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The fate of universal history: on the task of philosophy of history between Kant and Benjamin

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**THE FATE OF UNIVERSAL HISTORY:
ON THE TASK OF PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY BETWEEN KANT AND BENJAMIN**

A Dissertation Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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DEDICATION

To so many wonderful teachers, who, together, opened up philosophy and the world to me; to Rick, for the complete gift of an apprenticeship in perpetuity; to the friends, who either from the beginning or somewhere along the way shared in that winding path from youthful curiosity to a life's devotion; to my family, those very dear ones that remain and those unforgettable ones, who passed before the time of this project's end; to Ashley, for giving more patience, love, and support than one person could reasonably ask from another; and, to my mother, who not only gave me this life, but reminds me to try to make it worth living, too—my gratitude overflows and I can only speak these words in return, *thank you.*

HAMM: I love the old questions.
(With fervour.)
Ah the old questions, the old answers, there's
nothing like them!

– Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*

Everything that happens may be meaningless, fragmentary, and sad, but it is always irradiated by hope or memory. And hope here is not an abstract artifact, isolated from life, spoilt and shopworn as the result of its defeat by life: it is a part of life; it tries to conquer life by embracing and adorning it, yet it is repulsed by life again and again. And memory transforms the continual struggle into a process which is full of mystery and interest and yet is tied with indestructible threads to the present, the unexplained instant.

– György Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*

INTRODUCTION

ON PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY, MODERNITY, AND THE IDEA OF HISTORY

Postmodernism, like so much of the history of modernity, already appears obsolete, inasmuch as it, too, has been consigned to the heap of outmoded, past due, unrealized, or simply failed attempts either to transcend or walk away from the modernist horizons of theory and praxis.¹ Nevertheless, even for its most ardent critics, postmodernism must be granted at least one unambiguous victory that still abides, that is, the thorough disenchantment of the seemingly ancient relic of modernist philosophy, namely, the theory of universal history. After the postmodern invective, universal history no longer names the philosophical account of the object, history, as the actually existing context in which we encounter and question of the meaning of the human being, but only as the speech act of a meta-discursive legitimation, that is, *the grand narrative*. If I am to contest this lasting victory of an otherwise largely outmoded philosophical program, it is from no disdain for the postmodernism that was. Rather, the motivation arises from a perceived danger in the one element of postmodernism that was all too easy to carry

¹ This term “postmodernism,” of course, has its own brief history of contestations concerning both the extent of its philosophical import and its exact social and historical connotations. The postmodernism that I consider here, however, refers to the meaning of the concept that Jean-François Lyotard formulated in his 1979 text, *The Postmodern Condition*. Lyotard’s portrayal of postmodernism memorialized a defining indictment of modernism in the figure of *the grand narrative*. Yet, the postmodern condition also approaches a de-historicized condition in the extreme, since it flattens history as both the ontological question of *the past* itself and the epistemological questions of the apprehension or cognition thereof. In postmodernism, the past appears as the arbitrary content of a specifically linguistic register in the present, namely, in such modes as speech-act theory and narrativity. Following his account of modernism inside the postmodern context, Lyotard only negatively defines postmodernism under the moniker of an *incredulity to meta-narratives* (Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis, MN: University Of Minnesota Press, 1984 (xxiii-xxiv). Lyotard thus stakes the very meaning of postmodernism against the modernist penchant for philosophy of history, which he identifies as one such, if not the primary, discursive practice of the grand narrative’s legitimation.

forward alongside modernity's short returns. In other words, as postmodernism comes to prominence by signaling modernity's inability to cash its own checks—modernity's failure to realize a new time distinguished by the historically developed, universal flourishing of the human species—postmodernism also threatens to evacuate any aspirational element from the philosophical contemplation of history altogether. For the postmodern critic, modernity *tout court* fails as the promise of another time in history, that is, a time other than that of the present. In the face of that loss and the ensuing historical fragmentation of the present vis-à-vis its history, it would seem all too easy and even potentially dangerous to return to a forward looking modernism that has otherwise lost an account of its history as its own—a history of missed or covered-over hopes to which it has not yet answered. To return to modernity again, 'post postmodernism', as it were, demands the relocation of another historical time emerging in that of the present, since, without such an effort, the claim of modernity stands to become quite meaningless or, at least, no more meaningful than any other antagonistically wagered claim given in the present. In this way, the philosophical interpretation of the relationships tethering the present and its past—as this is the object of philosophy of history in general—can work to uncover an indexing of the aspirational meaning of modernity itself.

If we are to return to philosophy of history as a definitively modernist philosophical task that unites theory and praxis in an account of history's universality, that does not mean we must dig postmodernism a grave deeper than the one that the actual persistence of modernist historical tensions has already assigned it. Yet, such a return to the modernist philosophy of history cannot simply assume to shake off the wounds and the historically persisting violence that are inextricably woven into the concepts proper to universal history, such as appears all too clearly the case, for example, among the concepts of the human, culture, and civilization in relationship

to the history of colonialism.² In light of its own history, a return to philosophy of history requires a dedicated, theoretical inquiry into the actuality of the underlying problem to which universal history emerges as an answer, even if it is an ‘old one’. Such an exigency for interpretation stands far apart from sketching some renewed content to a not-yet, future prosperity, that is, some end of a history that is still to come. Instead, in the face of modernity’s damaged yet irrefutable persistence, interpretation must look to the distinctly historical claims that endure in the idea of universal history itself, so as to better understand both the claim to which it is responsible and the power of philosophy of history to respond.

To put it simply, it would seem that all critical inquiries into universal history must begin with one and the same question: what is that apparently universal web in which history remains ensnared as a modern thing?—the historical consciousness of the human’s self-consciousness, or the effect of some *deus absconditus* sealed in a natural providence, or the historically natural(ized) values of liberal democracy, or the material spell of capital’s socially effected necessity? Each of the above are possible, although mutually exclusive responses, insofar as each would articulate the process or mechanisms through which chaotically splintered particulars become an integrated, complex plurality of some history in the singular. The veracity of each

² In an effort related to this one, Antonio Y Vázquez-Arroyo has done an admirable job of showing the persistence of the need to confront and to interpret the shadow and legacy of universal history in postcolonial theory. Instead of simply denouncing universal history to dispense with it, Vázquez-Arroyo shows the relevance of a “negative universal history,” a concept he adopts from T.W. Adorno, at the intersection of postcolonial theory and critical theory (see: Antonio Y Vázquez-Arroyo, “Universal history disavowed: on critical theory and postcolonialism.” *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 4, 2008 (451-473).) In addition, Amy Allen has also critically explored and isolated the persistence of narratives of progress in the second and third generations of Frankfurt School critical theory from a “decolonial” standpoint, although she takes up that problematization of progress apart from any philosophical inquiry into universal history as a theory of history itself (see: Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016.). While this dissertation does not extend into a treatment the many problems surrounding this specific intersection of universal history and declonial thought, it does share in Vázquez-Arroyo’s fundamental insight from Adorno, namely, that universal history ought to be “disavowed” or critically repudiated, but it cannot simply be disappeared, such that it should be answered with interpretation and critically tracked.

response does not belong to the future it illuminates, but to the account it supplies as to how this thing, *history*, is given, that is, how history emerges into and as the present. In the first instance, then, universal history responds to the claim of history's inheritance in the present and the extent to which that inheritance either attains or implies a need for the achievement of a rounded *historical universality*. And, since no known possibility to access to the thought of historical universality exists outside of history, that claim of historical universality can only emerge from *society* as a basic point of intersection—a locus that names the condition for the possibility of thinking history itself—whereby the present finds itself either more or less unified with that which preceded it and conditions it, that is, the past.

From these basic stepping-stones, the essentially modernist horizons of universal history take shape through the very nature of this problem of historical universality. Universal history, moreover, remains a modernist endeavor, as long as it seeks to reconcile the claim of historical universality with the present in which it appears. To respond affirmatively to the claim of historical universality does not imply a celebration of the present, the past, or even some presumed continuity between the two. Rather, the resolve to respond to that claim of historical universality, namely, that every given present is the result of all that which precedes it, points to the task of philosophy of history, prior to the uncovering of specific principles of historical continuity and whatever attending method is adequate to present the process of that continuity's development in a theory. The task of furnishing an account of historical universality is, therefore, not a matter of selecting one genetic story among many possible stories from and about the past, but to account for a present social reality that swallows up all other realities (past and future) in the moment of its own existence.

In light of that claim of historical universality, to which philosophy of history responds, it should become clear that the criteria for an account of historical universality does not transpire in the living present in abstraction from the its other historical and temporal dimensions, but in its connection with the ossified traces of past historical particulars, on whose backs the historical unity (and, by extension, the discontinuities) of any present rests. Because the theoretical response to the claim of historical universality must always depart from such an intra-historical, social origin, all operations of critique in universal history culminate in the exercise of social critique. Indeed, social critique may be the only way that thought can differentiate, on the one hand, the positive accumulation and concentration of the past in the present as a socially specific organization of historical tensions from, on the other hand, the question of *how* that past still might appear otherwise than it is historically given. Theories of universal history must pass through these philosophical questions, in order to arrive at a fundamentally synthetic question at the heart of thinking historical universality, namely, the question of *how* the being of the past appears in the moment of its historically changing presence, i.e., the present itself. The uniquely unifying character of social critique in philosophy of history thus belongs to its focus on distinguishing the mode or the “how” something is given from the “what” is given, such that it might open up a path, if any, out of an idealist matrix of philosophical thought that would identify the *how* to the *what*, in order to justify modes of existence as properties of that which exists (such as it is often the case with concepts of spirit or mind (*Geist*) in philosophical idealism writ large). Throughout this dissertation, the success of philosophy of history is staked against that idealist proviso, since, as a premise, it would construe such a thorough identity of the past and its present that it would annul the very claim to which philosophy of history responds,

dispensing with any thought of the being of the past that might cut against the grain of its concentration in the present.

This introductory chapter offers an account of the historico-philosophical framework at play when approaching the object of history and, moreover, in what cases the claim of historical universality does or does not emerge as a responsibility that theory must acknowledge and on which it should strive to make good. The first and second chapters take up Immanuel Kant's plan for a theory of history as universal history. The guiding effort between those two chapters is to specify the sum of Kant's philosophical resources to account for the unity of history as an object that both does not rise to the rational and synthetic coherence of a theoretical concept and would also gainsay any application of a practical logic of willing to it. While the first chapter examines Kant's 1784 essay on universal history itself—the only text that Kant explicitly devotes to a theory of history—the following chapter takes up the place of the idea of universal history as it relates to Kant's critical philosophy, specifically considering its latent philosophical relationships to the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* and the *Critique of Pure Reason*. As a result of history's questionable status as an object of cognition, I develop an account of two different registers of truth in Kant's theory of universal history: one of progress that emerges from the development of history's social processes and another that refers to history's aspirational element that must be excluded or barred from the first, which is only saved in the articulation of the idea of historical universality itself. The second chapter answers to this bifurcation of truth in history by expounding it largely through the cognitive resources made available by the third *Critique*, i.e., reflective judgment, through which an account of the priority of the aspirational truth of the idea emerges as the predicating possibility for subsequent reflection on history's objective purposiveness and thereby the intelligibility of progress, too.

Yet, that is not to say that this solves the contradiction these two registers of truth still bear in their application to historical phenomena, since progress demands violence for the sake of historical development and the aspirational truth of the idea of historical universality—or, as Kant also calls it, the idea of happiness—refuses any possible justification of violence against historical phenomena. I argue that it is this aspirational link of historical appearances to the idea—the thought that the idea of historical universality is nothing other than the idea of the fulfillment and completion of phenomena—that becomes the measure and the guiding thread for the theorization of universal history.

The third chapter focuses on the Early German Romantic reception of the enlightenment aspirations for a theory of universal history in two closely related, yet, ultimately, incompatible thinkers, Friedrich Schiller and Friedrich Schlegel. On the one hand, this chapter deals with the particular meaning of the “romantic” interpretation of universal history, since both Schiller and Schlegel saw themselves as taking up Kant’s plan for a theory of history as universal history with a newfound, definitively “romantic” aspiration, namely, the realization of the absolute. Schiller and Schlegel, on the other hand, have mutually exclusive philosophical approaches to Kant’s understanding of universal history. Where Schiller sees universal history as an expressly moral problem and therewith a question of (moral) progress, Schlegel will stay closer to Kant’s specifically theoretical questioning of the idea of universal history, in order to articulate the fragmentary nature of such a thought of historical universality in the plainly historical world. The philosophical task, for Schlegel, concentrates into the effort to discern whether the problem of the *absolute fragmentation* of history could be reconciled with a concept of the fragment as such. If the problem of fragmentation lends itself to a conceptual unity that simply has not yet taken ground or not yet completed its progress in actuality, then Schlegel’s thought would appear

as if it were a merely incomplete idealism. Yet, to the contrary, if the problem of fragmentation is a problem because it disrupts and interrupts the coherence of a concept like *the fragment as such*, then the incompleteness that fragmentation wreaks on historical universality is not a rationally reconcilable one, that is, not an issue of some missing step in a rational sequence of conceptual necessity, but a general prohibition on such a concept that would reconcile given fragments into their missing universality in history. This is, admittedly, a thought brushing up against a looming fatalism. Schlegel's problematization of universal history, therefore, becomes a question of whether or not fragmenting historical processes, imbued as they are with an element of irrationality, might ever yield something other than (more) fragments. In the years of his early work prior to converting to Catholicism and his subsequent service in the court of Metternich—the years of Schlegel's work that are under consideration in this chapter (approximately 1796-1801)—the answer to the above question is a profound, *no*.

Schlegel repeatedly comes up against a block in the philosophical reflection of the unity of history's social processes, because he isolates history's only possible coherence inside the rational and teleological framework of historical self-consciousness and, in opposition, the absolute as such definitively escapes such internalization in consciousness. As a result, the idea of historical universality fails to show us anything more than the impossible possibility of historical consciousness reaching that which conditions it and remains external to it, namely, the ineffable being of the absolute. The fourth chapter picks up from the near collapse of theory in the face of the repeated, rising fragmentation of the plainly historical world, so as to ask what might become of philosophy of history in such a godforsaken world where universal history no longer appears quite tenable. This question reemerges with remarkable clarity and animating force throughout the 1916 text of György Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*. Lukács, an avid

reader of post-Kantian and romantic traditions in that text in particular, looks to the “novel form” of historical unity as a new form of articulating the plainly historical unity of historical life. While the aesthetic, representational form of the novel gives unity to the historical time of life, as Lukács critically notes, that form does not itself give form to history, such that it falls into and perpetuates the real historical problem of abstraction, out of which it finds no recourse. Though Lukács himself subsequently finds resources in Marxism after *Theory of the Novel* to critically elaborate that problem of abstraction, in that text he remains at a loss as to how any appeal to universality could rise from the ashes of the godforsaken world. For this reason, the second part of this chapter turns to Walter Benjamin’s *Theological-Political Fragment* as such a rescue attempt to retrieve the task of philosophy of history inside the metaphysical framework of a godforsaken, historical world, that is, to articulate the relationship of the profane existence of the historical world to the idea of happiness—a relationship that, for Benjamin, opens up the possibility of a specifically intra-historical context for the redemption of fallen, past, historical phenomena. What exactly redemption means in a godforsaken, historical world, however, is not yet entirely clear within the strict confines of the *Theological-Political Fragment* alone.

The fifth chapter endeavors to show how Walter Benjamin’s theory of the ideas accomplishes the implied undertaking of the previous chapter, that is, a materialist theory of universal history that preserves the possibility of the redemption of plainly historical, fallen phenomena. It must be admitted that the notion of a *materialist* universal history sounds like a bit of backwards turn of phrase. Nevertheless, the thought is perhaps less strange than it may first sound, if we acquiesce that the implementation of critique, particularly social critique, cannot proceed without reference to some kind of universality. For, otherwise, critique falters in the face of a merely accidental pool of unrelated, abstract, arbitrary intentions, at best, and, at

worst, it is put explicitly into the service of social practices of subjugation and capricious uses of violence. For Benjamin, that appeal to universality ultimately resides in the idea of happiness as an idea of the completing fulfillment of phenomena, such that all ideas as ideas must implicate and recall the shine (*Schein*) of happiness, in order to achieve that defining aspect of completeness or perfection proper to ideas as such. This last chapter begins with a reading of Benjamin's own account of his theory of the ideas as it appears in the "Erkenntniskritische Vorrede" ("Epistemo-critical Preface") to his 1926 *Habilitationschrift, Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* ("Origin of the German Mourning Play"). There Benjamin provides his fullest articulation of the meaning of the idea as constellation and it is also where he tasks theory with the presentation of the ideas, much like the task he gives to philosophy of history in the *Theological-Political Fragment* to present the idea of happiness in the profane existence of the historical world. The second part of this chapter takes that articulation of the theory of the ideas from the *Trauerspiel* book and reads it with Benjamin's last account of the task of philosophy of history in *On the Concept of History*. In that last essay we have from Benjamin, we see Benjamin come into explicit conflict with the historicist affiliation and alliance of the theory of universal history, while he, at the same time, attempts to make a rescue of the *messianic* nature of the idea of historical universality itself. This conflict with and against universal history can be explained through Benjamin's materialist account of the idea of universal history, which culminates in his understanding of the intra-historical, weak messianic power of the present as the presence of a historically determinant and determining past. On Benjamin's account the idea of historical universality is necessary to think this weak messianic power, because philosophy of history requires such a medium other than thought to think the metaphysical aspiration of historical phenomena to become otherwise than they are given in the present, such that this

claim—that which is to be redeemed, for Benjamin—can only gain appearance through theory’s presentation of the idea.

In the rest of this introduction, the investigation into universal history as the prevailing theoretical task of philosophy of history is prepared by way of a historico-philosophical framing of the specificity of universal history. The issue here is simply to ask for whom does the semblance of something *more* than history emerge from the immanent contemplation of mere, empirical history. The answer—and, perhaps, the only one possible—is us moderns. It is, therefore, a matter of universal history’s penchant for modernity, which unfolds the modernist tendency to locate history as the unifying site of theory and praxis. For even if the unity of history is borne out in praxis, one can only address it or speak about it with reference to theory. And, since praxis requires and needs theory to access and to clarify the principles of its own determination, the question of universal history remains one of theory throughout. In that direction, what seems *new* about the thought of universal history is the notion that historical occurrences and action in general could effect and lead to a completion and fulfillment of historical existence, such that modernity has long found its staunchest advocates among the proponents of a theory of universal history. Yet, modernity and philosophical modernism, in turn, only gain definition by reference to historical antecedents against which the promises of something new are drawn. As a result, if modernity did not imply such a conceptually necessary, internal relationship between the present and the past, history and the new, then modernity would, in short, be nothing.

* * *

As early as 1361, Nicholas of Oresme uses the French term *moderne* to distinguish his time from antiquity.³ He, however, did not yet thematize the term beyond the sense of the related Latin term, *recens*. This would happen almost exactly a century later as a result of the great methodological conflict between the practitioners of the *via moderna* (nominalist philosophy writ large) and those of the *via antiqua* (all those who upheld the ontological realism of universals). The *via moderna* did not just refer to something recent, but a *new* path, the *new* method, which gave rise to an entirely new image of a chaotic world filled to the brim with the blooming, buzzing confusion of untethered singulars and a divine will whose sheer omnipotence defined its own moral goodness (not per the intellect). Yet, even at this point in the mid-15th Century, no semantic substantialization of *the new* appears close to the connotations of the term “modernity.” Only after the wide application of the terms *Gothic* in later 16th Century English and the subsequent profusion of the term *Middle Ages* across Europe by the mid-18th Century did the nascent term *modernity* begin to suggest the meaning and historical sense of an epoch. This is not to suppose, however, that a philosophical understanding of modernity itself would result from such an archival enumeration of the various applications of these terms. What is at issue here is the fact that modernity’s recognition of itself through the definition of its antecedent epochs presupposes the very historico-philosophical work through which the new comes to light as a promise of something more than mere history in history.

Beyond periodization and philological exegesis stands the philosophical question of what it means for history to bear the sign of modernity. Modernity defines itself *in time*, in the course of its passing and its persistence. Though never simply to be swept along, modernity announces itself as the active, self-defining intra-historical production of a new time. Yet, there is no new,

³ Michael A. Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*. Chicago, IL: University Of Chicago Press, 2009 (3).

no passage of time into and out of itself without an attending understanding of historical time as finite. Finitude or transience thus shapes an ineliminable component of modernity's historical sense, because it already unfolds the evidently metaphysical question of that toward which history drives, if anything, under this basic stricture of historical time's finitude. In response, philosophical modernism signals a conceptually unifying articulation of history that gives orientation and context to the total array of historical forces in the nexus of their determination, i.e., in the social. This call to provide an account of the meaning of history by means of a conceptually unified account of history's processes of development signals the utterly unique, modernist task of philosophy of history that becomes the charge of universal history to philosophy of history.

To chart the emergence of this account and the theoretical project of universal history within modernity's own genesis is no small chore. Furthermore, it is a problem that has also been met with such tremendous efforts over the last century that a number of aspects of this problem go well beyond what is necessary for an introduction to this inquiry into the idea of universal history.⁴ That said, I will briefly rehearse the role of history in two quite distinct

⁴ Since at least the beginning of the 20th Century, the vast majority of this conversation has taken place in the discourse of "political theology." Insofar as political theology describes an investigation into the theological structure of secular, i.e., exclusively political concepts, it remains tied to the much debated historical narrative of secularization (which is an intellectual undertaking different in kind from a philosophical question of universal history). This thesis claims that all political concepts are mere 'secularizations' of their theological counterparts, such that their secularization is something done to them and against some homogeneously bound religious sphere that precedes all else historically. Yet, a paradox then emerges that uncovers an inevitable absurdity of the secularization narrative applied by Carl Schmitt in his 1922 text *Political Theology* and subsequently defended, though in no way improved, in Karl Löwith's *Meaning in History*. That is, in order for modern, exclusively political concepts to emerge as secularizations from a homogeneously religious system, that means there must always already have been an original, purely religious world, which was at some point de-sacrilized by pagans and then only later recovered in the translation of the pagan world into Christianity—even though such a line of development is even emphatically contradicted by almost all quotations of Jesus of Nazareth in the Christian New Testament, as the historical world, there, is always to be destroyed. Thus, in order to justify the secularization thesis's coherence, one must turn history into an explicitly theological, religious

philosophical contexts, so as to illustrate the definitively and exclusively modernist context of universal history proper.

I. History and the Antique Image of It

Antiquity holds an immense variety of historical writings, not merely at the level of style or proclivities in the approach to the subject matter, but forms of history that are different in kind. For example, Hesiod's mytho-poetic narratives surely perform a kind of history, insofar as a text like the *Theogony* displays a genetic story (μῦθος) that details how all things—the various

narrative, such that history itself utterly dissolves absent of anything like a conceptual account of actual historical processes. Hans Blumenberg, with his 1966 text, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, remains one of the first and most original critics of the utter philosophical incoherence of the secularization thesis. In the first part of that text, Blumenberg painstakingly details the incongruity and incoherence of any account of a simple metamorphosis of theological concepts into modern political concepts and thereby any notion of modernity as the mere result of a loss of tradition, let alone some arbitrarily supposed loss of transcendence's tenability. While Blumenberg in no way denies the existence of instances of religious elements of thought and practice becoming secularized—such as, for example, on the secularization of the Church's land property—he consistently opposes the use of the secularization narrative to explain and to define modernity itself, as Löwith does so emphatically (Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. Trans. Robert M. Wallace. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985 (21)). Schmitt's driving assumption that secularization appears as an incontrovertible historical result underpinning each and every possible political concept actually seems to arise out of a problematic misunderstanding of Max Weber's sociological theory of disenchantment and rationalization. Already describing the very pressure points that Blumenberg would later apply, Weber shows quite plainly in *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism* (1904-1905) that it is Lutheran theology that positively posits the secular world as a condition for its own religious practices and, moreover, that such Lutheran theology is devoid of anything like a politics (Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Trans. Talcott Parsons. Ed. Anthony Giddens. London, UK: Routledge, 2001 (41)). Blumenberg also quite convincingly demonstrates that the idea of modernity can only emerge in conversation with the pioneering claims from the modern scientific method and the historical possibilities they set up, namely, that of a general, human, rational progress of the domination of nature. In the end, Schmitt's fascination with the jargon of “the political” never gets beyond its problematic presupposition of a purely secular sphere in opposition to lost sphere of religious enchantment, the two of which remain externally and abstractly opposed. As a result, political theology appears somewhat bankrupt, insofar it cannot get beyond the secularization thesis without becoming something else altogether. Yannik Thiem has done an admirable job to excavate the concept of political theology itself, so as to make a reply to these problems through the works of Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida, whose philosophical works both admittedly transport the concept of political theology well beyond its articulation in Schmitt (see: Yannik Thiem, “Schmittian Shadows and Contemporary Theological-Political Constellations.” *Social Research: An International Quarterly*: Vol. 80, no. 1 (2013): 1–32.).

divine orders or governments of the cosmos and the races of human beings alike—originate from a single, original chaos. That first order of chaos, like all divine elements throughout the *Theogony*, is immediately overthrown by the order emerging out of its offspring, yet, although deposed, chaos still touches all that follows from it. Chaos, the expanding expanse, the very first (πρώτιστος), is the principle or source of all coming to be, such that it returns throughout the *Theogony* in the unpredictable, immanently expanding orders of the cosmos, which all originate from and repeat that very first. Herodotus, however, drastically departs from that cosmological scope when he conducts his *Histories*.

