discomfit Wittgenstein, who prefers to see the concept fade away once a language-game has been described in detail, but, as we’ve seen, Benjamin shares with Wittgenstein the project of resisting the temptations of the externalized interpretive model. Benjamin’s conception of meaning can accommodate the intuition that the experience of meaning is essential to our linguistic capacity without hypostatizing it in the way Wittgenstein fears. Putting Benjamin in dialogue with Wittgenstein on this point can also shed light on Benjamin’s contention that the use of signs is dependent on the “language of name,” since the possibility of meaning-blindness is, in effect, a denial of that thesis. The meaning-blind use signs without experiencing names.

Instead of asking, as Wittgenstein does, to imagine people who do not experience the meanings of words, Benjamin asks us to imagine words that are experienced in complete independence of their meanings. It is again the division between the meaningful and the material that is put to the test here. Benjamin distinguishes between the word “tower” and its word-skeleton, “—tower—”. The word-skeleton, as Benjamin describes it, is produced by estranging ourselves from the word and bracketing its symbolic or designative capacity and its intended meaning altogether. It is this feeling of the word losing its meaning—produced, for example, by inspecting a written word obsessively or by repeating it aloud to ourselves—that Wittgenstein, as we saw above, denies the meaning-blind. They are incapable of it because, for them, the experience of the word never has a connection to the intended meaning to begin with (*PPF* §261).⁵³

When we do this, on Benjamin’s view, we are *not* left with a semantically inert collection of lines or sounds. It is not the case that a word is simply material into which a subject breathes life by intending this or that meaning with it—just as our image of the duck-rabbit is not a collection of lines imbued with an interpretation. Even when its meaning

⁵³ See, on this point, Mulhall, *Inheritance and Originality*, 164.

is bracketed, the word-skeleton we are left with still communicates something according to Benjamin. Namely, it “communicates a communicability” (*GS* 6:15). By this he means that even though the word no longer symbolizes the way it normally does to a (meaning-sighted) speaker, it is not wholly devoid of meaning. It still appears to us with certain aesthetic features—the way it looks, the sound it represents—and these Benjamin wants to include under an expanded concept of communication. Indeed, it is these aesthetic features, according to Benjamin, that underwrite or make possible its more substantial, “symbolic” meaning.

The same way Wittgenstein’s remarks on aspect-seeing throw into question an assumption that there is something like uninterpreted seeing, Benjamin is arguing here, more forcefully, that the idea of the material absent the meaningful is a fiction. For even when we strip the meaning from words, the bare sound or letters communicate something to us. This more fundamental, never-absent conception of communication or “communicability” is, as we saw, the subject of “On Language as Such and the Language of Man.”

The communicability granted the word-skeleton is thus a particular example of Benjamin’s refusal to countenance a lack of meaning anywhere. It is possible for us to bracket the intended meaning of the word: we can think of the word “tower” without any of its associations. But what is left over, “—tower—” is still communicative. Like the non-linguistic objects of experience, it still communicates itself. This is the “linguistic structure,” Benjamin writes, that supports the full meaning of the word that has been disengaged in the word-skeleton. Benjamin takes this underlying communicability as evidence that the word “does not communicate the thing that it apparently designates [*bezeichnet*] but rather that which it in truth means [*bedeutet*].” Although there can be words that mean and don’t designate—Benjamin mentions “God, life, yearning [*die Sehnsucht*]”—he doubts that there can be words that designate without meaning, “since the possibility of the designation of an object rests upon meaning-ability [*Bedeutbarkeit*]” (*GS* 6:16). The meaning of human language is a structure built atop the basic communicability demonstrated by the word-skeleton. This meaning or meaning-ability itself supports the ability of language to designate or stand for objects and concepts. Communication of meaning *in* the word is thus essential to all higher linguistic functions and makes meaning-blindness, as

Wittgenstein conceives of it, look incoherent, since language use depends on a communicability that the meaning-blind do without.

In another example of a word-skeleton, also discussed above, Benjamin uses the word "*Tisch*" (table) and its word-skeleton "*—Tisch—*" and remarks parenthetically, "Incidentally, the textbook case of a shift in intention" (*GS* 6:15). Benjamin is referring to the change in meaning undergone by the word, which originally meant "dish."⁵⁴ The word-skeleton is, so to speak, what underlies this change in intention. This points to the role, which I will return to below, the experience of meaning plays in the manner in which language changes and extends itself into new domains. The "merely virtual word-picture," "*—Tisch—*," Benjamin writes, "[is] expressionless in the maximum," but not completely expressionless. It has a "postulated but missing [*ungefundene*] meaning," whereas the word itself is "expressive in the maximum," having "the empirically forward-reaching, grinning appearance of meaning, which rests on the sound-picture [*Lautbild*]." Whereas "the word grins," there is a "weakening of the symbolic and communicative power in the word-skeleton."⁵⁵ Benjamin thus identifies in words two communicative aspects (*GS* 6:16)—the symbolic and the communicative, or self-communicative, on which the symbolic rests. In the word-skeleton this symbolic function is bracketed or turned off, but the word maintains an ineliminable baseline of communicability and it is revealed that the symbolic function of the word—what pushes itself forward—is based on its inherent communicability, demonstrated by the word-skeleton.

Benjamin, interestingly, uses the word "grins" to refer to this pushing itself forward, mirroring a reference of Wittgenstein's to "the familiar face of a word, the feeling that it has assimilated its meaning into itself,

⁵⁴ Peter Fenves misreads this passage in his interpretation of Benjamin's philosophy of language (*Messianic Reduction*, 133). He translates Benjamin's "*Übrigens Schulfall einer intentionalen Umstellung*" as "test case of an intentional alteration," and construes it as referring to the *intentional* shift made by the subject who brackets the symbolic meaning of the word "*Tisch*." This feeds into his view that Husserlian phenomenology has an important, but largely unacknowledged influence on Benjamin's work. He thus emphasizes the role of "a living soul" or "living speaker" in turning off or on the intentional meaning of the word. Benjamin, however, does not refer to the role of the living speaker, and part of his goal in turning to language is to overcome a subjectivist philosophy he sees manifested in phenomenology as much as in empiricism.

⁵⁵ Fenves translates *grinst* instead as "grimaces," again in support of the contention that Benjamin is speaking about the role of "living subject" in endowing a word with meaning (*Messianic Reduction*, 135).

that it is a likeness of its meaning—there could be human beings to whom all this was alien” (*PPF* §294).

Although both compare the communicative power of a word with facial expression, a simpler form of communication, the comparison serves quite different purposes for each. For Benjamin, the grinning face of the word is an enlivening of the “dead” or disengaged communicative power of the word-*skeleton*. The word is the word-skeleton come to life, as it were, and therefore requires, or “rests on,” the word-skeleton. For Wittgenstein, the aesthetic communicability and the experience of meaning could be absent. This is unimaginable for Benjamin, *not* because he imagines the meaning of the word is contained in it or in our experience of it, but because the experience of the word is *already* a kind of meaning, on which the symbolic meaning of the word is founded.

7. The “Depth” of Meaning-Blindness

One way of better understanding Benjamin’s contention here is in terms of certain figurative uses of language. Consider Wittgenstein’s idea of secondary meaning. Would the meaning-blind be able to understand or use secondary meanings? What will they make of someone’s finding Wednesday “fat” and Tuesday “lean”? Or the claim that “for me the vowel *e* is yellow” (*PPF* §278)? Or my sense that a word does or doesn’t sound like what it means? Sometimes, as Wittgenstein notes, we’ll be able to guess at explanations for these feelings; sometimes we won’t.⁵⁶ These examples show the way some of our concepts and words are imbued with minor, and usually backgrounded, aesthetic reactions. I may only think of them when I have cause to reflect on the word, or they may help me remember a word when I first learn it, but they aren’t present every time I use it. They are part of the aesthetic relationship we have to words. Since the meaning-blind don’t experience the meaningful in the material, they won’t have—perhaps won’t even be able to understand or identify with—these kinds of aesthetic and synesthetic experiences.

These feelings are individual—sometimes we share them with others, sometimes we don’t—and so we can imagine that being deprived of

⁵⁶ *Brown Book*, 136.

them will hardly affect the meaning-blind's linguistic capacity. As with wordplay that relies on meaning being immanent in its expression, they may be stumped with secondary meanings, but they will remain able to more or less use language as we all do. But there is reason to think secondary meaning points to something more general about our language. In the *Brown Book*, Wittgenstein imagines a response to the question of why one might call a particular vowel darker than another:

"Nothing made me use the word 'darker,'—that is if you ask me for a *reason* why I use it. I just used it, and what is more, I used it with the same intonation of voice, and perhaps with the same facial expression and gesture, which I should in certain cases be inclined to use when applying the word to colors."—It is easier to see this when we speak of a *deep* sorrow, a *deep* sound, a *deep* well.⁵⁷

What is easier to see, exactly? I take it that Wittgenstein means it is easier to see how different uses of the same word might relate to each other with a certain sense of aptness, yet without our being able to give a clear, non-circular explanation of their relation.⁵⁸ It is hard to say what it is that a deep sorrow and a deep well have in common without recourse to the concept of depth or some related figure of speech in the explanation. In the same way, I might notice a similarity in two faces and say, "They are similar but I don't know what it is that's similar about them."⁵⁹

Does this mean "deep sorrow" is a secondary meaning as well? Wittgenstein doesn't treat it that way in his narrow discussion of the idea, but some commentators have applied secondary meaning to such cases.⁶⁰ There are, however, in addition to the similarities I've just described, a number of differences between the sense that a sorrow can be deep and the sense that Wednesday is fat. The former is not idiosyncratic but widely shared, and even if we may not be able to offer a clear, independent explanation of why a sorrow can be deep, we will have at our disposal a whole slew of descriptions, comparisons, and examples that we may use to try to convince a skeptic of its rightness. The phrase has its place amid a whole range of related meanings, and its use is

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 136–37.

