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Images Of History: Kant, Benjamin, Freedom, And The Human Subject

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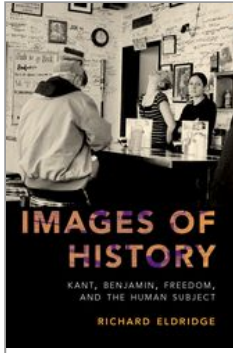## Images of History: Kant, Benjamin, Freedom, and the Human Subject

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Introduction

Historical Understanding and Human Action

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Abstract and Keywords

Arguments in the theory of action and theory of explanation are developed to show that there are two-way implications between moral-political philosophy and historical understanding. The explanation of socially significant, long-term human action requires reference to ideals. History writing on any significant scale presupposes a philosophical anthropology or general account of the powers and interests of human subjects, including their (often tacit) commitments to ideals. Moral and political philosophy presuppose narratives of what is possible and desirable. Kant and Benjamin share a picture of philosophy as historical criticism, involving bootstrapping on earlier efforts at the achievement of free and meaningful life.

Keywords: philosophy of history, historiography, philosophical anthropology, moral philosophy, political philosophy, theory of action, theory of explanation, criticism, Kant, Benjamin

1.1. Historical Understanding and Political Ideals

It is a familiar experience to be unsure in retrospect about both the causes and the meanings of one's actions, both trivial and significant. Just why did I reach for that last cookie? Did I consciously decide that it would be tasty and healthy enough, all things considered? Or did I just do it, perhaps even without being able quite to help it? Or did I secretly wish to keep you from having it? Or was I acting out of a fantasy that I really would exercise later? At a higher level of significance, just why did I choose to study philosophy? Did I clearly understand and opt for what that would turn out to involve? Or was it just fun enough at the

moment, with good enough prospects? Or was it an attempt to compensate for other inadequacies by taking on the role of an authority about some forms of cultural practice, driven by a fantasy that there could be such a thing as abstract authority detached from detailed technical expertise?

Questions of these kinds about the causes and meanings of actions become even more pressing when we consider historically **(p.2)** significant actions and events involving multiple agents and how we might best go about understanding and explaining them. We are, in general, not clear about exactly how, if at all, ideals play a role in history. Abstractly, historical understanding and the articulation of political ideals can influence each other. Historical understanding can function negatively to constrain fantastic idealization and empty utopianism. Sometimes what we know about how human beings have managed to live historically can show that some particular efforts to achieve ideal forms of human community are in the long run doomed to failure. For example, perhaps the Shakers foundered unavoidably by prohibiting sexual relations among their members, so that they were unable to generate new adherents from their own biological offspring. Productively, historical understanding might afford a sense of the genuinely possible. If we see that a problem of social organization has been almost solved in the past and might be solved conclusively with just a bit of tweaking now, or if we see that a problem has been solved in one region and that conditions are similar elsewhere, then we might either carry out the necessary tweaking or transport the solution to new conditions. For all the violence that has attended their inaugurations and all the inadequacies and unfairnesses that remain, it should not be ruled out tout court that modern legal systems, say, often function more effectively as means of the resolution of certain forms of entitlement dispute in modern complex societies than feud, war, or revenge. For both reasons, it would be a bad idea to try to imagine and achieve ideal forms of political life in the absence of significant historical understanding.

Conversely, political ideals of settled community can affect the development of forms of historical understanding. In many forms of history writing, political ideals shape the determinations of beginnings, middles, and ends within narratives that have to do with opportunities for better settled political life that have been **(p.3)** seized and effectively acted on, or, alternatively, tragically missed. As Morton White argues, identifications of decisive contributory causes of historical events are functions of "the point of view of the historian" that is shaped by "basic differences of interest, basic differences of concern and curiosity" that vary among historians.[1] "Cause," as historians use the term, indicates what the historian regards as something abnormal, "a difference-maker" to an outcome about which the historian cares and imagines an audience might care.[2] For example, at least one central topic of political and social history is how comparatively stable and satisfying forms of settled political life have or have not been established, where, for what periods of time, and by what means. This topic can scarcely be addressed without some general conception of what

stable and satisfying settled political life might be, that is, of what that outcome (or its opposite) might be. Without reference to political ideals, it will be impossible to identify related causes and outcomes, and the writing of political and social history will collapse into mere chronicle of the incidental.

Given these directions of mutual influence between historical understanding and political ideals, no simple distinction between analytical and speculative philosophy of history is available, nor can we reasonably simply prefer one style of thinking about history to the other. Traditionally, speculative philosophy of history focuses on contentful political ideals being actualized, often enough behind the backs of agents (the cunning of reason). Hence it ignores both the force of circumstances and the thought that independently achieved historical understanding can reshape the content of political ideals that are worth taking seriously. Traditionally, analytical philosophy of history focuses on either law-subsumptive explanations of historical events or interpretivist elucidations of actions in light of the beliefs, desires, and other commitments of agents. In either case, however, it tends to ignore the overdetermination of **(p.4)** actions by beliefs, reasons, desires, and attitudes that are in flux, that are expressible differently in different contexts, and that can be reshaped by new articulations of political ideals. We live, one might say, between fully dispositive absolute volitional freedom and absolute determination by circumstances.

> If human beings were completely free [to act in accordance with rational, ethical-political ideals, independent of external influences, then] the historian's long grubbing in the archives would be an entirely unnecessary torture, . . . [Conversely] the historical investigation of deterministically governed beings would be pointless, given that human behavior would be explicable in nomothetic terms, as deriving from the workings of scientific laws. [Instead we should hold] that the discipline of history is marked by an unresolving dialectic between determinism and freedom in which neither has primacy and both are clearly present [as, sometimes,] mores morph into morality [and vice versa].[3]

In general, then, between the articulation of political ideals and the development of historical understanding of political life there is and should be bootstrapping mutual influence. But how—and in particular how, now, within modern, settled political societies, with highly complex and articulated divisions of labor—can this bootstrapping mutual influence take place productively? That is, what are the ideals of settled political life that can be fruitful now for historical understanding? And what form of historical understanding can now both inform and be fruitful for political imagination?

These are extraordinarily large, abstract questions. To give them some further shape and focus, five significant qualifications are in order.

First, there is what Arthur Danto calls "an unexpungeable factor of convention and of arbitrariness in historical description,"[4] **(p.5)** depending on what we are interested in. One can focus in history writing on various actors, individual or joint, on various stretches of time, and on various regions of space. Actions, both individual and joint, are typically overdetermined by motives and intelligible with reference to them in multiple ways. There is, for example, every reason to think it is reasonable to choose to write a history of a literary society in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, between 1920 and 1940 without worrying much about large-scale distinctively political ideals. The contours of the narrative will be set by the aims of the society and the motives of its members, as one will focus on who participated, what was discussed, and so forth. Out of curiosity and interest one might undertake to write a history of a gear-manufacturing firm or a botanical garden or a set of cousins, without significant political issues coming much into view. Of course such issues could come into view, if the gear-manufacturing firm produced important parts for tanks used to advantage by one side in a major war. But then the history would expand beyond the doings and decisions of the firm itself. In general in writing history, some sense of significant connection among events must be in view; there could no history of a perch swimming in a river in eastern Tennessee in relation to thumbtack manufacture in Beijing, at least not without a lot of mediation. But the significant connections that are tracked in history writing need not always involve the furtherance or inhibition of large political ideals. In short, there are many kinds of history writing, undertaken for many good reasons, not all of them having to do with what, politically and socially, awe of some large extent thinks about itself and does.

Second, in thinking about how larger forms of historical understanding and political self-conception do inform each other, it is not possible to proceed simply empirically, by, as it were, surveying all significantly political historical writing. Markus Völkel's **(p.6)** impressive survey[5] of the practices of history writing throughout all regions of the world, from the earliest documented efforts to the present, is a useful reminder of how history writing takes many forms, often shaped by a motley of background political, social, economic, scientific, religious, metaphysical, and literary conceptions and conditions. Even where the writing *is* about significant political events, the forms of understanding, explanation, and rhetoric that are developed vary enormously. But this motley of forms tells us little about how we might now best achieve large-scale political and social historical understanding. Normative questions about current large-scale history writing will have to be faced directly; empirical induction over multiform cases will not by itself suffice. What are the political ideals and forms of historical writing that can productively influence each other for us, within modern settled, complexly differentiated political societies?

Third, accidents surely make a difference to history. If, for example, Alexander the Great had not died of typhoid fever—if indeed that is what he died of—then the Macedonian Empire might not have collapsed, and India might have been integrated into what later became the Roman and then the European economic system. The fact that Alexander died makes a difference. But its likely cause has little to do with broad political ideals of settled life. However significant such singular events may be, they do not have to do directly with the significance of political ideals for historical understanding and of historical understanding for political ideals.