Where Hesiod's story (μῦθος) provides a poetic account of the genesis and structure of the divine orders of the cosmos, Herodotus's *Histories* (ἱστορία) specifically refer to the great deeds of individual human beings, Greek and non-Greek alike, which he commits to memory (that is, by writing them down) against the forgetfulness of time. Herodotus's histories thus present a compilation of that which is fact (ἱστόριον), borne out in action. The significance of each story included in his remembrance is justified out of the self-evident respect for and wonder at the magnitude of particular deeds, such that the task of the historian is to keep what is great from falling into disrepute (ἀκλήεις). Thucydides, on the contrary, like the many subsequent Greek and Roman historians who follow his practice of political history with didactic accounts of statesmanship therein, appears closer to the modern expectations of writing empirical histories. As Thucydides relates it, his historical chronicle of the Peloponnesian War stands without any *fables* (in Thomas Hobbes' translation) or things of fiction (τό μυθῶδες), such that he includes only the events in which he himself was present or those for which he could furnish an account with due diligence.⁵ With this avowed description of historical writing, Thucydides looks and

⁵ Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*. Trans. Thomas Hobbes. Ed. David Grene. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989 (1.22.2-4). Thucydides, *Historiae, Volume I*. Ed. Henry Stuart Jones and Johannes

sounds like every bit of the modern historian who steers clear of metaphysical speculation and any tall-tales, so as to stay committed to the question of *wie es eigentlich gewesen* (how it really was).⁶ In other words, the impetus to history is one for the sake of refined historical narratives and to excavate any moral or otherwise didactic lessons therein. The philosophical elements of Thucydides' work—and they do indeed abound—are limited to those speculations on the individual actors of a specific city or empire, such that they at no point turn to a straightforwardly philosophical, abstract conversation about the nature of virtue. To this extent, although they can appear worlds apart in their narratives and perhaps even standards of historiographical accuracy, Thucydides and Herodotus are not so far apart from one another, for it is not the case that no moral or practical implications exist whatsoever in Herodotus's stories. Indeed, with the title of the “father of history,” likely first applied to him by Cicero, and often followed by a rather less prestigious one, “the father of lies,” there is an air to Herodotus's work

Enoch Powell. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1942 (1.22.2-4). All translations of ancient Greek texts are my own throughout, unless explicitly treated otherwise.

⁶ As often as this line from the introduction of Leopold von Ranke's first major work is invoked to summarize the task of modern historiography (and not without good reason), the significance of its placement in that text is hardly ever recalled, which, as a result, conveniently forgets its promotion of explicitly racist historical narratives. Hence, a brief word here seems worthwhile. As stated in the introduction to his text, *Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1514*, Ranke states his goal to be a record of the historical production of the cultural entity known to us as Europe, which he expects to prove as an exclusive product of the historical victories of two peoples or races: “the racially kindred nations of either purely Germanic or Latin-Germanic origin whose history forms the heart of all modern history” (Leopold von Ranke, *The Secret of World History: Selected Writings on the Art and Science of History*. Ed. Roger Wines. New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 1981 (57)). Then, in the last paragraph of the introduction, Ranke insists that his tract has no other intention with regard to historical events, but simply to show *how they really were*. Ranke's, *how it really was*, is a matter of how Europe was *really* produced by and therefore exclusively belongs to the Germanic and Latin-Germanic peoples—not so subtly implying a total irrelevance of the historical legacies and exploited contributions of Jewish, Asian, Arabic, Amerindian, and African peoples in their involvement with or subjugation under the victories of European nations. In short, Ranke attempts to prove that modern Germany inherits the cultural primacy and historical destiny of Rome, which later became a common historical presupposition and trope among the Nazi intellectuals and historians.

that implies more than meets the eye, that is, more than merely individually self-contained actions of indeterminately related historical actors. That suggestion appears both true and false.

In the 1822/28 drafts for his lectures on the philosophy of world-history, Hegel famously privileges Herodotus's work as an outstanding example of the category of *original history*.⁷ Yet, the meaning of that title is somewhat less impressive than it might first sound. By *original*, on the one hand, Hegel means a source in the sense of the foundation on which the task of philosophy of history builds its conceptual framework. On the other hand, that it is just the foundation—something dug out and sketched in outline, but not yet developed—means that original history is absolutely empty of any necessary content. Hegel would describe this by means of his usual invectives against insufficiently metaphysical accounts of conceptual relations of determination: that the contents (individual historical actions) bear no necessary relation to and are not reflected in the form (the recounting of individual human action), which in turn has only an external, arbitrary relation to contents. In other words, because Herodotus articulates no conceptual unity between the historical account and the historical object, the most he can say is, here lies a record of some great, exceptional things we know human beings to have done as the authors of their own actions. But what that purely formal description of determination actually means in the case of the ancient Greek historians is relatively straightforward. That is, whenever we read about absurdly larger than life episodes from Herodotus, like Xerxes' whipping the waters of the Hellespont into submission, the reported action is the work of human individuals as the lone, often capricious, authors of their own actions. Original history, for this reason, should include any wild and outrageous story of a

⁷ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*. Trans. Hugh Barr Nisbet. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981 (12). (Hereafter, PWH.)

remarkable human action, insofar as it offers an account of that action as one determined by human capacities alone—in that case, all the wilder and crazier is all the better, so as to expand and explore the unknown limits and possibilities of human action. The philosophical importance of this kind of *original history*, for Hegel, appears in spirit's realization, albeit unreflective, of the immediately spiritual object of spirit's own action and thereby an identity of action and its objectivity not by means of myth, religion, or any supernatural elements, but purely within language and memory, even if the (spiritual) account of that (historical) account does not yet arise there.

Hegel's formulation of the philosophical significance of ancient histories as *original history* helps to illustrate why and how *istoria* carved out a distinct category in speech or *logos*, one that was certainly not mythical but also only implicitly philosophical, due to the exclusive focus on particulars absent any descript account of their mutual implication or how they might cohere universally, that is, as a whole (τό καθόλου), to use Aristotle's vocabulary. And, to be clear, Hegel's point is far from an anachronistic one, since it seems almost all but admittedly read from Aristotle's treatment of history in his *Poetics*, except that Hegel seems to try to restore a little more philosophical integrity to history than Aristotle ever acquiesced. Aristotle confirms this in the sparse, extant treatment of history, which reveals a show his unambiguous philosophical disregard for the matter.

For Aristotle, history simply pales in comparison to poetry. After his ultimate definition of tragedy in chapters six through eight of the *Poetics*, Aristotle concludes by explicitly arguing that tragedy is more philosophical than history, because:

the one [history] speaks to those things that have come to pass (τὰ γενόμενα), while the other [tragedy] speaks to how things might come to be. As a result, poetry is both more philosophical and more elevated (σπουδαία) than history,

since poetry speaks more to what is universal (τό καθόλου), whereas history speaks to what is particular (τὰ καθ' ἕκαστον).⁸

The reason this passage is particularly intriguing lays in the comparison Aristotle draws between tragedy and history as artistic expressions of what is expected from a philosophical account (λόγος). Nonetheless, tragedy categorically outstrips history in this, since the object of its mimesis is not that which has already happened, but the issue of how might serious, purposive, human action (πράξεως σπουδαίας) come into being. Surely both tragedy and history might perform a mimesis of excellent actions, but the tragic one refers to the elements shared in the coming to be of all action as such, that is, the general structure of human action, while history simply speaks to the discrete and unique qualities of ones that have occurred and passed. The issue has nothing to do with poetic or written style, as Aristotle asserts at one point, for surely Herodotus's work could be shaped into a lyric verse and it would still be just as much of history as it now stands.⁹

The reason no one would describe Herodotus's work as a tragedy or refer to the *Oresteia* as a history is palpably clear, for Aristotle, since the difference between the two lies in the object of the mimesis. In a historical account, for example, when we read of the young Alexander breaking Bucephalus, this is not followed by an account of horse-breaking in general, but only the particular time that the particular person, Alexander, broke a particularly strong horse, Bucephalus. Whereas, what intrigues our eye in the *Oresteia* is the mimesis of possible action, of what one might do when, like Orestes, confronted with contradictory dictates from the law. In

⁸ Aristotle, *De Arte Poetica Liber*. Ed. Rudolph Kassel. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1922 (1451b4-5). (Hereafter, *Poetics*.) To be clear, Aristotle is redeploying the very term he used to describe the specific kind of action that is the object of tragedy's mimesis as a qualifier of tragedy's superiority over history: elevated, excellent, or even heroic (σπουδαίας). The evaluative importance of the word in connection to ἀρετή (moral or ethical excellence, virtue) is consistent throughout Aristotle's account.

⁹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1451b1-3.

both instances of Alexander and Orestes—assuming both stories refer to once historically existing situations for the purpose of Aristotle’s argument—the action could be described as serious, elevated, exceptional, and evidently purposeful or severe (σπουδαίας). Nevertheless, the objects of the mimetic accounts are strictly mutually exclusive: the account of Alexander tells of that which has already come to pass, as Aristotle signals such objects of a historical account with the aorist participle (τὰ γενόμενα), whereas tragedy tells of what a particular person, Orestes, might be or might not be able to do when confronted with a situation that is not limited to him alone, that is, a situation and context of action that stands in the light of the whole of human action itself (πράξις).

Tragedy appears especially philosophical because of this relationship that it develops between the individual endeavor of human action in the context or position of its universal circumstances—the conditions of fate, debt, law, and transgression that envelop and recur within the tragic sense of human action and its oblique place in the nature of things. It is only in and through this dynamic relationship in a tragic work that something like a catharsis, the expiation of pity and fear by means of those same affects (παθήματα), becomes possible.¹⁰ If there is no possibility for something otherwise than the particular situation, if it is only the case that Alexander did so many great things and then unexpectedly dies, then there is no foreseeable way that the pity we feel in that particular case would ever become anything other than that single intuition of a particular pity. The mimesis of the recurring possibility of possible action, in the very face of observing its tragically finite experience, unfolds the truly unique character of tragedy. It seems such a complex relationship in human action is excluded from history, precisely because it is not the mimesis of possible action, but the time or period (χρόνος) of

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449b21-28.

particular actions alone.¹¹ In short, whatever the particular purposiveness might be of various historical actions, struggles, or events, their action remains self-contained and indifferent to the prospect of any possibly larger, encompassing end for human action (πράξις). If any kind of conversation of that nature were to take effect on Aristotle's watch, it would become an issue of ethics, which examines the ends of human action as a whole.

Happiness (εὐδαιμονία) takes precedence as the end toward which all purposeful actions tend, even though the quality and height of that happiness will depend upon the nature of the ethical principle employed vis-à-vis the independence of the soul under that principle, insofar as the soul or intellect (ψυχή) is a fundamentally necessary presupposition of ethical action itself. It seems rather improbable, then, that Aristotle would find many resources in history for a discussion about ethics, since an ethical account also requires that conversation or dialogue of an individual's action in the context of an explicitly clarified whole or, in this instance, an ethical community (ἔθος), in which are inscribed the reception of principles, customs, or norms of action that inform the possibility and meaning of ethical action on the individual level. For Aristotle, the ethical question of happiness takes us out of ourselves in isolation and into an interrogation of this relationship between the individual's capacity to act virtuously and the nature of what is virtuous as a whole. If we fail to go beyond the particular dimensions or circumstances of our particular actions, it is not clear that we ever arrive at a properly ethical inquiry, since no relationship to the ethical community has yet been drawn out of the account of action. This is the very reason why Aristotle, when treating justice as the highest and most complete virtue in Book V of *Nicomachean Ethics*, heaps scorn on *the tactless many* (οἱ πολλοί) who consider themselves virtuous according to the action they are able to accomplish privately—in the

¹¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1459a20-24.

economic activity of private affairs (οἰκεῖος)—yet fail to act virtuously among others, that is, publically or politically.¹² The error of those who consider themselves virtuous when merely acting privately or for their own benefit—acting in abstraction of the whole community in which their actions gain definition and determinacy—is a fundamental misrecognition of the ethical meaning and proper context of virtue, presuming that the private comes before or could stand independent of the public, such that one would suppose virtue to be meaningful in privation of the ethical community or the public.

By extension, we might say, that it would be a similar mistake to think that one could learn from history anything about happiness or ethical action for Aristotle, because such a path would privilege concerns outside the priority of the immediate ethical community in which one's action is enmeshed, habituated, and thus defined. At most, one could perhaps look to the histories of another ethical community so as to assess and evaluate it and the praxis that follows from other principles of ethical action. For example, if an Athenian looks to historical accounts of ethical action and politics in Egypt, then, for Aristotle, the Athenian could only learn about what is good and just in Egypt, but likely nothing else. This is the utterly one-dimensional particularity of any historical account for Aristotle. While politics might foreseeably benefit from the memory and lessons of historical deeds, it seems much less clear that historical accounts would benefit ethics as a conversation about the proper ends and virtues of human action in general. As Aristotle shows in the *Poetics*, the very form of a historical mimesis precludes any consideration of action as a whole. Nothing about an account of particular historical actions would ever tell us about those larger terms in which human action becomes either politically or even philosophically intelligible, such as the ethical community, time, the

¹²Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. H. Rackham. Vol. XIX. Loeb Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934 (1129b33-35). (Hereafter, *Ethics*.)

nature of things or the cosmos—and least of all does something like the claim of historical universality follow from such a historical account. That is not to deny that some undefined, abstract universality is at play in any such historical account, namely, the universality of human action as authored and executed by humans alone, even though the philosophical clarification and interpretation of that universality's completeness (τέλειος) belongs to ethics. For this reason, the properly modern notion of universal history is simply unthinkable for Aristotle and any ancient thinker of ethics or politics. Even if some kind of distinctly human, spiritual self-determinative capacity is evidenced by the ancient histories, as with the example of Hegel, that universality is so thoroughly abstract from the ancient understanding of history that it would provide no grounds for a greater understanding of the one-sided particularity of historical accounts.

II. History and Eschatology

Throughout the Medieval era, the strictly religious preoccupations with articulating theological knowledge in and through ancient philosophical systems was so pervasive that anything like a theory of history—on its own terms, as it were—appears irrelevant, if not simply unimaginable. Here, contemplative knowledge was primarily responsible to such issues as the nature of God's existence (especially regarding the trinity), creation (God's spontaneity or emanation), revelation (logic after the word has been made flesh), and transcendence in general (especially as it relates epistemology to the divine passion, for example, as in such philosophical projects as Bonaventure's). As a result, the thoroughly religious, otherworldly notion of salvation set the practical orientation and the end of all contemplative knowledge. Particularly in

the world of Christendom, history, as the mere contingent or accidental interludes among divine cosmological events, can only amount to a kind of record keeping of what occurs amidst the natural transience that marks and permeates the sublunary sphere, that is, the finite world of sin. At most, such a religious context allows historical accounts to provide some version of didacticism. This use of history could apply either to the religious individual's contemplation of the meaning of good deeds as in the case of Christian hagiographies or for the purpose of political didactics, for which Machiavelli's writings stand out eminently (particularly with respect to *The Discourses* and *The History of Florence*) and which became increasingly prescient following the peace of Augsburg in 1555 with its resulting dictum: *cuius regio, eius religio*. Yet, it seems quite impossible to discern any logical path that would lead out from such didactic historical narratives to unfold the need for an account of historical universality. The success of historical didactics, whether they be soteriological or political, in no way depends upon or calls for or implies a conceptually coherent account of historical continuity or discontinuity. That is not to say, however, that history in medieval thought remains the discontinuous, one-sidedly particular account of human deeds that it was for the ancients. Especially with regard to Christian theology and eschatology, an emergent sense of history's unity becomes rather pervasive, though such a theological framework must also be mutually exclusive with anything like the philosophical account of universal history.

In Christian philosophy, history gains unity as all that which follows from the fall from paradise and stands with a relative independence as a cosmological interlude between the divine events of creation and rapture, the latter of which requires the destruction of the finite, historical world in the apocalypse. History thus attains an internal unity in the distinctly human autonomy it holds out, but it is a destitute unity that admits of no internal power that could advance

anything other than its own wretched state. St. Augustine polemically portrays and nearly defines the framework of this Christian view of history in the first part of his immense tract, *The City of God*. In Book II of that first volume, Augustine inveighs against the vainglory of the historical city of man and counters it with the otherworldly, heavenly city of God that never deviates in its eternal glory, the way to which has been paved by the blood of the martyrs and, of course, the passion:

Choose now what you will pursue, that your praise may be not in yourself, but in the true God, in whom is no error. For of popular glory you have had your share; but by the secret providence of God, the true religion was not offered to your choice. Awake, it is now day; as you have already awaked in the persons of some in whose perfect virtue and sufferings for the true faith we glory: for they, contending on all sides with hostile powers, and conquering them all by bravely dying, have purchased for us this country of ours with their blood; to which country we invite you, and exhort you to add yourselves to the number of the citizens of this city, which also has a sanctuary of its own in the true remission of sins. Do not listen to those degenerate sons of thine who slander Christ and Christians, and impute to them these disastrous times, though they desire times in which they may enjoy rather impunity for their wickedness than a peaceful life. Such has never been Rome's ambition even in regard to her earthly country. Lay hold now on the celestial country, which is easily won, and in which you will reign truly and for ever.¹³

Throughout this text, Augustine is absolutely consistent that the follies and catastrophes that arise within the historical city of man are endemic to its nature. The portrayal of history's tumultuous course, as exemplified in the decline of Rome, points to the need for a religious, contemplative withdraw from the inescapable worldly (*seculorum*) woes of the pagan city of man. Any who place their hope for happiness in that pagan citadel of the historical world are fated to its corruption and decay, the dissolution and pain of death that sin unfolds there, and ultimately an alienation from grace, which is the only means by which a finitely free will becomes truly free, that is, in heavenly, otherworldly communion with God. The only true

¹³ Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*. Trans. Henry Bettenson. London, UK; New York, NY: Penguin, 2004 (86-7).

happiness that comes to the world *in these disastrous times* is the freedom that leads away from the city of man and onto the heavenly city of God. Augustine thus perceives two temporalities present at play here. On the one hand, explicitly arguing against the pagan philosophers, he indicates the temporality of the city of man is narrowly focused on the present as a matter of earthly happiness or flourishing, which is achieved either by the satisfaction of the flesh or the winning of *popular glory*, i.e., flourishing at the political register. Augustine, on the other hand, discerns the time of the city of God inside the city of man, precisely in the downfall and tumult of the city of man, through which the true, eternal, otherworldly happiness and glory of God are illuminated. The task of the Christian, in perceiving this contradiction of earthly, false promises and the true promises of salvation brought to light by the city of man's corruption, is to find freedom by means of withdraw or resignation from the historical avarices of the city of man.

For Augustine, because the ultimate question of the earthly or worldly life of the Christian is not happiness but the freedom of his or her will, the Christian must choose to place all faith in a strictly metaphysical freedom that descends from the city of God to the worldly world as grace. In its early appearances, that grace signals the Providence that touches each finite will, thereby giving the power to be free in and through willing God's will as manifested in the life of Christ. Those who give themselves over to the city of man—following those pagan philosophers of happiness, i.e., Epicureans, stoics, even the Neo-Platonists for Augustine, and more—are fated to sin: error, confusion, sorrow, and a slavery of the will to merely worldly pleasures.¹⁴ To deny that the individual, human will can accomplish anything by itself except

¹⁴ Augustine's *Confessions* is a text memorialized by its immense commitment to this very problem and the doctrine of the will it elaborates in response. One small passage from Book IV, concluding Augustine's recollection of his time as a pagan philosopher, nicely summarizes the thematization of sin as sorrowful alienation or wandering (*errare*) from grace, or, in other words, death: "The good which you love is from him. But it is only as it is related to him. [...] There is no rest where you seek for it. Seek for what you seek, but it is not where you are looking for it. You seek the happy life in the region of

sin, that is, to do nothing but iterate its own alienation from grace, either contradicts the doctrine of the fall or gives supra-human power to the finite, human will—landing one in the company of the Pelagians. Instead, moving beyond that perpetual wretchedness of the merely finitely free, individual will and thereby the whole history of the city of man as constitutively alienated from grace, the Christian gains in freedom only once freedom's abode is understood to belong to the eternal city of God. In this way, Langdon Gilkey reads Augustine as translating what are, for the most part, endemically historical, eschatological symbols in the New Testament into, "events in a supernatural, ahistorical realm; not as a new age in future time and space, but in a higher realm of being."¹⁵ That is to say, the freedom of the will that Augustine has in mind is not only ahistorical and apolitical, but, much more tellingly, it is a freedom won only by forsaking history, by denying that anything like freedom could possibly issue from politics as the affairs and misgivings of the worldly world. Augustine's argument is thus pivotal in relation to ancient philosophy because he formulates all questions of happiness as questions of the strictly metaphysical freedom of the will, the completion of which is the happiness of an otherworldly communion of souls in the city of God. In this eschatological vision of otherworldly happiness, freedom is a freedom from the worldliness of the world, such that history has no claim to a veritable future as it does attain in the modern as the province of the new. With that, it is worth a further moment to distinguish rather sharply between the theological contextualization of history

death; it is not there. How can there be a happy life where there is not even life" Saint Augustine. *Confessions*. Trans. Henry Chadwick. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009 (63-4). The freedom of grace is always the freedom from this sorrowful world of unfreedom and death. For Augustine, our human, finitely free will is marked with death, such that the merely possible freedom that it has is only good insofar as it seeks God in His otherworldly eternity, which Augustine will often call *the life of my life* or *my soul*. The only meaningful sense of the happiness to which freedom leads, i.e., a happiness that is not fraught with the contradictions and sin of human life, is not worldly or political, but only the otherworldly communion of one's will with the eternal being of God's.

¹⁵ Langdon Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind: A Christian Interpretation of History*. New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1977 (162).

in eschatology and how that stands apart from the philosophical project of universal history, so as to be sure that idea of universal history cannot simply follow from a loss of certainty about eschatological transcendence.

Eschatology, the account of the coming of the *eschaton*, the last things, end times, the destruction of the historical world, etc., presents history in a unified image of its downfall and the concomitant need for its own destruction in worldly catastrophe, only through which emerges an apocalypse or revelation of the one true God against those false deities reigning in the worldly world. A common notion from that scholarship passing under the title “political theology,” that universal history arises as a secularized form of Christian eschatology, succeeds only to the extent that it hides two immense, qualitative, structural differences that can in no way result from the secular notion of the historical process of secularization. On the one hand, eschatology, as already shown in the case of Augustine, indicates the non-existence of historical development, let alone any robust sense of an intra-historical future. On the other hand, eschatology describes an event breaking into a stagnant, unified image of history, whereas universal history attempts to account for history’s immanent forces and processes of determination that are at play in every individual historical present.¹⁶ Eschatology identifies the unity of history that follows from the outside forces exerted on it, whereas universal history attempts to locate forces of fragmentation and unity that arise within immanent historical processes. Nevertheless, defenders of political theology might protest that the secularized, eschatological phantom of *providence* shows a pivot on which a transition between Christian eschatology and universal history might turn. Yet, the specifically eschatological meaning of providence, as espoused by the likes of Martin Luther, shows the difficulty of that position.

¹⁶ Blumenberg, *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, 29-30.

By the time of his 1520 publication, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther had decided that the Catholic Church was under the yolk of Satan and that the *eschaton* was not simply near, but already underway, following much in the manner that the eschatological symbols throughout the *New Testament* books of John suggest it (the corruption of all the worldly institutions of the faithful). From this early standpoint, Luther advances to formulate an eschatological vision of the world, in which history provides a terrain for the predestined elect to show themselves in a war against the corrupted worldly empire of Christendom. History, as a result, cannot be a question of any kind of salvageable future or, most ridiculous of all for Luther, a matter of peace. For Luther, history quite simply is catastrophe or *tumult*. This eschatological conviction, that peace stands mutually exclusive with history, is first assured by Luther's, *Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, also of 1520:

we must be sure that in this matter we are dealing not with men, but with the princes of hell, who can fill the world with war and bloodshed, but whom war and bloodshed do not overcome. We must go at this work despairing of physical force and humbly trusting God; we must seek God's help with earnest prayer, and fix our minds on nothing else than the misery and distress of suffering Christendom, without regard to the deserts of evil men. Otherwise we may start the game with great prospect of success, but when we get well into it the evil spirits will stir up such confusion that the whole world will swim in blood, and yet nothing will come of it.¹⁷

This conviction of the necessity of historical violence, since it alone provides the cypher of the coming of the *eschaton*, is absolutely consistent throughout Luther's works. In addition, it entails two major consequences for Luther's eschatological image of history. First, *peace* is never possible in the historical or worldly world and, second, those who protest against historical violence and encourage Christians to put down arms in favor of earthly peace are to be regarded

¹⁷ Luther, Martin. "Works of Martin Luther, with Introductions and Notes (Volume II)." www.gutenberg.org. Accessed February 18, 2019. <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub-34904/pg34904.html>.

as the agents of Satan, since they mean to deceive the faithful about the nature of the historical world. Luther sharpens these eschatological consequences when challenging Desiderius Erasmus on the nature of the historical world and the possibility of freedom therein with his 1525 polemic, *The Bondage of the Will*,

To want to quell these tumults, therefore, is really to want to remove the word of God and stop its course. When the word of God comes, it comes to change and renew the world, and even heathen writers acknowledge that such changes cannot take place without commotion and upheaval—nor, indeed, without bloodshed. Now it is the Christian’s part to expect and coolly to endure these things. [...] Personally, did I not see these upheavals, I should say that the word of God was not in the world. Now that I see them, I rejoice from my heart and smile at them, knowing for sure that the Pope’s kingdom and all its allies will fall; for the word of God is now at full cry.¹⁸

Far from provoking doubt, worldly catastrophe breathes hope into the heart of the faithful, for Luther. The word of God, the destruction of all earthly kingdoms as promised throughout the letters of Paul and the books of John especially, would seem quite suspect, if the historical world were to unfold some flourishing or universality out of itself. The whole argument of *The Bondage of the Will*, in this respect, is no dispute over carefully interpreting Augustine and his doctrine of the will, as much as it was a contest as to who could better claim the legacy of Augustine’s thought—Luther or Erasmus, the humanist skeptic. For Luther, after the Fall, free will exists in name only. Luther likens the human will and its entire history to a log that one might move about in any which way, but left to itself would only ever fall.¹⁹ Whatever unity might reign in history can only be the product of otherworldly forces exerted upon it, for even the will on its own has no power to reach God, except through Providence, which shows itself to the faithful in worldly catastrophe.