⁵⁸ On this point, see Hanfling, *Wittgenstein and the Human Form of Life*, 152–55.

⁵⁹ *Brown Book*, 136.

⁶⁰ For example, see, Hanfling, *Wittgenstein and the Human Form of Life*, 152–59; and Diamond, "Secondary Sense," in the *Realistic Spirit*, 225–42, 228–29, 241n.

supported by them. It is in this sense perhaps more like what Cavell calls a “projection,” where a word naturally extends itself to usages in a new domain.⁶¹ His main example is the way the word “feed” projects into contexts where no food is involved, “feed the meter,” “feed his pride,” etc. Like “deep sorrow,” “feed the meter” can be “assured or explained by an appeal to its ordinary language games,” whereas the “fat” of “Wednesday is fat” can only be explained by its use in its primary context (*PPF* §§274–75).

Yet there is reason to think “deep sorrow” is a different kind of projection from “feed the meter,” one that shares features with secondary meaning. I can say what “feeding the meter” and “feeding the baby” have in common without recourse to the image of feeding: in both cases I offer some material to a recipient, which takes it in and processes it and is thereby able to continue functioning. The same kind of neutral description is unavailable with “deep sorrow” and “deep well.” This seems to be because the language of “depth” is, to again use Charles Taylor’s terminology, *constitutive* of a certain aspect of the emotional domain that is being figured by the language of physical depth.⁶² Taylor draws in part in his book on Hans Julius Schneider’s reading of Wittgenstein. Schneider writes:

For a projection through which a secondary meaning is constituted, it is [. . .] typical that it creates for the first time a possible articulation: the “figurative expression” is used to open up an area of discourse that otherwise, without the projective step, would not be available.⁶³

Thus, projection from calculating on paper or out loud to “calculating in the head” opens up an “area of discourse” otherwise unavailable, as does the step from “deep well” to “deep sorrow.”

None of this will prevent the meaning-blind from using both “deep sorrow” and “deep well” as we do. Just as the aspect-blind can operate with the duck-rabbit image in various contexts as both duck and rabbit without seeing either figure *in* the composition and without, therefore, being able to switch between them as we do, the meaning-blind will use

⁶¹ Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 181.

⁶² Taylor, *Language Animal*, 165.

⁶³ Hans Julius Schneider, *Wittgenstein’s Later Theory of Meaning: Imagination and Calculation*, trans. Timothy Doyle and Daniel Smyth (West Sussex, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 86–87. Qtd. in Taylor, *Language Animal*, 165.

“deep” competently, as if it were a blueprint or a mathematical sign. But would someone who saw “deep” as merely a sign for physical depth—and did not perceive its meaning directly in its material—be able to transfer it to emotional depth? And if and when such a person did apply the word “deep” to both physical and emotional depth, what connection would she see between these two uses? It seems she would see “deep” as applying to physical and emotional depth in a way analogous to the way we see the word “bank” applying to investment banks and riverbanks. And now one wants to ask, if she does see them that way, will she really be able to use the language of emotional depth as we do?

This does not mean, of course, that we meaning-sighted users must experience the meanings of words like “deep” every time we use them, but it does suggest we must at least be capable of experiencing the meaning in words in order to understand constitutive cases. Since the connection between emotional depth and physical depth is one constituted *in* language and not otherwise available, it is hard to see how the meaning-blind will be able to understand and use the projection.⁶⁴ Once such domains are disclosed, either for the coiner of the new usage or the child learning it in a new language-game, the aesthetic features of our language can fade into the background. Meanings detach, as it were, from words. But the immanence of meaning in words seems to be part of the way meaning is able to “move” through our language.⁶⁵

This points to another closely related question we might ask of the meaning-blind: could they acquire a language?⁶⁶ Can we imagine a child acquiring language without experiencing the meaning of words, without, that is, regarding words—before they have acquired any meaning and are “just sounds” made by their parents—as communicative?⁶⁷ From Benjamin’s perspective, the experience of a word’s communicability is, at minimum, required if a child is to begin to learn to do

⁶⁴ What we call emotional depth might, of course, be available under some other figurative description, but as Taylor points out, that description would itself be constitutive. The same domain would thus “only be accessible if it were understood very differently” (*Language Animal*, 165).

⁶⁵ Zettel, §237.

⁶⁶ Mulhall makes a similar point: “The aspect-blind have no native language” (*Inheritance and Originality*, 171).

⁶⁷ Day offers an interesting Wittgensteinian account of a child learning the word for ball. He writes, “A word’s meaning begins for him necessarily as the experience of its meaning, as finding a new home in its utterance” (“Wanting to Say Something,” 212).

something with words. Before it is understood, a word must appear meaningful. It must “postulate” its meaning, as Benjamin says of the word-skeleton (*GS* 6: 15).

From a Wittgensteinian perspective, Benjamin might be accused of essentializing an inner experience that plays no role in actual language-games. Although his commitment to the notion of the inherent communicability of reality is perhaps radical, it is important to note what Benjamin is not saying here. He does not fall prey to the view that there is any intrinsic connection between the word and its use nor to the view that any *content* is conveyed by the word and extricated from the experience of it. For Benjamin, both language acquisition and secondary projections involve a kind of translation that is characteristic for him of meaning in general. When we extend the word “deep” to sorrow, we are translating or articulating an experience using language originally intended for the physical world. A similar maneuver needs to be made by children acquiring language. They must begin to connect sounds and perceptions, and thereby begin to articulate, constitute, and make available regions of their experience.⁶⁸

These similarities between words and things or between emotional and physical depth are not ones “produced by nature,” to use Benjamin’s parlance, but by human beings (*GS* 2:210 / *SW* 2:720). They are inventions of our “mimetic faculty,” our capacity to not just recognize but *produce* similarities. Such produced, “nonsensuous” similarities stand at the foundation of language for Benjamin. “It is nonsensuous similarity,” he writes, “that establishes the ties between what is said and what is meant” (*GS* 2:212 / *SW* 2:722). Benjamin is writing here about the connection between words and their meanings, but this connection is, as I’ve tried to suggest, involved in the imaginative connections Wittgenstein identifies as secondary meanings as well.

Now I think we are in a better position to identify what is wrong with asking the question whether the perception of meaning falls outside the use of language. To ask that question—to countenance the genuine possibility of meaning-blindness—is to divorce human language from experience. But as Wittgenstein’s remarks on aspect-seeing and the perception of meaning already suggest, the perception of meaning in a picture—the perception of “picture-objects”—is, in some respects,

⁶⁸ See Day, “Wanting to Say Something,” 211–12.

continuous with the experience of the meaning of words. The same kind of immediacy, the same recognition and production of similarities, can be involved. This, of course, does not mean that the experience of meaning is the meaning or the use itself. "The contents (images, for instance) which accompany and illustrate [meaning] are not meaning [. . .]" (*PPF* §280). But it doesn't follow that we could mean everything we do mean without them. A word need not encode the content that determines its use, but it needs to express something. In Benjamin's philosophy, it does not communicate its meaning or use, but simply itself.

In contrast to the immediate perception of meaning in picture-objects, there is usually no direct resemblance between the word and how it is used. Benjamin's point is, in part, that this doesn't matter. A fundamental part of a word's meaning something is its conveying or communicating that meaning through our own imaginative production of similarity. In order for this to be possible, on Benjamin's view, the word itself (independent of its symbolic meaning) must be communicative. Its aesthetic features must, in a sense more elementary than the symbolic meaning of the word, communicate something. The word "*Tisch*," whether it means "dish" or "table," means something else aside from or "underneath" either of those symbolic meanings—namely, "*—Tisch—*". If it didn't have that meaning, it couldn't have any symbolic meaning. It is this more fundamental meaning—language as such—that supports the symbolic meanings of human language that is "absorbed" into word-skeletons. In language conceived of as medium rather than means, meaning is immanent in its expression—it is communicated in, rather than by, language. By conceiving of meaning as an omnipresent constituent of reality that moves into various different media, Benjamin assures that Wittgenstein's worries about meaning conceived of as a Platonic term or reified inner experience are avoided.

Even though we come to use signs in a manner that appears simple and independent, this usage depends on a communicative structure already there. The designative structure easily erases this prior structure and presents itself, as it did to Condillac, as basic and independent, imposed on the world from without by a human subject. It can make the prior, aesthetic structure look separate, embellishing, and, at least in principle, dispensable. But when we do dispense with it—as happens in considering the possibility of private language or meaning-blindness, or in Condillac's children—we lead ourselves into confusion. Just like

“stepping between” pain and its expression with language leads to inexorable difficulties in Wittgenstein’s private language argument, so too does stepping between use and expression with language in the example of the meaning-blind.