Fourth, environmental and biological circumstances surely have significant influences on the developments of human cultures. For example, Jared Diamond has powerfully argued that the causes of the technological superiority of Eurasian peoples over native American, Australian, Polynesian, and African peoples are to be found in such things as the availability for domestication in Eurasia, unlike elsewhere, of the plants with the highest yields and **(p.7)** of animals capable of being used for ploughing and transport. The consequent earlier introduction of agriculture in Eurasia in turn led to the development of larger communities with complex political organizations and divisions of labor, writing, and productive technologies, including weapons technologies. Within these larger Eurasian communities, severe infectious diseases crossed from domesticated animals into human populations, leading, however, also to the development of resistances among Eurasians but not among other peoples. With these advantages, the conquest and colonization of the Americas, Australia, and Africa posed little problem for the Europeans; superior intelligence and superior political ideals and arrangements were not the primary, dispositive causes of the acquisition of these advantages.[6]

Interestingly, Diamond argues that Aristotle is wrong to hold that settled agricultural life in larger political communities is natural to human beings, appealing to the incontrovertible fact that the existence of such a form of life among human beings occupies only a small portion of the 13,000 or so years since the last major Ice Age. Even up until 1492, the greater part of the earth's habitable surface continued to be occupied by chiefdoms, tribes, or bands of hunter-gatherers.[7] However, while he is surely right about the facts, Diamond also misunderstands what Aristotle meant. What is natural to human beings, according to Aristotle, is the condition under which their defining rational capacities can flourish, and the flourishing of these rational capacities—for language, for art, for theoretical understanding, for culture in general, for long-term planning and end-setting, for the development of technology, and so forth—clearly requires, as Diamond accepts, the existence of settled life within larger political communities.

It is the development of this settled life within larger political communities, in relation to political ideals, that is the focus here, not the ecological and biological conditions that enabled this **(p.8)** settled life to emerge and that continue significantly to influence it. Whatever the considerable influence of biological, ecological, and medical circumstances on the shapes of human societies, it is also the case that the political ideals that are held within them can influence and be influenced by courses of historical cultural development. And the central questions here are: How is this bootstrapping mutual influence of political idealization and the further development of larger scale, settled, modern political life productively possible? And, how, to the extent that this bootstrapping mutual influence takes place, might historical writing best uncover and contribute to it?

Fifth and finally, the development of technology and its influence on forms of political organization is not directly in view, for similar reasons. Settled political life requires the development of at least agricultural technologies, in all but the rarest, most propitious natural circumstances, and it is further massively informed by the abilities of human beings to produce large surpluses of goods within a given production cycle. Nothing about modern post-European life would look the way it does in the absence of cast iron, the steam engine, the gasoline engine, antibiotics, chemical fertilizers, and all the rest.

But despite the undeniable importance of these technological influences, the question of who gets to control the distribution of the large surpluses that the use of technologies can produce remains a political question that is not itself settled by the existence of the technologies alone. There may be some elective affinity between a broadly free market form of economic distribution and a more rapid development of new technologies, each encouraging the other. But within this broad affinity there is room for enormous variation in forms of social structure, in political organization, and in policies of taxation, health, education, and social welfare, where these variations are shaped in part by both political ideals and the historical experience of political forms of life, including facts about **(p.9)** class and power. It is, moreover, neither possible nor desirable that all economic exchanges be freely agreed to by all parties bilaterally in conditions of equal information and opportunity in the absence of any central political authority responsible for such things as adjudication, punishment for criminal wrongdoing, public works of various kinds, education, taxation, and so on. Economic life within larger settled societies exists only within political settings and differentiations of class.[8]

These five significant qualifications—legitimate variability of historical subject matters and narrative forms; restriction to large normative, political questions about settled modern societies; and leaving sheer accidents, biological-environmental influences, and technological developments out of account as less than fully dispositive for the large shape of social life—may seem at first glance

to omit everything important and interesting about how human societies develop. Given, however, the variations just mentioned, there is in fact enormous room left for political ideals and historical understanding to inform each other in a variety of ways, as we seek both to take our bearings in political imaginings from what has been done and experienced and to understand and assess what has been done and experienced in terms of political ideals. The focus is then on long-term tendencies and possibilities of development within modern, politically organized settled societies, which form, for interesting reasons not having to do only with bombs and guns, an increasing part of the world. How might we best understand the development of that settled, modern, political life, as it is both influenced by and influences political ideals? How might we best think about ourselves and our prospects of fruitful development, against the background of what has been done and imagined politically within the framework of this life, and how might we understand that background fruitfully in relation to our sense of what is politically possible and desirable?

(p.10) 1.2. Amphibious Animals, Narrative Form, and a Moral Image of the World

One way to begin to get a grip on these large questions is to note that human beings within modern, settled, political societies have had, all of them, to cope with certain continuing large oppositions that appear in more specific shapes within social settings. In Hegel's formulation, human beings are occupied with and troubled by oppositions that appear as

> the contrast between the sensuous and the spiritual in man, as the battle of spirit against flesh, of duty for duty's sake, of the cold command against particular interest, warmth of heart, sensuous inclinations and impulses, against the individual disposition in general; as the harsh opposition between inner freedom and the necessity of external nature, further as the contradiction between the dead inherently empty concept, and the full concreteness of life, between theory or subjective thinking, and objective existence and experience.

> These are oppositions which have not been invented at all by the subtlety of reflection or the pedantry of philosophy; in numerous forms they have always preoccupied and troubled the human consciousness, even if it is modern culture that has first worked them out most sharply and driven them up to the peak of harshest contradiction. Spiritual culture, the modern intellect, produces this opposition in man which makes him an amphibious animal, because he now has to live in two worlds which contradict one another.[9]

More crudely, human subjectivity, in the form of individual thought and feeling, bumps up against a sense of the way things are done **(p.11)** and are to be done. (*Man kreuzt nicht gegen den Ampel.*) Can human subjectivity find itself at home

in what is done and what is to be done by taking on a meaningful social role, or is it doomed, and if so how far, to be forever confronted by social routines that it finds in some measure cold and alien, mere dead necessities for the moderation and disguise of what ultimately remains for many a form of violence?

Both historical narratives concerned with settled life and philosophical articulations of political ideals for it address and reflect on these fundamental oppositions between subjectivity and the manifold ways things are done and are to be done. History—or at least large-scale social and political history—investigates the lived experience of these oppositions. It tracks which forms of opposition have been felt to be particularly pressing and by whom, what various historical actors have undertaken to do about them, using what devices of political or social reorganization (themselves influenced by technological, ideological, and other circumstances), and whether these actors have succeeded or failed in various ways, and with what further effects. We, or at least we denizens of complex modern societies, live within these oppositions and within various, complex, overlapping, complementary, and mutually contestatory efforts to address and to resolve them. History writing all at once attends to, participates in, and undertakes to assess the ongoing course of this historical life within oppositions. It does so by bringing forms of emplotment, or discernings of beginnings, middles, and ends, to bear on efforts to address these oppositions, where the descriptions of beginnings, middles, and ends involve normative assessments.

The mixture of participation, discernment, and assessment that historical writing achieves helps to explain the well-known persistent ambiguity of the words *history, Geschichte, histoire*, and their cousins, as they can be used to refer both to what happened and **(p.12)** to how it has been narrated. Living within these oppositions and within our own efforts to recognize their more specific shapes and to address them, we simultaneously note what is going on around us and give it narrative shape, as we attempt to get some orientation for where we might fruitfully go next. There is, despite the existence also of sheer happenstances and the pervasive facts of materiality, to some extent an internal connection for us, as historical animals, between what is experienced and how it is narratively understood. The form of a historical narration "is not only a matter of an art of presentation or narration, but also one that is imputed to, or derived from, the actual history."[10] How we tell the story is necessarily at least in some measure a function of how we live the story and vice versa.