¹⁸ Luther, Martin. *The Bondage of the Will*. Translated by J.I. Packer and O.R. Johnston. Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Ravell Company, 1957 (91-2). (Hereafter, *Bondage*.)

¹⁹ Luther, *Bondage*, 142.

Luther's eschatological image of history shows the present to be the contraction of all of historical time in a single catastrophe, wherein all historical tensions are judged inasmuch as they are ended and thus complete. Since faith in the word of God requires the destruction of the worldly world, there would be no possible need even to question the sanctioning historical violence. History is nothing other than the whirlwind of chaos and violence through which the faithful rise out from the merely historical, i.e., transient, totality of world, so as to commune with God in the only freedom a Christian can attain—otherworldly, heavenly peace. The messianic element of history, on this eschatological model, emerges in redemption by means of destruction or *catastrophe*, that is, an *overturning* that makes way for such an otherworldly transcendence. Faith, the intimate reading of scripture as doctrine or the judgment of *the living word*, provides the telescope through which all of history becomes recognizably coherent and by which the faithful might espy the beyond. While it may not look it from the outside, Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone that calls for this eschatological judgment of the historical world is a doctrine full of hope, renewed by the rising catastrophe of this world known to us as history.²⁰ To be clear here, since confusion about the relationship of history and eschatology seems to abound in recent scholarship around topics of political theology, the worldly catastrophe itself is not equal to the eschaton, but the eschaton comes in the judgment that is prepared for by catastrophe, thus revealing the path of providence in the absence of any metaphysical meaning of history.²¹ This is crucial, because, following both St. Augustine's and

²⁰ On the necessary connection between Luther's doctrine of justification by faith and eschatology, see: George Wolfgang Forell, "Justification and Eschatology in Luther's Thought." *American Society of Church History*: Vol. 38, No. 2, (1969): 164-174.

²¹ For example, while reading Walter Benjamin's *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* in his *State of Exception*, Giorgio Agamben explicitly argues for eschatological elements present and co-existing in the modern philosophy of history. Agamben goes so far to insist that the text of Benjamin was supposedly corrupted by editors who made Benjamin's sentence read: *the Baroque knows no eschatology*, by

Luther's insistences, no path of worldly commitments, ends, or flourishing can either manifest or carry over into the messianic realm. Redemption does not operate in the historical world, but only in its exit, which is the eschatological goal or aim of history. Providence vis-à-vis the transience of the historical world thus signals the unity forced upon history in the coming of the *eschaton*. In this sense, providential catastrophe, as the seal of the *eschaton*, is the only historical universality in the eschatological model of history. There is no history in the eschatological model of history, for there is no evidently historical development of history to be had. As Luther explains in his commentary on St. Paul's letter to the Galatians, Paul "correctly" lists the virtue of longsuffering after that of peace, because there is no peace without longsuffering: for one does not beat back the devil by means of arms or wits, but by *longsuffering*, so that he may tire of his game.²²

III. History and the Idea of It

If all violence is sanctioned or at least expected to come with the eschatological idea of history, then the modern task of philosophy of history should make some kind of reply as to what role or sanctioning of violence is appropriate to the theorization of universal history, that is,

inserting a *k-* in front of Benjamin's *eine Eschatologie*, thus rendering it *keine Eschatologie*. While Agamben insists that Benjamin's passage could only possibly make sense if some eschatology is present, he provides no textual evidence of a change in Benjamin's text that would support such a claim. Benjamin, in fact, proceeds shortly after the disputed line to speak explicitly of the loss of all eschatology (*der Ausfall aller Eschatologie*) in modern philosophy of history as one ground for the modernist aesthetic attitude of melancholy. This shows that Agamben, as one such representative of researchers of political theology, falls prey the dangerous conflation of eschatology (or just theology) with the task of philosophy of history. See: Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*. Trans. Kevin Attell. Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press. 2005. (56) and Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Translated by John Osborne. Verso, 2009 (81).

²² Martin Luther, "Commentary on the Epistle to The Galatians." Trans. Theodore Graebner. www.gutenberg.org. Accessed February, 2019. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1549/1549-h/1549-h.htm>.

especially if the coherence of history is exactly what one presumes to be at stake in such a theory, whereas eschatology only expects history's destruction and dissolution. The task of philosophy of history has often been reduced to the image of an arrow that shoots through the fray of historical tensions so as to strike at some target future whereby the subject of history becomes free from history, that is, where history as error comes to an end because history has attained its goal or *telos*. In this instance the new stands-in for the abstract futurity of a present that has lost an account of itself with and under the historical processes that precede it. And as long as philosophy of history operates with such a broad-strokes teleological model, historical strivings, struggles, and tensions can only be indexed by and become intelligible through some single goal of the historical totality to come. Such a model of history prescribes to theory the task of tracking the course of that arrow cutting through historical tensions, so as to justify the violence by which the subject of history—that which is thrown-under, suffers, and abstractly endures the afflictions of historical change—arrives to and at itself outside of history. In this way, the teleological model appears synonymous with an idealist theorization of universal history. It is, perhaps, ironic to note that such a model of history not only expects more out of history than the ancients and other didactic uses of history as chronicle (the story of other times), but it also looks to develop the Kingdom of God on earth in a way that is absolutely refuted throughout the most basic Christian theological and eschatological teachings. In fact, it is no stretch to suggest that this modernity is *unprecedented* in its hopefulness, inasmuch as it actually expects something new to emerge from history. For this reason, theory must find a way to justify both the theoretical problem of historical universality and a response as to how it might, if it is possible, develop from the given social processes of empirical history, or else resign itself to a fatalistic, postmodern rejection of that hope in history altogether.

The theoretician of universal history is compelled to ask a rather confounding question: what means of history (that which immanently emerges from the violence of historical struggles and strivings) might transport historical contents beyond the errors, transience, and downfall of history into a detached, irrelevant past? This problem drives a wedge through theory's response to the claim of historical universality, namely, whether or not one would justify the historical use of violence in order to develop and save meaning in history. To answer "yes" commits theory to the idealist model of universal history, since it finds the key to universality in history not among historical strivings and struggles themselves, but in the goal of history that transports the subject of history beyond its history. What is much more difficult to conceive of, however, is how a theory of universal history might proceed while answering negatively, that is, refusing to justify any means of historical violence by which a subject of history attains itself by sundering or eliminating the affliction of history as error and a plague of unfreedom. Such a response must develop an account of the idea historical universality not outside but inside history, so as to highlight how history holds together against the tides of historical transience and fragmentation, especially if there is no goal outside that properly historical context.

It is my contention that Immanuel Kant tried in a very difficult, if not impossible, way to answer both yes and no at once. Out of that ambivalence comes two distinct Kantian legacies of universal history, as it were: one that preserves the logical trajectory of the subject of history, the human, on its way to self-attainment as a freedom from history and another that takes leave of such a strictly teleological method, the violence it must justify, and the extra-historical claim of a subject of history that could possibly free itself from its accidents, its guilt of error, subsisting beyond the otherwise mere contents of history. The other approach of theory to history, while perhaps *nihilistic* as Walter Benjamin described it in his *Theological-Political Fragment*, can see

no freedom to be won in the purity of extra-historical elements beyond history—or, for that matter, no beyond whatsoever. As a result, it must make a different use of theory in response to the plainly historical downfall of historical phenomena, that is, a use indexed to the happiness that would follow from the redemption of historical phenomena amidst their own historical fragmentation. In this way, the task of theory for Benjamin centers on the articulation of the possibility for an intra-historical fulfillment of that happiness that was missed in history and that historically repeats as incomplete. Both embodiments of philosophy of history, for Kant just as much as Benjamin, require an appeal to the ideas, in order to a rescue a hopeful, unifying relationship between phenomena themselves and the idea of their completion or fulfillment—i.e., historical universality—through which historical appearances could wager that they are not as they ought to be, languishing in repetitions of fragmenting, historical violence and discarded into the past as irrelevant to the empirical, causal persistence of history. It is this other legacy of universal history that this project seeks to articulate in its problems and, ultimately, to justify, while also showing the links with its idealist, teleological counterpart. The moment in which these legacies converge is, in truth, their aspiration: both are legacies of articulating the human in history.

Where the teleological model would justify empirical processes of historical violence to achieve an unhistorical concept of the human, the other looks to rescue the shine of the idea in what is given historically, in order to redeem the aspirational element of phenomena to be otherwise than they appear, that is, to redeem what was missed historically—the missed happiness or fulfillment of the past—in the moment of its incomplete or enduring historical presence. As a result, this latter legacy of the idea of historical universality, in contradistinction to any account of history that would justify historical violence, seeks to rescue the aspirational

claim to happiness in history as a claim that is essential to human life, an aspirational claim without which life seems to fall short and to decay. Philosophy of history, nonetheless, can only begin from that decay, whereby an exigency emerges to rescue the shine of the idea in the history that confronts it. For, if it is the case that history's persistence has turned away from and superseded the import of the individual, such that individuals have become irrelevant to history, then the relevance of history to the human must be indexed by that aspirational claim of historical phenomena to be otherwise than they are given—it is this claim, then, that catches and reflects the shine of idea in history. For philosophy of history to commit to this task, as I argue, entails a commitment to *the idea* of historical universality itself, without which the downfall and fragmented pastness of historical phenomena suggests nothing more than what is given historically. The extent to which that effort can be articulated with a teleological or critical models of history's empirical coherence as the right one, as Kant attempted, is here taken up with the most interpretive seriousness and care, even if it is denied. So, if I take issue with that justification of history's causal coherence, since it annuls and confuses the aspirational claim to which philosophy of history ought to respond, it is for this reason alone: that life deserves humanity and to miss this risks everything. To make a response to that claim, to try to rescue and preserve it against the emptying and violent tides of history's causal inertia, that is the responsibility of a philosophy of history that would save the spark of hope in the past.

CHAPTER ONE

ON THE KANTIAN TASK OF A THEORY OF HISTORY

Immanuel Kant's 1784 essay, *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent* (*Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht*), inaugurates a philosophical task that was to become a touchstone throughout modern philosophy: the task to construct a theory of history as universal history—in short, to theorize historical universality itself. Though this essay has suffered some dispute as to its relevance to and possible inclusion in Kant's critical philosophy, it stands beyond doubt that the essay's profound influence emerges almost immediately in post-Kantian German Idealism and Romanticism, and continues to stretch well beyond that into 20th Century European philosophy.²³ So, while it may not be exactly groundbreaking to promote Kant to a central role in the philosophical development of the modernist theorization of history, to claim that Kant's theory of universal history attains a significant role in his critical project quickly becomes a contentious claim. It is, in fact, no exaggeration to point to a longstanding tradition of reticence throughout Kant scholarship and the idealism that followed Kant when it comes to assigning any systematic significance to Kant's *Idea for a Universal History*, which is commonly separated off from the critical philosophy in

²³ Yirmiyahu Yovel, for example, goes so far as to strike Kant's *Universal History* essay almost entirely from his interpretation of Kant's philosophy of history in his study, *Kant and the Philosophy of History*. While he is certainly not alone, Yovel's argument is largely responsible for popularizing the charge of an "uncritical dogmatism" against Kant's *Universal History* essay. See: Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1980 (30). (Hereafter, KPH.) Yovel's argument against this essay as a piece of critical philosophy and how that argument shapes his limited interpretation of Kant's philosophy of history will be treated in the present and the subsequent chapters.

the practically oriented, popular pieces known as the *Aufklärung* essays.²⁴ And yet, the philosophical legacy of the *Universal History* essay is by no means limited to philosophical idealism alone, but it can be discerned just as forcefully in its materialist inheritances and interpretations from Marx to critical theory. The lines marking the exact division between those two interconnected legacies—between an idealist one and its counterpointing materialist response—fall along and trace the problem of historical violence as it already forcefully appears in Kant’s theory of universal history.

A full understanding of Kant’s effort to wager a theory of history as “universal history” requires an interpretation of that problem to which his theory would appear a viable answer, namely, the problem of history’s underlying, fragmenting, and perhaps increasing, social

²⁴ By designating this reticence as a “traditional position,” I should be clear that it is by no means limited to any specific historical school of Kant interpreters. The reluctance to find much significance in the relation of Kant’s systematic philosophy to his work on history begins as early as Hegel’s reading of Kant between the works of *Faith and Knowledge* and his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. It then returns in an almost completely opposite fashion with Marburg Neo-Kantianism (especially Natorp and Cohen), and persists among leading contemporary readers such as Henry E. Allison. While Hegel and Marburg Neo-Kantianism both make significant attempts to recover an integral, systemic role for history, which they find Kant simply lacking, they go about this on divergent paths. Where Hegel seeks a wholly rational account of history as the history of reason, the Marburg Neo-Kantians were convinced that history is essentially irrational in its processes, such that the critically restricted task of philosophy should be to operate on the coattails of the haphazard historical path of the sciences, in order to explain the changing meaning of experience relative to the development of the hard (not human) sciences. Hegel’s reading of this problem seems to be most clearly announced in §29 of his “Preface” to the *Phenomenology* (G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. A. V. Miller. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1977.). For a brief but incisive outline of this trajectory of Neo-Kantianism see Cohen’s early preface to the last edition Friedrich Lang’s *History of Materialism* (Herman Cohen, “Biographisches Vorwort und Einleitung mit kritischem Nachtrag”, in Friedrich Lange, *Geschichte des Materialismus und Kritik seiner Bedeutung in der Gegenwart*, 6th ed., Leipzig: Baedeker, 1898. (xv–lxxvi)). Allison, who generally acquiesces the importance of history for Kant as a typical enlightenment thinker, devotes not a single philosophical discussion to history relative to the critical project in any of his major interpretive works on transcendental philosophy or even in an essay supposedly dealing with this very problem (cf. Henry E. Allison, *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. Henry E. Allison, “Teleology and History in Kant.” *Kant’s Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim*. Ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty and James Schmidt. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009.) For Allison and many others who follow Yovel’s lead, there is a thought of history relative to the practical, Enlightenment orientation of Kantian philosophy, but nowhere does Allison seem to recall history as an object of cognition that thought confronts and that would countenance thought in return.

violence that threatens to disabuse theory of the very opportunity to speak of any unified thing called history. The interpretation of this historical problem of violence and fragmentation through Kant's philosophical response to it in the theory of universal history will commence from this chapter and follow into the next, which specifically brings the *Universal History* essay into relation with Kant's critical project through the *Critique of the Power of Judgment (Kritik der Urteilskraft)*. Throughout these investigations into the fundamentals of Kant's theory of history and the interpretation of its motivating problem, the social repetition of historical violence stands at the very center as a paradox, for Kant: while history can only develop in and through processes of social violence, the meaning of history as universal history—the promise of history's completion or fulfillment—would require the end of and a total release from the violence by which history develops. This paradox outlines the very problem facing a philosophical account of universal history.

Despite the apparent severity of its problem, the *Universal History* stands alone as Kant's single effort to formulate a theory of history as universal history, and it is an evidently truncated one at that.²⁵ Kant would, of course, continue throughout subsequent works to elaborate and expand upon certain problems and insights first articulated in this essay, for example: *Speculative Beginning of Human History* (1786) with regard to issues of pre-formationism and epigenesis in the unity of the human species as the historical subject, *Toward Perpetual Peace* (1795) with regard to the plausible political demands of a cosmopolitanism order, and notably in §§82-84 of the third *Critique* with regard to the articulation of history's teleological unity of the natural and the moral. Nonetheless, the *Universal History* essay is the only published document wherein Kant takes himself to be elaborating the specifically theoretical *idea* of a universal

²⁵ Kant writes the *Universal History* essay in a thesis and remark structure that emphasizes the self-understanding of this work as a mere sketch of a larger, incomplete philosophical task at hand.

history itself. As a result of that fact, it is surprising to see, to say the least, how very few commentators take notice of the specificity of this essay in the uniquely pressing, if not at times desperate, philosophical task that it portrays in the attempt to supply a theory of history as universal history. In other words, the unique claim from this essay in relation to Kant's other essays that ostensibly consider history is that this one begins from and terminates with an interrogation human history itself as an object of cognition, without losing or dissolving that object's specificity in any other domain of philosophical inquiry. This essay, in fact, appears to be the only place where Kant does take history as such as independent object of philosophical inquiry.

Whether Kant's task to theorize a universal history is covered-over in debates about the liberal-utopian readings of "cosmopolitanism" or whether the thought of history as a veritable Kantian idea is elided with issues of moral teleology, from all corners it would appear confirmed that universal history is not a serious philosophical question for Kant or in general.²⁶ Among the latter readings wherein commentators elide the theory universal history with issues of moral teleology we find Yovel, Henry Allison, and Karl Ameriks, for all of whom it remains doubtful that the idea of universal history would hold any specificity apart from moral framework of the highest good. Consequently, Yovel, Allison, and Ameriks reject the idea of universal history as a theoretical idea that could remain intelligible outside of a practical orientation or the ideal medium of the pure moral will. In opposition those readings that would diminish the idea of

²⁶ On the one hand, the liberal utopian reading may come from diverse corners both positively and negatively assessed, but it is perhaps most perceptible in its positive reception. For example, Seyla Benhabib largely follows a Lockean tradition of a specifically spatial image of politics—binding the intelligibility of property, person, and justice—when celebrating Kant's cosmopolitanism as the account of a redeeming, utopic space (in the dual sense of the term: a place that is good because it exists as no place) that transcends the state of nature between nation-states that came to a fever pitch in the genocides and wars of the 20th Century (see: Seyla Benhabib, *Another Cosmopolitanism*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008.).

universal history as an independent, intact idea, the motivation of this present reading is to offer an interpretation of the *Universal History* essay as an effort to mark and to characterize the contours of history as an object for cognition and to what extent that cognition is possible relative to the problematic conceptual status of the object. It becomes an immanently necessary result of that specifically theoretical approach to history, for Kant, that universal history must be articulated as an idea. For, only as an idea can a theory of universal history harbor at once the fragmenting violence history incurs in its development alongside the hope for history's reconciliation in and as the universality of the human species itself. History thus becomes *meaningful* to the very extent that it can be thought as if it were a unified, fulfilled whole, that is, considered in the shape of an idea in the technical sense of that Kantian term.

This strictly theoretical interpretation should not be assumed to go so far as to disassociate the theoretical from the practical, but rather to argue that the mutual relevance of the one for the other depends upon their possible and meaningful separation, since the division between the two marks a divergence in how thought engages the world as a unity of subject and object. That is, where the unity of the practical subject and its object is always noumenal or internal to thought, for Kant, the unity of the theoretical subject and its object must be written across the profound non-identity between thought and an object other than it, such that the articulation of such a unity entails an appeal to the ideas. The interpretive decision to take up the *Universal History* essay from the theoretical context should prove decisive in illuminating why Kant's work on history calls for a strict conceptual distinction between the cognition of the totality of historical processes and that of moral progress. In turn, this argument should also aid the understanding that the theoretical endeavor of universal history is in no way set apart from Kant's systematic, critical philosophy. The *Universal History* essay thus offers a philosophical

account of history from the very standpoint of its problematic status as object of cognition, such that, since the nature of history itself rebuffs conceptual formulation, history's developmental aspiration to universality belongs to it as an idea.

I. The Hope for a Universal History

In the opening two paragraphs of the *Universal History* essay—what I will refer to as the preface, since it stands without any denotation prior to the essay's nine theses and remarks—Kant straightforwardly addresses the reasons why he is undertaking this elucidation of an idea first ascribed to him in an edition of the *Gotha Learned Papers* from earlier that same year (1784). Chief among these reasons is a hope that Kant finds to arise when *observing* history, specifically emerging from the contemplation of empirical history: the hope that by observing the appearances of human action *in the large* of history that what initially meets the eye as chaotic and confused at the level of the individual could be “cognized (*erkennen*)” in a regular or lawful (*regelmäßig*) course of the species in the supposed whole of history. This question of hope endures as one of the three (or four) central questions taken to express the plurality of tasks at play in Kant's critical philosophy as a whole: *What can I know? What ought I to do? For what may I hope?*—to which Kant, as Hannah Arendt notes, occasionally added a fourth, “what is man?”²⁷ Kant's explicitly voiced motivation in the preface to the *Universal History* essay would thus seem to concern primarily the third question, namely, that the theory of universal history emerges from the philosophical questioning of that for which we might hope in our encounter with the object, history. Yet, even this question of hope must entail questions of what one can

²⁷ Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*. Ed. Ronald Beiner. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989 (20). (Hereafter, LKPP.)

know and, specifically, in the case of history, with regard to the question of the human species too, such that universal history offers a particular triangulation these questions of justifiable knowledge, the status of *the human*, and of hope as a question asking what one can reasonably expect from the the historical world and what, if anything, is promising in that world.

When organizing the philosophical trajectories of these general questions, Arendt ascribes the first question of knowledge to the task of Kant's first *Critique*, since it asks about the nature of cognition relative to possible experience, and the second to the second *Critique*, since it asks for a normative claim applicable to all possible rational action, i.e., willing. Yet, instead of relating the question of hope similarly to an installment of Kant's critical project, which would refer that hope to some kind of possible experience, Arendt somewhat surprisingly relates hope to the uncertain immortality of the soul.²⁸ This is surprising only inasmuch as it breaks with the forgoing pattern and relates hope, unlike the previous questions of cognition or normativity, to a speculative object of cognition that stands outside of experience altogether.²⁹ Nevertheless, following Arendt's direction in mapping the two previous questions, it would seem that the question of legitimate hope could belong to the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, because the question, "for what may I hope," asks about what one can expect to come about and that, accordingly, might be fulfilled or completed in experience, that is, "hope" seems to ask about and to point to a roughly teleological question for Kant. This particular sense of hope would signal a thematic use of the principle purposiveness (*Zweckmäßigkeit*), which Kant will invoke from the outset in the very first thesis of the *Universal History* essay.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ To be clear, even though Arendt's proposition here is by no means implausible as the nature of the soul is a serious and constant concern of Kant's, the mapping of this question of hope does seem to break curiously with the path she was already taking in her mapping of these formulaic questions of transcendental philosophy.

What strikes as peculiar in the preface's invocation of this hope is not so much the understanding of hope as the hope to retain regulative teleological accounts for the purpose of understanding and making sense of our own cognition, but the context in which that hope is now elicited, namely, with respect to empirical history. Kant had, indeed, already preserved the regulative use of teleology at the close of the first *Critique*.³⁰ So, it should not be so surprising that Kant's account of historical universality will require some location of purposiveness, since historical universality itself is certainly not something given in or to experience. No finite being could possibly attest to an experience or observation of historical universality itself, even if the very need for an account of it arises from the negative experiences of its absence. As a result, Kant methodologically treats the hope for a universal history out of its traces in experience as synonymously bound to the purposiveness of empirical history for the idea of a universal history. The resultant task of his essay is, therefore, to provide a comprehensive account of history's need for theory, so as to articulate how that aspirational thread ties empirical history to universal history and whereby history might become more conceptually coherent.

Kant begins his first lines of the *Universal History* essay with this emphatic appeal to empirical history as his philosophical point of departure. Empirical history is that reality to which his subsequent transcendental claims in the essay's first three theses refer.

³⁰ In the "Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic" of the first *Critique*, Kant had already explicitly and emphatically rescued the regulative employment of purposiveness in his discussion of the idea of God (see: Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. Ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge UP, 1999 (A 686/B 714). (Hereafter, CPR.) The regulative use of the principle of purposiveness offers one way in which we might critically temper reason's drive to uncritically extend or generalize the concept mechanistic causality, so as to hold onto some limits of the mechanistic explanation of nature and its regulative compatibility with freedom. In addition, the rescue of purposiveness also already portends the critical capacity of teleology prior to its explanation in the cognitive framework of reflective judgments on the basis of objective purposiveness that Kant takes up in the second part of the third *Critique*, the relevance of which to the *Universal History* essay will be taken up in the subsequent chapter.

Whatever concept one may form of the *freedom of the will* with a metaphysical aim, its *appearances*, the human actions, are determined just as much as every other natural occurrence in accordance with universal laws of nature. History, which concerns itself with the narration of these appearances, however deeply concealed their causes may be, nevertheless allows us to hope from it that if it [history] considers the play of freedom of the human will in the large, it can discover within it a regular course (*regelmäßigen Gang*).³¹

Kant's immediate designation of empirical history as the realm holding out the explicit appearances of the human being's free will certainly might seem alarming, if not downright un-Kantian for the philosopher who argues that our freedom is essentially noumenal. Nevertheless, this appeal to the free will's empirical appearances, that is, the acts of human beings as supposed authors of their own willing, does not go so far as to claim that human beings are absolutely free without coming into conflict with universal, mechanistic laws of nature or any limits whatsoever. Rather, Kant is here following the results of the transcendental dialectic from the first *Critique* in asserting that we do reasonably know that human beings are *both* subject to the mechanistic laws of nature *and* always at least possibly free without contradiction, because the source of free willing is not derived from external (mechanistic) nature, but furnished internally by reason's fundamental spontaneity. And if that is the case, it stands to reason that history would include appearances of that always possible freedom with specific appearances and acts of a self-legislative will. In other words, instead of beginning this essay in a deviation from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant seems quite clearly to be thinking through the empirical realism that is entailed by his transcendental idealist defense of the compatibility of human freedom and mechanism in the first *Critique*. Unlike transcendental philosophy's definitive work of abstraction that uncovers those *deeply concealed causes* of freedom's appearances (and the conditions or forces that might restrict them), empirical history simply assumes the task of recording those empirical appearances whenever and however they appear. Because empirical

³¹ IUH 108/AA 8: 17.

history has no recourse to a transcendental investigation of history's conceptual structure and coherence, its very absence of a given universality inspires the hope to elucidate one, so that the question and meaning of the human is not simply incomplete and wanting throughout history.