Benjamin offers, then, a way of theorizing the immediacy of the communication of meaning on which later and more mediated linguistic structure is built. From his point of view, the apparent possibility of meaning-blindness can itself be regarded as one imposed on us by a certain attitude toward language, which divides experience from expression here, just as it divides seeing from interpreting in instances of aspect-seeing. By conceiving of experience as linguistic in his broadened sense, Benjamin provides a framework from which meaning-blindness appears a profound incapacity that would entail not just an inability to use language as most people do, but a kind of “experience-blindness.” Our experience is always already infused with meaning and requires the interpenetration of language to take the articulate form it has in human discourse. That capacity does, of course, involve designation, but designation is a withdrawal from immanent language, which functions translationally and mimetically.

Wittgenstein’s remarks seem at times—in the passages that inspire Mulhall’s interpretation, for example—to head in this direction. And Wittgenstein does suggest that the way we experience certain objects cannot be extricated from how we use them (*PI* §74, *PPF* §222). But elsewhere he seems to think the impact of meaning-blindness can be confined to certain characteristic language-games—“choosing and valuing words” (*PPF* §294), “finding the right word” (*PPF* §295), etc. For Benjamin, these are particularly perspicuous demonstrations of the kind of feeling for words that stands at the very foundation of our language. Wittgenstein’s insistence on understanding meaning in terms of use, while successful in dissuading us from certain philosophical indulgences, seems on its own unable to provide a description of the full character of human language, at least if use is understood in independence of expressivity. Benjamin’s philosophy of language offers a way forward here that, at the same time, manages to evade the reifications and essentializations that Wittgenstein so assiduously identifies throughout his late writing.

The Character of Language

IN THIS CONCLUDING CHAPTER, I want to explore some more general features of Wittgenstein's and Benjamin's approaches to language and philosophy. Methodologically, both insist, somewhat paradoxically, that while philosophy needs in some sense to return to the concrete things themselves, it need not deal with them on a strictly factual basis. Wittgenstein constructs imaginary language-games, for example, to shed light on certain aspects of our language. And Benjamin writes that the phenomena out of which constellations are constructed become something virtual in the constellation, shedding light on the origin of *Trauerspiel*, for example, without necessarily corresponding to the factual, historical development of the artform. In each case, the virtual methodology is derived from a view about the character of language and, in particular, concepts. Philosophy is tasked with remedying the damage done to our understanding by thralldom to concepts and conceptual modes of thought. Although they do not conceive of the non-conceptual—the activity or expression that outruns the concept strictly interpreted—in precisely the same terms, Wittgenstein and Benjamin both use virtual and literary means to draw philosophical attention to it.

Comparing these methods leads to questions about the character of language as a whole and its limits, or lack thereof. As I've already suggested, in Wittgenstein's later philosophy, the space formerly occupied by the limits of language is largely taken over by the idea of form of life. Where the *Tractatus* tried to draw, from within language, a limit to the expression of thoughts, the *Investigations* tries to show where logical justification of discursive practices, so to speak, runs out. At these

boundaries we get a glimpse of our form of life, those aspects of our linguistic practices that are incapable of being rationally grounded, that are always before us, and that must be accepted. Although form of life certainly doesn't reach the point of ontology as language as such and Hamann's concept of condescension do, these ideas share a great deal with one another: in the epistemological limitations they imply, the kinds of holism they underwrite, and the peculiar philosophical methodologies they, in part, determine. I conclude the chapter with a consideration of some of the ethical implications of Benjamin's and Wittgenstein's critiques of externalized language.

1. Virtual Philosophy

In Chapter 8, I framed Wittgenstein's and Benjamin's approaches to language as centered around a kind of exile from meaning and an attempt to return us to the inside of language. Both these attempts turn on the relationship between philosophical writing and concepts, and in both the question of method and presentation comes to the fore, in part since what is at issue here is the inadequately attended to shift of everyday language into a philosophical register. For both, the response is the cultivation of a particular way of seeing (*Anschaungsweise*), which can resist the pull of rigid, unreflective conceptual thought. This way of seeing also involves particular kinds of holism for both Wittgenstein and Benjamin, since concepts reify and divide our experience.

Benjamin's holism, as I detailed in Chapter 3, involves a historical dimension that is crucial to the philosopher's construction of constellations. Wittgenstein's holism in the *Investigations*, by contrast, has a temporal but not a historical element. That is, Wittgenstein is deeply concerned with a developmental account of language use, not in the interest of establishing the facts of language-learning or the historical development of language, but only in order to provide, to the extent possible, a perspicuous or surveyable representation (*übersichtlichen Darstellung*) of the facts. He is interested, in other words, in getting us to see linguistic phenomena in light of that fact *that* our use of language and concepts has a history and not necessarily in establishing the details of *how* they developed. Thus, as we saw, he frequently takes inspiration from speculations of Mauthner's about historical linguistic

change and puts them in a virtual form. Mauthner's notion that prehistoric language consisted of one-word commands, for example, becomes, in Wittgenstein, the "block-slab" language-game of §2.¹

In the course of criticizing James George Frazer's conception of the development of science out of religion, Wittgenstein writes, in an earlier version of the comment on surveyable representation that appears at §122 of the *Investigations*:

[. . .] This surveyable representation conveys the understanding which consists precisely in the fact that we "see the connections." Hence the importance of finding *connecting links*.

But a hypothetical connecting link should in this case do nothing but guide attention to the similarity, the connection of the *facts*. As one might illustrate an internal relation of a circle to an ellipse by gradually converting an ellipse into a circle; *but not in order to maintain that a certain ellipse actually, historically originated from a circle* (development hypothesis), but only to sharpen our eye for a formal connection.

But I can also see the development hypothesis as nothing more than the clothing of a formal connection.²

Seeing connections is central to seeing things aright. This means not being in thrall to the apparent conceptual fixity we encounter when we move from the everyday to the metaphysical but instead seeing the wide array of similarities between uses of certain words. Attaining this point of view does not require the establishment of any actual historical background but only a background against which our way of seeing will change and which can subsequently, like the Tractarian ladder, be discarded. The idea that the ellipse came from a circle need not be true to help us see a particular element of the circle that might have otherwise eluded us.

Wittgenstein thus offers a peculiar kind of natural history—peculiar, like the picture theory, in its virtuality. One of the tensions in the *Tractatus* that is worked out in the later Wittgenstein is that between the virtual character of his philosophical task and the rigidity of philosophical theorizing, which led him in the earlier work to see linguistic phenomena primarily from the perspective of saying. Produced by the wrongly postulated primacy of saying, in other words, was a tension

¹The notion of "diurnalization" that Cavell applies to Spengler's narrative of decline thus might also be extended to Wittgenstein's relationship to Mauthner.

²*Philosophical Occasions*, 133. Italics in original.

between, on the one hand, the idea that all we are trying to do in philosophy is see the phenomena aright, and, on the other, that there is *only one* way—a virtual and discardable theory—that can give us that perspective. In the *Tractatus*, something like a theory of the structural relationship between language and world was developed not in order to *say* that that's the way things actually are, but to show—to allow us to see—language in the right light. (For just this reason, the book might require a reader “who has himself already had the thoughts that are expressed in it”—the reader has to be willing to be guided, to already have a sense of where the book will lead.)

In the *Investigations*, this method is replaced by one according to which “the same points [. . .] are continually touched on anew from different directions and new pictures always sketched” (*PI*, “Preface,” 3). The primacy of saying assumed in the *Tractatus* required a virtual theory that attempted to show what could not be said, the structure of language. Once that primacy is given up, Wittgenstein's virtual methodology is unchained from the strictures of philosophical theorizing employed in the *Tractatus* and free to take on the flexibility and continual renewal characteristic of the later writings. But in both books, philosophy is conceived of not in terms of the facticity of its claims but in terms of the view of the whole, the overview, it is able to provide, or at least point toward.

In the *Philosophy of Psychology*, Wittgenstein describes his later methodology in terms of the formation of concepts:

If concept formation can be explained by facts of nature, shouldn't we be interested, not in grammar, but rather in what is its basis in nature?—We are, indeed, also interested in the correspondence between concepts and very general facts of nature. (Such facts as mostly do not strike us because of their generality.) But our interest is not thereby thrown back on to these possible causes of concept formation; we are not doing natural science; nor yet natural history since we can also invent fictitious natural history for our purposes. (*PI* §365)

Wittgenstein is interested only in getting the phenomena into view, and this can be done, indeed must be done, from a variety of viewpoints of which natural history—real or imagined—is but one. We do not need a factual genetic account of a particular concept to see how it functions in a particular language-game. We need only to be pried away from the

self-interpretation the concept presents to us, to see it as something formed and something that could have been formed differently.

There are similarities between Wittgenstein's conception of the role of a development hypothesis and Benjamin's method in "On Language as Such" and the *Trauerspiel* book. In the former, Benjamin uses the Genesis narrative not in order to substantiate its factual content but to give us the right picture of a relationship between the communicability inhering in reality and human language. In the latter, he sanctions (albeit in modified form) Hegel's own purported disdain for the actual facts in constructing a philosophical theory and insists on the virtual character of the real phenomena once they are made to play a role in the philosopher's constellation. For Benjamin, these phenomena are loosened from the everyday conceptual interpretations that hold sway over them and made to serve as extreme points in the constellation that defines an idea. This methodology extends to the *Arcades Project*, where Benjamin uses a strikingly Wittgensteinian formulation to describe his method: "Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't *say* anything. Merely show" (*GS* 5:574).