One might be tempted to argue that this claim about the intertwining of the actual with the narratively formed and normatively assessed is mistaken. There are, after all, sheerly material happenstances––for example, lightning strikes or virus mutations––that affect human historical life from outside, as it were. Likewise, our powers to organize events narratively and to assess them normatively are to some extent free of materiality, in being driven in part by

creative imagination. Hence one might be tempted to assert some strong form of a fact/value, outer/inner, or material/spiritual distinction. In the end, however, these distinctions in their strong forms will not hold, as we experience our plights and possibilities of subjectivity within a situation of oppositions that are themselves simultaneously material and spiritual. As Dieter Henrich observes,

> One could argue that the very notion of a "practical" philosophy precludes any occupation with cosmological and metaphysical problems. Yet this stance conflicts with the fact that the agent and the intelligent person are one and the same subject. . . . We certainly cannot claim that the world **(p. 13)** of objects and the world seen from the moral viewpoint are totally separate. For moral action has as its domain the very situations and circumstances we regard as part of the physical world. . . . The enlightened moral agent needs a moral view meeting two requirements: first, that it relate the various worldviews in some way that prevents their multiplicity from resulting in sheer anarchy or confusion; second, that it survive being exposed to competitors. The moral view must remain reasonable and immune to the charge of arbitrariness and irrationality. . . . If the beliefs that are inseparable from the viewpoint of the moral agent are consistent and linked together into a single network, one can call them "a moral image of the world."[11]

Hence, as beings who live within oppositions and who seek both to articulate and to live according to orienting values, we need a moral image of the world, or at least some sense of orientation that promotes the worth and stability of our projects and relationships, by casting them as meaningful, for us and for others. After all, we are, as agents, inextricably bound up with surrounding environments as the domains of our actions. But exactly how and where is a moral image of the world to be found, or cobbled together, and how is it to win allegiance, beyond the bounds of circumstantial, sectarian affinity groups? Once upon a time, a presiding moral image of the world that commands the allegiance of all rational agents would have been taken to have been furnished by the very nature of being as such. As Plato has Socrates put it in the *Republic*,

> One must conclude that [the form of the good] is the cause of all that is correct and beautiful in anything, that it produces both light and its source in the visible realm, and that in the **(p.14)** intelligible realm it controls and provides truth and understanding, so that anyone who is to act sensibly in public or private must see it.[12]

Aristotle on self-moving *Noûs* as the divine origin of all being, activity, and value and Aquinas on the will of God offer similar groundings of moral images of the world in the affordances of ultimate being.

For us moderns, however, such groundings of systems of value in a reality that is prior to and somehow dispositive for human life as such are scarcely credible. Even if extreme physicalism, too, is less than credible, in failing to make room for intelligible human agency, we are too aware of widely divergent possibilities of life and action that may be experienced as meaningful. Modern technologies and the development of increasing surpluses within a given production cycle, however those surpluses are distributed, have enabled us to live much more diversely and much more in independence of nature than is possible for hunter-gatherer or primitive agricultural societies. Travel, anthropological reports, and communications technologies have made us inescapably aware of just how different patterns of activity, interests, and social organization are at anything above the barest level of subsistence and also of how valuable divergent patterns can be. The experience of modernity is characterized by "the belief that there are no intelligible essences, no preordained qualities, and no 'auratic' presences in the world. The disappearance of such qualities yields a vision of the world as potentially open to transformation from within, but also raises fears that the world may be governed by no authoritative perspective or controlling point of view."[13]

Hence we have for good reasons largely lost a sense of presiding ends that are simply given, prior to and independently of human life. But it is also a mistake to take all ends to be entirely **(p.15)** arbitrary or subjectively formed. There are some interests, such as adequate nutrition and communicative contact with others, that human beings have whether or not they are aware of them. Except in extraordinary circumstances, such as perhaps a political hunger strike or in the pursuit of religious ecstasy, an agent who denied or repudiated these interests would normally count as confused or unreasonable. More important, casting all ends and interests as subjectively formed and arbitrary opens the way to the instrumentalization of human relations and of other human beings. If there is nothing that commands general allegiance, then exploitation by the powerful, free-riding, and the general privatization of satisfactions loom on the horizon. Even if it is true that claims to know objective human interests in detail and to administer culture on the basis of this knowledge have often been the heavy-handed, tyrannizing stuff of philosophers and priests as the servants of the materially powerful, it is not clear that anything but gathering chaos and massive exploitation will result from a general repudiation of the existence of all objective interests.

Happily, it is at least plausible to suppose that there may be a middle way between dogmatic appeals to sources of value that are independent of human life, on the one hand, and taking human life to be nothing but a matter of unconstrained competition for purely subjective satisfactions, on the other. "Moral actions in particular, as well as their intentions, cannot be regarded as automatic responses to needs or to an environment."[14] Human beings do deliberate. They resolve indeterminate drives into formulated, specific wants

and desires; they rank these wants and desires in terms of their importance; they specifically choose to act on the basis of some rather than others; and they attempt to integrate the satisfactions of various wants and desires with one another within a coherent overall life plan. As they thus deliberate and act, they are sometimes moved by longer term considerations of what may make **(p.16)** sense in more than immediate and subjectively material ways. To be sure, the ideals of meaningful life that thus move human agents are far from uniform, and they typically come into conflict with each other. As Max Weber argued, "the highest ideals, which move us most forcefully, are always formed in the struggle with other ideals which are just as sacred to others as ours are to us."[15] But however disparate they may be, these ideals that surface within deliberation and that form part of the structure of human action are themselves available as objects of reflection. Recently, Rudolf A. Makkreel has described the hermeneutic pursuit of orientation in cultural life as a matter of *reflexive assimilation* of local object recognitions and inherited local habits, *reflective acquisition* of new knowledge through the formulation of discipline-specific general theories, and *reflective-reflexive appropriation* of the first two kinds of knowledge-claims through critical evaluation. "When second-order reflexivity also encompasses what has been reflectively acquired, our sense of standing in the world also provides the basis for a stance toward it."[16] Via reflection on both knowledge-claims and the ideals to which the pursuit of knowledge is in service, we might hope to become more aware of what we have always already been doing, and so more explicitly self-conscious and more reasonably confident both about what we might now be aiming at and about what we might best aim at, in relation to others.

1.3. Idealization, Act Description, and Agentive Causality in Historical Explanation

Just this form of reflection characterizes the emergence of modern historical self-consciousness since at least roughly the late eighteenth century. Instead of taking ideals either only from putatively **(p.17)** absolute sources prior to us or from our subjective wants and desires as they surface and remain fixed prior to deliberation, human beings have come increasingly to be aware of themselves as living within developing, contested historical narratives of the articulation and modification of longer term, ideal-serving projects, relationships, and desires. As Stefan Deines, Stephan Jaeger, and Ansgar Nünning characterize this development,

> Historically considered, a massive transformation in the relations between the human subject and history is evident in the second half of the eighteenth century. Prior to the eighteenth century, a foundation for the human subject outside of history was taken for granted, for example in philosophical, metaphysical, ethical, or anthropological systems of reference. History performed only a mediating function in relation to the norms, values, and paradigms of these external, transhistorical systems.

The acting subject was likewise oriented by this third term external to history; the self-grounding of a subject—as for example Descartes paradigmatically carried it out for modern philosophy—was thinkable only outside of history, through a divine authority.[17]

By the end of eighteenth century, after Gibbon, Burke, Rousseau, and Kant, and with the increasing development and spread of intercultural awareness, things are different. To a significant extent, orientation is achieved, when it is achieved at all (bracketing reversions to modern fundamentalisms that are themselves more willed as a reaction against fears of chaos than they are immediately lived and bracketing likewise action that is driven by wants and desires that are mistakenly taken for granted as dispositively given), via the mutual bootstrapping of political and moral ideals with historical narratives.

(p.18) This mutual bootstrapping is accomplished, as already suggested, via the use of political and moral ideals in constructing historical narratives and via the use of historical narratives to test the availability and significance of political and moral ideals. The construction of historical understanding must significantly draw on research or *Forschung* into what has actually been done by human beings or has otherwise taken place in relation to human doings. But beyond the piecemeal, chronicle-like establishment of mere occurrences of unrelated actions and events, historical understanding must relate what has been done by A at t at p to what has been done by A' at t' at p'. A first action will be presented as causally influencing the occurrence of further actions, fruitfully, banally, tragically, comically, and so on, as may be. As Arthur Danto argues, it is a necessary condition for a historical narrative that it must "(a) report events which actually happened; and (b) report them in the order of their occurrence [or make this order manifest], … and (c) explain what happened."[18] Absent fulfillment of this necessary condition, one will have only a chronicle or list of events.

This condition is, further, necessary, not sufficient, for adequate historical narration. Or, more precisely, what it is relevantly to explain an action historically must be further specified. Just what sort of explanation is in view, when we are explaining events—or at least the significant actions of human agents within settled political societies—historically?

A first step to answering this question is to see that events must be assigned significance by way of an action description. "To ask for the significance of an event, in the *historical* sense of the term, is to ask a question which can only be answered in the context of a *story*. The identical event will have a different significance in accordance with the story in which it is located or, in other words, in accordance with what different sets of *later* events it may be connected. Stories constitute the natural context in which events acquire historical **(p.19)** significance."[19] Hence, when knowledge of a relevant

background story is lacking, otherwise ordinary events can seem puzzling, and supplying the missing background can dissolve the puzzlement. For example,

> A story is told of a Chinese man passing through the foreign legations' compound in Peking. Seeing two of the European staff playing an energetic game of tennis, he stopped to watch. Bemused, he turned to a player and said, "If it is, for some obscure reason, necessary to hit this little ball back and forth thus, would it not be possible to get the servants to do it?"[20]

As this example makes clear, action descriptions make sense of what someone is doing, quite frequently against a background of specific practices and involving a number of physical events taking place across a stretch of time.