This perhaps minor contextualization of Kant's point of departure from within empirical history when theorizing universal history is crucial to note, since readers like Yovel ultimately dismiss Kant's theory of universal history as incoherent, precisely because of an assumed missing relationship to empirical history.³² With such a claim, Yovel surrenders one of the most basic strengths of Kant's own understanding of his critical project, that is, transcendental idealism *is* an empirical realism, without which Kant's entire critical project would be absolutely incomprehensible. If questions of the conditions for the possibility of experience are not indexed to the very possibility experience—what reason both demands of it and also uniquely adds to it—then no critical kernel can remain within the Copernican turn. Yovel's repeated claims about the uncritical “dogmatism” undermining Kant's theory of universal history thus results from his failure to read this preface with the seriousness that it deserves as marking that reality to which the theorization of history refers in general.³³ For, as the preface indicates, it is from the plain and immanent contemplation of these empirical appearances and perhaps their recollection, too, that Kant points to the rising hope for those historical appearances to not merely be capricious, disconnected, fungible, and abstract occurrences. The hope for a universal history is a hope that the empirical, historical life of the human aspires to a rounded lawfulness through which all its appearances might become reciprocally coherent and meaningful in history as a complete whole. Within the articulation of this hope, although Kant had not yet formulated his theory of reflective

³² KPH 21, 77, and 166.

³³ KPH 127.

judgment at the time, we can see the role reflective judgment should occupy in the account of observations of empirical history ascertaining a purposiveness through their comparison and reflection, such that the reflection of their merely external relations would uncover how they might be subject to and fill out a universality that is not given prior to their appearance. That account of reflective judgment will, however, have to wait until the next chapter after the basic problems of this essay can first be articulated.

The hope for a universal history is thus a hope that history could acquire a transcendental account that reveals an ultimate, concealed cause behind *the play of freedom in the large*, which would be unknown to the typical historian or chronicler who only deals with empirical appearances as they are given. History's need for theory is thus the need to work through the empirical in order to get beyond the empirical's recurrent risk of an arbitrariness of its direction and the disintegration of its processes. This task is quite distinct from the account of freedom in the first *Critique*, because it is not referring to the issues of the Copernican turn in our cognition of nature, but with regard to the plainly historical interpretation and meaning of the historical appearances of the human, so as then to ask for what may we hope for or of it. That is not to say that universal history takes effect without reference to nature altogether, but that the account and the meaning of nature in human history will always and already be mediated by human action or praxis. It is a necessary presupposition for Kant that nature appears in universal history only insofar as human beings are simultaneously acting freely, making a use of their nature as conditioned by certain predispositions for rational action, putting nature into different skillful applications, and bringing it under different practical principles in experience, such that the historical life of (our) nature that is under consideration already transcends the confines of the mechanism of nature alone. From this critical perspective, universal history is to provide an

account of “what meets the eye in the individual subject as confused and irregular, yet in the whole species can be recognized as a steadily progressing slow development of original predispositions (*ursprüngliche Anlagen*).”³⁴ In the first three theses—the ones stipulating the universal and necessary conditions for the intelligibility of universal history—Kant takes up the meaning of those original predispositions or, better, capacities (*Anlagen*) of the human being with further insight into their decisive role as a teleological impetus for development in history or, as it were, the horizons of the human in history. Those original capacities belong to the species *by nature* (*wesentlich*) and are, therefore, subject to the action and praxis that ensues in empirical life of history, such that they identify the difference between the species as an abstract whole and its historical, real appearances. While the next section attends more to these *Anlagen* in particular, what is of importance in the preface, however, is the relationship Kant construes between the empirical individual and the species as a bridge between the empirical and the universal spheres of history in general, even if that universal register of history is not yet complete or fulfilled in its historical appearances.

Kant’s principal hope for a universal history rides upon the articulation of a universal, theoretical web—the claim of historical universality itself—wherein the actual, empirical acts that display the work of the human can gain both unity and coherence, such that the deeds of individuals are not merely abstract, indeterminate endeavors, but expressions and achievements of a single historical subject or project—the human. As Kant notes, by far and away, the vast majority of human history is lumped together only haphazardly by “folly, childish vanity, and often of childish malice and the rage to destruction; so that in the end one does not know what

³⁴ IUH 108/AA 8: 17.

concept to make of our species, with its smug imaginings about its excellences.”³⁵ In contradiction to the suffering wrecked upon individuals and the torrents of historical violence that nearly make a complete mockery out of free willing and history in general, theory hopes to retrieve some indexing of universal history in the individual’s experience of history. T.W. Adorno is not so far from merely repeating Kant here, when he observes that, “history is *for the most part* something done to individuals.”³⁶ That is to say, it would rightly seem impossible, if not absurd, to claim that the species could take effect through a universal history and achieve its progress therein, despite the absence of the individual’s experience of the species and its progress. That history is done to individuals means that individuals appear as if they are obsolete or even irrelevant to historical processes and history’s persistence in general. If that simply were the case, this hope would be torturous instead of aspirational. Kant’s hope for a universal history must, then, be a hope wagered against that historical violence, since even if that violence may not be able to nullify or negate the transcendental possibility of freedom in general, it could, nonetheless, render history meaningless.

The theory of universal history must find a way to circumvent the enormous danger of empirical history standing alone as a merely empirical, historical unity of abstractly related ‘events,’ for which nothing more can be said except that they happened or that one thing has lead to another, and no more. The merely causal connections among historical appearances of violence, caprice, and destruction results in a whirlwind of history’s fractured fragments, that is, individuals to whom history has happened. In this way, we should not take Kant’s language of

³⁵ IUH 109/AA 8: 18.

³⁶ Theodor Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965*. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2006 (9—emphasis added). (Hereafter, HF.)

empirical appearances of freedom to suggest something promising is given in historical appearances as such, as if such a possibility for free action alone were to imply some clear pattern of progress to be realized. In fact, the opposite appears to be the case. It is because of the gratuitous violence in history, the nearly ubiquitous “malice” and the “rage for destruction” among history’s appearances of free wiling—individuals making individual and thereby arbitrary or unfree ‘choices’ (to the extent an arbitrary choice can be a choice)—that the retrieval of a theory of universal history becomes quite necessary to articulate how history might hold together in the face of that violence. A theory of universal history must comprehend and give a reason why history would not just disintegrate every time it seems to appear or, in this case, recur. The hope for a universal history must answer why history could be anything other than a merely fragmenting process of abstract fragmentations. In other words, why we could hope that something is happening, namely, history, instead of a fungible nothing. This is, in short, the question of meaning in history, without an answer to which any talk of progress becomes nonsense.

To the extent that the hope for a universal history can be answered—that there is some index in the experience of history out of which a universal history could be articulated—relies upon an account of how history attains coherence in and through furthering nature, specifically human nature as it is marked by reason. Kant first introduces the clue of such an index under the concept of, “an aim of nature (*Naturabsicht*),” in opposition to the various and merely externally or conflictually related aims of individuals.³⁷ This aim of nature, which might sound somewhat extravagant, is neither related to anything outside of possible experience (God, providence, etc.) nor is it decided in empirical experience alone, such as an object of consensus among the

³⁷ IUH 109/AA 8: 18.

appearing free wills. The purpose of the *Naturabsicht*, according to Allen Wood, is, “only to organize the facts of inquiry in ways that go beyond what can be explained by the causal mechanism of nature.”³⁸ In other words, the *Naturabsicht*, very much as it sounds, is a regulatively modified teleological point of cognitive orientation, because only teleology can provide a “guiding thread,” for Kant, that would organize the vast and confusing array of empirical history into an account of how those appearances relate to one another meaningfully. Given that the human must, at the least, be assumed rational to establish even an abstract coherence of its thought, for Kant, the *Naturabsicht* simply amounts to asking: what would it mean for the human to act upon its rationality *well* and to fulfill it? This is where the impetus for historical development in the claim of the species becomes manifest. The *Naturabsicht* is Kant’s way of bringing the species to light not abstracted from the individual or unrelated to historical appearances, but bringing the question of the species to light through its historical life and thereby finding the questionable meaning of the species always at play even among the empirical and socially specific developments of history.³⁹

³⁸ Allen Wood, “Kant’s Fourth Proposition: the unsociable sociability of human nature.” *Kant’s Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim: A Critical Guide*. Ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty and James Schmidt. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009 (113).

³⁹ While this might sound like a Hegelian admission, on the contrary, it is the only way to make any sense of Kant’s text itself without extrinsic reference. In the preface, Kant makes an appeal to the surprisingly regular patterns of the species in a rather abstract formula of births, deaths, and marriages, which could not take effect absent of, “the free will of human beings [which] has so great an effect on them,” that is, in reference to the persistence and turning over of the term of species (IUH 108/AA 8: 17). Here, in the first paragraph, Kant quite plainly appeals to this individual-species dynamic as central and indispensable to the conceptual structure and coherence of any theoretical conversation about history. To regard the problem merely from the empirical side of untethered individuals apparently making decision only presents a chaotic blooming and buzzing confusion of the species as a whole. On the contrary, merely examining the definition of the species would give no indication as to the empirical patterns of its historical life. In this way, the *Naturabsicht*—the bridge in theory between the terms of individual and species—is significantly more important and also much more specific than a disconnected, alternate, “non-individual perspective on history,” as Karl Ameriks proposes (Karl Ameriks, “The purposive development of human capacities.” *Kant’s Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim: A Critical Guide*. Ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty and James Schmidt. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2009

The palpable difference between Kant's *Naturabsicht* and issues of natural teleology is that the human being is emphatically not merely nature, such that it points to the need to consider *human* history independent of natural history. That individuals are capable of reason and set ends in the historical world surely cannot ensure that all or any of those ends are rational ones. The individual use and inevitable misuse of reason in history immediately problematizes the claim of a natural aim of the human conditioning the possibility of history, as the thought of universal history might seem to suggest. Kant's way through this problem in the course of the essay will be to return time and again to those original, naturally given predispositions or capacities (*Anlagen*) of the human, in order to discern in them alone—not in discrete, causal chains of events—"a regular course (*regelmäßige Gang*)," through which runs, "a steadily progressing slow development of original predispositions (*ursprüngliche Anlagen*)" of the species.⁴⁰ So, on the one hand, Kant refers us to the development of the *Naturanlagen* as the markers and criteria of empirical history's coherence, insofar as they link and refer the turbulent occurrence of historical appearances to the historically enduring problem or claim of the species. However regular or not the course might appear in history, in truth, is secondary to the fact these natural capacities give discernible, empirical coordinates to the interpretation of meaning in history, that is, it provides coordinates for thinking history's developmental coherence relative to the fulfillment of the human in the species as a complete whole. On the other hand, this indexing of the aspiration of empirical history for universality might not look so impressive in relation to the historical violence that Kant clearly recognizes, inasmuch as it neither responds directly to that violence nor promises against its historical return. In that respect, it should be clear that the

(50). Ameriks appears to reduce what is a necessary and uniquely dynamic concept for Kant into a dangerously hypothetical, one-dimensional concept.

⁴⁰ IUH 108/AA 8: 17.

Naturanlagen are far from ahistorical, but are thoroughly historical, subject to develop progress just as much as a regression. This immanent appeal to the historical use and application of the natural predispositions thereby implicates the concentrating, historical reality of praxis and the work it does on (our) nature concomitant with the very moment of that nature's existence. Yet, for Kant, this also does not mean that we simply hand the problem of historical universality over to debates about praxis in the empirical, material sphere of history. Rather, the point is to locate that index for historical universality inside of history itself, relating the empirical to the claim of the universal in the thought of the species itself—this is, indeed, the entire meaning of the species as a “subject” history and, foremost, it entails that the species is subject to history, too. Though this preface does not yet fully explain the meaning of those natural, original capacities (*Anlagen*), it does provide for their specific conceptual intersection between nature and history, in which they can attain further definition.

II. Indexing Development in History

The first thesis of the *Universal History* essay announces the aim of nature only in a generalized form—along with the methodological caveat of implicating the need for teleology at the very outset—in order to isolate an Archimedean point in theory that fixes a naturally or essentially human aim in history. Kant states this thesis accordingly: “All natural predispositions (*Naturanlagen*) of a creature are determined to develop (*auswickeln sich*) completely and purposively (*vollständig und zweckmäßig*) at some point.”⁴¹ It is important to see that this first thesis does not state that the natural or given predispositions of the human

⁴¹ IUH 109—modified trans./ AA 8: 18.

develop *themselves*—something quite confounding to imagine—as Wood slightly over-translates the reflexive use of the verb *auswickeln*. Rather, Kant simply states that these given capacities surely *develop* or even *unfold* (*auswickeln*) vis-à-vis some necessarily assumed point of completion and purpose, such that what appears opaque *in potentia* would become discernible in the appearances of history and thereby subject to a measure by means of theory. To say, as Wood does, that the natural capacities of the human “develop themselves” mystifies the very dynamic Kant attempts to construe between the transcendental and empirical elements of history, because it *hypostatizes* the historical category of natural capacities.⁴² By this, I mean that it steals one element that is initially defined through its relationships to an array of others out from that relational context and then flips that element around on the *relata* as the condition for the possibility of all other, related elements. In other words, it is a move away from understanding the relations as that which provides for the definition and determination of the *relata* and toward an understanding of one or a few elements as the condition for the possibility of any relations whatsoever. Wood’s translation that the natural predispositions or capacities *develop themselves*—as if all the rest of the historical elements never touched or affected that process—makes it sound as though the historical category of the natural capacities has morphed from an immanently historical term into term that lives on a different plane of reality from the rest of empirical history, which Wood does not seem to intend when he himself treats the issue.⁴³ This is, however, not to suggest that the natural predispositions do not serve a transcendental role in Kant’s argument. Rather, this is to show that such a mischaracterization as the hypostatization of the historical life of the natural capacities is immensely problematic because it ultimately turns

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ See: Wood, “Kant’s Fourth Proposition,” 117-120.

into a constitutive claim about the possible existence of historical elements, whereas Kant's argument remains thoroughly regulative in the status of its teleology.

Kant's first thesis presents the originally given capacities (*Anlagen*) as a lever that opens a connection between the transcendental demands of theory and the empirical life of history. The argument is not without presuppositions, but the argument is meant to justify those presuppositions, namely, that we cannot understand these capacities without some recourse to purposiveness and thereby teleology. As Kant notes, any capacity of an animal that is not employed in relation to its ends proves, "a contradiction in teleological doctrine of nature. For if we depart from that principle, then we no longer have a lawful nature, but a purposelessly playing nature; and desolate chance takes the place of the guideline of reason."⁴⁴ This is, indeed, the very line that causes quite a stir about charges of dogmatism. Nevertheless, it should be clear at this point that Kant is posing a *transcendental* condition of history's intelligibility, that is, our ability to make sense of *our cognition* of mechanistic causes and their systematic unity often requires a specifically regulative use of ostensive purposes.⁴⁵ Kant is suggesting that without positing some aim—some reason for the sake of which the original capacities work and even undergo alteration, while remaining no less effective in relation to the definition of the human—the original capacities would be mired in superfluity and reason deserted in a *purposelessly playing nature*, namely, a nature that changes with respect to no coherent or justifiable cause

⁴⁴ IUH 109/ AA 8: 18.

⁴⁵ Ibid. Kant explores the regulative use of purposiveness as an explicitly teleological principle in accordance with the ideal of a rational author of the world in the first "Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic" in the first *Critique*: "This highest formal unity that alone rests on concepts of reason is the purposive unity of things; and the speculative interest of reason makes it necessary to regard every ordinance in the world as if it had sprouted from the intention of a highest reason. Such a principle (*Princip*), namely, opens up for our reason, as applied to the field of experience, entirely new prospects for connecting up things in the world in accordance with teleological laws, and thereby attaining to greatest systematic unity among them" (CPR A686-7/B714-15).

whatsoever. This argument to preserve regulatively modified teleological aims stands far apart from claiming that there is some constitutive end that is either present in actuality or in privation and thereby operates as the explanation of historical development as such. For this reason, it seems impossible to agree with Yovel that Kant here presents a “natural teleology,” which “transgress[es] the boundaries of critical reason.”⁴⁶ Kant, instead, refers teleological judgments to the much needed organization and coherence of our cognition and comprehension of these natural capacities, not as a principle of nature itself. Kant here suggests that this problem calls for a move from an analytic definition of these natural capacities to a synthetic judgment about their purposive development in history—something that would not already belong to an a priori, analytic definition of the human.⁴⁷

That reason requires reference to even regulatively modified teleological aims does not imply a statement about nature itself, but it should be read as a rather revealing depiction of reason on Kant’s part. For, without some teleological recourse for the natural or original capacities or predispositions (*Naturanlagen*) of the human species, the historical mapping of them would be a shot in the dark, hence a *purposelessly playing nature*. So, Kant further clarifies the way through this problem in his second thesis:

In the human being (as the only rational creature on earth), those predispositions (*Naturanlagen*), which are aimed at the use of reason, should develop completely only in the species, but not in the individual. Reason in a creature is a faculty of extending the rules and aims of the use of all his powers far beyond natural instinct [...] But reason itself does not operate instinctively, but rather needs

⁴⁶ KPH 127.

⁴⁷ The full explanation of and the executing of such a judgment would, however, only become possible and coherent in the framework of a reflective judgment, since it involve a series of reflections on appearances that would presumably approach and imply a lawfulness among contingent perceptions. Nevertheless, this cognitive framework of reflective judgment only becomes fully available in the third Critique, such that its discussion is relegated to the next chapter.

attempts, practice and instruction in order gradually to progress from one stage of insight to another.⁴⁸

Whatever else the human being is—and much could be said of that—the species is most of all defined by reason for Kant, because everything else that a human might be (with regard to instincts, passions, habits, and skills) only becomes apparently or distinctly human insofar as it comes into contact with reason. Though, this need not even entail that, for example, the human is definitively more rational than passionate (as Kant almost ubiquitously suggests), but only that the human is *at least* rational, come what may with that. That reason *needs*, as Kant writes, that it requires instruction and practice for its advantage and refinement, means that it can develop only in and through its historical use. Kant does not seem to suggest that what reason *is*, in the emphatic sense, actually changes with its history, but its applications and practices do, such that its specific historical meaning would evidently undergo change, too. The practices of the original capacities in their employment under reason includes the most basic and almost instinct-like uses of perceiving causes and anticipating effects to the more exceptionally rational activities of positing ends that are not given and selecting or procuring means adequate and proper to pursuing those ends. In this context, the naturally given predispositions or capacities (*Naturanlagen*) for the use of reason are not instincts or even part of reason itself. Rather, what Kant appears to have in mind in the *Naturanlagen* are those elements of human nature that must be realized historically and beyond nature, such that they express that part of our nature that is emphatically historical. As a result, the *Naturanlagen* are able to be instrumental in the historical course of reason's instruction and refinement from the most basic self-preservative functions to its most abstract or purely rational applications, while also not being reduced to or ever left behind by reason in history.

⁴⁸ IUH 109-10—modified trans./AA 8: 18-19.

Since this trajectory of the original capacities to use reason is such a seemingly *boundless* task, it stands to reason that it could only be articulated in a theory of universal history and not explicated within the life of a single, a few, or even one community of individuals. It is the demand for development issued from the *Naturanlagen* of the human that pushes Kant's theory of history into a treatment of society as history's encompassing plane of tensions, practices, and development throughout the historical problematization of the species. That these original capacities take what is natural in order to go beyond nature, doubly insists upon the need to turn to society as a containing term of all such action, production, and development of the human. Kant prepares for this turn from the transcendental claims framing historical universality to the empirical sphere of society in the third thesis, when he claims that everything the human being brings about must come out of humanity itself, going beyond "the mechanical existence of his animal existence," such that human beings can "participate in no other happiness (*Glückseligkeit*) or perfection (*Vollkommenheit*) other than that which [they have] produced" through reason.⁴⁹ The historically diverse and changing application of the naturally given capacities to use reason thus speaks to the heart of the historical unity of the human and sets up the articulation of history's possible coherence prior to the achievement of its ends. Kant, in the remark to the third thesis, makes this point in a rather unsuspecting way, as he there appeals to the more basic social elements and attributes of historical life that he understands the human to procure (beyond nature), such as: means of nourishment, clothing, external safety (for which nature did not supply us with horns, claws, or big k-9s, but just reason as Kant notes), yet also all kinds of "gratification" (*Ergötzlichkeit*) that would make life "agreeable."⁵⁰ For those latter

⁴⁹ IUH 110/AA 8: 19.

⁵⁰ IUH 110/AA 8: 19.

types of a distinctly human gratification or fulfillment in history, Kant includes generosity and prudence, but, perhaps, one might also add such elements as confidence, audacity, humor, wit, and resolve, insofar as they all refer to intra-historical engagements with the past that one might take up in a particular historical present. Gratification itself, then, must refer to some intra-historical lines of connection that rise beyond merely causal ones between the past and the present, that is, it points to and isolates the aspirational element of the human among historical phenomena, which highlights the tethering the idea of history to history's appearances. As a result, this gives a clue as to how wide the array of implications are in Kant's proposed criteria for tracking the natural capacities of the human in history, but it also begins to indicate the kernel of hopefulness in that effort.

At this point, and in order to make sense of Kant's claims, it must be absolutely clear that the given capacities to use reason—that point of intersection between the human's nature and its history—include a vast array of possible means and modes of development. For example, as Allen Wood notices, when Kant treats the issue of the *Naturanlagen* in the *Anthropology*, he refers to three general types *animality*, *humanity*, and *personality* and notably distinguishes two groups of the *Anlagen* proper to the *humanity* type, namely, technical rationality or skill (*Geschicklichkeit*) and prudence or practical wisdom (*Klugheit*).⁵¹ Kant employs the technical sub-division of the original capacities to use reason in reference to both the issue of *techne* and, more generally, intelligence with regard to all possible pursuits and studies motivated by theoretical reason, including the arts. Under *Geschicklichkeit*, Kant surprisingly groups together both the capacities to use reason in technical rationality in the sense of producing, mastering, and generalizing means-ends relations along with more creative and expressive media in the arts.

⁵¹ Wood, "Kant's Fourth Proposition," 119.

The prudential or practical sub-division refers more specifically to praxis and thereby to ethics, morality, religion, and practical reason.

The development of the given capacities to use reason undergoes development insofar as reason asserts itself back on them in the form of expanding intellectual powers or moral advancement, which means—and there is no underestimating the importance of this claim for Kant’s theory of universal history as a whole—the historical progress of the *Naturanlagen* can occur *either* intellectually and technically *or* practically and morally, such that *progress itself need not be moral progress*. Kant surely has very nice sounding lofty ideals as goals and as the proper aim of reason’s development, but historical progress itself is in no way limited to make progress by the measure of moral means. In this way, even though he later goes against this absolutely necessary point above, Karl Ameriks is quite right to point to an enormous amount of ambivalence in the development of the *Naturanlagen*, because one could still suppose that the mere demand for human species to develop in a way distinctive of its rational endowments, “could be met by their exhibiting something like the mere ability to ‘play’ ruthless strategic games, or to do ‘desolate’ things like cultivating (beyond survival needs) only tobacco.”⁵² That there must be some element of history in the definition of the human stands to reason on the basis of Kant’s account of the uniquely quasi if not pseudo natural status of the human’s *Naturanlagen*, that is, they are natural only inasmuch as they are the given elements of the species that undergo history. Nonetheless, that there must be a progressive development in the species with regard to the intellectual and practical capacities to use reason in general is a claim of a different order.

⁵² Ameriks, “The purposive development of the human capacities,” 59. Ameriks will later diminish this moral ambiguity in the claim of a teleological development of the natural capacities of the human and, instead, restrict all meaningful, historical progress to moral progress alone (see: Ameriks, “The purposive development of the human capacities,” 61).

Progress itself, as Kant appears quite aware, is an extra-historical claim. For example, one could presumably imagine a historical trajectory unfolding various uses of these *Naturanlagen* that was not only immoral, but the developments of which appeared only as mere change evidencing no distinct progress whatsoever. Moreover, when Kant does attribute progress to these naturally given capacities he does so with reference to a *plan of nature* so as to communicate his cognizance that these are not the intentions of empirical individuals, but the trajectory by which the whole of the species ascertains historical unity and comes into vision. As a result, the only possible historical subject under Kant's analysis is the life of the species in its purposive development for a state of universal achievement in the naturally given capacities to use reason. The expectation of progress does not simply ride on the historical existence of varied and disparate applications of the original capacities to use reason—a path to progress that might sound a little miraculous—but from reason asserting itself back on those historical uses and the more than likely misuses so as to repeatedly expand the human's intellectual powers and reason's self-knowledge in the social developments of those capacities. This, I take it, is the meaning of Kant's notion of each generation passing its enlightenment to the next with respect to those expanding capacities.⁵³ The complete development of the *Naturanlagen* therefore remain the single goal of universal history—not cosmopolitanism itself, although it remains a decisive step in this task—and as such serve as the index of the transcendental claim that the naturally given capacities of the human to use reason should historically develop to a point of completion inside history itself, which Kant also marks as a state of happiness.

⁵³ IUH 110/AA 8: 19.

III. The Empirical Life of Antagonism

The fourth thesis signals Kant's turn away from a largely transcendental treatment of the theoretical idea of universal history to the empirical life of history in its purposiveness for universality, which those theoretical claims allow us to see. This thesis itself is most of all noted for its introduction of the term "unsocial-socialability (*ungesellige Geselligkeit*)" that Kant avows as the means that our nature employs in history and also the realization of history's greatest possible extent of lawfulness.⁵⁴ From this line, Yovel develops his reading of the "cunning of nature," although a term which Kant does not use, that Yovel exclusively reads as the precursor to Hegel's *ruse of reason*.⁵⁵ There are, perhaps not surprisingly, some advantages and some serious disadvantages to this reading that Yovel has so successfully popularized. Advantageously, Yovel's reading communicates that Kant's unsocial-sociality is an immanently historical process, that the nature at play is one in the context of praxis or, what Yovel calls, "moral nature," and does not depend on an otherworldly providence or one intervening in history from external nature, that is, it appears to be a wholly human, historical activity of reason's self-realization.⁵⁶ The disadvantages of Yovel's reading follow from the promotion of his "cunning of nature" to a transcendental claim, which would mean that progress universally and necessarily occurs by means of unsocial-sociality independent of empirical conditions or experience. This becomes a significant problem because the empirical, social processes that Kant describes in unsocial-sociality are undeniably incompatible with his moral

⁵⁴ IUH 111/AA 8: 20.