We can see in Wittgenstein and Benjamin, then, two unique philosophical methodologies designed to make up for and provide alternatives to philosophical thinking that reifies concepts and looks at language from a falsely externalized perspective. Both approaches see the primary obstacle to clear philosophical vision as a drive to give formal definitions of general terms—concepts. Both propose to resolve this problem by way of returning our attention in some sense to the phenomena themselves.³ And both counterintuitively construe this return to the things themselves as, at the same time, something virtual. To see why,

³ Goethe's influence on both Wittgenstein's and Benjamin's emphasis on attention to the phenomena is important. See Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin*, 52–59 for a discussion Goethe and Benjamin. Goethe was also acquainted with, and influenced by, Hamann. Of Hamann's emphasis on what Benjamin calls *Lehre*, Goethe writes (in a remark quoted in part above):

The principle to which every remark of Hamann's can be reduced, is this: "Everything which the human being undertakes, whether produced by word or deed or something else, must arise from its total united powers; anything isolated is reprehensible." A magnificent maxim! But difficult to follow. It might perhaps be true of life and art; but in every transmission in words that is not simply poetic, there is a great difficulty: for the word must become detached, it must isolate itself, to say or to mean something. The human being in which it speaks must for the moment be one-sided.

it is necessary to home in further on their respective understandings of concepts.

2. Putting Language to Use

Wittgenstein is reticent to give any definite account of concepts; still he conceives of them, like Benjamin, in broadly Nietzschean terms.⁴ A “craving for generality” can lead us to assume that general terms designate a feature or set of features to which all specific phenomena that fall under the term conform. We tend to think of the concept “leaf”—an example Wittgenstein borrows from Nietzsche, or possibly Mauthner—as a Platonic model to which the individual leaves conform to a greater or lesser degree (*PI* §74).⁵ But Wittgenstein points out that what we are thinking of here is actually just another linguistic practice—using a sample—and does not tell us anything essential common to all uses of the term. In keeping with the strategy of asking us to reimagine our conceptions of inner processes as external objects, Wittgenstein asks us to imagine a real model or schema for the leaf, a kind of rule for the concept leaf. There will, he says, be nothing necessary about the model of the “perfect” leaf being used in this way—as a sample. Moreover, using it in that way will involve seeing it in a particular way.

As a matter of experience, someone who *sees* the leaf in a particular way will then use it in such-and-such a way or according to such-and-such rules. Of course, there is such a thing as seeing in *this* way or *that*; and there are also cases where whoever sees a sample like *this* will in general use it in this way, and whoever sees it otherwise in another way. (*PI* §74)

Dichtung und Wahrheit, in *Sämtliche Werke nach Epochen seines Schaffens, Münchener Ausgabe*, ed. Gerhard Sauder (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1985–1991) 21 vols., vol. 16, 549. Qtd. in Gwen Griffith Dickson, *Johann Georg Hamann's Relational Metacriticism* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1995), 320.

⁴ See Sluga, “Family Resemblance” *Grazer Philosophische Studien*, 71 (2006), 1–21, 9–14.

⁵ Sluga suggests that Wittgenstein borrows the example of the leaf directly from Nietzsche’s “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense” (“Family Resemblance,” 9). It is also possible that it came to him indirectly through Mauthner, who uses Nietzsche’s example in the *Beiträge*. See, for example, *B* 1:112 and 1:536. Mauthner writes, “There are no identical trees, there are no identical leaves from which the concepts or words ‘tree,’ ‘leaf’ could be residually taken (abstracted)” (*B* 1:536). Mauthner likely borrowed the example from Nietzsche.

There is nothing essential in the model that forces it to be used in a particular way, and there is nothing essential in the word that determines its application to the realm of phenomena. Wittgenstein, importantly, uses sight and use here to bring the concept down from its metaphysical sense to an everyday use. To see objects and words in terms of how they are perceived and employed is to see their edges blurred and the essentialism of a Fregean or Platonic understanding of concepts as inadequate to the phenomena (*PI* §71).

Instead of the rigid, conventional understanding of concepts, Wittgenstein proposes that we understand the uses of terms as “families,” whose instances relate to each other via various kinds of similarities, resemblances, or affinities (*Verwandtschaften*) “overlapping and criss-crossing” (*PI* §66). Sluga clarifies that, for Wittgenstein, not all terms must be understood in terms of family resemblance.⁶ A specialized term may, for example, have only one use. As Sluga writes, the point is rather that “consideration of family resemblance terms might alert us to the wider fact that all general terms are analogical structures.”⁷ That is—as Hamann, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and Mauthner all pointed out—concepts grow out of metaphors or analogies and shift in their semantic content and application by way of analogy.

Sluga finds that an explicit commitment to this latter view of the analogical character of concepts fades away by the period of the *Investigations*. But there remains, as I argued above, a commitment to a semantic field characterized by continuities, affinities, and analogies. The apparent fixity of concepts and the use to which are put in philosophy draws our attention away from this field, and Wittgenstein’s construal of concepts as families draws us back to it.

Adorno, influenced heavily by Benjamin’s philosophy of language, called the former kind of philosophizing “identity thinking.” Concepts are taken to completely identify or determine the character of their objects. Wittgenstein’s goal, to put in Benjaminian terms, is to lift us back into a higher linguistic air that helps us begin to see the specificity with which we use language and its resistance to generality and to the assumption of fixed meaning or extension. He pulls us back from the metaphysical to the everyday so that we can see differences and particularities that are sometimes occluded by our own language. Wittgenstein’s

⁶ Sluga, “Family Resemblance,” 13.

⁷ Ibid.

philosophical method itself involves criss-crossing a wide field and seeing or creating connections between similar uses of the same term instead of identities, where individuals are overwhelmed by concepts. In his invented language-games, he imaginatively varies or constrains linguistic practices in order to destabilize concepts that have taken on overly fixed meaning in philosophical discourse. Wittgenstein is thus, like Benjamin and Adorno, using language or concepts against concepts by resisting the identity they tend to impose on the individual.

One crucial difference is that pointing out differences, contingencies, and unseen affinities is largely enough for Wittgenstein. He is satisfied when his method has enabled us to see the interweaving relations between different uses of a term, and we have given up on the identity-thinking characteristic of philosophy. This is because he largely conceives of the terrain over which the philosopher criss-crosses in practical terms. Family resemblances originate in various uses of terms that are extended in this or that direction for this or that reason and fundamentally open-ended; nothing governs their future extension or limitation. What emerges is a world very different from that of the *Tractatus*. Instead of a totality of facts, each with a discrete and identifiable structure, we see a world of particular kinds of practices, relating to one another in diverse and manifold ways, requiring an infinite degree of articulacy to describe in full, and not admitting of any kind of perfect or fixed determinations through language. Wittgenstein thus tries to show that concepts are not what they seem, that the fixed character they take on in logic is a kind of fiction growing out of language on vacation, language that has come to rest and reflects on itself.

The *Investigations* set language back to work so that meaning can appear as the fluid medium that it is. To see this, we must constantly be wary of focusing too closely on one domain of our language, constantly be prepared to remember or imagine new uses, and then to look back at the original domain analogically, from the perspective of the new one—to “change our way of seeing.” This way of seeing can be effected just as well, if not better, by the kind of virtual philosophizing Wittgenstein engages in because it is not a view into how meaning *has* “moved” historically, but the *way* it always moves. Wittgenstein’s methodology is thus matched to a particular conception of language—even if it is one he is reticent to describe in theoretical terms. Meaning is composed of interweaving affinities derived from various analogies, extensions, repurpos-

ings, and so forth, and philosophy therefore requires the same kind of agility, imagination, and memory to bring it to light.

The domain of particularity that is lit up in Wittgenstein is similar to that of pure language that Benjamin finds illuminated by translation—again with the crucial difference that for Benjamin this sphere is conceived more in aesthetic than practical terms. This means Benjamin's and Wittgenstein's respective understandings of the non-conceptual differ substantially—despite the broad similarities in the way they view concepts. For Wittgenstein, the return to the everyday or to “culture” from the metaphysics of “civilization,” which takes concepts too literally, is comprised by a return to the activity in which language-games have their foundation. Once we have recognized this, there remains nothing more to do but guard against misunderstanding where it crops up—to return us to culture from the civilization to which we tend to revert.

Rather than simply drawing us away from the false ideality arising from concepts, Benjamin constructs new non-conceptual idealities. His methodology in the “Epistemo-Critical Foreword” is, like Wittgenstein's, an attempt to combat the leveling-down of phenomena by conceptual thought. Also like Wittgenstein's, it is recollective and holistic. But its form of redemption is, as we saw in Chapter 3, much more complicated, ambitious, and more strongly historical. Whereas Wittgenstein's philosophical practice ends once we are drawn back to the realm of the everyday, Benjamin's is much less concerned with the project of therapeutic liberation and claims for itself the possibility of another kind of “inductive” truth. For Benjamin, this way of seeing language enables us also to see historical phenomena differently and more “originally” than the manner in which they appear under conventional, rigidified conceptual interpretation. The broadened semantic field that Wittgenstein characterizes by resemblances, overlappings, and criss-crossings, Benjamin sees as an opportunity to build new connections.