Nor is the point limited to recherché cases involving alien or exotic cultures. Consider the kinds of -ing verb forms—dubbed by Danto *project verbs*—that we normally use to answer the question, 'What is so-and-so doing?', for example, planting roses. Formulations of the form " 'is R-ing' will generally cover a whole range of different pieces of behaviour *B1…Bn,,,,*[where] the range marked out by a predicate like 'is R-ing' is almost certain to be very flexible."[21] Project verbs of the form "is R-ing" organize a series of discontinuous physical events under a normal result-related description, where the events thus organized may be "*open* and *non-homogenous*."[22] A long as there is a normal result-related activity going on, all sorts of variations and interruptions may be possible, yet the activity may still correctly be described as "is R-ing." For example, planting roses will include such things as digging the hole, loosening the surrounding soil, embedding the plant, filling back over the roots, and watering the embedded seedling, and it may **(p.20)** include such things as wiping one's brow, reaching for a different shovel, taking a break to smoke a cigarette, or asking a neighbor for advice. Moreover, the thing can be done in new ways: one might scoop with one's hands or push with a bulldozer or use a high-pressure hose, instead of poking about with a shovel. Surely there are at least fifty ways to leave your lover or to run a firm.

Matters grow more complex, but display a similar logic, when longer term projects and activities involving multiple agents, extended periods of time, complex circumstances, and overlappings with other projects are in view: for example, organizing a conference, raising a child, stopping an oil leak from a drilling platform, or making a revolution.[23] Generally speaking the more long-term, complex, and significant the activity in question is, the more the relevant project verb will involve reference to a moral or political ideal that is introduced to characterize the activity as having a larger aim in view. Thus we say such things as, A is organizing a conference on terrorism not only in order to address a discrete problem or to advance his career but also to promote international security, or B is working on changes in the tax code in order to promote a more just society, or C is closing down the local factory and outsourcing production

abroad in order to cut costs and to increase efficiency and profit. It is possible to have lower level descriptions of projects and activities that make little or no reference to ideals and have relatively straightforward instantiations: for example, D is eating candied violets. There is every reason to accept that there can be significant histories of lower level human projects and activities than making a revolution or working for social justice. But generally the more complex, long term, and significant the activity, the more reference to ideals will figure in the complexes of higher-level project verbs that are used to describe the goings-on.

In addition, human beings within settled societies both grow up under and lead adult lives in relation to various political and social **(p.21)** institutions, including tax agencies, police departments, deed registries, civil courts, armies, and public schools, among others. They will have attitudes, explicit and implicit, toward these institutions, attitudes bound up with their senses that their lives are or are not going well in relation to them. Human beings often act not only as countable biological individuals, but also as occupants of familial, social, economic, and political roles, and they have attitudes toward the fruitfulness of occupying them. Their attitudes toward their surrounding institutions and their roles within them can come dramatically into play in motivating actions at crucial moments of political possibility, and they figure in any case in the texture of anyone's day-to-day social life.

Both when we have complex projects and activities in view and when we ask *why* things have been done or have happened in relation to human agency, we link together project-verb structured accounts of particular doings in order to form a story that *explains* the many things that are going on, some of them as consequences of others. Causal verbs such as *instigated, influenced, gave rise to, motivated, undermined, inhibited, enabled*, and so on link together descriptions of activities under project verbs to form explanatory accounts. In Danto's characterization of these causal verbs, "each of these terms, to be true of an event E-1, logically requires the occurrence of an event temporally later than E-1, and sentences making use of such terms in the obvious way will then be narrative sentences"[24] that describe *what went on* in and through a connected series of activities. Crucially, because the occurrence of the later event is logically required, but is not discernible via the techniques of physical measurement at the time of the initiating event E, since anything could happen to disrupt normal expectations, establishing that a sentence involving a causal verb is true will require waiting to see what happens. As Danto famously notes, the true sentence "The Thirty Years War began in 1618" could not be known to be true until 1648.[25] Yet **(p.22)** soldiers in 1622 were fighting in the Thirty Years War; that is what they were doing, or at least one of the things that they were importantly doing. Likewise for the logic of "Montesquieu influenced Madison's development of the doctrine of separation of powers in writing the

United States Constitution." Historical explanation, therefore, is essentially retrospective, not predictive.

The relevant kind of causal explanation that is brought forward within historical narratives, further, need not be, and typically is not, law related, at least not in the sense of laws that figures in physics, where mathematical formulation and possibilities of more precise measurement are in view. Rather, when one project or activity causally influences another, by instigating it, enabling it, inhibiting it, motivating it, and so on, the kind of causality in question is what J. L. Mackie has described as an INUS condition: an insufficient, nonredundant member of a set of unnecessary but sufficient conditions. Mackie puts this conception forward as a general theory of causality, including the causal relations that obtain among more or less physical events. Thus, the lightning strike caused the forest fire, even though the lightning strike is not by itself sufficient for the fire (the timber and brush must be dry enough for the strike to cause a flame and for the flame to spread) and not necessary, not even with other conditions fulfilled (the fire could have been caused in other ways).[26]

Within physics, the specification of INUS conditions as causes may sometimes be transformed into a law-formulation and made mathematically precise, in cases in which the full set of relevant sufficient conditions can be captured and the particular contribution of each member of the set can be made explicit. It is at least a defining aspiration of some parts of physics to achieve such law formulations, and that aspiration is sometimes approximately realized. But it is less fully and less often realized even with regard to purely natural processes than is often assumed. As Nancy Cartwright has **(p.23)** argued, following Otto Neurath, there are no straightforward law formulations available from physics under which the spot at which a thousand dollar bill dropped from the top of St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna will land in the square.[27] If a large number of complex laws involving various vector forces and taking into account whether the bill is crumpled or folded, in which orientation it is held when released, and whether it is dropped or tossed, and so on, are in principle available from fluid dynamics to subsume the bill's path and landing spot under them, that complex of laws, taken just like that, will be singular, not in any way comparable to the more general laws of physics, from which that complex is derivable, that describe and explain events with reference to smaller numbers of variables under artificial, controlled conditions.

More important, since we have never succeeded in constructing absolute law formulations, free of all ceterus paribus clauses that acknowledge the possibility of intrusive events, including as yet unknown ones, that might disturb causal connections, the very idea of a specifiable sufficient physical cause derives historically not from observation of absolute physical connections, but rather from our ability to bring it about under artificial, controlled conditions that one type of event follows a predecessor type. As G. H. Von Wright puts it, "It is

established that there is a causal connection between *p* and *q* when we have satisfied ourselves that, by manipulating the one factor, we can achieve or bring it about that the other is, or is not, there. We usually satisfy ourselves as to this by making experiments."[28] This point is fully compatible with the causal connections thus uncovered being fully "there" objectively.[29] Discernment via experimentation is discovery of what *is there* (under controlled conditions but also, plausibly, under uncontrolled conditions, where the connection is present but obscured by other variables), not free invention. Or this is so at least often enough, when experimenters are careful enough. Nonetheless, the *idea* or *concept* of causation **(p.24)** that is involved in successful enough law formulations is that of an event that we can bring about by arranging initial conditions. "To think of a relation between events as causal is to think of it under the aspect of a (possible) action,"[30] in von Wright's formulation. "For *that p* is the cause of *q* … *means* that I could bring about *q*, if I could do (so that) *p*."[31]

But however it may be with the availability of law formulations in physics, we are left in history always only with the specification of INUS conditions as relevant, pragmatic causes. As already noted, narrative sentences that involve causally related activities characterized under project verbs are essentially retrospective. Moreover, unlike the ascription of purely physical properties on the basis of measurement, ascriptions of propositional attitudes—the beliefs, hopes, desires, intentions, hopes, wishes, fears, and all the rest that surround and inform the undertaking of an extended activity with a result in view—are holistic, governed by considerations of reasonableness, and hence subject to normative assessment, as Donald Davidson has eloquently argued, following Aristotle and Wittgenstein.[32] Or as von Wright puts it, a "behavior's intentionality"—its aiming at and being about something; hence its being an action—"is its *place* in a story about the agent. Behavior gets its intentional character from being seen by the agent himself or by an outside observer in a wider perspective, from being set in a context of aims and cognitions."[33] We do not ascribe a belief or a hope to a creature one-off, just like that, based on a single criterion, without taking into account a decently large stretch of reasonable performances over time.[34] Beliefs, desires, wishes, hopes, fantasies, and so on cannot be read off single, natural, physical happenstances. They are mediated by and expressed in an ensemble of actions of a reasonable agent. "There will not be books in the running brooks until the dawn of hydro-semantics";[35] and hydro-semantics collapses in the face of the muteness of the **(p.25)** brutely physical about attitudes, in contrast with the holism, reasonableness, and normativity of the psychological.