⁵⁵ KPH 8.

⁵⁶ KPH 134.

theory and yet Yovel systematically insists upon the meaning of progress as moral progress in Kant. If unsocial-sociability were a condition of the possibility for progress as moral progress, then progress would be barred from the outset in empirical history, since unsocial-sociability necessarily includes development by immoral means. Surprisingly, Yovel appeals to these interpretive decisions as the reason that Kant's theorization of history *fails* and remains incoherent although systematically necessary.⁵⁷ In response, I will argue here that unsocial-sociability is indeed the social processes through which progress emerges, but that *historical progress*—the only coherent measure of progress in universal history—cannot be expected to adhere to moral demands, although morality certainly partakes as one element among others in the progress of the naturally given capacities to use reason (and even if it is the historical element that Kant cherishes most).

Perhaps the most difficult and most deciding factor of Kant's discussion of unsocial-sociability arises from the question of its theoretical status, that is, whether it is a transcendental or an empirical concept. On the one hand, if unsocial-sociability were a transcendental concept, it would arise in thought independent of historical appearances, such that it would function as the category or concept of history and thereby condition appearances *as* historical. If, on the other hand, unsocial-sociability were an empirical concept, then it would not define historical appearances as such and thereby retain no independence from the actual experience of the object. One reason why scholars such as Yovel go so far as to attribute a transcendental status to unsocial-sociability emerges directly out of the language that Kant employs in the remark to the fourth thesis in particular, where he seems to want to wax poetically about the social processes that might turn counter-purposive suffering and destructive acts among individuals into

⁵⁷ KPH 22.

trajectories of historical progress for the species.⁵⁸ Yet, this simply over-estimates Kant's claims in the remark, as if they were universally necessary statements about the human itself, such that unsocial-sociability were a condition for the possibility of the human in history, instead of a social and therefore empirical process of the development of the *Naturanlagen*. That unsocial-sociability is a specifically social processes and thereby must belong to empirical experience is more evident in the fourth thesis itself than the remarks: Kant begins with the proposition that the naturally given capacities to use reason can only possibly develop in "their antagonism *in society*, insofar as the latter is in the end the cause of their lawful order. Here, I understand by 'antagonism' the unsocialable sociability of human beings."⁵⁹ Without any ambiguity whatsoever, Kant here states that the *Naturanlagen* only attain a development through their antagonistic play *in society*, such that society alone allows for the changes in the uses of the *Naturanlagen* and it alone too holds together the growing influence of their development over experience. Society is the one and only seedbed of this *antagonism*, in which Kant, following Montaigne as Wood notes, perceives this unsocial-sociability of human beings, who stand conflicted in their natural inclination toward the social use and development of their given capacities to use reason, and yet frustrated by the expectation of constraint from others, which compels them against one another in vicious ways.⁶⁰ In other words, there would be no possible

⁵⁸ For example, we see this as Kant tries to make clear the plausible triumph of the species through its repeated jeopardization in social antagonism at end of the fourth thesis: "Thanks be to nature, therefore, for the incompatibility, for the spiteful competitive vanity, for the insatiable desire to possess or even to dominate! For without them all the excellent natural predispositions in humanity would eternally slumber undeveloped. The human being wills concord; but nature knows better what is good for its species: it wills discord" (IUH 111-112/AA 8: 21).

⁵⁹ IUH 111/ AA 8: 20.

⁶⁰ Wood, "Kant's Fourth Proposition," 115. Wood convincingly contends that Kant is in fact paraphrasing Montaigne and simultaneously referring to Rousseau with the term "unsocial-sociability." The passage from Montaigne that Wood has in mind comes from the essay, *On Solitude*, "There is nothing more unsociable than Man, and nothing more sociable: unsociable in his vice, sociable by his nature" (quoted

observation of this unsocial-sociability outside of society, such that its prior term or concept is not human nature independent of experience, but society, which cannot be thought prior to experience. By necessity, that also means that the process of unsocial-sociability should not be assumed as historically constant or prior to history, that the extent and the exact forms of its social violence immanently develop in history and would eventually be overcome in the achievement of cosmopolitanism.

To locate unsocial-sociability as a transcendental condition for history or even for the theory of universal history, as Yovel does, seems to land universal history in an utterly confounding situation. Following this out, if unsocial-sociability were a universally necessary condition of historical experience, how would such a thing as moral progress ever be possible alongside historical progress? If Kant's argument about progress is to be at all coherent, then one must consistently maintain at all times that moral progress is only one element of the possible shapes of historical progress, since it belongs to those prudential or practical capacities to use reason, which does not include the technical or broadly intellectual capacities of the human. Nevertheless, trying to localize some transcendental framework for unsocial-sociability, Yovel directly contradicts the coherence of Kant's argument when he argues, "the moral will is the generator of history," in the sense that meaningful history only occurs out from the progressive growth of the human being's consciousness of its own freedom, i.e., the history of

in: Wood, "Kant's Fourth Proposition," 115). The reference to Rousseau concerns Rousseau's extensive account of *amour propre* in the second *Discourse*, whereby human beings are passionately moved to competition in the state of nature, which is at first beneficial for their ingenuity (Rousseau calls this the happiest time in human history) and then proves disastrous and perilous following the introduction of private property, exiling all from the state of nature. Kant surely has Rousseau's *amour propre* in mind throughout the *Universal History* essay with his appeals to the *self-conceit* of humans, the discussion of passion-driven competition in the remark to the fourth thesis, and the line from the preface, wherein Kant implies that a universal history of a species so violent and so taken with itself might hardly seem worth the trouble to the philosopher (Kant, 2009: 10-11). While Rousseau's influence on Kant is undoubtedly immense, that philosophical relationship goes quite beyond the purview of this reading.

reason.⁶¹ For this reason Yovel argues—referring to nothing historical or empirical whatsoever—that the Kantian end of history is therefore the kingdom of ends, since the meaning of progress is bound to the human being’s duty to takes its merely noumenal freedom into a realized form, in order to provide the merely formal imperative with historical content.⁶² Here Yovel and others unsystematically conflate the practical imperative of the kingdom of ends with the strictly theoretical project to articulate an idea of universal history.⁶³ When Yovel argues that history should provide the content proper to the purely formal articulation of the kingdom of ends, he fails to see that the *ideal* of the kingdom of ends *does not* require such a historical content and, moreover, it would prove quite problematic to nominate any given episode of empirical, human history to conform with that *merely* ideal sphere.

⁶¹ KPH 77.

⁶² KPH 171. Karl Ameriks weds himself to this framework too when he describes Kant’s ultimate concern with history to belong to the self-esteem of individuals that they gain through respect for the moral law (Ameriks, “The purposive development of the human capacities,” 61). Ameriks comes to this conclusion by reading the second thesis specifically, but he simply takes that portion of the text too far in an argumentative direction that is not there in the text itself. Near the end of the remarks to the second thesis—the passage Ameriks treats as his evidence—Kant is making an argument for why *any* practical principles whatsoever should retain meaning in history. He states there that if there were “no idea of the human being, the goal of his endeavors” in history, then all practical principles would lose their meaningful and essential purchase on human life (Kant, 2009: 12/AA 8:19). In other words, universal history promotes a vision of the idea of humanity through its account of the progress of the *Naturanlagen*, which insists upon the historically pervasive relevance of practical principles. For Kant, showing the historical veracity of the human allows us to gain confidence, to hope that practical principles in general are meaningful throughout all of history without qualification, because they are not just historicized, mutually indifferent choices, but instantiations of practical reason that are held together under the ideal of humanity. That argument is quite different from a normative argument about the correct practical principles of action and certainly not the same moral argument as the second section of the *Groundwork*, which proceeds from the abstraction of *the pure moral will*. Ameriks thus confuses these two arguments by reading universal history as a precursor to the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*.

⁶³ At the end of his essay, “Teleology and History in Kant,” Henry Allison appears to retreat into an ungrounded hypothesis that, as difficult as he finds it to conceive of a thing like a universal history within the confines of the critical project, we can console ourselves that *the whole idea is “molded” on the thought of the kingdom of ends* (Allison, “Teleology and History in Kant,” 44). Allison’s assertion is typical of the haphazard treatment of the *Universal History* essay by traditional Kant scholars, who are quite reluctant to read the essay as compatible with the critical project and, instead of seeing unique arguments there, are quick to subsume it under other received arguments.

The very universal validity that a practical imperative poses for Kant descends from the fact that practical reason is able to self-legislate it *a priori*, such that it need not matter what happens empirically or in history in order for one to know what practical reason demands there. In short, nothing empirical could ever pose a risk to or jeopardize the validity of a purely rational, moral imperative. So, to think that history should become its proper content in order to correct for its formalism is simply erroneous and rides on a misunderstanding of the practical imperative as a properly if not necessarily abstract, universal rule directing the will's capacity by means of abstraction to will freely. That Yovel makes such gestures—that the problem with Kant's philosophy is that it is contentless and so forth—seems to derive more from his attention to Hegel than to, what is for Kant, the very introspective, demandingly reflexive, and ultimately ahistorical practices of morality that highlight the idealist priority of the self-relation of the will before all else, which is an understanding of freedom that requires abstraction. Thus, the transcendental elements of universal history cannot be construed as moral imperatives, but remain strictly theoretical relative to their speculative object, namely, universal history.

While the theory of universal history does include some transcendental claims—that the naturally given capacities to use reason must develop in history—nowhere do we see Kant offer practical imperatives on the basis of this theoretical idea. As Allen Wood contends, to presume that the *Universal History* essay is, “motivated by morality is totally to misunderstand the essay from the ground up.”⁶⁴ Wood argues that as related as theoretical and practical reason are for Kant, they are decidedly distinct. The misunderstanding to which Wood refers, then, results from a basic misunderstanding of the *theoretical* project of universal history as a *practical* one, whereby the claims of universal history become quite untenable or incomprehensible. Yovel falls

⁶⁴ Wood, “Kant's Fourth Proposition,” 112.

into this trap when he attempts to interpret universal history as a secular mirror-image of the ethical community from Kant's lectures on religion. Pauline Kleingeld falls into this same trap, too, when she applies moral progress as the rubric of historical progress, such that the idea of universal history is reduced to the gambit of a historically motivated 'politics' that would promote the ideal of the kingdom of ends. One reason this trap proves so difficult is because Kant does overlap his language in the highly reminiscent discussions of the practical imperative of the kingdom of ends with the account of cosmopolitanism, yet to conflate the two problems on the basis of some reminiscent passages does fundamental damage to the exclusive philosophical domain of each. Just as "cosmopolitanism" neither presents nor is it explicated by moral imperatives, so too are the moral dictates of the kingdom of ends valid wholly independent of any consideration of "cosmopolitanism" or history. Kleingeld thus loses track of this distinction when she treats Kant's account of progress in her article, "Kant, History, and the Idea of Moral Development," as she states, "[p]eace, both within and between states, is the condition under which the predispositions of humanity can be further developed."⁶⁵ Even a cursory read of the fourth thesis refuses the tenability of such a claim. The reason that Kleingeld goes in this direction, however, is due to the misreading of moral progress as the meaning and measure of historical progress. If that were the case, it would seem quite right to say that no possible progress could result from the counter-purposive suffering, the greed, the indolence, the widespread social violence, tyranny, and unbridled ambition that are all active in unsocial-sociability according to Kant's description of it in the remark to the fourth thesis.⁶⁶ But, since Kant explicitly argues that progress of the *Naturanlagen* can only occur in and through their

⁶⁵ Pauline Kleingeld, "Kant, History, and the Idea of Moral Development." *Kant's Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim*. Eds. Rorty, Amélie Oksenberg, and James Schmidt. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012 (61).

⁶⁶ IUH 111-12/AA 8: 21.

antagonism in society, one must acquiesce that moral progress is only one division of historical progress and not vice versa. This is in no way to argue against the importance of peace for Kant's theory of universal history, but actually to show that the significance of peace is *not* a condition for progress to occur. Instead, the condition of peace belongs to cosmopolitanism where it stipulates that progress cannot be considered complete or achieved without the healing of the scars and wounds left in the wake of progress's historical path of antagonism and violence.

In theses four through seven, Kant develops his account of the empirical life of society as antagonism and the historical trajectory of progress whereby a teleological aim of progress would bring historical violence to a halt in a cosmopolitan order. This intra-historical aim is the same end to which Kant referred in the third thesis as that point of completion for the development of the naturally given capacities to use reason—what Kant also called there *happiness (Glückseligkeit)*.⁶⁷ The difficult thing to digest in Kant's account of unsocial-sociability from theses four to seven is how we move through a social process of individuals behaving very much like individuals, taking advantage of and subjugating one another, and the violence therein that produces counter-purposive suffering to then find some kind of restored or fulfilled historical state of affairs in peace or cosmopolitanism, such that Kant can retrospectively claim from a theoretical standpoint, “[t]hanks be to nature, therefore, for the incompatibility, for the spiteful competitive vanity, for the insatiable desire to possess or even to dominate (*herrschen*)! For without them all the excellent natural predispositions in humanity would eternally slumber undeveloped.”⁶⁸ It is quite clear that Kant understands unsocial-sociability to be responsible for the immense amount of violence we perceive throughout history, especially

⁶⁷ IUH 110/AA 8: 19.

⁶⁸ IUH 112/AA 8: 20.

when we regard it empirically, such that it even appears as though that violence or negativity were the single consistent element of history, weaving it together as a merely historical totality of indeterminately related, fungible or arbitrary elements, as Kant observes in the preface. In response, Kant also expects that unsocial-sociability will ultimately cure itself by virtue of keeping the technical advances of the *Naturanlagen* in-check beside the advances in the practical uses of the *Naturanlagen*, such that the excesses or unlawfulness of social processes will either inspire or lead to the coercion of their own lawfulness.⁶⁹ If nothing else, this account of progress rescues the hope for hope, since any progress at all is still progress toward the historical completion of the human species.

The logic of progress that Kant details is essentially a disciplinary one, since he articulates the progression from an overwhelming historical negativity to lawful communities on the way to perfect constitutions as one prompted by antagonism's work of coercion and external necessity. Progress is to expand in reaction against social violence, to be modified by external relations among institutions and persons, and ultimately to arrive at moral societies where justice might become an intrinsic motivation, such that in the end, "[a]ll culture and art that adorn humanity, and the most beautiful social order, are fruits of *unsociability*, through which it

⁶⁹ At the end of the second essay to *Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant finds himself in this problem when confronting the French revolution. On the one hand, the Revolution proceeds by immoral means, which one could never practically justify. The possible success of the Revolution to establish a republican system of government, on the other hand, would be a result that testifies to progress in history, regardless of whether we can avow its means. Kant therefore consoles his readers that, despite the painful consequences of the Revolution, one can discern, "a very imminent turn of humanity toward the better that is even now in prospect" (Kant, Immanuel. *Religion and Rational Theology*. Ed. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001 (309).) The perhaps troubling expectation here is that, following the establishment of a republican system of government, the French nation will become so empowered and the dignity of persons so equally recognized that it will dispel the possibility of such violence returning to wreck havoc on the moral improvement and fortification of the state.

[humanity] is necessitated by itself to discipline itself.”⁷⁰ In this remark to thesis four, Kant tellingly distills his praise for unsocial-sociability as praise for *unsociability* alone. For, without its compulsions of historical violence and negativity, the naturally given capacities to use reason could never find the historical development they require. Individuals must therefore undergo the irreparable violence of this “antagonistic play” in society, in order for history to realize and generate the progress wherein humanity disciplines, limits, or restricts itself in its own capacities to use reason. Thus, as Adorno notices, we might negatively indicate that universal history’s progress exists—the purposiveness of empirical history for universality itself—in direct proportion to this antagonism, which functions as “a principle of particularity,” whereby particulars—historically codified and socially specific uses of the *Naturanlagen*—can raise themselves toward universality only “in so far as it can subjugate something different from and alien to itself [...] it can exist only by identifying everything that is caught up in its machinery, by leveling it and by defining it in its alterity as something that resists.”⁷¹ Here, Adorno means to draw attention to the great degree of violence effective in the social production of history’s purposiveness for universality that Kant’s implies with his appeal to “antagonism.” The development that is “antagonistic” is one that can only move through and depends upon the negation of historical appearances, the limitation on and elimination of possible uses of the natural capacities of the human for the sake of their determinacy. For, as we saw in the preface, where else does one confront the need for a theory of universal history, if not in the face of those hopeless empirical particulars, appearing untethered and so precarious in their abstract particularity? Therefore, in the absence of universality—which reason cannot furnish for itself prior to experience—progress must forge its appearances in the negativity of that empirical

⁷⁰ IUH 112—emphasis added/AA 8: 22.

⁷¹ HF 13.

domain absent of universality, that is, in the “play” of abstract or merely particular uses of reason gaining precedent over others as merely other. The social process of this antagonism is a play of subjugation, whereby abstract particulars are fated to collide and only thereafter elevate themselves into coherent patterns or a progress. The right use of the *Naturanlagen*, as Kant admits, cannot be predicted or foretold, but only retroactively and retrospectively posited from the standpoint of some victors, that is, after the fact of the subjugation of the other. In other words, the progress that gains purposiveness through subjugation can only retain its purposiveness through historically perpetuated practices of subjugation too.

If un-social-sociability is alone that which checks either the excessive or the deficient uses of the *Naturanlagen* in society—that is, to negate and to abolish them—then the social processes of this antagonistic “play” act as if they were a single invisible hand adjudicating these natural capacities into more and more properly human uses. And this seems to be Kant’s understanding as he acquiesces that the *Naturanlagen* would be left to “slumber” undeveloped without such antagonism.⁷² So, whatever purposiveness arises in history must be effected socially: technical and moral shapes of progress can only come to light through the subjugation or negation of that which is counter-purposive *both* with regard to limiting suffering *and* the imperfect uses of the original capacities, which are only decided as unbecoming of *humanity* in an through the processes of their negation. Violence is, therefore, what is to be surpassed on the way to peace, but violence is also always brought back on the scene of history and justified as the means by which universal history crowns its results as the more completely human ones, that is, as the truth of the historical process *because* it results from it. This is, in short, the only tenable logic of a *progress* in itself where universality is not given. In this respect, new light is

⁷² IUH 112/AA 8: 21.

cast on the sixth thesis when Kant claims that the *master* of all historical individuals, whose stubborn and unsocial wills must be broken, is the species itself.⁷³ The historical progress toward the achievement of the universality of the human in history marks the end of progress, such that it is left entirely to the devices of progress to show us the more perfectly human against the deficiently human through their repeated social antagonism and even war.

That peace can be realized only with the end of progress entails that peace and progress stand apart as mutually exclusive historical domains, each ruled by mutually exclusive jurisdictions, as it were. Peace or, more accurately, a cosmopolitan order (*Bürgerlicheswelt*) is the immanent aim or natural purpose of history's purposiveness, yet impossible and necessarily deferred amidst the means of social antagonism. Perceiving this gap just wide enough to pose a threat between history's means and its presumed end in the fifth and sixth theses, Kant attempts to tie down the elements of historical progress in the broadly social goal of achieving more perfect civil constitutions. If the purposiveness of progress is for "civil society universally administering right (*Recht*)," then it would seem that all historical violence and its social process of elimination by the more against the less human applications of the *Naturanlagen* would at least conceivably end in peace, even if the development toward that end repeatedly suspends the end and leaves it in question.⁷⁴ Here we are reminded that, from the outset, the hope to which the theory of universal history responds is a hope for an account of how empirical history attains meaning, that is, by considering "the play of freedom in the large" or, now, *antagonism in society*, that what appears unlawful and arbitrary in the individual might be retrieved as a steady,

⁷³ IUH 113/AA 8:23.

⁷⁴ IUH 112/AA 8: 22.

more or less regular progress of the species throughout its history.⁷⁵ The aim of universal history's progress, therefore, includes such a universal administration of right, because that achievement would prove a profound step in the meaningful recognition of the dignity of each and every individual, historical appearance of the human in history. Though the administration of that right does not fully cash out the hope Kant voices in preface, namely, that each individual would attain and fulfill a meaningful relation to the whole of the species, it does, at least, point to the veracity or historical potential of such an achievement. The move to discuss the import of political states is, then, much more an appeal to the potential of political life to contribute to this wide ranging historical goal, rather than the commitment of a political end as the end of history itself. The appeal to an order in which the dignity of each individual could be given a voice or abstractly represented in the form of state constitutions shows a veritable sign of progress for Kant toward the end of the universality of the species, but it is not equivalent to that end nor a sufficient condition of its achievement, that is, the moving cause of history's fulfillment or completion.

Kant thus forwards his concept cosmopolitanism in the seventh and eighth theses as a response to the self-jeopardizing empirical processes of universal history. It is a moment too wherein Kant circumscribes the disciplinary authority of the state in universal history. The state is one achievement of historical progress that yields socially and historically local sites of a legal recognition of individual dignity that serves as stepping-stones on the way to reaching some "universal cosmopolitan condition, as the womb in which all original predispositions (*Naturanlagen*) of the human species will be developed."⁷⁶ While the two are often confused as

⁷⁵ IUH 108/AA 8: 17.

⁷⁶ IUH 118/AA 8: 28.

one, it must be clear from this line that cosmopolitanism is a guiding intent for theorizing universal history, but not the deciding *end* or completion of history as such. In this respect, it is quite possible to over-estimate the significance of this cosmopolitanism for Kant.

Cosmopolitanism is the achievement of an empirical state of historical universality because it incorporates the pronouncement of each particular, each individual as a recognized, explicit member of the human species. In such a cosmopolitan state of affairs, the species is posited as the sum of its appearances, whereas it definitively cannot be amidst the historical processes of progress leading up to it. The progress that occurs within and after cosmopolitanism as a veritably existing, historical universality must therefore alter its social processes, since the violent, unsociable means of progress prior to the universality of species would contradict the purpose of the progress that follows from it, namely, the final touches of perfection for the practices of the naturally given capacities to use reason that mark a historical state of humanity's fulfillment or happiness. Kant unfortunately neither enumerates nor clarifies these final social processes in detail in the essay itself, but, from the given purposes of the essay itself in response to Schulz's remark, it would seem that the only means of progress at this point of an explicitly existing historical state of universality would proceed sociably (as opposed to unsociably) in the creation of "perfect state constitutions," which Kant named in the seventh thesis as "the most difficult" and "the latest" (*am spätesten*) of historical charges to be settled.⁷⁷

Though its theoretical import is quite significant, Kant does not devote much time in the universal history essay to the topic of peace as the object of sociable progress after the achievement of cosmopolitanism. This is, instead, the task of Kant's later essay *Toward Perpetual Peace* (1795), where he includes among the requirements for peace that each and

⁷⁷ IUH 113/AA 8: 23.

every government be a republican mode of governance (which uniquely means, for Kant, that only citizens could decide by parliamentary means on the need for and exercise of war), that no (standing) armies exist, that individuals are released from any debt relations to states, that states do not conduct foreign policy through debt relations, and that cosmopolitanism already be in effect as the universal right of hospitality of persons.⁷⁸ These requirements are particularly noteworthy, because they expiate the unsociable, historical elements of subjugation and debt (*Schuld*) in order to heal the violence of progress for the sake of its completion. The theory of universal history, however, need not dive into the explication of those demands, since they do not necessarily further clarify the argument for the idea of universal history itself. The political stipulations of peace already depend upon and presuppose the achieved historical state of the universality of the species, without which the approximation of perfect state constitutions or peace could not even be imaginable. For this reason, we should understand Kant to be restricting the scope of the theoretical domain of universal history by treating cosmopolitanism as the intention (*Absicht*) of empirical history's purposiveness for universality, and not history's *end* in the senses of either *Zweck* or *Ende*.

Readers such as Kleingeld nevertheless attempt to sneak morality back onto the scene as an explanation for cosmopolitanism as Kant's end of history. Kleingeld maintains that within the efforts of cosmopolitanism, "the final end is the transformation of the legal-political order

⁷⁸ Kleingeld convincingly argues that the cosmopolitanism that Kant deploys in the *Universal History* essay and *Perpetual Peace* are not quite the same. Whereas the *Universal History* essay proposes the need for a constitutional connection between the achievement of perfect constitutions and a third-party institution of a federation among states, *Perpetual Peace* does not appeal to this third-party cosmopolitan institution of an international federation, but treats cosmopolitanism as a relation among states themselves. This argument, however, goes in a direction of the possible politics of cosmopolitanism, which lies beyond the scope of this chapter (see: Kleingeld, Pauline. "Kant's changing cosmopolitanism." *Kant's Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim*. Ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty and James Schmidt. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009 (177-182).)

into a ‘moral-whole.’”⁷⁹ Kleingeld envisions cosmopolitanism as the final procedure of progress whereby a, perhaps extrinsically compelled, just juridical compact among states transforms itself through education and enlightenment into an inwardly motivated moral whole.⁸⁰ And this is not altogether wrong, since Kant surely does impose some loosely moral criteria from the transition of historical progress onto the achievements of cosmopolitanism, but only as the *externally motivated* recognition of the dignity of individual persons.⁸¹ Nowhere do we see Kant imposes properly moral criteria of right willing within cosmopolitanism, even though it involves moral results in both the *Universal History* essay and *Perpetual Peace* as the right of hospitality.⁸² Kleingeld, as a result, falls back into the problem of making the real purpose of history a moral end, such that genuine progress once again becomes moral progress alone, which dissolves the theoretical specificity of universal history entirely. Kleingeld’s argument appears to result from

⁷⁹ Kleingeld, “Kant’s changing cosmopolitanism,” 172.

⁸⁰ Kleingeld, “Kant, History, and the Idea of Moral Development,” 66-7.

⁸¹ IUH 116-117/AA 8: 27.