He finds expressive meaning embedded in the artifacts and writing of the past in such a way that it can change with the passage of time. As expressive phenomena age, their obvious conceptual self-interpretations fade away, and they can be looked upon as ruins and made available for the philosopher's interpretation and presentation. This project requires, at the same time, resistance to the tendency to project the current conceptual field back on to the past. Part of the faith in progress that both

Benjamin and Wittgenstein disparage is to interpret the past as a linear projection leading to the present. But if we understand history and language as fragments of a totality in the way Benjamin does—if we take up the allegorical way of seeing—these artifacts have neither the meaning they had in the intention of the person who produced them, nor that projected onto them by our own present conceptual biases. Their significance depends instead on what is original in them—an aesthetic expressivity that is cut off by their subsumption under concepts. The philosophical vision that sees non-conceptually and uncovers the extremes in phenomena is then in a position to see connections that were unavailable before. These connections are a product of the kind of insight that conceptual thought forestalls. Where Wittgenstein's method offers liberation and respite from the false rigidity of conceptual thought, Benjamin's promises truth.

3. "What Has to Be Accepted"

Despite his confidence in the philosopher's ability to pursue a certain kind of truth, Benjamin, along with Wittgenstein, thinks that conventional philosophy radically overestimates the capacities of language and philosophical reasoning to understand reality. This epistemological humility finds expression in both of their philosophies in structures that bound philosophical investigation in such a way that resists what Wittgenstein calls in *On Certainty* "ratiocination [*raisonnement*]."⁸ Benjamin places this structure at the beginning of his theory of language, calling it language as such, "an ultimate reality, perceptible only in its manifestation, inexplicable and mystical." For Wittgenstein, by contrast, this structure, form of life, is evoked, as we've already seen, when he find ratiocination running up against its limits. Both argue that these structures must be taken as given, not simply because we happen to be incapable of transcending them but because they don't admit of transcendence. Their explorations of language and the limits of philosophical explanation modeled on scientific explanation produce, in both Wittgenstein and Benjamin, conceptions of the task of philosophy

⁸ *On Certainty / Über Gewißheit* ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. Wright, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), §475.

that place it, in many respects, closer to art criticism than science. But their respective characterizations of this boundary and the limitations it imposes on human reasoning are, again, colored by their distinctive approaches to meaning—aesthetic and practical.

Despite the amount of interest garnered by the idea of *Lebensform* in Wittgenstein, he employs the concept relatively rarely in the *Investigations*. At §19, after asking us to imagine a language consisting only of “orders and reports in battle,” he writes, “To imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.” Of course, our own form of life is not as open to view as that of the severely restricted language of §19. Whereas we have an overview of this imaginary language, our own language (human language conceived of as a whole) is “deficient in surveyability [*Übersichtlichkeit*].” The concept of form of life is thus closely connected to the idea of an overview (*Übersicht*), which he takes to be “of fundamental significance for us,” and for philosophical inquiry in general. Since we can never gain a perspicuous overview of our own language as whole—which is our form of life—Wittgenstein takes a large part of his own project to be that of “finding and inventing *intermediate* links [*Zwischengliedern*].” (*PI* §122). These include both imaginary language-games like that of §19, which give us an overview of a fragment of our own language or of an imaginary language comparable to our own, as well as analogies between different parts of our language, which allow us to see connections between diffuse language-games. We imagine, for example, boxes with beetles present or absent in order to disabuse ourselves of the notion of pain or sensation as an inner object (*PI* §293). Form of life is thus primarily used by Wittgenstein to mark a limit. We can have a complete overview of forms of life that we have imagined or invented ourselves and given strict limitations, but we cannot see our own language or form of life from outside in this way.

As I’ve already discussed in the context of the private language argument, Wittgenstein also uses the phrase “form of life” when we approach this limit, as it were, from within.⁹ In the course of his remarks on rule-following, Wittgenstein writes that at a certain point reasons for why we follow a certain rule run out, and we reach a region of agreement that cannot be justified with an interpretation and cannot be discarded without changing the character of the entire practice. We follow

⁹See Chapter 7, section 2.

the rule blindly. It is not the product of an interpretation but of an education in a practice and whole slew of closely related practices. Our following a rule is simply the product of how the situation occurs to us, but, looking back on the practice, we have an impulse to offer a rational justification. This creates an interpretation separate from the action and construes the action as the application of an interpretation, but “there is a way of grasping the rule which is *not* an interpretation” (*PI* §201). “‘Following a rule’ is a practice” (*PI* §202). The pursuit of justifications eventually runs out, and we find ourselves confronted with an element of our form of life.

Form of life is, then, as Wittgenstein puts it elsewhere, “what has to be accepted, the given” (*PPF* §345). Examples where instruction in a language-game is *not* successfully carried out—as when no explanation seems able to help the pupil see how to go on—show what this kind of agreement does and does not involve. Wittgenstein asks us to imagine instruction in the series of natural numbers. If we are unable to get the pupil to accurately and consistently replicate the series of natural numbers, Wittgenstein writes, “Our pupil’s ability to learn may come to an end” (*PI* §143). We may simply come to an impasse: the pupil may fail to carry out the actions required to continue or complete the instruction. These moments importantly demonstrate the lack of a rational basis for inaugurating the pupil into the system.

This may be obvious, but, as with all examples of language-learning that Wittgenstein marshals, it serves as a reminder to dissuade us from the idea, which occurs naturally to us outside the context of language-learning, to assume there is some such basis. Of the example, Wittgenstein writes, “The *possibility of communication* will depend on his going on to write it down by himself” (*PI* §143). The translation “communication” for *Verständigung* here, though not incorrect, can obscure the peculiarity of Wittgenstein’s claim here (and the reason he uses italics). “Understanding,” or “mutual understanding,” or even “coming to understanding,” might be better, since what Wittgenstein means, in opposition to our usual use of the words, is that the criterion for determining that the pupil has understood—which we might be given to thinking of as an inner process (in this case the grasping of a rule)—is actually his carrying out a subsequent move in the language-game.

Wittgenstein’s comment thus anticipates the famous one made at §242: “It is not only agreement in definitions, but also (odd as it may

sound) agreement in judgments that is required for communication [*Verständigung*] by means of language.”¹⁰ What we are witnessing, then, in the example of the instruction of the pupil in the series of the natural numbers, is the establishment of such an agreement in judgments that is a condition for the possibility of communication or the mutual understanding that serves as the indispensable foundation for a form of life. When the pupil succeeds, in other words, in copying down the sequence, he or she has not, strictly speaking, “grasped” a concept but been inaugurated into something.

This is connected to the very different understanding of the “limits of language,” discussed in Chapter 7, that Wittgenstein has developed by the time of the *Investigations*. Language is not limited because it runs up against and tries to transcend its essential capacity to state facts about the world; rather, language-games are limited insofar as they depend on the establishment of basic rules for which no deeper justification can be provided and obedience to which is required for the game to function at all.

The example is also importantly connected to the two aspects of understanding discussed above (*PI* §532). The kinds of appeals one can make here to the recalcitrant pupil are very different from the reasoned explanation involved in replacing one set of words or one interpretation with another. They are closer to the kinds of appeals one makes to aid someone in coming to understand what is going on in a picture or to appreciate some aspect of a poem. German has a word for this kind of instruction that nicely captures the activity involved: *beibringen*, which means “teach” in the sense of teaching *how*, that is, *bringing* someone to knowledge of something. Wittgenstein uses the verb to refer both to the impossibility of teaching a dog to simulate pain (*PI* §250) and instruction that helps someone to recognize an aspect in a picture (*PPF* §218). Such instruction might involve pointing to a particular aspect of a given situation or picture, imitation, analogy, or simply repeating oneself, perhaps with a particular emphasis or intonation. When I bring someone to the understanding of a particular practice, I establish an element of a shared form of life. This instruction will *not* involve reasoned argument or a rational interpretation of a foundation lying “behind” a given situa-

¹⁰It also anticipates, in slightly different respects, the comment made at *PPF* §223 and discussed above to the effect that behavior or action must in certain cases be the “logical condition of someone’s having such-and-such an experience.”

tion or picture, and the philosopher will not be able to come along later and successfully establish such a foundation.

Importantly, it is also this kind of instruction that Wittgenstein invokes to describe his own philosophical project. The appeals one makes at points such as these are, then, very closely connected to what Wittgenstein takes himself to be doing throughout the *Investigations*. However, whereas the instruction described above brings someone into a language-game, Wittgenstein's remarks are meant to show us—on the other end, as it were—where the limits of the language-game lie. That is, they seek to remind us that we were brought into the language-game in the first place, and that our attempts to see it from outside are actually just the misapplication of other language-games that we extend outside their native sphere. Wittgenstein, for example, offers the following methodological comment on his claim that the “pupil's ability to learn *can* come to an end.” After having his interlocutor ask why this possibility is being offered, Wittgenstein responds in his own voice:

I wanted to put this picture before his eyes, and his acknowledgement of this picture consists in his now being inclined to regard a given case differently: that is, to compare it with *this* sequence of pictures. I have changed *his way of looking at things* [*Anschauungsweise*]. (Indian mathematicians: “Look at this!”) (*PI* §144).