Because actions, as opposed to mere bodily reactions and other brute physical events, are undertaken and performed only by rational-enough agents to whom some ensemble of coherently sustained commitments (aims, beliefs, projects, etc.) can be ascribed over time, the kind of explanation that is available for them, while in some sense causal, is not open to the kind of precisification,

testing, and subsumption under law-formulations that are available in the natural sciences. (We neither ask whether nor assume that samples of salt are acting in accordance with coherent aims when we discern that they dissolve in water into equal parts of sodium and chlorine under specified conditions.) As von Wright puts it, "causal explanations which look for sufficient conditions [that are specified in physical terms, that we can manipulate and replicate, and that may be increasingly narrowed to yield more precise law-formulations] are not *directly* relevant to historical and social research."[36]

Instead, explanation and understanding of action take place via subsumption under practical syllogisms, within which behaviors, identified as actions, are described as intentional. Von Wright formulates the relevant practically explanatory inference schema as follows:

> From now on A intends to bring about *p* at time t.
>
> From now on A considers that, unless he does *a* no later than at time *t'*, he cannot bring about *p* at time *t*.
>
> Therefore, no later than when he thinks *t'* has arrived, A sets himself to do *a*, unless he forgets about the time or is prevented.[37]

Under a practical syllogism with this structure, "the verification of the external aspect of behavior and/or its causal effects [does *not*] **(p.26)** suffice; … we … have to establish the intentional character of the behavior, that it is 'aiming' at a certain accomplishment, *independently* of whether it accomplishes it or not."[38] That is to say, the behavior *qua action* is understood and explained as undertaken (whether successfully or not) from the point of view of an agent who is coherently enough in reasonable enough pursuit of the accomplishment of aims. What is thus understood and explained—an action as, one might say, the expression of a point of view, consisting in the possession of coherent enough commitments—is something that is itself fully real, something that agents set themselves to do and then do or fail to do.

Some projects and activities, along with the intentions, beliefs, desires, and so on that inform them, are among the historical causes, then, of other projects and activities, where the kind of causality in question is that which is captured in a relevant, illuminating INUS condition, without any reference to any law.[39] What makes a historical narrative of how the undertakings and the outcomes of some projects and activities causally influence others explanatory is just that the narrative helps us to see what is going on continuously within these thus interrelated doings. As Michael Scriven usefully puts it, both events and actions can sometimes be

> explained *merely* by being described in the correct way regardless of deduction from laws. . . . [For example,] if you reach for a cigarette and in doing so knock over an ink bottle which then spills onto the floor, you are

in an excellent position to explain to your wife how that stain appeared on the carpet, that is, why the carpet is stained (if you cannot clean it off fast enough). You knocked the ink bottle over. This is the explanation of the state of affairs in question, and there is no nonsense about it being in doubt because you cannot quote the laws that are involved, Newton's and all the others.[40]

(p.27) We typically ask for or seek an explanation, especially with regard to human actions, when we are unclear about what is going on or about what has happened. We understand something—a man was shot and killed, or a secret was betrayed to a foreign power—but we want to know what complex of larger projects and activities lends sense to what happened, as part of the ensembles of doings of reasonable agents.

A common case is that when someone, greatly puzzled, asks What on earth is this? Or what's going on here? and is told, for example, that it is an initiation ceremonial on which he has stumbled. Analogous cases in particle physics, engineering, and astronomy are obvious. The point of these examples is that understanding is roughly the perception of relationships and hence may be conveyed by any process which locates the puzzling phenomenon in a system of relations. . . . A description may enable us to supply a whole framework which we had already understood, but of whose *relevance* we had been unaware. We deduce nothing; our understanding comes because we *see* the phenomenon for what it is, and are *in a position* to make other inferences from this realization.[41]

The task, then, for the understanding of action in general, is to see what agents are up to, that is, what results or ends they have in view, as they are, qua agents, sensitive to considerations of reasonableness and involved in ensembles of projects and activities, the execution of which is subject to normative assessment. For longer term, historically significant actions, involving projects and activities that are causally linked and involve multiple agents with complex attitudes toward institutions and roles, the task then is likewise to see what multiple agents are broadly up to, what results or ends they have in view, in relation to what sorts **(p.28)** of reasons that involve reference to broad political and ethical ideals, and with what sorts of normatively assessable outcomes.

1.4. Fundamental Terms of Description and Explanation as *Elicited*

Exactly what the relevant political and ethical ideals are; how specific, long-term activities in pursuit of them are responsive to considerations of reasonableness; and how the outcomes are properly normatively assessed—all this is far from transparent in immediate happenstances. Nor will it always or often help simply to ask individual agents what they are up to or to consult whatever records of their beliefs, desires, and aims they may happen to have left. Consulting such records is always relevant, but it is often not by itself decisive, since

commitment to ideals as ends may be largely taken on from a social environment, in ways that are habitual, implicit, and unrecorded. Beyond relying on various forms of direct testimony, then, we must undertake at least sometimes to see the reasonable, ideal-related pattern in what is going on or has gone on.

This seeing is furthered by our ordering the doings of human agents into a narrative of what is going on, where we attempt to order what happens under a narrative form that will make manifest what causal relations (in the sense of INUS conditions) obtain among actions, as well as the appropriate normative assessment of actions and consequences alike. Among the issues that are addressed by the determination of form in the course of history-writing Reinhart Koselleck lists the determination of beginnings, middles, and ends; the construction of transitions and narrative connections; determinations of primary and secondary acting subjects (political vs. social history, kings vs. commoners vs. **(p.29)** captains of industry, etc.); assignment of long-term motives and interests to agents; and trackings of the impingement on actions and actors of conditions external to their motives, interests, technologies, and institutions (e.g., natural circumstances, including environmental considerations, diseases, earthquakes, and so on).[42] Concluding his survey of the issues addressed via the determination of form in history-writing, Koselleck notes that it is appropriate to ask about any piece of history-writing, "What leading categories of theoretical discernment does the author employ? Out of what life world do the leading categories of the presentation stem? Are these leading categories theoretically well founded or simply posited?"[43]

What would then count as an adequate grounding of any leading categories for historical narration and historical understanding, particularly in cases of long-term, multiple-agent, causally linked cases of action within complex settled societies, where the contents of many intentions and motives (that tie together heterogeneous events into long-term, aim-expressive doings) may be implicit? One way to begin to address the question of how to determine whether categories of narrative historical understanding—that is, references to larger political motives and aims—may be plausibly discerned within actual historical goings-on or rather projected onto events by the history writer is to remember that this very opposition *discerned versus projected* is itself not as sharp and absolute as it is often taken to be. Max Weber points out that, at least above subsistence level, in surplus-generating settled societies, we––both the objects of historical inquiry and the writers of history––"are cultural beings, endowed with the ability and the will to take a conscious stance toward the world and to endow it with a sense."[44] To the extent, then, that there are fundamental, continuing problems of human life, this stance-taking and sense-endowing activity will itself be understandable under **(p.30)** terms that describe and reflect the lives of both the subjects and the constructors of historical narratives. At least at higher levels of description, where long-term, multiple-agent complex projects are in

view, reflective discernment of what is going on within the lives of historical subjects will draw on a sense of what is going on at present within the lives of retrospective narrators, and vice versa. As Jörn Rüsen usefully puts it, "the formative sense is something that lies on this side of the distinction between the facticity and the fictionality of narration. The *res factae* and the *res fictae* cannot be divided into two distinct domains: here history-writing and there 'beautiful' literature. Undeniably, both the *res factae* and the *res fictae* are essential for both domains, since 'sense' as a factor of orientation is only formed through reference to both domains,"[45] at least as long as there are large, shared fundamental problems of human life. An imaginative sense of what it makes sense to do or say now is informed by an historical sense of what it has made sense to do or say then, and vice versa. History writing is of course more fact-governed than fiction. It makes sense to criticize a fiction for implausibility––this is the stuff of writers' workshops––but not for factual error about stipulated action. In contrast, stipulation that something was done is not available for history writing, which must take facts as they can be discerned into view. But this discernment is always also shaped and situated by appeal to an imaginatively formed sense of what was done (including the formation of action descriptions and practical causal relations among actions).

But are there fundamental, continuing problems of human life that are addressed via long-term, multiple-agent complex projects? Or is it rather the case that appeal to shared habits and practices of sense-making is overwhelmed by the sheer particularity of various quite divergent problems and practices at hand in distinct historical situations? Here Rüsen, developing his view, poignantly argues that **(p.31)** the anticipatory experience of death on the part of a finite, temporally conscious and self-conscious being figures ineliminably in the construction of historical narratives as sense-determining factors of orientation.