⁸² Kant’s concept of a right of hospitality or world citizenship (*Weltbürgerrecht*) is his third and final of the “three definitive articles” of perpetual peace. After the first, that all governments be structured as republican models of governance, and the second, that the laws of nations ought to be modeled on a federation of free states, comes the conclusion of a universally binding right of hospitality for individual persons to have their rights and fundamental dignity respected wherever they so travel on the earth. In *Perpetual Peace*, Kant concludes his discussion of the right of hospitality in specifically legal and not moral terms, showing that though it requires a moral result—the recognition of each individual rational being’s dignity—this right does not share in the moral demands of right willing. Legally, persons can be compelled into conformity with the law, unlike in the moral sphere, where one can teach respect for the moral law, but it seems quite impossible to coerce an individual into taking respect for the moral law as the maxim of his or her own action (cf. AA 8: 360). In the above referenced passages, Kleingeld often appears to treat the legal sphere of right as a historical stepping-stone on the way to moral perfection, whereas I read Kant to be drawing a hard philosophical distinction between subject matters in legality and morality, such that there is no need to overcome the difference between the two domains. Legality, on the one hand, asks of external relations among law, right, and thereby sovereignty (as the external source of power mediating the previous two terms). Morality, on the other hand, asks about the capacity of the individual will to will itself, to self-legislate one’s maxims, which evidences an internal, necessary relationship between the will and law, because the individual will cannot know of its own freedom without an account of its lawfulness.

her selective use of a passage from the remark to thesis four that she rather misleadingly invokes as a description of cosmopolitanism itself.⁸³ In that passage, following the definition of unsocial-sociability, Kant is describing that even moral progress can come out of what is at first a morally disturbing process of unsociability. He contends there that particular societies could reasonably develop from creating a social sentiment (*Zusammenstimmung*) by means of force or coercion into creating legal distinctions about the acceptable action of individuals and, ultimately, come to effect the moral decisions and actions of individuals, so as to realize an ethically robust society or a *moral whole*.⁸⁴ Nowhere in the fourth thesis does Kant waver any discussion of an end of history, much less some moral criteria for it. Rather, Kant's application of the term "moral whole" refers specifically to the conceivable or ideal development of *particular societies* in trajectories of progress, since he is there discussing the historical inheritance of culture as one way to break with and halt the historical repetitions of unsociability and violence. Culture, as the inherited array of prior elements of progress, can always be rearranged within some particular society to that society's immediate benefit—this is an important point for Kant to make, since it might suggest that certain elements of progress (i.e., uses of reason) could be re-purposed, so to speak, such that their subsequent historical iterations might not require the same violence that their first appearances did.

Under the criteria of historical progress, then, what seems most significant to Kant about cosmopolitanism is that it marks the turning point of progress from the violent social processes of the *play of antagonism*, whereby history purposively anticipates universality, to an emergent state of historical universality, wherein the human species progresses as a whole to that final

⁸³ Kleingeld, "Kant's changing cosmopolitanism," 172.

⁸⁴ IUH 111/AA 8: 21.

achievement of perfection or happiness in the last developments of naturally given capacities to use reason. This final aim of progress appears to be Kant's notion of states drafting perfect constitutions for the most possible freedom of individual human beings, without endangering the apparent human status of each and every (present) historical individual. Contrary to Kleingeld's vision of universal history as a process of moral education and enlightenment, the fact that the state is an instrumental piece of keeping these appearances correct or in line with the intent might suggest that discipline, coercion, and punishment enter where education and enlightenment are lacking in cosmopolitanism, that is, where historical appearances might seem false or deviant.⁸⁵

IV. Theory & the Big Idea

The central, consolidating philosophical task when putting universal history into practice, for Kant, comes down to the issue of theoretically tracking and conceptually representing the coherence of the human in history, especially prior to cosmopolitanism as the aim setting the historical trajectory of an empirically achieved universality of the species. And, in relation to that historical aim, the task of Kant's "philosophical historiographer" becomes the representation of the purposiveness of empirical history for such a complete fulfillment with reference to the

⁸⁵ Kleingeld "Kant's changing cosmopolitanism," 66. In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant reserves exactly these kind of disciplinary powers as the express right and authority of the sovereign executive in contrast to the sovereignty of legislative power. The sovereign executive (*Souverän*) is the single source of public punishment: "So a people's sovereign [*Beherrscher*] (legislator) cannot also be its ruler, since the ruler is subject to the law and so is put under obligation through the law by *another*, namely the sovereign (*Souverän*). The sovereign can also take the ruler's authority away from him, depose him, or reform his administration. But he cannot punish him [...] for punishment is, again, an act of the executive authority, which has the supreme capacity to exercise coercion in conformity with the law" (Immanuel Kant and Roger J. Sullivan, *Kant: The Metaphysics of Morals*. Ed. Mary J. Gregor. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996 (94).) While the ultimate historical achievement of peace might abjure such coercive and disciplinary relations between states and individuals, it would accord fully with the program of cosmopolitanism.

idea of historical universality itself. The issue of this representation in theory thus retraces and underscores the immense motivational force that the hope for a universal history continues to exert on theory. In an attempt to make good on that hope, the presentation of the idea in history would seem to entail the responsibility of justifying the historical life of progress. Yet, the problem that Kant repeatedly confronts throughout the essay is that as much as immoral and violent social processes might produce moments of progress (as we saw in the analysis of Kant's praise for unsociability alone), one cannot justify those immoral means or their violence in general as the cause and locus of *meaning* in history itself. In fact, these social processes directly threaten the potential for history to retain a meaning of its own, that is, a meaning independent of the moral rules and significance of the self-relation of the will in its self-legislated possibility for action. Since meaning in history is not reducible to that practical logic and also manifestly lacks any given universality or rule for its judgment, theory must find recourse to the representation of history's potential meaning in the idea alone, especially insofar as that meaning runs directly counter to the merely causal coherence of historical phenomena caught up in the web of social processes of unsociability.

So, as we have seen, Kant never goes so far as to apply his account of unsocial-sociability as a demonstration or imperative of what ought to be done in a specific historical situation, nor can it guarantee the shape of progress to come or that it will in individual historical moments. Universal history always remains a strictly theoretical problem about the meaning of historical appearances "in the large" historically, that is, the meaning of appearances ostensibly of the human in the midst of the very process of historically accomplishing the fulfilled universality of the species itself. In other words, Kant never poses universal history as a practical imperative or as a principle for praxis, but he pursues it as a theoretical question about

the meaning of that historical activity of the human species prior to its completion and as only held together in the idea of the fulfillment of that claim to the human. The effort to track the development of the species in history through the progress of its *Naturanlagen* alone thus isolates the means in theory to represent a potentially meaningful coherence in history that is one other than the violence that materially moves and empirically establishes it. As the aim of progress, then, the face of the perfection of the *Naturanlagen* can neither be derived from any instance or achievement in empirical history nor should it be called on to justify specific historical uses of violence. Nonetheless, Kant leaves no room for ambiguity throughout the essay that progress cannot be imagined without social violence.

The danger, as we have seen in the forgoing analysis, is that the social processes of the historical progress of the species cannot take effect without simultaneously jeopardizing the success of the historically achieved universality of the species, since antagonism requires *particular* uses of *Naturanlagen* to negate other, imperfect, *particular* uses of *Naturanlagen*. This antagonistic play of particulars negating others as other in the absence of a given universality or rule was what Adorno named the principle of particularity or the play of abstraction. So, as long as individuals appear out of step with the progress of the species, the species itself also remains in question and individuals appears as abstract, precarious, and potentially arbitrary particulars. It is for this very reason, we must remind ourselves, that Kant turns to universal history in the first place: to restore confidence that what appears irrational and arbitrary in the historical life of empirical individuals might be able to attain meaning in an account of the historical progress of the species. Only at the level of the idea of the species, not with the individual, does Kant argue for a historically purposive trajectory toward the complete development of *Naturanlagen*, whereby the species itself would be a perfected or complete

historical term of universality—such that one could rightfully call this the *happiness* or *flourishing* of humanity. Kant thus methodologically deploys the theoretically posited concept of history's completion or happiness as a means to recover the empirical index of history's purposiveness for universality. Happiness alone confers meaning in history. The ultimate question of universal history, therefore, culminates in a question of how we can represent the human in history, insofar as its development in history remains imperfect, the nature of its appearance being inevitably historically fragmented, and its meaning incomplete or unfulfilled at the instance of any particular, historical moment.

There are, perhaps, two ways to answer this question of the human in history that are certainly related but methodologically distinct, that is, either with reference to the social trajectories of progress in empirical history or in the idea alone. To find the meaning of the human in history through the articulation of progress draws a strong, causal relationship between the social processes of progress and the goal of the universality of the species, such that one would consider that universality to be already manifestly underway. The second option, however, would limit the claim of historical universality to the illusory reality of the idea as long as social antagonisms persist in history, because no amount of purposive elements in history could ever be equated to the empirical, historical existence of the fulfilled universality of the human in relation to each of its presumed appearances. The first answer belongs to Yovel's broadly Hegelian interpretation, but the second appears to be the only plausible position that Kant's essay would allow.

Yovel locates the reality of historical universality in the throes of progress is because he understands progress to rely on reason's progressive self-realization, i.e., the history of reason. By this notion of the *history of reason* Yovel understands history to attain universality only by

virtue of practical reason's self-imposed, necessary duty to realize the highest good.⁸⁶ Reason's self-realization, for Yovel, is the 'universal element' in history, regardless of whether history has not yet accomplished an actual universality, such that as long as some consciousness of reason—however opaque—exists in history, progress already exists and universality is underway. As a result of this reading, however, he renders the idea of history empty or at least eclipses it with the imperative to realize the highest good, because this would mean that the only unity that history can attain is the unity of those spiritual and intellectual steps by which reason is able to take itself as an object of contemplation and action. The universality of history would therefore not belong to history itself, but to reason in abstraction of history and every historical element included therein would be rational without remainder. On that reading one would be quite right to claim—without hyperbole—that all of history is ancillary flourish and pomp in the service of bringing about the history of philosophy, since the history of philosophy alone provides the most distilled accounts of reason's progress of self-recognition. That which is irrational in history, namely, counter-purposive suffering, would not just be insignificant but virtually inexistent, inasmuch as it would not even be counted as a factor in history's progress and therefore could make no claim on the achievement of historical universality. Yovel must therefore commit to the charge that the only thing universal in history is that which wholly pertains to reason's *self-knowledge*.⁸⁷ In so doing, his reading condemns all of empirical history to bear no relation to universal history, even though he projects this charge against Kant as the single reason why Kant's theory of universal history is fundamentally incoherent.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ KPH 49-50.

⁸⁷ By self-knowledge here I have in mind Kant's sardonic description of "self-knowledge" in the second edition paralogisms of the first *Critique*, namely, when confronted with irresolvable theoretical problems that reason should just shrug them off and return to prudential matters (CPR B 421).

It is quite difficult to understand how Yovel maintains a theory of universal history absent a demonstrable connection to empirical history, especially given the prominent philosophical context of it in Kant's essay. For this reason, Yovel often turns to Kant's 1793 text, *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone*, as a historicized plan of reason's development. In Yovel's reading, the history of reason comes to the fore most clearly through religion, because reason first encounters itself through an externally posited third term of lawfulness in religion:

According to Kant there can be many faiths and churches but only one religion. This is the religion of reason, which the many historical faiths express with varying degrees of vagueness and empirical distortion. The one true religion is basically identical with Kant's moral theory [...] The history of religion is thus a latent mode of the history of reason in two respects. On the one hand it is the process in which the rational principle of morality gradually breaks through the diverse historical creeds until it attains clear explication as a pure system of practical reason. But on the other hand, even after the true nature of religion is known in theory, the task of rational religion is not done, but still lies ahead in future history. This task is to establish the "kingdom of God on earth"—a metaphor expressing the secular moral ideal contained in the highest good.⁸⁹

Yovel applies Kant's *Religion* text in order to present a fundamentally substantialist account of reason in history. If reason can only make progress in history by means of its self-articulation and thereby identity, then it must do so through religion, because religion is the spiritual and intellectual sphere wherein reason gives itself laws and interprets them through critique. Yovel uses *the religion of reason* to argue that reason emerges as the true historical subject, whose followers comprise what Kant called the "invisible church" or the "ethical community."⁹⁰ Yovel portrays this concept of the *religion of reason* and its *ethical community* as filling out one and the same practical imperative for reason's self-recognition. This self-recognition would not just

⁸⁸ KPH 21.

⁸⁹ KPH 8.

⁹⁰ KPH 171.

mean the formal articulation of the moral law, but also its historical realization or particularization, in the sense that each and every (existing) individual would become an end in themselves. In this way, Yovel understands the kingdom of ends to explain both the task of the religion of reason and the second postulate of *Critique of Practical Reason* to promote the highest good. Yet, more consequential than Yovel's identification of all figures of practical reason in the kingdom of ends as history's end, one should notice the extreme role that Yovel prescribes to the ethical community as the historical locus of reason as the self-identical, self-causing historical substance.

Yovel identifies the ethical community as the existence of the universal element—or substance—in history that is not yet concretely universal, i.e., universally and positively valid in relation to all empirical instances, but is nonetheless manifestly existent or *actual* in history. If the ethical community is a collection of individuals who bear the religion of reason, that is, those who “have emancipated themselves from transcendent fears and from all dependence on an external basis for morality,” then history can only socially and antagonistically make progress by securing the element of reason binding the ethical community in exclusion of and by subjugating others.⁹¹ Whereas Kant abandons the possibility of the ethical community as a conceptual site for a universal history, precisely because some individuals could not know *how* to instruct others universally how to relate to their own capacity to will (even if we formally know the moral law), Yovel takes the meaning of the ethical community to be those who know “the true nature of religion,” in the same sense of the true nature of the individual's ability to practice morality

⁹¹ KPH 171.

correctly.⁹² As a result of Yovel's read, one could compel individuals into the correct private relation to their own capacity to will (their own will) for the sake of further progress in history. Yet, this is only possible to the degree that one claims reason exists in history as the ethical community of moral persons, who possess the religion of reason in their historical moment, such that they progress history by preserving its universal element against that which might impede or interrupt it.

The reason that Yovel's reading seems to take liberties with Kant's text arises from his treatment of progress as the progress of a manifestly existing universal element in history, instead of progress being empirical history's purposiveness for a universality that does not yet exist. As long as no possible experience of that universality exists in history, then it must be relegated to the status of a theoretical idea (*Idee*) in the strict sense of the term. And even though the title of Kant's text bears this term "idea" as the locus of universal history's intelligibility, some commentators, such as Henry Allison, find it impossible that Kant really intends this connection: "'Idea' as it appears in the title of our essay, is clearly not to be understood according to the model of transcendental Ideas, since it refers to human history rather than to any illusory transcendent entity."⁹³ Allison's refusal to see Kant's title words *the idea for a universal history* to be in line with the first *Critique* use of the term idea (*Idee*) seems to contradict Kant's argument throughout the essay. Allison contends that because the idea of universal amounts to a

⁹² Kant does argue that a universal presentation of the religion of reason would be possible, but explicitly not as a universal history: "One cannot demand a universal history of the human species from religion on earth" (*Religion*, AA 6:124 – original translation). Instead a universal presentation of the history of religion follows from the comparison of historical religions with the pure, rational moral faith, such that the moral law is the universal measure of all religiously divined practical imperatives—this is surely, as Kant notes and Yovel confuses, a far cry from the project of universal history as Kant presents in his essay.

⁹³ Allison, "Teleology and History in Kant," 24.

cosmopolitan or “political project,” the exact meaning of which he does not clarify, it would be inappropriate to understand its claim on theory to be a comprehensive theoretical idea.⁹⁴ Much to the contrary, the foregoing analysis has shown that cosmopolitanism decisively fills out the trajectory or intention of human, empirical history’s purposiveness for universality, that intention is not identical to the claims of universal history altogether, not the least of which reasons is its index for universality in the naturally given capacities of the human being to use reason and the idea of the human species that lies in the balance of that progress. In other words, cosmopolitanism elaborates empirical history’s aim toward historical universality, but it does not explain the meaning of universal history itself. Universal history should therefore not be reduced to one political project to be debated against others that are all only hypothetically related the present, most of all because it proposes to attend to history in terms of an emergent totality. The idea of universal history, taken in the strict theoretical sense of that term, should present an intelligible unity to universal history’s claims, which, as we have seen, are themselves constantly set against one another even in dangerous and problematic ways throughout Kant’s theses.

In this essay, Kant’s argument for the idea of universal history does not respond to an observation or intuition given in experience that allows for the cognition of human, empirical history as a manifestly universal history. Rather, he begins from the traces of an absent experience out of which the hope for a universal history emerges in the negativity of its absence. And as much as antagonism might provide the means to map the progress appropriate to the human in its empirical history, antagonism can only demonstrate history’s purposiveness for universality to the exact same degree as history’s social fragmentation and its disintegration into irrational suffering. This, I take it, is the reason that Kant expresses the only possible

⁹⁴ Allison, “Teleology and History in Kant,” 25.

intelligibility of universal history in an idea, because *nothing empirical* has the power to justify the totalizing claim of historical universality—such is the need for theory to take refuge in the ideas, as Kant had similarly expressed it in the first *Critique*:

This unity of reason always presupposes an idea, namely that of the form of a whole of cognition, which precedes the determinate cognition of the parts and contains the conditions for determining *a priori* the place of each part and its relation to the others. Accordingly, this idea postulates complete unity of the understanding's cognition, through which this cognition comes to be not merely a contingent aggregate, but a system interconnected in accordance with necessary laws.⁹⁵

An idea articulates the merely intelligible, systematic organization of cognition as a totality uniting the transcendental account of cognition and its necessary presuppositions that fall outside the domain of cognition. In this way, Kant conveys reason to reach for an idea that would precede the cognition of the parts of cognition, such as pure intuitions and pure concepts, with a vision of the determinate shape and meaning of the whole of cognition. Such an idea would not just provide an account of the internal objectivity of subjectivity's framework, but a fully formed metaphysical account of the concrete framework of the world in which this subjectivity emerges. In this way, the fulfilled idea would mark the reconciled intersection of systematicity and completeness, which had to be sacrificed in the first *Critique* for the sake of conforming to cognition's own coherence: *that concepts without intuitions are empty, and intuitions without concepts blind*. As a result, all ideas are ideas because they are concepts that would comprehend a content far in excess of possible experience, such that they remain *empty*—only to be filled out by conjecture and aspirational thoughts. In this respect, the Kantian idea is much like a vanishing point within cognition: a semblance-like point construed from the positioning of the parts that tends infinitely closer toward a totality that is not given, such that its intimation can only appear through the presentation of those relations among the parts. The idea of universal

⁹⁵ CPR A 645/B 673.

history must then be such a merely intelligible organization of the concepts and claims of theory's pursuit of a historical universality, a container of the aspirational elements of history's theorization.

The idea of universal history thus stands as something quite different than anything that is given in empirical history and apart from the processes and states of affairs that move and realize empirical history too, that is, it is not exhausted in the teleological account of the *Naturanlagen*, the historical processes of social antagonism, or cosmopolitanism alone. The idea of history is the organization of those theoretical pieces through which emerges history's completion or happiness as a totality. Because Kant does relegate universal history to such a position of epistemological and metaphysical skepticism as the ideas of God, world, and soul in the first critique, it would be well founded at this point to ask whether or not the achievement of historical universality should be expected under Kant's rubric. Yet, before answering that question, which will still require the work of the next chapter's account of reflective judgment, we should notice that the absolutely singular importance of universal history's status as an idea opens up the possibility of two meanings or registers of truth when confronting this problem of history. On the one hand, within the empirical history, Kant articulated the basic transcendental claim of a regulatively modified teleological development of the naturally given capacities to use reason in history, i.e., the derivation of the *Naturabsicht* or aim of nature—this I take it is the *a priori* thread to which Kant refers in the last thesis when arguing against a merely empirical treatment of history.⁹⁶ This claim merits the title of transcendental precisely because, independent of experience, it judges an internal, mutually determinative, synthetic bond between the naturally given capacities and a history of their development. The empirical life of this

⁹⁶ IUH 119/AA 8: 30.

claim—that the *Naturanlagen must develop* in history—came through in Kant’s account of the social antagonism that violently sets history in motion and keeps it so, even if under duress. On that register, the truth of the historical process stands as its results: the uses of *Naturanlagen* that at any given point negate others are the most developed, since they incorporate in their antagonistic play both the best of that which preceded them and simultaneously eclipse that which needs to be thrown aside for the sake of progress. In other words, the progress of the naturally given capacities to use reason flows only to the extent that it can subjugate another and finds an other to subjugate. If the process is in itself rational, then the results are indefatigable, regardless of what they actually are. In Yovel, we saw the extension of this logic through the localization of a historical substance, from which follows a teleological of justification violence on the basis of its substance. Yet, on the other hand, Kant escapes the seal of that fate only insofar as he opens up another register of truth in history relative to the idea of universal history.

In the idea of universal history, the aspirational element of history that asks, *for what might I hope*, becomes a second but no less important register for the meaning of truth in history. In the idea, history is measured neither by the rational processes that vindicate its results nor the strength of those results themselves. In the idea both the irrational and the rational elements of history have equal purchase on and access to the thought of the human’s universal achievement, of a complete whole and not a merely historical sum of appearances. The idea of history is not a selection of what is best in history or what is worth hoping for in a future on the basis of given history. Rather, at issue is the need to make good on and to represent the idea’s presence in history, which first anticipated this hope that may “still serve us as a guiding thread for exhibiting (*darstellen*) an otherwise planless *aggregate* of human actions, at least in the large, as

a *system*.”⁹⁷ Here, it is worth drawing attention to Kant’s thematic use of *darstellen* as the presentation of all possible parts or cognitions in relation to the whole or form of cognition. System, in this sense, intends the meaningful incorporation and organization of *all* elements. As a result, the idea finds its truth no less among history’s counter-purposive suffering wrecked on individuals and the historical fragmentation of fragmenting social processes than in the examination of progress and the historical expansion of the naturally given capacities to use reason. The idea does not provide a measure by which to categorize or hierarchize those historical elements, but instead highlights and suggests what of those appearances belongs to the completion of history, that is, the redemption of the universality of the human in its historically incomplete appearances. That for which we hope, that aspiration to which the idea of universal history holds a candle, is such a fulfilled *happiness* of the species. In this way, the idea of universal history as the fulfilled happiness of the species shows us one of Kant’s only positive appeals to happiness in the theoretical domain.⁹⁸ The meaning of this idea of happiness, then, is the complete satisfaction or fulfillment of the human in each of its historical appearances. And it is only through this idea of a historical universality that the human gains intelligibility in history prior to its achievement or completion, which would mark something *new* in history. The truth of history in the idea is this very aspirational element, and it would seem that there is an infinite amount of hope between history and the idea, but it is also not something that can be possessed or called upon in experience and empirical history to justify some sequence of historical phenomena, since that hopefulness belongs only to the idea of history’s fulfillment.

⁹⁷ IUH 118/AA 8: 29.

⁹⁸As the following chapter will explore in more detail, Kant does entertain happiness in the later sections of the third *Critique* as the end of the teleological system of nature (§83), but he quickly abandons that thought with no reservations whatsoever. That happiness fulfills the meaning of the idea of historical universality here, for Kant, is indicative of the difference in the philosophical question of this essay and from the “Appendix” to the “Critique of the Teleological Power of Judgment” in the third *Critique*.

Kant's method of presenting the idea of universal history thus centers on unfolding these two registers of truth in their distinct relevance to history: truth as the processes of progress and truth in the idea of universal history. While the truth of empirical history is beset by the repetition of social processes of antagonism and the counter-purposive suffering that throws the relevance and meaning of individuals in history into question, the truth of history in the idea aspires for the redemption of meaning in history, that is, the meaningful relation of each historical appearance to the idea of the fulfilled happiness of the human as a whole. Theory itself thus plays an indispensable if not the only role that opens the thought of a connection between the truth of the negativity of empirical history and the truth of history as the idea by means of construing the very theory of universal history itself, without which the very question of the compatibility or intersection of those two registers of truth would be unthinkable. Kant, however, ends the essay only with the indication of such a compatibility without actually elucidating it in the essay itself. For this reason, we must turn to his later account of reflective judgment, since it opens up the possibility of empirical observations to unfold from out of contingency and to generate concepts precisely where they are absent. In this way, reflective judgment might once again close the gap, as it were, between the empirical truth of history and its truth in the idea of universal history.

CHAPTER TWO

COHERENCE, COMPLETENESS, AND IRRATIONALITY IN KANT'S PLAN FOR A THEORY OF HISTORY

The previous chapter provided an account of Kant's argument and the basic philosophical problems filling out the 1784 *Universal History* essay. That foundational account does, however, leave some larger interpretive questions unanswered, specifically, on the one hand, the contending rationality or irrationality of history as a whole in light of the violence that belongs to its processes of development. Also, on the other hand, the nature of some consequential relationship—if any—between the two registers of truth in history remains in question, that is, between the truth of history as expressed in its social process of antagonism and its aspirational content lodged within the idea of universal history itself. This chapter attempts to clarify both these interpretive issues through recourse to Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, since, as the last chapter was at pains to show, Kant's theory of history principally entails the task of judging an emergent order or pattern among history's contents in the absence of any given rule or universality for the object, history itself. That task, therefore, requires a greater understanding of this need for judgment and an explication of the extent to which it is possible.