Wittgenstein, interestingly, describes what he can accomplish here in terms of a shift in aspect, a change in our way of looking at things where what is “seen” doesn't change, but our attitude toward it does and so, consequently, does what we do with what we see. Just as placing the duck-rabbit with pictures of rabbits will incline us to see the duck-rabbit as a rabbit, picturing Wittgenstein's recalcitrant pupil allows us to see the process of learning in a different way—that is, as initiation rather than explanation. Wittgenstein relates this kind of explanation, which helps us to see a given phenomenon “aright,” to “Indian mathematicians,” who offer in lieu of a logical proof, “a geometrical figure accompanied by the words ‘Look at this!’” “This looking too,” Wittgenstein writes in his notebooks, “effects an alteration in one's way of seeing [*Anschauungsweise*].”¹¹ This, then, is Wittgenstein's way of drawing a limit

¹¹ Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, §461. Of the source of this method of proof, Wittgenstein writes only that he “once read” about it “somewhere.” It is possible he is referring to twelfth-

to the language-game, offering a picture whose significance does not consist in its reality or even possibility, but in the light it sheds on the acquisition of the language-game. The example of the pupil who cannot learn, in other words, allows us to see another aspect of the normal case, namely the fact that its success is in no way necessary or forced upon the pupil by some kind of logical necessity, but depends rather on an act—writing down the sequence in order—that could, quite easily, not be taken.

This shift in our “way of seeing” that Wittgenstein wants to effect is closely connected, I’d like to suggest, with aspect-seeing in the sense in which Wittgenstein develops it in the *Philosophy of Psychology*. The German word *Anschauung* mirrors a polysemy in the English “view”: it can refer to both an opinion and a sight. A similar ambiguity is captured in Wittgenstein’s conception of seeing-as: thinking and seeing are extricated from one another at the cost of seeing the phenomenon aright. Just as certain kinds of explanation (like “look, there are the ears”) can get us to see the rabbit, where we might have only seen the duck, Wittgenstein’s difficult pupil can get us to see the ground of the success of instruction, its dependence on an act of mimicry. We, of course, also notice when we see the duck in the duck-rabbit, where we might not have before, that the figure supports both these ways of seeing and that nothing about the figure in itself forces one interpretation or another. Likewise, Wittgenstein’s discussion of the instruction in the natural numbers seeks to reveal that the language-game is not grounded in the way complete immersion in it might suggest. That is, it is not grounded in the game’s intrinsic logical necessity. Once we see the possibility of instruction not taking hold, we also see the contingency or the elements of “form of life” that do make instruction in the normal case successful.

At these limits, our language-games require what I’ve been calling aesthetic and not logical understanding. Philosophical description and “explanation” of language-games—grammatical investigation, as Wittgenstein calls it—will involve the same kind of explanation or understanding that these aesthetic cases do. The same way we use gestures, analogies, or examples to bring someone to the understanding of a musical theme or an ambiguous figure, we will use them, on Wittgen-

century Indian mathematician Bhaskara. See Florian Cajori, *A History of Elementary Mathematics* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 123.

stein's model, to demonstrate the limits of language-games and to show the points, so to speak, at which people are brought into language-games. Whereas in the former case, however, the evidence that someone has understood will lie in their using particular words in particular ways, the evidence that they have understood Wittgenstein's philosophical remarks will lie in our not engaging in particular kinds of philosophical speculation, in "leaving everything as it is" (*PI* §124). Wittgenstein's remarks give us an overview of our use of language so that we will not be tempted to investigate what we believe to be a hidden structure beneath language (*PI* §92).

Whereas Benjamin's prioritizing of aesthetic meaning over logical meaning has to do with aesthetic communicability of language, including non-human language, Wittgenstein has no equivalent concept. For Wittgenstein, what has priority here is action. Once "I have exhausted the justifications [. . .] and my spade is turned [. . .] I am included to say, 'This is simply what I *do*.'" (*PI* §217, my italics). The aesthetic mode of explanation in the *Investigations* serves to allow us to see that priority, but it does not indicate, as in Benjamin, that this priority is itself aesthetic.

Language-games, like that of counting the natural numbers, depend on one or both parties carrying out a particular action—going on in the appropriate way. Aesthetic explanation is what we resort to describe the limits or contours of a language-game, to initiate someone into them, or even to get the game back on track when a breakdown has occurred. It is not an explanation of the basis for the language-game but a description of it, or instruction on how to enter it. The use of language in practical activity establishes the meaning of the words in practice, and it is only secondarily that they come to be associated with their meanings and with inner objects in the way that leads to philosophical confusion. Aesthetic description thus can provide a guide for use in our initiation into language-games, or a picture of use in philosophical grammar, but the use of language itself is not conceived of as fundamentally expressive or aesthetic the way it is in Benjamin.

Form of life is thus a practical concept. What has to be accepted is a particular way in which things are done that defines either a particular practice or, in broader examples, the human form of life in general. With language as such, Benjamin places the word before the deed. The analysis of meaning, for him, terminates in communicability as such, rather than in action. This means, as we've seen, that philosophy can hope for far

more than simply drawing attention to the practical aspects of our form of life that must be accepted; it can instead try to present the truth with the kind of immanent ideality Benjamin outlines in the “Epistemo-Critical Foreword.” Moreover, unlike form of life, which serves as a kind of ending point for Wittgenstein, language as such is a starting point for Benjamin. It is something that has to be accepted from the beginning, Benjamin thinks, if we are to understand the relationship between human language and reality, rather than a concept evoked when our attempts to give reasons for the character of a particular linguistic practice run out.

Despite these serious differences, these boundaries result in a similar characterization of immanence of the domain of language. Our language is not something that we can either get outside of or beneath. Both Benjamin and Wittgenstein—despite the fact that neither practiced religion—are given to characterizing this immanence in theological terms.

4. The “Religious Point of View”

As I argued in Chapter 1, Benjamin’s view that the word, or language in the broad sense—language as such—is given is indebted to Hamann’s understanding of divine condescension. Furthermore, as I suggested in Chapter 4, Hamann’s argument with Mendelssohn over the significance of religion and faith, along with the closely related *Pantheismusstreit*, influences Benjamin’s conception of the task of philosophy, especially its ineliminable historical aspect. Like Hamann, Benjamin characterizes philosophy’s historical boundedness in terms of religion. Philosophy requires the concept of a unity of experience that is provided by religion—*Lehre* or doctrine—in order to begin its essayistic investigation of historical phenomena. A large part of what Hamann and Benjamin object to in Kant (and in Mendelssohn) is the refusal of this historical project by way of the elimination from philosophy of any trace of religious or theological reasoning, specifically an inherited concept of the whole that both Hamann and Benjamin think is indispensable.

Wittgenstein’s late philosophical outlook relies on a similar conception of unity. Wittgenstein, in fact, mentions Hamann’s conception of God and his relationship with Mendelssohn in his notebooks of 1931,

when he was first contemplating the book that would become the *Investigations*.¹² On Hamann's conception of God, Wittgenstein remarks, "Hamann sees God as a part of nature and at the same time as nature, and is not with this the religious paradox expressed: how can nature be a part of nature?"¹³ Wittgenstein refers here to Hamann's notion of condescension and the kenotic character of Christ, his being part of nature (a man) and all of nature (God). This dual nature is summed up in the title of Hamann's essay against Mendelssohn, "Golgotha and Sheblimini." Golgotha (or Calvary) refers to the place where Christ was crucified and thus emphasizes his human character and renunciation of the divine, while *sheblimini*, the Hebrew for "sit thou at my right hand," refers to Psalms 110:1 and Hebrews 1:13, where Jesus's divine place is affirmed.

Following the remark on Hamann's conception of God, Wittgenstein adds, "It is noteworthy: Moses Mendelssohn appears in his letters to Hamann already like a journalist." This is a difficult remark to understand. James C. Klagge and Alfred Nordmann suggest that Wittgenstein may be referring to Mendelssohn's letters on literature, in which he comments on the works of Hamann. Mendelssohn wrote a letter attempting to persuade Hamann to contribute to the journal in which these letters were published.¹⁴ More broadly, we can assume at least a marginal concern on the part of Wittgenstein with the relationship between Mendelssohn and Hamann, and likely also with their disagreements over natural religion and the relationship between faith and reason, which would reach their climax in Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* and Hamann's response, *Golgotha and Sheblimini*.

This debate was complex, but a brief summary will suffice in showing its relevance to Wittgenstein's concerns.¹⁵ Mendelssohn defended reli-

¹² See also Monk, *The Duty of Genius*, 309ff.

¹³ *Public and Private Occasions*, 74–75. I am indebted to Hans Sluga for pointing out this passage to me. Compare with TLP 6.432: "How the world is, is completely indifferent for what is higher. God does not reveal himself in the world."

¹⁴ See Wolfgang-Dieter Baur, *Johann Georg Hamann als Publizist: zum Verhältnis von Verkündigung* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991), 12ff.; Karlfried Gründer, "Hamann und Mendelssohn," *Religionskritik und Religiosität in der deutschen Aufklärung*, ed. Karlfried Gründer and Karl Heinrich Rengstorff (Halle: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 2007), 113–45, 114ff; and Arthur Henkel, "Briefstrategien: Hamann and Mendelssohn, 1762," in *Zwischen den Wissenschaften*, ed. Gerhard Hahn and Ernst Weber (Regensburg, Germany: Verlag Friedrich Pustet), 236–57.