> The basic experience of natural time as a repeated, unintended alteration of man and world, which essentially affects the human course of life [as, for example, in earthquakes, volcanoes, diseases, and so forth] manifests itself most clearly in the experience of death. . . . Narration is then the manner in which, beyond the experience of natural time, sense is formed, with a view to an intentionally drafted time of human self-retrieval by means of active intervention in the experienced alterations of man and world. Narrative transforms natural time into human time, on the level of the orientation of actions. One could also say: narration is a mode by means of which, through linguistic actions, nature heals the wounds she has inflicted. . . . History is a structure of meaning for human beings, in that they relate their experiences of temporal changes in their world and in themselves to their need for self-reassurance (or identity-stabilization) throughout these changes; in this way they appropriate these experiences

and orient their actions and sufferings within time, as moves within time that is now intentionally organized.[46]

To what extent, if at all, are such claims credible? More sharply, what is meant by such large phrases as "time of human self-retrieval," "human time," "self-reassurance," and "identity-stabilization"? Can we reasonably believe that it is possible to take a stance on one's world, invest it with sense, achieve orientation, appropriate one's experience, and achieve confidence about what one is up to, all by means of historical narration? Consider again **(p.32)** Hegel's similar, only slightly less abstract description of the conditions of human life as involving "the harsh opposition between inner freedom and the necessity of external nature [and] the contradiction between the inherently dead concept and the full concreteness of life, between theory or subjective thinking, and objective existence and experience."[47] It is plausible enough that these oppositions "have not been invented at all by the subtlety of reflection or the pedantry of philosophy, [and that] in numerous forms they have always preoccupied and troubled the human consciousness."[48] Thought and choice take place within and must confront developing courses of both material and social life that are far from transparent and conflict-free. But are these oppositions effectively addressable, and addressable, moreover, in ways the reasonableness of which persons differently situated are able to recognize, endorse, and perhaps learn from, if they latch on to what is going on? Or are these oppositions—abstractly universal though they are—rather always essentially locally experienced, with little or no possibility of mutual historical intelligibility across boundaries of significant difference? Try to resolve these oppositions though we may, so as to achieve freedom in the Hegelian sense as "being with oneself in another"[49]–– that is, being at home within the experience of these oppositions, now themselves regrasped as meaningful and intelligible—we may in the end find nothing but locality, difference, and mutual unintelligibility.

But then, too, there are the facts of action and deliberation (socially embodied and implicit) in the face of these abstract universal oppositions. Action and deliberation are not simple material happenstances, comparable to the leaves on deciduous trees changing color as the number of hours of daylight diminishes. Reflectiveness and appeals to moral images of the world, however implicit, are part of the structure of human action and mediate our responses as deliberative agents to our environments.

(p.33) What is needed, then, in order to hold together a sense of human beings as deliberative agents, capable of reflection, on the one hand, and a sense of the standing force of forms of opposition, on the other, is an image of history as the embodiment of reasonable, but deeply contested and contestable responsiveness to an ideal of the overcoming of these abstract oppositions. An image of history is not a theory. It does not support either prediction of historical events or efforts at expert management of historical processes based on a grasp of laws of

history, working themselves out independently of the open deliberative grasps of possibilities that human beings sometimes manage. Nor is its content fixed "behind our backs" by some transhuman presiding agency. Instead, it must be elicited out of historical experience, and it functions both to enable retrospective intelligibility and to figure in further, open, imaginative efforts to resolve oppositions and to move toward the accomplishment of human freedom as reasonable and meaningful individual and joint social life. An image of history, generated imaginatively from within an experience of history, elaborates at an abstract level forms of reflective attention to and narration and assessment of historical experience, hence structuring a field for subsequent political and moral imagination.

1.5. Constructivist Realism and Opposed Substantive Ideals in Kant and Benjamin

Deeply complementary, yet also deeply opposed, constructivist-realist images of history, generated imaginatively from within historical experience, yet functioning, too, as moral images of the world that might obscurely but genuinely inform historical progress but do not legislate it, are what Kant and Benjamin each offer **(p.34)** us at the deepest strata of their writings.[50] They produce, moreover, specific textual forms that model for us possibilities of our attention to historical experience and of attention to political projects, each form of attention bootstrapping the other. They write about history, one might say, in open anticipation of freedom as the reconciliation of oppositions. As Yirmiahu Yovel puts it, commenting specifically on Kant, but in a formulation that applies equally to Benjamin,

> it is clear that the immanent goals of reason must be understood as they are projected by the rational subject who explicates his own structure in them, and not as merely discovered or assumed by him, as ready-made goals. . . . [The] further reshaping of the world is to be accomplished in time and through the cooperation of generations; it is the final end of history and equally that of creation or existence itself. If . . . philosophy can furnish existence with an ideal meaning or a justifying *telos*, it can do so only from the viewpoint of moral history and not as part of the world's actual ontology. The final end of the world is not inherent in it *per se*, as in a thing in itself; it is projected on it by man's moral consciousness and is realized by his praxis in history. The process of moral praxis unites man and nature by both remolding and transcending their actual existence in light of a rational ideal, thus introducing into human experience the only possible justification of its existence.[51]

Yet while they are deeply in agreement with one another in their constructivist-realist procedures for the historical generation of moral images of the world, Kant and Benjamin are quite evidently opposed to one another in certain specific claims about historical experience in relation to political ideals. Kant **(p.35)**

notoriously rejects a right to revolution against unjust authorities, arguing that a people suffering under injustice is entitled only to make public complaints and arguments, in the hopes of reforming existing political institutions from within. They may "oppose … injustice by complaints (*gravamina*) but not by resistance."[52] Moral self-criticism on the part of both authorities and political subjects, not revolutionary action, is the primary vehicle of human self-improvement, and this moral self-criticism must be both disciplined by principle and respectful of existing civil institutions. In contrast, Benjamin urges revolution, and he undertakes to uncover both the motivation for it and the proper content of its political ideals in the distorted dream images of public life that are manifest in the architectural forms and social practices of nineteenth-century Paris. By decoding the latent content of these manifest-content public dream images, a contemporary audience might be helped to see and feel both what it has always already wanted without quite knowing it and what is now possible for it. The decoding will require not discipline and deference, but attention to material-sensuous life, fugitive attachments, and veiled eroticisms. Appropriate political action will be revolutionary, anarchic, and ecstatically celebratory. As Benjamin describes his own way of thinking in a famous letter to Gershom Scholem, "To proceed in the most important things always radically, never consistently would be my disposition, if I were ever one day to join the Communist Party, something which I in turn let depend on a final impulse of accident."[53] Here impulse, accident, and felt responsiveness to the particular displace discipline and attachment to institutions as the primary vehicles of historical progress. Benjamin's scorn for the social democrats and their careful attempts to design new institutions in accordance with a putatively more objective understanding of history knows no bounds.

(p.36) Opposition in the historical vehicles of development toward freedom is matched by opposition in substantive political ideals. Kant favors political proceduralism or the institution of fair civil procedures, overseen by institutions, for the resolution of disagreements, thus replacing violence and revenge with justice. The contemporary liberal tradition, including John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, takes a similar stance. Benjamin favors self-conscious political responsiveness and intimacy in the joint carrying out of a revolutionary project. The contemporary tradition of radical political criticism in the name of enhanced grounded meaningfulness, including Judith Butler and Giorgio Agamben, moves in this direction.

In fact, however, there are good reasons to take seriously both thick responsiveness to felt experience and liberal proceduralism. As Raymond Geuss argues against proceduralist liberalism, "discipline and good order may be excellences of a human society; spontaneity, noncoerciveness, and tolerance may also be excellences. It may, however, be no more than a pious wish, an infantile fantasy, or an ideological delusion to think that all of these properties could even in principle be maximally instantiated in the same society at the same time."[54]

Human beings may have little clear idea what they want, and they may well prefer attention to the somewhat inchoate particularities of their experience to the existence of abstract fair procedures that may seem to take no account of just who they are. Arguably, it is a mistake "to ignore or blank out history, sociology, *and the particularities that constitute the substance of any recognizable form of human life*."[55] Some thought of this kind is a staple of important claims to recognition on the part of those who have not been able to identify with the normal procedures of stable political orders as they have existed. Without a politics of the cultivation of the attentive recognition of the thick doings, sufferings, and achievements of different **(p.37)** particular agents, procedural institutional politics is likely to collapse into factionalism, in involving a failure to see different agents as leading human lives within their spheres in a reasonable way, but against the grain of public procedures for conferring rewards and recognitions. Ignorance of experienced meaningful intensities is likely to breed contempt and oppression, and consciousness-raising that attends to such experienced intensities can help to undo ignorance.

But then we are also scarcely likely to do well politically if we simply drop the thought, as Rawls puts it, that "justice is the first virtue of social institutions."[56] If we try to do without fair procedures, neutral with respect to substantive conceptions of the good that are held by individuals, and seek to rely instead on nothing more than open mutual responsiveness without settled institutional frameworks of good enough cooperation, then mutual ignorance, self-seeking, chaos, and violence are at least as likely to arise as any form of significant political reciprocity.