From the outset of the *Universal History* essay, Kant articulates the motivation for a theory of universal history against history's looming fate of arbitrariness, contingency, and a general state of gratuitous violence as the only given nexus of historical individuals or particulars. In response to that intimation of a nearly godforsaken, historical world, we saw Kant give theory the task to delineate a horizon of historical universality inside the social fabric of

empirical history. That horizon ultimately comes to light in and through the idea of universal history, wherein an image of a universality in thought stands over the breach of historical negativity, bridging the gaps and rifts between historical particulars that lack meaningful relationships on the way to the thought of an empirical universality that would circumscribe the intelligibility of humankind in a direct and explicit relationship to each historical particular. Kant relays this image—one that he named a unifying, cosmopolitan (*weltbürgerliche*) achievement—through the “guiding thread” of the original teleological character of an, as yet, unrealized, historical totality of the human species. This is, in brief, the scope of universal history: to designate in theory a rounded totality of history by means of isolating its tendency to unfold the universality of the species as a complex whole, so as to bring each historical particular out of its persistent, looming arbitrariness or fate and into the manifest, historical unity of a flourishing, complete species. Under this framework, Kant calls the idea of history’s completion or fulfillment as such a rounded totality “the happiness (*Glückseligkeit*)” of the species. Though this problem is no small business, we saw Kant limit the *Universal History* essay to sketching a roadmap to retrieve the latent hope for such a universal history from the chaotic and irrational experience of history as something simply done to individuals, as Adorno incisively put it.⁹⁹

Universal history demands, in the simplest of terms, the recovery of rationality and order in thought from the irrationality of antagonism, its fragmenting disorder, and the resultant not-yet conceptualized negativity surrounding historical particulars. On that basis, we might say that the theoretician’s job in that business—what Kant had appealed to in the figure of *the philosophical historiographer*—is to impart conceptually related images of history that would fix the historical horizon, mixing the elements of truth from empirical history alongside that of the aspirational

⁹⁹ HF 9.

content at play in the truth of the idea. The articulation of such *not-yet* conceptualized images in a merely reflecting activity of thought is exactly the work that Kant gave to reflective judgment in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. It is therefore my contention that the third *Critique* provides unique theoretical resources in its account of reflective judgment that would aid an understanding of Kant's theorization of history not just from a bird's eye view of all the moving parts in theory, but from inside history and the taking-on of its philosophical task, namely, to convey meaning in history between its seemingly two divergent registers of truth.

As the last chapter argued, Yirmiahu Yovel contends that the singular failing of Kant's theory of history is the lack of any strong or dynamic relationship between two spheres of history he identifies as empirical history and the history of reason, a bifurcation of history that Yovel diagnoses as the problem of *historical schematism*. While Yovel is by no means inattentive to the third *Critique* in his account of Kant's philosophy of history, he attends almost exclusively to the "Appendix" to the "Critique of the Teleological Power of Judgment," where Kant revisits his account of unsocial-sociability from the *Universal History* essay and repositions it in the context of teleological judgments of natural purposiveness. Yovel surprisingly turns to this account of natural teleology as Kant's only coherent, critical account of history. This ultimately yields the substitution of what Kant there calls *culture* for history and, as a result, also the thought of the human being as the final end of the entire system of nature itself (*Endzweck*) instead of a theory of history. On Yovel's reading, the account of culture is the summit of Kant's philosophy of history, because it thoroughly describes the meaning of history as the history of reason. Culture, for this interpretation, offers the sum of the moral efforts and achievements of human beings throughout history. Yet, inasmuch as culture realizes its meaning amidst or alongside history, it is also not a concept of history itself, such that history appears, there, as the

dress one must remove to excavate the meaning of human agency. As a result, the concept of culture no longer bears much of a resemblance to the object Kant carves out in the *Universal History* essay, which raises the whole of plainly historical phenomena into view as a possible object of cognition. One way to understand the move away from the object of history to these rather late conclusions from the third *Critique*—in the appendix to the critique of teleological judgment—is an almost unprecedented confidence that meaning, for Kant, could be secured in and for the object, history, through the stamp of a teleological character alone, as if the presence of teleology were enough to secure the idea of history as a meaningful whole.

After working through the interpretation of history as an problem of culture, I will turn to Kant’s “First Introduction” to the third *Critique*, so as to both rightly contextualize the role of accounting for objective purposiveness in history and to show what else that account of objective purposiveness relies upon to become meaningful, namely, the idea of history itself.¹⁰⁰ In direct response to Yovel’s perceived problem of a historical schematism, I will provide a reading of how Kant’s account of objective, reflective judgment—and not just the late conclusions that presuppose those cognitive issues—might help to explain how a theory of history might retrieve order from disorder in the historical world. Kant clearly has this exact problem in mind in the “First Introduction” when discussing the issue of reflective judgment as accounting for, “a lawfulness for the contingent *as such*.”¹⁰¹ On that basis, I will argue in the second section of this chapter that the theoretical use of reflective judgment thereby allows for the presentation of

¹⁰⁰ John H Zammito, *The Genesis of Kant’s Critique of Judgment*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1992 (5). (Hereafter, *Genesis*.) Zammito lays out a strong, genetic argument for the transformative role of the “First Introduction,” which he dates to the spring of 1789, wherein Kant’s project develops from a “critique of taste” into a critique of the specific faculty of judgment. In this way, Zammito often reads the unpublished “First Introduction” as a roadmap to how the question of teleological, reflective judgment follows from the question aesthetic, reflective judgment and thereby the very unity of the text as a whole.

¹⁰¹ CPJ 20/AA 20: 217-8—emphasis added.

quasi-schematic images out of the disorder of the seemingly contingent, fatedness of historical particulars. Such an organizing reflection of particulars, however, requires a medium that is the third in and through which those fated, contingent particulars can be rescued, and that medium can only be the idea itself as an analogue to a “schema of the empirical,” as Kant suggests in the first *Critique*, precisely when a determining judgment lacks.¹⁰² It is, therefore, the idea of historical universality alone that sets up and provides for an account of history’s possible coherence. From that standpoint of the idea history’s fulfillment, it should become clear that while progress always demands social violence—and the irrationality to which historical particulars are thereby fated—in order to develop and, ultimately, to establish history’s teleological coherence, that progress can only become meaningful in relation to the thought of history’s truth in the idea, which categorically prohibits the justification of any specific use of historical violence for the sake of meaning in history. A Kantian theory of history can, therefore, answer the lingering element of irrationality in history by retrieving an intra-historical appeal to the aspirational element that connects history to the ideas, since this allows for the thought of historical particulars to appear otherwise in the semblance-like shine of the idea as a reflective medium, yet that appeal is never so powerful, for Kant, to extricate that element of irrationality, but only to save some aspirational element for history in the contemplation of the idea.

I. The Problem of Historical Schematism

Yovel formulates his primary objection against Kant’s philosophy of history in what he terms the problem of historical schematism, namely, the lack of a connection of or internal

¹⁰² CPR A665/B693

relationship between the empirical and the rational spheres of history. The rational sphere of religion, as we began to see last chapter, circumscribes the concepts comprising the history of reason: the development of reason's self-consciousness through the history of its practical concepts and the religiously cloaked articulations of its moral lawfulness. Yovel therefore argues that only a rational history of religion can elaborate the history of reason itself, since reason in its infancy works through its dependence on religion to articulate law that, in turn, provides for the interpretive critique of those religious forms of reason's own lawfulness. The end result of this trajectory of law and critique, for Yovel, is the transformative realization that all such articulations of law, freedom, and critique actually depend on nothing other than the independence or autonomy of reason itself. At that point, the very peak of Enlightenment thinking, reason disrobes the historical, religious cloaking of law so as to reveal its own thoroughly practical character, through which practical reason gives itself the object of its own legislative power, i.e., freedom. History would be the general context—the setting—in which the human being comes to account for its nature (*Wesen*), as that nature is historically and progressively understood to be the final end in the system of nature itself. As a result, Yovel suggests that the history of reason should be the determining concept of history as a whole, yet the explanatory resources in this concept—its content—only appears as a loosely threaded, indeterminately related sequence of either more or less rational concepts of freedom. So, the suspected problem plaguing Kant's outline for a theory of history is this very chasm separating the abstract coherence of the history of reason from actual, empirical history, such that there appears to be no form for history as a concrete, social existence.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ The post-Kantian, idealist standard that history should be or, alternatively, should realize itself as “concrete” is not something Kant appears to require for a successful theory of history. Nevertheless, if the meaning of concreteness were restricted from its metaphysical implications and limited to an

On the other side of history as the history of reason, in the actual or empirical experience of the object, individuals remain fated or left to history as something done to them rather than something that individuals themselves practically conduct and rationally organize with regard to the positing of ends. If the concept of history as the history of reason fails to touch down in empirical history, it fails to ascertain content, such that this “purely” rational account of history is actually quite precarious, if not altogether neglecting to identify a thing called history.

The problem of historical schematism follows, like other problems of schematism in Kant, from his unbridgeable dualism. Although Kant must admit of a non-empirical history of reason, he cannot explain its relation to *empirical* history. [...] How can a bridge be built between the history of reason and empirical history? I think that Kant does not and cannot have a sufficient answer. Reason is to grow, mature, and affect the world in and through empirical history, which goes on in time and is bound by natural laws. How can the correspondence between real states in experience and the stages in the evolution of reason be accounted for? Since no intrinsic ground can be found within the system, Kant must resort in the field of practical reason to a transcendent postulate, "God"; but even this postulate does not *explain* the correspondence. It only asserts and, in the final analysis, *presupposes* it.¹⁰⁴

History, on the empirical plane of experience, seems like an indeterminately abstract umbrella-term to catch all the historical elements and forces that remain contained within and do not rise beyond the empirical sphere of history. Though Yovel does not thematize this term, we might simply call this empirical plane of history *society* or, precisely because of its imprecise and abstract character, *the social*. So, broadly construed for Yovel, the rational sphere of history—the history of reason—includes the historicized stages of reason’s progressive self-recognition

epistemological, critical framework, then concreteness would apply to the issue of an exhaustive intelligibility, that is, a complete judgment of history as a whole. In this sense, the concreteness of history is largely and repeatedly deferred in Kant’s theory, precisely because of history’s manifest incompleteness, i.e., the absence of a universal concept of the species. In spite of that, Kant seems to argue that the task of a theory of history would be to provide an intra-historical appeal to the idea of history’s completion, so as to supply a critical standpoint that lends intelligibility to history in the very state of its incompleteness.

¹⁰⁴ KPH 21.

and its attending stages of lawfulness, whereas the empirical sphere includes everything else that is at play in history (present social institutions and with that the particular state of the arts, the sciences, and religion). If, in the end, one must brush the empirical content of history aside in order to excavate the exact 'historical' meaning of reason's progress and its practical shapes, the cognition of history itself remains nothing short of indeterminate and incoherent. In other words, on this reading, what concerns us in history is not history as a complex totality, but just specific elements traveling through history, which come into vision only once we remove the dross of empirical history. To put Yovel's argument under a slightly polemical emphasis, this problem of historical schematism intends to pinpoint a fundamental and decisive problem for any philosophy of history worth the name, that is, what is the merit and historical purchase of a philosophy of history that separates society from the sphere of history's truth and meaning?

Yovel's provocative indictment of an absent *historical schematism* means that Kant lacks any justificatory ground to account for the mediation that evidently must be taking place between the few and far between peaks of the history of reason and the deep, murky valleys of empirical history or society that transports reason on the way to its practical self-realization. As Yovel insists, when Kant talks of history, he does not intend some set of automatic natural processes, but the reshaping of the world of human beings according to a progressively clarified moral ideal that lives in the consciousness of particular human beings, such as a Plato, a Luther, a Newton, or even a Robespierre.¹⁰⁵ In this way, the proper question of the history of reason is how some *historically specific individuals* become both the cause and effect of the human species itself, that is, how these particular individuals rise to historical peaks above their empirical circumstances so as to articulate progressive models of the human being in the historical life of

¹⁰⁵ KPH 21, 125.

its own practical reason.¹⁰⁶ In other words, for Yovel, the historical schematism is essentially a question of how the ethical community of reason in history, as was examined last chapter, relates to the actual, empirical processes of history, a relation which he ultimately denies.

If there were some schematizing account of the mediation between the concepts of rational history and the intuitions or observations of empirical history, it would require some third thing or medium, such as historical time, in which the concept of the human being could be lawfully matched with its appropriate historical appearances. Yet, because time is only ever given in experience as a pure form of intuition (inner sense) and not outside of that transcendental, *a priori* framework, Yovel argues that no resources exist in Kant's philosophy for any such schematism of the rational and empirical spheres of history. As a result, according to Yovel, the most that Kant can do here is to invoke the notion of God as such a unifying term of historical existence as *Providence*, the underlying unity of reason and nature in the super-sensible that allows for something like history to proceed.¹⁰⁷ Providence, this presupposed third

¹⁰⁶ Here, one could say that Yovel tips his hand quite clearly: this is the issue of what Hegel called the historical realization of *world-historical individualities*, where empirical individuals aid or provoke the self-consciousness of conceptually specific individualities of spirit in history (PWH, 52).

¹⁰⁷ With respect to the meaning of Providence, Yovel ultimately argues that the notion of Providence is no more than a "figure of speech" in Kant that stands in for a justifiable hope in the actuality and eventual completion of a world unified through a moral teleology on the way to the highest good (Yovel, KPH: 97-8). Here, however, Yovel almost seems to support contradictory positions. On the one hand, he understands the historical invocation of God as Providence to lead Kant into a central, dogmatic, metaphysical claim about nature having a plan for history independent of history and human subjectivity (KPH, 141). This is, in fact, the only consistent reference point that Yovel entertains for the meaning of Providence, even though Kant does not appear to make any such appeal to nature independent of history in the *Universal History* essay. In opposition to that Providential reading of the relation of nature and history, Yovel forwards his own reading of the historical life of providential nature as "moral nature," namely, the nature that human beings mediate and do work on in history—human nature (see: KPH: 68-72). On the other hand, when Yovel attempts to disarm Providence as a "figure of speech," disbanding any positive theoretical use of Providence, he also indirectly acquiesces that Kant's explicit appeals to Providence are of a specifically practical character, namely, Providence as the name for an account of moral teleology unfolding in the natural world that human reason alone develops throughout history. The slight, yet defining, difference between these two appeals to Providence, which Yovel implicates but does not directly identify, cuts along the theoretical and practical standpoints of reason. The theory of

term of reason and nature's super-sensible commensurability and purpose, should, accordingly, appear in those historical appearances of progress, those peaks of practical reason's progressive self-recognition. If providence does outwardly and directly appear in history, then theory would grasp history as explicitly governed by some plan or purpose that rises beyond history's own empirical, sensible transience and incoherence. That providence does not obtain such a determinate rule over the empirical, but is only regulatively invoked, might prove Yovel's point, but only inasmuch as it would simultaneously show Yovel abandoning the regulative meaning and use of the Kantian doctrine of the ideas. Nevertheless, schematism counts as a serious problem for Yovel, because he is tending toward an interpretive demand that history should amount to a conceptual claim that lends itself in the direction of a determinative use. As a result of that interpretive framework, Yovel falls into a larger trend (a path traveled by Henry Allison and John Zammito as well) of confining all Kant's supposedly worthwhile or tenable claims about history to §83 of the third *Critique*, since Kant there articulates the meaning of the human as teleologically manifest in history, whereby discrete empirical events would be reflectively lifted from history and transported into the paradigm of the human being as a natural end (in regulatively posited teleological system of nature). Yet this path also threatens to slip into a problem similar to that of historical schematism: a narrative of meaning detached from the empirical, to which historical narratives and conflicts are pinned—or, if it were to somehow become a determinate concept, *subsumed under*—so as to fill out an otherwise “empty” concept

universal history as an unambiguously theoretical deployment of thought approach to the world should have no need for an appeal to providence in its cognition of history. The practical inhabiting of history—what we finitely rational individuals should do as supposed participants in and agents of historical forces and how we thereby relate to history as a whole—is a different matter entirely. It is only this latter, practical comportment of reason in history—something different in kind from the theoretical question of universal history—that includes a positive appeal to Providence as the intersection of the sensible (empirical history) and the supersensible (reason's autonomous moral dictates of action) (cf. §87: *On the Moral Proof of the Existence of God* CPJ 313-316/AA 5:447-450).

of history. That is, to speak of the meaning of culture in history does not furnish or prove the mediation between the transcendental and the empirical claims of a theory of universal history, but instead seems to presuppose that such mediation is already effective in history. It cannot, therefore, be taken for granted that the use of history in the third *Critique* amounts to Kant responding to his earlier 1784 essay (as Yovel presents it).

Such readings of Kant on history as defended by Yovel, Allison, and Zammito turn to the appendix from the *Critique of the Teleological Power of Judgment*, because they understand that to be the only place where Kant critically treats the intractably teleological problem of historical progress.¹⁰⁸ While the previous chapter argued that Kant's account of historical progress and the use of teleology in the *Universal History* essay accords with the strictures of the critical project, this reading turns to the appendix, "Methodology of the Teleological Power of Judgment," to track what John Zammito calls the "ethical turn" of the third *Critique*, that is, transporting the model of objective, reflective, judgments of teleology from the context of natural science and its

¹⁰⁸ In his essay, "Teleology and History in Kant: the critical foundations of Kant's philosophy of history," Henry Allison argues that the "Appendix" to the "Critique of the Teleological Power of Judgment" shows "essentially the same view of history" as the *Universal History* essay, but now in a critical, systematic context (Allison, *Teleology and History*, 41). In his *Kant and the Philosophy of History*, Yovel consistently argues that §83 hold the sum of Kant's critical meditation on history (KPH, 181). John Zammito argues with somewhat more complexity that Kant's focus on history really concerns the conception of humanity as an end in itself, of which the *Universal History* essay is one preliminary attempt that Kant later refines and reformulates between *The Critique of Practical Reason* and *The Critique of the Power of Judgment* (Zammito, *Genesis*, 326). While Zammito's argument appears perhaps the most persuasive of the three, it is not clear why or how we as readers of Kant would be justified in stating that there is one, internally identical argument about the nature of humanity in such different contexts—history, practical philosophy, and the natural scientific inquiries of the third *Critique*—as if the notion of humanity could be detached and transported among those argumentative and conceptual contexts without remainder.

logic of the organism or the natural end to the issue of the “ethical destiny” of the human being as such.¹⁰⁹

This appendix thus addresses the problem of how the human species might be reflectively judged not just as a single, individual natural end or purpose (*Naturzweck*), that is, the question of the organism, but as the last or ultimate end (*der letzter Zweck*) of the whole system of nature.

¹⁰⁹ Zammito, *Genesis 3*. Kant develops the logic of the organism throughout the second part of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, namely, “The Critique of the Teleological Power of Judgment.” The problem there concerns how we might judge the teleological organization of a living material or empirical being beyond the formulation of merely empirical concepts (such as dog or cat), but rather cognize the uniquely end-bearing, causal relationship between an organism as a whole or end vis-à-vis its parts. In other words, judging the logic of the organism amounts to an account of the casual unity of animate matter as living—something, at first, apparently antithetical to the blind necessity of the Newtonian model nature’s mechanistic organization via externally compelling force relations. For example, on the one hand, if we take one instance of organic matter such as a piece of coal and divide it in half, divide those two halves into quarters of the original piece, and repeat again so we have eight relatively equal parts of the original piece, it remains coal all the way down beyond any margin of doubt. With each division, the same mechanistic causal explanation of coal’s definition and possible generation from external heat and pressure applied to carbon over time still suffices. If, however, we were to do this with, forgive the brutishness of this example, a horse, we would run into some very serious problems about whether our independent halves, quarters, or eighths were as much a horse as the original whole. The point of this example is simply to show that while parts of an organism or, to be more specific, the constitution of its very organs, might well be explained by mechanistic causal relations, the relationship of those parts to the whole of the organism is an utterly unique causal relationship that speaks to the organization of the respective parts toward an end greater than the unorganized sum of the parts alone. “The Critique of the Teleological Power of Judgment” thus endeavors to retrieve an account of how our reflecting judgment can hold out the judgment of the organism as such as a natural end, so as to benefit the natural scientific task of comprehending and regulatively understanding empirical organisms. Whereas aesthetic reflecting judgment (the question of subjective purposiveness) produces specifically feelings of either pleasure or displeasure, Kant intends that the reflecting judgment of objective purposiveness—the logic of the organism—will actually regulate the natural scientific task of generating empirical concepts of organisms for the sake of further inquiry. In the dialectic to the teleological power of judgment, specifically between §§70-71, Kant ultimately defends the compatibility of determinate judgments of mechanism and reflective judgments of natural teleology on the basis that reflective judgments of final causes or natural teleology are just that, reflective and regulative, since their necessity belongs not to the object but only to the purpose of *our* cognition, such that natural teleology poses no threat or incompatibility whatsoever to the understanding’s legislation of nature’s fundamental mechanism. In contrast to these problems and questions, the appendix to “The Critique of the Teleological Power of Judgment” takes up a rather different question no longer responsible to the domain of empirical scientific inquiry. Rather, in that appendix, Kant turns to the larger systematic function and consequences of judgments of natural teleology, that is, whether or not the disparate judgments of organism as an inner, objective purposiveness can amount to anything more than relations of external or extrinsic purposiveness in the sense of one organism being useful for another. As a result, it is here that Kant finally deals with the question of nature as an end-bearing, systematic organization of organisms with respect to some total, governing end.

Yet, that system of nature up to this point in the third *Critique* is one only connected through relations of external purposiveness, that is, a series of instrumentally purposive relations between apparently independent natural ends or organisms. For example, large bodies of water and heat develop algae, which sustain a multitude of fishes, which in turn can provide a rich source of sustenance for terrestrial organisms such as humans, cats, or bears. While some organisms might be instrumentally purposive for others, those relationships do not unfold any necessary connections, such that we can equally imagine the existence of bears, humans, and cats without that of fishes or algae. Nature as such a series of externally purposive relations among organisms seems to fall short of the title of “system,” because the teleological, organic unity that natural ends proffer lacks any thought of that for the sake of which they are ends. The system of nature as a veritable system must rescue some notion of an underlying purpose, so as to preserve all this natural purposiveness as incontrovertibly necessary, such that all relations of external purposiveness can ultimately be grounded in some internal or inner purpose. Without such a ground, nature would tend toward some bad infinity of external purposiveness to such a degree that it may no longer in fact appear purposive at all, but just “related,” as it were. It is here, first posited in §82 and then fully defended in §83, that Kant stakes the human being as not just another or the last end (*der letzter Zweck*) in an array of externally purposive natural ends, but as the final end or purpose (*Endzweck*) of nature as a systematic whole.

The success of Kant’s argument of §83 of the third *Critique* depends upon showing that the human being is not concluded as nature’s final purpose (*Endzweck*) as a result of all prior external relations of instrumental purposiveness among organisms, but rather that something internal to the organic purposiveness of the human being as one special natural end (*Naturzweck*) actually might be provide a ground in reflection for regualtively organizing entire set of external

relations among natural ends as a systematic whole. In other words, we must buy into the strictly regulative claim—occurring only in human thought and reflection—that external nature has a final purpose or end (*Endzweck*) to be realized in the (inner) nature of the human being, if we are to regard the relatively independent series of natural ends as a systematic whole. Kant entertains two possible options as to what that end internal to the human being might be that could supply an end to nature as a system of ends and not just a seemingly infinite chain of externally related ones: happiness (*Glückseligkeit*) or culture. At first glance, Kant appears to move through a not exactly rigorous process of elimination for the reason why happiness—here considered as a purely subjective, thoroughly unhistorical category of natural fulfillment—could provide such an end. In opposition, culture seems to point to and to index a teleological development of the human being, wherein the instrumental, externally purposive ends of nature gain an end that goes beyond mere external purposiveness and attain a ground inside the inner purposiveness of the human. The unique and, perhaps, counter-intuitive element of Kant's argument against happiness here is actually a central feature of the Kantian understanding of teleology and it points back to the very reason why the human can be counted as the final end or purpose (*Endzweck*) of nature: there is no possible straight line of development or improvement that leads from relations of external purposiveness to that of internal or inner purposiveness. Kant above all argues that internal purposiveness is the condition for the possibility of external purposiveness and never vice versa. It is in light of this understanding that Kant here excludes happiness, which stood in as the not-yet known terminus of history's development toward the fulfillment of an empirically existing universality of the human species in the *Universal History* essay.

While both happiness and culture certainly stand as conceivable ends or purposes of human activity, Kant evaluates happiness as a self-contained state of affairs, pointing to nothing

beyond or outside of the natural end (*Naturzweck*) of the human organism or species alone. With that, it might be rather obvious that culture must in some way bear the purpose that nature—rising above a mere series of externally purposive relations—gives to the human being to fulfill, stamping its task or its own end (*Endzweck*) in the (internal) nature of the human as such, viz., the spontaneous spark of reason. Since this account of happiness in the context of natural teleology differs so greatly from the understanding and use of it encountered in the context of universal history, the reasons for happiness’s exclusion do merit some further attention. Kant provides three reasons why happiness does not answer the problem of natural teleology: first, happiness is simply too subjective, such that: “even if nature were to be completely subjected to [the human’s] will it could still assume no determinate universal and fixed law”; second, even if it were somehow possible for the human to positively fix and determine a merely subjectively posited, constantly changing state of “being satisfied” (*befriedigt zu werden*), it falls outside the power of the human being’s nature “to call a halt” to the progressive possession and enjoyment of pleasures; third, and perhaps surprisingly, Kant declares that, “it is so far from being the case that nature has made the human being its special favorite and favored him with beneficence above all other animals,” that is, Kant in short asserts that experience gives us absolutely no good reason to assume that nature either predisposes the human species toward or encourages its happiness.¹¹⁰ Happiness, saturated with subjective whimsy and capriciousness, contained within a subjectively restricted self-relation of the individual to its own nature, and repeatedly thwarted for the human being’s (internal) nature by (external) nature, may well be a problem for human beings in general, but it clearly has no place for Kant in a discussion of natural, objective purposiveness, least of all with regard to the issue of nature’s final end.

¹¹⁰CPJ 297-8/AA 5: 430.

In the theory of (universal) history, the thought of happiness unfolds the possible reconciliation of historical forces in the development of human species and, ultimately, the rescue of a meaningful, dynamic relation bridging historical particulars to their historically emergent, shared universality as human. As a result, the universal history essay is forced into the position of arguing that, on the one hand, the species has not yet achieved universality—such that the very claim of the species itself is imperfect and fragmented in history—while, on the other hand, the species ought to be completed or fulfilled. The idea of happiness as the idea of the fulfillment of the species was, therefore, the thought that required saving in the theory of universal history, because that idea lends theory a way to regulatively treat and assess the possibility of meaning in history. Now, in the discussion of natural teleology, happiness appears almost as a term of privation, that is, it seems impossible to conceive of it meaningfully participating in the account of objective, natural purposiveness. Reflective judgments of natural teleology pertain only to our reflection on the objective purposiveness at play in the logic of the organism, of which there is no precise experience given for conceptual determination or comprehension, but only comparing reflections of mutual cooperation among “organs” in the appearance of a whole “organism.” The problem is not particulars as such, but the generation of empirical concepts for the judgment of kinds of organisms, such as “rhino” or “butterfly.”