¹⁵ For extended discussion of this debate see Part 3 of Robert Alan Sparling's *Johann Georg Hamann and the Enlightenment Project* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 105–

gious tolerance and a separation of church and state in his *Jerusalem*. There he argued in defense of the liberal state with natural rights, including the right to the free practice of religion. Mendelssohn distinguishes, in all religions, between the elements consistent with the rational, natural religion whose universal principles are common to all human beings and religions, and the “revealed” elements that are unique to the particular religion. In Judaism the revealed elements are confined to custom or law. The substantive truths it puts forward therefore do not go beyond those discoverable by reason, the truth of natural religion, whereas revelation in Christianity does include such substantive truths. Judaism, thus, far from being inconsistent with the modern civil society as had been charged, lends itself especially well to a modern state in which the civil order is based on universal, rationally grounded principles but leaves open a pluralistic space for personal and customary religious practice that does not interfere with a state granted certain coercive powers over its citizens by the social contract.

In *Golgotha and Sheblimini*, Hamann, driven in part by anti-Semitism despite a previously warm relationship with Mendelssohn, argues vehemently against Mendelssohn’s conceptions of both natural right and natural religion.¹⁶ In the following passage he attacks an account of actions and convictions that Mendelssohn gives in the course of separating the domains of church and state, or ethical and political life. Hamann begins by rehearsing part of Mendelssohn’s book: the first two sentences are near direct quotations.

Actions and convictions belong to the true fulfillment of our duties and to the perfection of man. State and church have both as their object. Consequently, actions without convictions and convictions without actions are a cleaving of complete and living duties into two dead halves. When grounds for action may no longer be grounds of truth, and grounds of truth are no longer suited to grounds of action; when being [*Wesen*] depends on necessary understanding, and reality on contingent will, then all the divine and human unity in convictions and actions comes to an end. The state becomes a body without spirit and life—carrion for eagles! The church becomes a ghost, without flesh and

58; and Ze’ev Levy, “Johann Georg Hamann’s Concept of Judaism and Controversy with Mendelssohn’s ‘Jerusalem,’” *The Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 29:1 (1984), 295–329.

¹⁶ See Levy, “Hamann’s Concept of Judaism,” 301–02; and Sparling, *Hamann and the Enlightenment Project*, 153–56.

bone—a scarecrow for sparrows! Reason, with its immutable coherence of ideas which either presuppose or exclude one another, stands still, like the sun and the moon upon Gibeon and in the valley of Ajalon. (HSW 3:303 / WP 179)

After presenting Mendelssohn's position, Hamann argues that in Mendelssohn's version of the separation of church and state, the unity of action and conviction in humankind is cleaved. We can now be compelled to act against our convictions by the state, and our religious beliefs may play no role in how we conduct ourselves. This means we are left with the empty authority of the state, on the one hand, which pretends to be rationally based, but in reality, lacking a foundation in a living tradition, is bent to the will of a sovereign or ruling class.¹⁷ On the other, the church becomes the mere domain of individual belief and no longer has any bearing on conduct. At best it provides a dead image, and often a negative one, to guide our behavior—a scarecrow. Mendelssohn's faith in reason insists on seeing both church and state in independence of history and tradition. In justifying them in terms of their role in bringing society to rational order it thereby robs them of their living being.¹⁸

As has already been suggested, we can read Wittgenstein's insistence on bringing language from its metaphysical to its everyday use against the background of counter-Enlightenment German thought as a "diurnalization" of it. But why, again, is Mendelssohn accused by Wittgenstein of sounding "already like a journalist"? Wittgenstein is likely using the term "journalist" in Karl Kraus's pejorative sense.¹⁹ Kraus associated journalism with the linguistic decay of his time, beginning in the

¹⁷ Hamann has in mind here, in particular, the Frederick the Great's "enlightened" absolutism, which he accused both Mendelssohn and Kant of supporting.

¹⁸ Hegel considered *Golgotha and Sheblimini* Hamann's most important work, and the passage quoted has an evident influence on the *Phenomenology's* discussion of Observing Reason, which reduces reality to dead matter. The passage also includes what appears to be a reference to *Antigone* ("carrion for eagles") and its own treatment of the conflict between religion and the state. These aspects of the tragedy also famously concern Hegel in the *Phenomenology*. See *Hegel on Hamann*, trans. Lisa Marie Anderson (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2008).

¹⁹ Wittgenstein also uses "journalist" pejoratively in a letter to Malcolm discussed below and in text he considered including in the preface to the *Investigations*. "It is not without a reluctance that I offer the book to the public. The hands into which it will fall are for the most part not those in which I like to imagine it. May it soon—this is what I wish for it—be completely forgotten by the philosophical journalists & thus perhaps be kept for a more upright kind of reader." *Culture and Value*, 75.

German-speaking world with Heinrich Heine. In a 1910 essay, “Heine and his Consequences,” he blames Heine, also using anti-Semitic tropes,²⁰ and the influence of the French language on Heine for the advent of the *feuilleton*, stylized news reporting and commentary characterized by a detached, world-weary voice and a clever and—from Kraus and Benjamin’s perspective—merely ornamental use of language.²¹ Of Heine’s time in Paris, Kraus writes in a passage reminiscent of some of Hamann’s own language:

With Paris not merely the matter but also the form was acquired. But the form, this form, which is only an envelope for the content, not the content itself, only a dress for the body and not flesh to the spirit—this form must only be discovered just once for it to be there at any time. That Heinrich Heine has taken care of, and thanks to him gentlemen no longer need trouble themselves to go to Paris. One can write *feuilleton* today without having smelled one’s way to the Champs d’Élysees with one’s own nose.²²

Kraus locates in the language of journalism the same cleavage of spirit from body that Hamann identifies in Mendelssohn’s account of the state and religion. In his exchange with Mendelssohn, Hamann resisted the attempt to be enlisted as a contributor to the journal. He refused out of the conviction that his authorial freedom would be compromised and

²⁰ See Paul Reitter’s work on Kraus’s anti-Semitism. “Karl Kraus and the Jewish Self-Hatred Question,” *Jewish Social Studies* 10, no. 1 (Autumn 2003): 78–116; and *The Anti-Journalist: Karl Kraus and Jewish Self-Fashioning in Fin-de-Siècle Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). In his essay on Kraus, which Kraus read but was unable to understand and dismissed, Benjamin wrote:

It has been said of Kraus that he has to “suppress the Jewishness in himself,” even that he “travels the road from Jewishness to freedom”; nothing better refutes this than the fact that, for him, too, justice and language remain founded in each other. To worship the image of divine justice in language—even in the German language—this is the genuinely Jewish *salto mortale*, by which he tries to break the spell of the demon. (*GS* 2:349 / *SW* 2:443–44)

On Benjamin’s and Scholem’s understandings of Kraus and his anti-Semitism, see Reitter, *Anti-Journalist*, 169–74. There is also Wittgenstein’s own much discussed comment on his own Jewishness: “Even the greatest Jewish thinker is no more than talented. (Myself for instance.)” *Culture and Value*, 16.

²¹ Adolf Loos’s famous lecture criticizing the role of ornament in modern culture, “Ornament and Crime,” was of particular importance to Kraus and his own critique of journalistic language.

²² Karl Kraus, “Heine und die Folgen,” *Schriften*, ed. Christian Wagenknecht (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986–), 20 vols., vol. 4, 185–210, 188.

out of hatred for the Berlin critics and *Aufklärer*. Wittgenstein's suggestion seems perhaps to be that already, in the middle of the eighteenth century, the urbane sophistication, simulated detachment, and cleverness that would come to define the feuilleton and journalism in general can be found in Mendelssohn's letters to Hamann. Moreover, Wittgenstein's remark suggests a connection—one that did not go unnoticed by Hamann either—between this tone and the cleaved, deistic religiosity that Hamann locates in Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*.

All this comprises the tide Wittgenstein views himself as having to swim so strongly against. The tendency to exile ourselves from the language is not just a philosophical or scientific one, but becomes characteristic of intellectual speech and writing in general. In the same conversation in which he remarked that his "thinking is not wanted in this present age," Wittgenstein said, "I am not a religious man but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view."²³ I think we are now in a position to better see what Wittgenstein means by this.

Norman Malcolm devoted his last book to this remark. He concludes that Wittgenstein meant it analogically, and draws four analogies between religion and Wittgenstein's philosophical approach. (1) Like religion, philosophy reaches a limit of explanation; (2) where religion approaches the world as miraculous, philosophy too expresses a "kind of astonishment at the inexplicable existence of the human language-games"; (3) where religion treats spiritual illnesses, philosophy treats intellectual ones; and (4) both religion and philosophy emphasize action (Christian works, on the one hand, and the priority of pre-linguistic action over reason, on the other).²⁴ While these comparisons certainly have merit, Wittgenstein's point is, in my view, stronger and simpler, not merely analogical, and closely connected with Benjamin's conception of *Lehre*. Wittgenstein means that he seeks to approach problems from the perspective of a united whole. This means resisting the application to philosophy of a scientific methodology that delimits a domain for the application of rationality and assuming a connected totality outside the grasp of the systematic application of reason. Philosophy cannot

²³ M. O'C. Drury, "Some Notes on Conversations with Wittgenstein," *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Personal Recollections*, ed. Rush Rhees (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), 94.

²⁴ Norman Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: A Religious Point of View?* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 84–92.

get outside its subject matter the way science does. It always finds its subject already underway; it is forced into a criss-crossing, circuitous route that must continually begin anew; it strives after an overview, knowing it will never get one.