What is needed politically then, instead of one-sided emphasis on either thick social communication or impartial procedures of justice are the courage, attentiveness, and resoluteness to accept our historical indigence and to see that we are in need of both fair procedures and attentive understanding of particular experiences. More important, despite their substantive disagreements about fruitful political practice, both Kant and Benjamin, drawing on their forms of constructivist-realism, appreciate the need for and develop just such forms of courage, attentiveness, and resoluteness. Rather than standing only on political ideals abstractly conceived, they each conceive of philosophy or the pursuit of human self-understanding as a form of historically developed critique that must be responsive to both the need for institutions and the importance of particular experience for a sense of felt identity. Kant accepts that human beings do and will differ in their **(p.38)** substantive conceptions of the good, and he urges moves toward substantive reciprocity—that is, toward a moral culture of mutual attention and engagement—above and beyond the installation of the institutions of liberal political society. Benjamin accepts the importance of political organization—however sketchy his anticipations of it may be—and he urges the conscious construction of a new society rather than either a return to any ruder state of nature or a leap into life beyond the political. For both Kant and

Benjamin, both the construction of political institutions and improvisatory political imagination matter, and the relevant construction and imagination are to be informed by historical understanding that brings together political ideals and real possibilities.

As Kant describes his conception of philosophy as historical critique in "The Transcendental Doctrine of Method" in *The Critique of Pure Reason*,

> it is first possible for us to glimpse the idea in a clearer light and to outline a whole architectonically, in accordance with the ends of reason, only after we have long collected the relevant cognitions rhapsodically like building materials and worked through them technically with only a hint from an idea lying hidden within us.[57]

That is, as we come to terms critically with history, seeking orientation in the articulation of political ideals, we can neither begin from intuitions or first principles that remain fixed nor fail to draw on a conception of freedom that we already possess only inchoately within our actual experience.

Likewise, there could scarcely be a better description of Benjamin's working procedure than "collecting the relevant cognitions rhapsodically and working them through technically with only a hint from an idea." Or as Benjamin himself puts it, **(p.39)**

> Resolute refusal of the concept of "timeless truth" is in order. Nevertheless, truth is not—as Marxism would have it—a merely contingent function of knowing, but is bound to a nucleus of time lying hidden within the knower and the known alike. This is so true that the eternal, in any case, is far more the ruffle on a dress than some idea.[58]

Though he criticizes here the thought that truth is to be found in an idea, Benjamin evidently here construes *idea* in a subjective psychological sense, as in "just having an idea." The nucleus of time hidden within the knower and the known in fact strongly resembles an idea in a Kantian sense, as something that obscurely underlies and informs knowing activity in both the knower and in the other who is to be understood. Human beings, according to Kant, are always already undertaking to live freely, in Kant's rich sense of freedom, without, however, quite knowing fully how to do this. Since, however, for Benjamin as for Kant, the idea of freedom lies hidden, it must be brought into articulated presence by critical work on historical materials at hand, so as to make evident how it is experienced, in distorted form, within the knower and known alike. Or, as Benjamin adds, " 'The truth will not run away from us,' reads one of Keller's epigrams. He thus formulates the concept of truth from which these presentations break away."[59] That is, the truth *can* run away from us, if we fail actively and critically to engage with it, bringing our ideal of human freedom into play. But this ideal must, in turn, engage with the historical materials. It

cannot be articulated in a way that will be fruitful—that is, that will engage with and resonate with the motivations of existing human beings—if it is presented apodictically as an abstract formula. The historical material must be engaged with; "the unconscious of the collective" and the "trace it has left in a thousand configurations of life"[60] must be attentively deciphered. **(p.40)** Or, to return to Kant's formulation, the building materials must be worked through technically, with only a hint from an idea lying within us. Neither the moment of immersion in the materials nor the moment of active contribution from the critically interpreting subject may be leaped over. The Absolute cannot be shot out of a cannon.

Hence Kant and Benjamin share an overall sense of meaningful life, including independence blended with reciprocity and satisfaction, as to be achieved within nature, through the human formation of culture, both political and aesthetic. Yet they also share a sense of the indigence of the human in the face of this task, as human beings remain locked in antagonisms of both opposed needs and rivalry for mastery, as far as any direct empirical evidence from history shows. Kant, looking on the results of the historical attempts at exercises of pure reason, finds "edifices to be sure, but only in ruins."[61] Human beings have failed to grasp their situation and their possibilities and powers of meaning-making, but have instead contented themselves with violence and its rationalization according to dogmatic theories. Benjamin's angel looking back on history sees "one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet."[62] While a telos of redeemed humanity retains its force for both Kant and Benjamin, there is no concrete, detailed path toward it that is either evident or unbroken, and there is no superintending providence that guarantees any progress. God is thought of as a bare possibility of redemption rather than as any superintending or intervening agent. Productive developments will require transformation resulting from a redirection of reason and of our powers of meaning-making, in what Kant calls "a revolution in the disposition of the human being"[63] and what Benjamin conceives of as political revolution.

 (p.41) Grasping and acting on our hitherto blocked powers of meaning-making is figured by both Kant and Benjamin as a Copernican turn, involving looking to our own flawed doings and the powers that underlie them, with a view to their radical reorientation, rather than either to any external authority or to any simply given historical facts. We might do better, as Kant puts it, if we followed Copernicus, who "made the observer revolve and left the stars at rest,"[64] where following Copernicus means attending to our powers and developing courses of life. Benjamin writes that

> the Copernican revolution in historical perception is as follows. Formerly it was thought that a fixed point had been found in "what has been," and one saw the present engaged in tentatively concentrating the forces of knowledge on this ground. Now this relation is to be overturned, and what

has been is to become the dialectical reversal—the flash of awakened consciousness. Politics attains primacy over history.[65]

In both cases, what is to be grasped and put into effective work is the priority of the practical—that is, our genuine practically significant self-understanding and powers, achieved in relation to critical history—over any theorizing about standing, simple material givens.

Similarly, both Kant and Benjamin use images of awakening to characterize figuratively the sort of turn in our practical powers that is required. Kant warns against "the slumber of an imagined conviction, such as a merely one-sided illusion produces";[66] skepticism effectively awakes us from such a slumber, but then must itself be overcome through an effectively delimited use of reason in the practice of critique. "Long practice"[67] will be required before we are able effectively to determine just what we are able to know and how. **(p.42)** Benjamin, drawing on the opening scene of *Á la recherche du temps perdu*, writes that "just as Proust begins the story of his life with an awakening, so must every presentation of history begin with awakening; in fact, it should treat of nothing else."[68]

Finally, both Kant and Benjamin stage their own writings as imaginative, conjectural engagements with the materials of history, introduced in order to promote awakening and modeled on the structure of a fairy tale, in which we, the readers, are placed in a position of emerging, self-conscious maturity, insofar as we respond to what has taken place. "Once upon a time" ("Es war eine Zeit"), Kant tells us, "metaphysics was called the queen of all the sciences";[69] now is the time for "an incipient transformation and enlightenment" [*einer nahen Umschaffung und Aufklärung*] of the currently prevailing chaos.[70] An early working title for Benjamin's Arcades project was "Pariser Passagen: Eine dialektische Feerie."[71] By casting our eyes, guided by the text, on what goes on in this fairyland, we are to come into our epistemic and political maturity.

Despite, however, these overwhelming similarities in both their overall conceptions of philosophy as historical critique and their figurations of how critique might be carried out, there remain striking differences between Kant and Benjamin: most notably Kant's commitment to the individual-driven moral reform of existing political institutions, cultural practices, and individual courses of action against Benjamin's interest in collective revolution, and Kant's commitment to laws of practical reason against Benjamin's attentions to what is fugitive and half-dreamt in experience. If, according to both Kant and Benjamin, political ideals and historical understanding are to bootstrap one another, in the interest of our moving toward epistemic and political maturity and toward more meaningful life, there are **(p.43)** at the very least significant divergences between them about exactly how bootstrapping historical critique might best be carried out and what its concrete fruits might be. How might we, as the

amphibious animals we are, best develop and pursue historically a moral image of the world? It is time to look more closely and systematically at the details.

Notes:

(1.) Morton White, *Foundations of Historical Knowledge* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), pp. 126, 125.

(2.) Ibid., p. 126.

(3.) Alan Megill, "Is There Moral Progress in History?" in *British Abolitionism and the Question of Moral Progress in History*, ed. Donald A. Yerxa (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2013), pp. 154–62 at pp. 159–60, 161.

(4.) Arthur C. Danto, *Narration and Knowledge*, 3d. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 15.

(5.) Marcus Völkel, *Geschichtsschreibung* (Köln: Böhlau, 2006).

(6.) Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), p. 292.

(7.) Ibid., pp. 282–83.

(8.) See Ibid., pp. 268inf.

(9.) G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art*, Vol. 1, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1998), pp. 53–54.

(10.) Reinhart Koselleck, "Fragen zu den Formen der Geschichstschreibung," in *Formen der Geschichtsschreibung*, eds. Reinhart Koselleck, Heinrich Lutz, Jörn Rüsen (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch, 1982), pp. 9–13 at p. 11; my translation.

(11.) Dieter Henrich, *Aesthetic Judgment and the Moral Image of the World*, ed. Eckart Förster, trans. David Pacini, Hans Sluga, Wayne Martin, Sven Bernecker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), pp. 4–5.

(12.) Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube and C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992), 517bc, p. 189.

(13.) Anthony J. Cascardi, *The Subject of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1992), p. 6.

(14.) Henrich, *Aesthetic Judgment and the Moral Image of the World*, p. 4.

(15.) Max Weber, "Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy," in Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, ed. and trans. Edward A. Shils and Harry A. Finch (New York, Free Press, 1949), pp. 44–112 at p. 57.

(16.) Rudolf A. Makkreel, *Orientation and Judgment in Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), pp. 166–67; see also p. 83.

(17.) Stefan Deines, Stephan Jaeger, and Ansgar Nünning, "Subjektivierung von Geschichte(n)—Historisierung von Subjekten. Ein Spannungsverhältnis in gegenwärtigen Theoriediskurs," in Deines, Jaeger, Nünning, eds. *Historisierte Subjekte—Subjektivierte Historie: Zur Verfügbarkeit und Unverfügbarkeit von Geschichte* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003), pp. 1–24 at p. 3; my translation.

(18.) Danto, *Narration and Knowledge*, p. 117.

(19.) Ibid., p. 11.

(20.) G. P. Baker and P. M. S. Hacker, *Language, Sense and Nonsense* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), p. 257.

(21.) Danto, *Narration and Knowledge*, p. 160.

(22.) Ibid., p. 225.

(23.) See Ibid., p. 166.

(24.) Ibid., p. 156.

(25.) Ibid., p. 158.

(26.) See J. L. Mackie, *The Cement of the Universe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 62 ff., and Mackie, "Causes and Conditions," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2 (1965), pp. 245–64. Compare also White, *Foundations of Historical Knowledge*, pp. 63, 65.

(27.) Nancy Cartwright, *The Dappled World: A Study of the Boundaries of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 27–28.

(28.) Georg Henrik von Wright, *Explanation and Understanding* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), p. 72.

(29.) One might call this position empirical realism and transcendental idealism about physical causal relations, but that would be rather a mouthful.

(30.) von Wright, *Explanation and Understanding*, p. 74.

(31.) Ibid. Plausibly, again, some causal relations just *do obtain* independently of any human actions or even of the existence of human beings. The force of attraction between any two bodies of mass M_1 and M_2 just is described correctly by the gravitational equation (under suitable very broad boundary conditions), no matter how we may or may not have arrived at formulating it. Hence von Wright's claim is better understood *not* as a claim about what all causal

statements *mean*, but rather as a claim about the historical conditions under which we came to formulate the concept of a cause. Contra von Wright, the content of that concept can and does vary from the content that appeared in our original formulation of it.

(32.) See Donald Davidson, "Mental Events," in Davidson, *Essays on Action and Events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 207–24 at pp. 221–22.

(33.) von Wright, *Explanation and Understanding*, p. 115.

(34.) With respect to history writing in particular, Frank Ankersmit has developed at length a similar view, holding that "the light of historical narrative truth is produced by carefully constructed and extensively discussed historical representations of the past," where what he calls *representational truth* is distinguished from propositional truth (as correspondence) by its focus on the presentation of *aspects* of things. (Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth, and Reference in Historical Representation* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012], p. 112.) This is right-minded, even if Ankersmit also wavers somewhat uneasily between a stronger, antirealist sense of "produce," derived from Nelson Goodman, and a sense of truth as disclosure of what is there, derived from Heidegger. Where Ankersmit develops a general, metaphysical account of aspects and representational truth, I focus more on explanation and the nature of human action.

(35.) J. L. Austin, "Truth," in Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, eds. J. O. Urmson, G. J. Warnock (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), pp. 117– at p. 126.

(36.) von Wright, *Explanation and Understanding*, p. 137.

(37.) Ibid., p. 107.

(38.) Ibid., p. 109.

(39.) Notably, both Arthur Danto, while focusing on the holistic character of relevant act descriptions, and Morton White, while acknowledging the ineliminable role of point of view in identifying decisive contributory causes, both adopt a hypothetico-deductive model of explanation and require that law-formulations be in principle available in any adequate explanations of actions. They do so, however, without supplying any examples of relevant law-formulations and without looking in detail either at the absence of the possibilities of controlled conditions and increasing precision of measurement in history or at the logical structure of how we do explain actions under practical syllogisms. The inference is unavoidable that they are overly impressed, without argument, with the thesis that all events in nature are closed under physically causal laws and so with the authority of physics as setting *the* paradigm for all explanation and understanding. While adopting that thesis is productive for and

arguably essential to serious natural scientific experimental work, its extension to a thesis covering everything in nature, including human action, is at least dubitable.

(40.) Michael Scriven, "Explanations, Predictions, and Laws," *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science II*, eds. H. Feigl and G. Maxwell (1962), pp. 170–230; reprinted in *Theories of Explanation*, ed. Joseph C. Pitt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 51–74 at pp. 65, 68.

(41.) Ibid., p. 73n17.

(42.) Koselleck, "Fragen zu den Formen der Geschichtsschreibung," p. 13.

(43.) Ibid.; my translation.

(44.) Weber, "Die 'Objektivität' sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Kenntnis," in Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wisenschaftslehre,* ed. Johannes Winckelmann, 7th. ed. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr Verlag: 1988), p. 180; my translation.

(45.) Jörn Rüsen, "Die vier Typen des historischen Erzählens," in Rüsen, *Formen der Geschichtsschreibung*, pp. 514–65 at p. 526; my translation.

(46.) Ibid., pp. 521, 523; Rüsen, "Geschichtsschreibung as Theorieproblem der Geisteswissenschaft. Skizze zum historischen Hintergrund der gegenwärtigen Diskussion," in Rüsen, *Formen der Geschichstschreibung*, pp. 14–35 at pp. 27–28; my translation.

(47.) Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art*, Vol. 1, pp. 53–54.

(48.) Ibid.

(49.) For versions of this Hegelian formula for freedom, see Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), §§7, 7A, p. 42; Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind*, trans. William Wallace and A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), §382A, pp. 15–15; and Hegel, *The Encyclopedia Logic*, trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991), §24A3, pp. 61–62.

(50.) "Constructivist realism" indicates that both (1) the full content of relevant moral and political ideals is not given but must be constructed through the use of our rational and reflective powers, and (2) those ideals are also dimly legible within human historical life regarded critically. Compare Paul Guyer's characterization of Kant's views about history and morality: "As sensuous creatures we can … take hope from actual moments in our history, and thus be encouraged to work even harder toward our moral goal. But nothing outside our own choice can guarantee the realization of our goal, and we would delude

ourselves and undermine our efforts to be moral if we thought otherwise.... [Human beings] must exercise their freedom and reason *through* their nature and not independently of it" (Guyer, *Kant* [London: Routledge, 2006], pp. 371, 254.)

(51.) Yirmiahu Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 18, 79.

(52.) Immanuel Kant, *Die Metaphysik der Sitten*, ed. Hans Ebeling (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1990), Ak VI, 319, p. 177; Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals* , in Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Ak VI, 319, pp. 353–604 at p. 462.

(53.) Walter Benjamin, "Letter to Gershom Scholem, 29 Mai 1926," in Benjamin, *Briefe* I, ed. Gerschom Scholem and Theodor. W. Adorno (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1966), p. 425; my translation.

(54.) Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 83.

(55.) Ibid., pp. 59–60; emphasis added.

(56.) John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, original edition (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1978), p. 3.

(57.) Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), A834-5=B862-3, p. 692; substituting "rhapsodically" for "haphazardly," in accordance with "rhapsodistisch"); *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, ed. Raymund Schmidt (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1956), A834-5=B862-3, p. 750.

(58.) Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. and trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), N 3, 2, p. 463.

(59.) Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band 5, Vol. 1, ed. Rolfe Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), N 3a, 1, p. 579; my translation; cp. Ibid., p. 463.

(60.) Benjamin, "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century," in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 3, 1935–1938, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, and others (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 32–49 at p. 34; *Gesammelte Schriften* 5, 1, p. 47.

(61.) Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A852=B880, p. 702.

(62.) Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4, 1938–1940, Thesis IX, pp. 389–400 at p. 392.

(63.) Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* , in Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, ed. and trans. Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 39–216 at p. 92; Kant, *Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der Bloßen Vernunft*, VI: 47.

(64.) Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Bxvi, p. 10.

(65.) Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, K1, 2, pp. 388–89; *Gesammelte Schriften* V, 490.

(66.) Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A407=B434, p. 460.

(67.) Ibid., B2, p. 136.

(68.) Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* N4,3, p. 464; *Gesammelte Schriften* V, 580.

(69.) Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Aviii, p. 99; *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Aviii, p. 5.

(70.) Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Ax, p. 100; *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Aviii, Ax, p. 6.

(71.) Rolf Tiedemann, "Dialectics at a Standstill," in Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, pp. 929–45 at p. 932.

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