These concerns, as they apply directly to religion, find perhaps their fullest expression in Wittgenstein's "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*," composed later in 1931. In these remarks, Wittgenstein objects to Frazer's account of earlier religions in similar terms to those Hamann uses in *Golgotha and Sheblimini* to object to Mendelssohn's characterization of Judaism. In subjecting cultural and religious practices to the strictures of scientific explanation, Frazer turns them into parodies (in a way similar to the way Benjamin's Adam turns the name into a parody). Frazer removes these practices from the contexts that give them life and considers them simply impoverished, magical, pre-scientific explanations.

Wittgenstein tries to bring out the impoverishment of Frazer's own method by applying it to a practice closer to our own. He asks us to consider a description of someone "kissing the picture of a loved one" to be based on a belief that their action will somehow affect the real person represented in the picture.²⁵ Wittgenstein's concern here, and in the *Investigations*, is not just to dissuade us from philosophical error but to demonstrate how deeply the error is embedded in our way of thinking. Philosophy—at least as it's usually done—is just one particularly explicit and therefore instructive example of a more general tendency to take up—or pretend to take up—an external perspective on given phenomena, thereby detaching them from the context that gives them life and providing causal explanations that are reductive, distorting, plagued by bias, and in thrall to a misapplied model of objectivity.

Wittgenstein's complaint against Frazer resembles not just Hamann's against Mendelssohn, but Benjamin's against a Kantian conception of knowledge that takes the scientific interpretation of phenomena to be the truth instead of the particular form of specialized knowledge that it is. From Benjamin's perspective, knowledge and experience are conflated—experience just looks like a degraded form of knowledge, in effect different "types of madness" as Benjamin puts it. As Wittgenstein shows, Frazer's gaze, too, conflates experience and knowledge, turning religious practices into a degraded form of science. The "religious point

²⁵ *Philosophical Occasions*, 122–23.

of view" refuses this step outside language and attempts to remediate it. It entails a thoroughgoing, radical holism that begins from an assumption that individual phenomena cannot be understood in independence of the whole. It also entails epistemological humility since this whole cannot itself be grasped. In the case of language, this means our inability to gain a complete overview of our grammar. Rather than the externalized explanation it cannot provide, philosophy carried out from the religious point of view limits itself to immanent presentation, in Benjamin's case, or grammatical description, in Wittgenstein's.

5. Overcoming Prattle

I want to close this book with a discussion of two letters, one by Wittgenstein to Norman Malcolm and the other by Benjamin to Martin Buber. In the first, written at the end of 1944, Wittgenstein recalls a 1939 incident in which Malcolm and Wittgenstein were discussing accusations made against the English by the German government over a recent attempt to assassinate Hitler. Wittgenstein thought it possible the British were responsible, but Malcolm disagreed, remarking that "the British were too civilized and decent to attempt anything so underhand" and that "such an act was incompatible with the British 'national character.'"²⁶ Recounting his shock at the "primitiveness" of the remark years later, Wittgenstein writes:

What is the use of studying philosophy if all that it does for you is to enable you to talk with some plausibility about some abstruse questions of logic, etc., & if it does not improve your thinking about the important questions of everyday life, if it does not make you more conscientious than any . . . journalist in the use of the DANGEROUS phrases such people use for their own ends. You see, I know it's difficult to think well about 'certainty', 'probability', 'perception', etc. But it is, if possible, still more difficult to think, or try to think, really honestly about your life & other peoples lives [sic]. And the trouble is that thinking about these

²⁶ Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, 30. See Marjorie Perloff's discussion of this letter in the opening of her *Wittgenstein's Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

things is *not thrilling*, but often downright nasty. And when it's nasty then it's *most* important.²⁷

The second, written in 1916 shortly before "On Language as Such and the Language of Man," is Benjamin's explanation of why he could not contribute to Buber's journal, *Der Jude* (a situation reminiscent of Hamann's refusal of Mendelssohn). Benjamin criticizes a conventional division between action and speech, implying that *Der Jude* subscribes to it.

It is a widely spread view, dominant almost everywhere, that writing can influence the moral world and the actions of human beings by putting the motivation for actions at hand. In this sense language is only a means for the more or less suggestive *preparation* of motivation, which determines actions in the inner regions of the soul. The characteristic feature of this view is that it fails to consider a relationship of language to deed according to which the former is not merely a means for the latter. This relationship applies equally to impotent speech and writing, degraded to bare means, as a poor, weak deed, whose source lies not in itself but in some sayable and expressible motives. This motive in turn can be discussed, countered to other motives, and so (in principle at least) the deed is positioned at the end as the result of a calculative process checked on all sides. Every action, that lies in this expanding tendency of a chain of words, appears to me terrible and even more devastating, when this whole relationship of word and deed runs rampant in ever-rising measure as a mechanism for the realization of a proper absolute.

Writing as such [*Schriftum überhaupt*] I can only understand poetically, prophetically, objectively—in terms of its effect—but by all means magically, that is immediately [*un-mittel-bar*]. Every salutary effect of writing—indeed every effect that is not at its innermost devastating—rests in its (the word's, language's) mystery.²⁸

Both Wittgenstein and Benjamin confront here moral aspects of our relationship to language, and both take political writing as a foil. For Wittgenstein, the journalist's use of language reflects a certain lack of conscientiousness. Just as the value of philosophy lies, for him, in talking words like "meaning" down from their metaphysical back to their everyday use, we see here him gesturing toward a version of Mauthner's critique of political language: shining a light on the uses of political

²⁷ In Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, 93–94.

²⁸ *Briefe*, vol. 1, 126. *Correspondence*, 79–80. The letter was written shortly before "On Language as Such and the Language of Man." Buber, understandably perhaps, did not reply.

cliché. Such words and phrases do more than the philosophical language Wittgenstein treats, but their effects are to be found in the often disreputable desires of the people who use them, rather than in the things—like national character—that they purport to designate. Wittgenstein reacts so vehemently to Malcolm's use of the phrase (he put an end to the walks they'd been taking together) because he sees in it the same "word-superstition," or thralldom to language removed from genuine, straightforward use, that he had been attempting to combat in his writing and lectures.

Benjamin takes aim at a similar target in a 1931 essay on left-wing writers and journalists of the Weimar era, who, he thought, simply derived from the contemporary political situation "objects of distraction" for the middle-classes, producing an "attitude to which there is no longer [. . .] any corresponding political action" (*GS* 3:281 / *SW* 2:424). He associates the alienation from action of these writers with an alienation from language itself, criticizing in particular the pseudo-objective form many of their pieces took:

What does the "intellectual elite" discover as it begins to take stock of its feelings? The feelings themselves? They have long since been sold off. What is left are the empty spaces, where, in dusty heart-shaped velvet trays, the feelings—nature and love, enthusiasm and humanity—once rested. Now the hollow forms are absent-mindedly caressed. An over-clever irony thinks it has much more in these presumed clichés than in the things themselves; it is extravagant with its poverty and makes out of the gaping void a celebration. (*GS* 3:281 / *SW* 2:424–25).

It is characteristic of the type of writing on Benjamin's mind that it feigns a step back from its subject matter, placing politics, history, tradition before itself as though arrayed behind the glass of a shopwindow. The words are no longer used with anything like the meaning they had originally; they might as well be in scare quotes. Instead, the writers and readers delight in their own withdrawal and in the withdrawal of language, thinking they have understood it better simply because they are outside it. This step outside is, for Benjamin, illusory; it has only obscured things and paralyzed them. Political discourse becomes an end in itself, not just divorced from activity on the ground, but blinding people to it, in the same way Wittgenstein's interlocutors in the *Investigations*, held captive by various pictures, become unable to see what's immediately before them.

In the letter to Buber, Benjamin construes the problematic relationship of language to action not in terms of paralysis exactly, but rather mechanical mediation. As the step outside naming language in “On Language as Such” puts words at a distance from things, here it puts them at a distance from action. They become designators of motives for action rather than being conceived of as actions themselves. Of course, they remain actions even when they are not considered as such, but weak, emptied ones. They come to serve a calculative, mechanical conception of action distanced from language and derived from countless motives refined and checked methodically against one another. This kind of de-racinated action, alienated from language, executed at the end of a calculative process, becomes increasingly predominant. It seems destined to produce what Adorno would later call a “totally administered world.”

Benjamin goes on to write of the goal of his own writing: “to awaken interest in what was denied to the word.”²⁹ The word, as we’ve seen, *means* immediately, the way a particular facial expression or comportment means, or the way action itself means. It means, in other words, in a way where it would make no sense to distinguish between the use of words and the experience of meaning. Meaning inhabits these outward appearances. As Benjamin suggests in “On Language as Such,” the analogy between morality and language hinted at here is not arbitrary. There is a definite connection, for him, between uses of language and forms of conduct where outward form is divorced from inner quality—a connection, that is, between prattle and hypocrisy.

The connection is legible in Wittgenstein’s letter to Malcolm as well. Wittgenstein’s philosophical practice suggests that we can remediate these tendencies by drawing attention to the effects language actually has, thereby dissolving the “thrilling” pictures or feelings that can grip our minds when we use them. Benjamin’s own construal of the potentially “devastating” effects of words is, typically, more far-reaching than Wittgenstein’s and more closely associates the use of language with its expressive power. But, philosophically and ethically, they both demand of us that we not accept the world as it is reflected to us in vacant, enthralling language, but continually strive, in both word and deed, to articulate it anew.

²⁹ *Briefe*, 126; *Correspondence*, 80.

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