The decisive difference between the historical and the natural scientific contexts of happiness—so much so that it decides the very comprehensibility of including happiness in each conversation—rests on the methodological approach not so much to particulars, the exact status of which remains rather unspecified in reflective judgments on objective purposiveness, but really with regard to the account of the human species itself. In the *Universal History* essay, Kant approaches the question of the fulfilled or completed historical meaning of the human

species from the theoretical standpoint of a professed remoteness from that achievement, i.e., in the very absence of a universality of the species. In §83 of the third *Critique*, Kant already begins from the insight into the human species as one, unified natural end or *organism* held together and thought in reflection (not empirically). The unity of intuitions or observations (*Anschauungen*) in reflection is thought, but not necessarily experienced as such—for example, as with the principle of objective purposiveness itself, which thought can only legitimately access and infer through the act of reflection. Reflection, in that instance of teleologically judging an organism, substitutes a unity in thought that is absent in (determinable) experience. Empirical unity, on the contrary, results from a unified observation in experience that is adequate to a given concept to unify and comprehend. If the concept that comprehends experience is an empirical and not a pure concept—such as the rhino, the butterfly, the human, etc.—one must assume that the empirical concept itself is nothing more than a reflective unity and does not promise the same determinacy of experience as the pure concepts of the understanding. So, we, on the one hand, should in no way go so far as to say that the complete intelligibility of the human species is *given* in or through the processes of reflecting judgment, but perhaps only that reflection legitimates the philosophical thought of its teleological character or nature (*Wesen*). In contrast to Yovel and Allison, on the other hand, this kind of reflective unity does not answer the question of whether or not we have any reason to hope that the historical particular somehow participates in and gains a meaningful relationship to the idea of history, which was the very occasion to theoretically construe the object “history” as *the idea* “universal history.”

The thought of the historical particular that we hold up in relief of its not-yet conceptualized, historical negativity cannot and perhaps should not be presented in its proper or ultimate relation to the species, as long as the complete universality of the species itself remains

unknown. Insofar as the species remains incomplete and “underway,” as it were, one cannot say that any particular historical appearance appears as it ought to be vis-à-vis the idea of the species. Happiness as an idea of that lacking fulfillment became necessary in the contemplation of history, precisely for the sake of rescuing the aspiration of historical appearances for that missing completion or happiness of the species in history. §83 of the third *Critique*, in contrast, takes up the organization of the cognition of the system of nature—which is emphatically not the same as taking up the immanent contemplation of plainly historical phenomena and thereby articulating what is missing among those appearances for the possibility of their attainment of meaning in history. Rather, Kant excludes happiness as a problematic term to invoke in §83, because, in the first place, the universality it would require cannot yet even be legitimately thought (but only thought vis-à-vis the would-be or possible content of an incomplete or unfulfilled idea) and, second and more proper to the context, because the whole under consideration in §83 strictly does not belong to the human alone. The whole in question in §83 is, once again, that of nature as a system of natural ends or purposes, whose perfection is not just extrinsically and haphazardly related but that finds an internal relationship in one particular end, the striving toward and realization of which signals the teleological necessity of nature as a system. That inner end of the human as nature’s ultimate purpose (*Endzweck*), after a process of elimination, must accordingly be culture, for only in culture, Kant contends, do we see the human being maintain a line of development through its defining rational possibility and power to set hitherto unprecedented ends for itself and to seek out and furnish the means proper to their fulfillment: “[t]he production of the aptitude of a rational being for any ends in general (thus those of freedom) is culture.”¹¹¹ In pursuing the end *culture*, the human being takes up and teleologically

¹¹¹ CPJ 299/AA 5: 431.

mobilizes all hitherto natural relations of external purposiveness, such that the satisfaction of the human's inner purpose of perfection beyond nature provides an ultimate end (*Endzweck*) for nature as a systematic whole. Culture is therefore not simply the skillful power of human beings to posit specific and naturally unprecedented ends, but therein also the power to perfect this end-positing power itself that is proper to the human's inner nature, i.e., reason.

What is perhaps peculiar about this argument is that Kant seems to move back and forth in two directions simultaneously: culture, on the one hand, results from the human being's ability to re-purpose relations of external purposiveness into that of its own inner purposiveness, what Kant describes as "using nature as a means appropriate to the maxims of his free ends in general," and also by nature compelling the human to "higher ends than nature itself can afford."¹¹² Here Kant begins to thematize two aspects of culture as two distinct, yet mediated, empirical concepts of culture in its reflective judgment: what Kant calls the *culture of discipline* (culture's development by the human compelling nature) and the *culture of skill* (culture's development by nature compelling the human). It is at this point, and perhaps only at this point in the third *Critique* as a whole, that the issue of teleology mingles with that of history. Yet, it must be abundantly clear that, here, the experience of the object, history, is simply not in question. While one might select episodes from historical chronicles to concoct progressive narratives filling out either the culture of discipline or the culture of skill, no exigency nor need for a thought of history as a whole immanently follows from this. Because culture operates to justify natural teleology as a systematic whole, its development is responsible to nature *as* such a whole. As a result, culture's use of history answers to and belongs in the natural scientific scope

¹¹² CPJ 299/AA 5: 431; CPJ 300/AA 4: 433.

of nature itself, whereas one would rightly expect history to go beyond nature in some evident and measured way, that is, in order to for it deserve the name history.

The reason that readers like Yovel, Allison, and Zammito retreat to §83 for an account of history is not because Kant explicitly treats history there—Kant in fact does not so much as even mention the terms *Geschichte* or *Historie* there—but because of Kant’s articulation of the empirical concept of progress in an explicitly critical, teleological account. Nonetheless, Yovel and Allison in particular must confront a rather paradoxical situation here: Kant provides a defense of progress and its end, cosmopolitanism, without an account of history. While this paradoxical situation does not altogether upend any relationship between history and progress as provided in the *Universal History* essay, it does suggest that progress alone, as explored in the last chapter, neither justifies nor secures a theory of history proper.¹¹³ The evidence for this slippage or division between progress and history as such is perhaps most palpable in that the *Universal History* essay concludes with the need for historical universality to be thought as an idea, as something that goes beyond given and possible experience in keeping with the cognitive dictates of the object, whereas the teleological account of the human being, making cultural progress so as to reflect a teleological unity of nature as a whole, points to no independent experience or judgment of history, but only further reflection on the end-positing and end-bearing nature of the human. The previously hypothetical concepts from the *Universal History* essay such as progress, cosmopolitanism, and even civil society as the site of the human being’s

¹¹³ This is much more a problem for Yovel and Allison, and less so for Zammito, because Zammito does not go so far as to read §83 of the third *Critique* as a theory of history as such, but rather as a historical explanation of ethics—i.e., the historical life of the highest good—in a profoundly historical world. Zammito, thus, contextualizes §83 as a historical problematization of moral teleology, but does not then turn to argue that moral teleology also explains the meaning of history altogether (see: *Genesis*, 332).

antagonistic development of its natural capacities, are thus here all deployed without any connection to history itself, that is, without any connection or responsibility to the past.

The absence of history in §83, however, does not mean that the third *Critique* offers no resources to advance Kant's admittedly underdeveloped presentation of a theory of history in the *Universal History* essay. Rather, §83 does give a clue to the consequences of Kant's account of progress as an empirical concept. Because empirical concepts are themselves nothing other than hypothetical concepts emerging from sets of reflected and compared intuitions or observations, they do not attain the same authority over experience in general as pure concepts do. Progress, as such an empirical concept, does not adjudicate historical experience, nor does it provide insight into the object of experience or the representation as such, i.e., the *nexus effectivus* of history. As an empirical concept, progress organizes specific results and observations from the standpoint of some given experience in history, such that the account of historical progress must follow experience *a posteriori* and could consequently even undergo alteration in subsequent reflection and articulation, just as empirical concepts from the material sciences do. There is, then, a manifest difference between empirical concepts of historical progress and an account of the object of history in judgment with regard to that object's genesis and structure. Nothing can be said of historical progress *a priori*: not its structure, the diverse shapes that structure might adopt in society, the exact and/or alternating social forces, or the social institutions it might effect. Instead, as Kant notes at the outset of the *Universal History* essay, one observation and one necessary presupposition as a rejoinder, together, elicit this theory of history. The observation includes the entirety of what Kant records in the preface of that essay: history appears entirely irrational as a whole, spilling over with unlawful violence, and a blooming, buzzing confusion of a merely historical totality, i.e., compelled by blind fate, devoid of any

coherent, systematic necessity. The rejoinder: that the natural capacities of the human species *must*, “develop completely and purposively at some point (*sich einmal vollständig und zweckmäßig auswickeln*).”¹¹⁴

Despite its subordinate cognitive authority as an empirical concept, the account of progress is nonetheless integral to representing history, since it provides a way for thought to organize and to mediate the immediate, given experiences of history. Yet that work following from the conceptualization of progress as history’s strictly intelligible, regulative coherence is very clearly not the same thing as the would-be object of history in experience, i.e., historical universality, which Kant unambiguously holds out as an idea and not an empirical concept. Allison, unfortunately eliding these distinctions in the concept of progress, claims that Kant, from §83 through the rest of the appendix, provides all the same insights as the *Universal History* essay along with the added benefit of an account of history’s “distant second half” that points to the achievement of the highest good, the possible realization of which had remained questionable at least in the *Universal History* essay, according to Allison.¹¹⁵ That Allison retrospectively posits the need for history to answer to the highest good—which, in the context of history, Kant relegates as a thought only imaginable after the achievement of the empirical universality of the species—shows that Allison’s approach to history oddly turns history into the post-history of the human species, that is, excluding the very history that would give us hope for the attainment of the species in its own universality. In this respect, Allison interprets history as the history of progress, progress as cultural progress, and cultural progress as a problem of natural teleology—nowhere in this does anything like a question of judging history with any

¹¹⁴ IUH 11/AA 8:18 – modified trans.

¹¹⁵ Allison, *Teleology and History*, 44.

measure of independence or specificity emerge. While the highest good is certainly the touchstone of all issues of moral agency and practical reason, it would amount to a basic category error to invoke it as some kind of criterion for a theory of history. As a result of this reading, Allison essentially evacuates all commitments to the theoretical effort of thinking the unique problem and its object that Kant brings to light in the *Universal History* essay, that is, the problem of historical universality.

If it follows that the formulation of culture and its own progress in §83—as something quite distinct from historical progress—isolates nothing specific with regard to history or its experience, then it should be clear that this concept of cultural progress cannot answer the larger problem of historical schematism. Nonetheless, Yovel is right to insist upon the problem of historical schematism, inasmuch as any philosophical attempt at history should not simply give us an abstract concept of history, but should include a rule for that concept's application in judgment, which is something other than the rule that the concept itself articulates. If the problem of historical schematism is truly a problem for Kant, that is because, throughout the theses of the *Universal History* essay, he does not provide a comprehensive account of what it would mean to judge the development empirical history in its historical progress toward a completed and fulfilled historical universality. In brief, the problem of historical schematism points to the need for historical development to ascertain some coherent, rule binding accounts of history's empirical and experiential contents, that is, from where there was previously or only immediately superfluous violence, contingency, and hopelessness.

II. After Coherence: Thinking History's Remains in the Shine of the Idea

The theory of universal history, beginning in the explicit absence of any universality or rule for history as such, demands that the given historical tensions of violence and irrationality be suspended in relief, so as to discern, perhaps, some budding order that would illuminate the empirical, historical life of that theoretically posited goal of history's completion in the universality of the human species. What is so difficult about this specific philosophical beginning (and left largely untreated in the *Universal History* essay itself) is the consequent demand to elucidate the historically particular and situated judgments of meaning in history, since there is no way to begin *outside* of history, as it were. Kant thus proceeds on the basis of what appear to be rather normatively argued theoretical claims, namely, that one *must* posit such an end of history's completion or happiness for the sake of any coherence or meaning whatsoever in history, and, furthermore, that end must belong to the universality of the human species. So, on the one hand, we see Kant wager a theory of history as universal history on the normative foundation of what cognition requires from an intra-historical standpoint in order to comprehend the blooming, buzzing confusion of empirical history: teleology as a rational presupposition (or a *priori* principle) of mind itself. To name teleology as a *rational presupposition* is meant neither to reduce it to an assumption nor to invoke it as some experimental heuristic that one could pick up and then put aside on occasion. Rather, a rational presupposition pertains to the critical task to establish consistency in thought immanently, hence it is regulative inasmuch as it is something that thought brings to the thought of the object and not vice versa. That said, the principal philosophical question becomes: to what extent does theory provide for the intellectual construction of historical coherence in the face of the given historical appearances that show only violent irrationality, obstinate arbitrariness, and mere disorder? Kant answers this question with his account of the natural capacities (*Naturanlagen*)

of the human, which, insofar as they are natural, should attain some kind of lawfulness in thought. That lawfulness then becomes the conceivable account of history's coherence.

On the other hand, there is little to nothing about that account of historical coherence that answers the problem Kant announces at the outset: whether or not we may hope that the relationship between historical particulars and history itself might at sometime become otherwise than a condition of irrational violence and abstract, arbitrary negation (which Kant later presents in a different context as the social 'motor' of history, i.e., unsocial-sociability). This problem of a latent irrationality persisting in history, unmoved by the theoretical construct of historical coherence, implicates the need for an idea of history as a whole. Yet, even as a proper Kantian idea, universal history would be quite meaningless if the idea only comes to light in the absence of or by dissolving empirical history into some far-flung abstraction. Kant, indeed, cautions against this exactly in the final thesis of the *Universal History* essay,

[that] I would want to displace the treatment of *history proper*, that is written merely *empirically*—this would be a misinterpretation of my aim; it [universal history] is only a thought of that which a philosophical mind (which besides this would have to be very well versed in history) could attempt from another standpoint [in history].¹¹⁶

Here, Kant plainly insists that a theory of universal history can only take place in dialogue with and thereby self-explicitly inhabiting the given coordinates of empirical history. The idea of a universal history must, therefore, culminate in an open dialogue of tenable relationships with “history proper,” that is, if it is going to be the least bit meaningful as an idea. To that end, something approximating a *schema* would be necessary to explain the possible relationships between the idea itself and the fate of historical particulars. This does not make the issue of historical coherence irrelevant, so much as it repositions that aspect of the theory: the theoretical

¹¹⁶ IUH 22; AA 8: 30—emphasis added.

construction of history's coherence in response to the demand for a lawfulness of the development of the *Naturanlagen* can only go as far as history would lend itself to cognition, that is, to the very threshold at which history can be thought rationally. On the other side of that threshold, the remainder with which a theory of history must contend, is the historical violence and irrationality sealed in the fate of historical particulars. The idea of history as a complete totality becomes a measured response, to the extent that the idea could arrest the particular from the constant temporal succession and social processes of history, so as to refer it to the thought of a meaningful totality whereby its relationship to the object—history—could be thought otherwise.

There is, however, still a remaining problem, namely, that a schema, in the strict sense, only attends where there is a legitimate application of a pure concept to the content of experience in general. As a result, if there is no schema, there can be no legitimate and necessary application of a pure concept, because the schema itself is only the rule for a concept's application or *subsumption*. In the present philosophical situation, that is, a theory of history, Kant begins with no pure, rational concept of history given to thought—much less does one even seem possible. That means whatever the possible connection between the idea and historical particulars might be, it would only be *schema-like* at most. As *schema-like* that connection opens a twofold issue to be resolved: initially, why the theoretical construction of historical coherence does not answer the problem, but only dissolves historical particulars and the irrationality they endure, in order to apprehend some lawfulness in the development of the *Naturanlagen* throughout history; and second to that, how the idea of universal history might offer a response to the unanswered, persisting needfulness among the fated historical particulars. In other words, we might ask, how does the contemplation of the idea conduct thought to access

an intra-historical appeal for history to be otherwise than it is? It would seem that such an appeal could only emerge in images generated by thought's reflection on historical particulars, whereby the images are not of historical particulars in their fragmented givenness, but historical particulars as they might appear together, catching and reflecting the shine of the idea.

Since much of the *Universal History* essay devotes itself to clarifying the basic need for a theory of history and how such a theory might clarify the claim and possible context of historical universality, that essay initially (theses 1-3) seeks to justify how thought can mediate given, immediate, historical appearances so as to present human history as if it were such a systematic, coherent object, that is, as if the species were one historically living and teleologically vital organism. And if the historical becoming of the species can serve as the subject of history, then there needs to be some cognition of the organization of its component parts—the *organs* of the *organism*—that provide for the recognition of the species prior to its actual completion. So, in the subsequent theses, Kant amasses a series of reflections that delineate how thought might organize or maybe has already apprehended the actual, empirical history proper to the human being. This was the occasion for Kant's account of unsocial-sociability (the antagonism that foments historical development, which does not directly translate into progress, though it creates the possibility for it by means of the negation of historical particulars), civil society (the apolitically framed, social *topos* of every possible historical tension that antagonism yields), the *weltbürgerliche* end (the historical transcendence of civil society into a universal accomplishment of the species, wherein each individual stands as an empirically manifest human agent or subject), and the general assurances of the cooperation among these concepts in the universal development or, potentially, progress of the human being's original capacities

throughout history.¹¹⁷ But what is the *cognitive status* of these claims that allow us to judge history as if it were a coherent organism (in addition to the proviso: as if living things were manifestly teleological)? It is my contention that Kant's account of history's coherence in the emergent lawfulness of specific *Naturanlagen* must take shape as a series of empirical concepts constructed through processes of objective reflective judgment.

At the time of the *Universal History* essay in 1784, Kant lacks the fully developed account of concept-formation through reflection that the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* delivers in the analysis of objective reflective judgment. With that analysis, the third *Critique* could remedy the latent methodological gap in Kant's theory of history on the issue of the intra-historical cognition of historical coherence. This gap initially results from the seemingly irreversible fact that, for Kant, history's appearances do not entirely conform to the determinations of either the dictates of a pure concept or the will itself. This is the very reason why history as a whole proves so recalcitrant an object such that it must be relegated to the realm of the ideas. Thus, for the sake of still retrieving a theory of history, Kant must stare in the face of history as such an object riddled with this element of irrationality and the violence it involves. Reflection offers a cognitive middle-way through which thought can access this object without reducing it to either a rational, determinate concept or an adjudication of the will's self-

¹¹⁷ The translation of *Bürgerlicheswelt* as *cosmopolitanism* is, perhaps, disconcerting for a few reasons. One, cosmopolitanism often became either conflated with or transformed into a distinctly political notion in the latter portion of 20th Century European philosophy, and Kant never presents his *weltbürgerlicher Absicht* as a political concept or a term consequent for issues of political action. Second, cosmopolitanism has a much further reach than what Kant had in mind: cosmopolitanism makes a direct appeal to a political being or life—literally, a *politeia*—of the *cosmos*, whereas the *Bürgerlicheswelt* pertains to the world that belongs to or inheres in the totality of *die Bürger*—something most akin to a “world bourgeoisie.” And, ultimately, if the concept of the *Bürgerlicheswelt* or the *weltbürgerlicher Absicht* in theory is to be politicized in some manner, that requires a full philosophical account of how and why that would be the case, which is something altogether different from Kant's descriptive use of the term to approximate the completion of a universality of the human species in history.

legislation—as this would amount to annulling the specificity of history as an object of thought. To articulate historical coherence through the framework of objective, reflective judgment, therefore, becomes operative as a bridge between thought and an object that would almost seem to defy it. Reflective judgment, then, can indicate the way to safeguard meaning in empirical history from an intra-historical standpoint—as Kant requires in the above passage from the ninth thesis—so that the idea of history itself may gain a meaningful presence therein.

The cognitive processes of reflection can only operate and thereby apprehend the, at first, incoherent and chaotic manifold of history’s appearances on the grounds of some appeal to the principle of purposiveness. Kant’s account of reflective judgment (*reflektierende Urteilskraft*) in the fifth section from the unpublished “First Introduction” to the third *Critique* already shows the genesis of such an objectively reflective access to the empirical manifold,

Thus it is a *subjectively necessary transcendental presupposition* that such a disturbingly unbounded diversity of empirical laws and heterogeneity of natural forms does not pertain to nature, rather that nature itself, through the affinity of particular laws under more general ones, qualifies for an experience, as an empirical system. Now this presupposition is the transcendental principle of the power of judgment [i.e., purposiveness], for this is not merely a faculty for subsuming the particular under the general (whose concept is given), but is also conversely one for finding the general for the particular. [...] [T]he power of judgment, which is obliged to bring particular laws, even with regard to what differentiates them under the same general laws of nature, under higher, though still empirical laws, must ground its procedure on such a principle.¹¹⁸

If, as Kant does throughout the third *Critique*, thought begins from its empirical access to nature, nature initially appears as nothing other than this “unbounded diversity,” or a multiplicity of empirical forms. After the first *Critique*, it rightfully seems maddening that Kant would start investigating nature by quelling or, at least, bracketing the understanding’s legitimate claim to (determining) judgment. Yet, the present motivation concerns the intelligibility of these very

¹¹⁸ CPJ 14/AA 20: 210-211—emphasis added.

empirical forms as such. When determining judgment provides intelligibility for intuitions of the empirical manifold, it does so through their subsumption under the lawful concepts of the understanding, such that an intuition is determinately cognized inasmuch as it confirms to the rule of a concept. What can be determinately cognized, then, is the empirical manifold as an instance or iteration of a rule—no remainder persists or preponders. If, in contradistinction, thought means to access empirical forms at the level of their specifically empirical differentiation, then thought must avail itself of the principle of purposiveness (*Zweckmäßigkeit*), since—and this is exactly what Kant is at pains to maintain above—it is a necessary presupposition for thought that it will be reduced to silence if denied this minimum of a principle. Only by recourse to the transcendental principle of purposiveness does thought ascertain grounds to lay hold of the multiplicity of heterogeneous empirical forms, i.e., particulars, through reflective comparisons. Otherwise, and Kant is unequivocal in the above passage, there would be no sustainable—that is, critical—criteria for comparing intuitions alone, nothing to take up in reflection, except the most abstract difference, as even the thought of discrete, empirical differences would be indiscriminate and empty. The account of historical coherence requires exactly this principled recourse so as to compare phenomena in reflection, opening up an account of the objective purposiveness at play in history's developing coherence.

So, in order for the intra-historical cognition of history's coherence to transpire, the reflective judgment of history's objective purposiveness must meet the prevailing expectation of every judgment of objective purposiveness, namely, a relationship to teleological causality, even though that relationship cannot be decided as a constitutive one. Kant acquiesces without reservation that the concept of a natural end as such—that cause for the sake of which a living thing *exists*—belongs to reason. As a result, reason would wander beyond the limits of

experience to posit the objective purposiveness of objects in themselves, so as to inscribe the concept of a final end in the very possibility of living things in general, which, for Kant, is something we strictly cannot know.¹¹⁹ In placing natural teleology among the thoughts of reason, Kant suggests that nothing resulting from the faculty of receptivity (or anything in the understanding) would justify a perception, that is, an experience, of natural teleology. Reflection on objective purposiveness, therefore, requires that the reflecting power of judgment first look to reason to begin, insofar as only reason supplies this aspirational thought of natural teleology or final causes, even if reason itself is in no place to carry forward that reflection in relation to objects in general. Reflection on objective purposiveness thus begins from an experience of teleological causality that must be fabricated or constructed in thought. That fabrication is the very inference that reason thinks: the coherence of living things shows itself through an aspirational tendency toward final causes. All reflections on objective purposiveness thus proceed on the basis of the essentially aspirational quality of objective purposiveness as such. So, too, must reflection on objective purposiveness in history make reference to some aspirational element inhering in history, namely, the “intent” (*Absicht*) of historical universality to be realized in the completion of history, which Kant also calls happiness (*Glückseligkeit*).¹²⁰ But, does the reflection on objective purposiveness in history alone accomplish this? The answer to that question must be in the negative, as the reflective judgment of objective purposiveness does not present or cognize the aspirational element itself, so much as it looks to or presupposes it. History’s aspirational element must, therefore, prefigure and set up the possibility for

¹¹⁹ CPJ 34/AA 20: 233.

¹²⁰ The emphasis on “intent,” here, is with reference to the title of the *Universal History* essay, where Kant seems to employ intent (*Absicht*) so as to signal either the activity of or the merit for applying teleology in history.

reflection on history's objective purposiveness. This aspirational element would reside in the idea of universal history alone. That the idea must (and does) bear an explicit relation to empirical history, for Kant, only subsequently makes the very reflection on historical coherence possible (and not vice versa).

The reflective judgment of objective purposiveness in history must construct the empirical accumulation of historical tensions into intelligible conceptualizations of history's coherence and its organizing patterns, such that the teleological character of universal history can emerge in thought where it cannot be directly perceived, namely, in the (intra-historical) experience of the object. This contextualization of objective purposiveness, then, lays the foundation for generating empirical concepts of the *Naturanlagen* in history, inasmuch as the *Naturanlagen* provide the sites of history's intelligible, conceptual coherence prior to its own completion. It is one of the truly unique threads of Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* that the reflective judgments of objective purposiveness can proffer empirical concepts as a means to "finding the general for the particular," as Kant notes in above quotation.¹²¹ And, as Kant argues, to every act of empirical conceptualization belongs three distinct, yet mutually involved cognitive moments: an *apprehension* (*apprehensio*) of the empirical manifold in intuition by means of reflection alone, followed by the formulation of an empirical concept through that precipitating reflective labor of the imagination into an act of *comprehension* (*apperceptio comprehensiva*), such that, in the end, the complete reflective judgment yields a *presentation* (*exhibitio*), "of the object corresponding to this concept in intuition."¹²² With these cognitive processes outlined in §VII of the "First Introduction," Kant provides the cognitive

¹²¹ CPJ 14/AA 20: 211.

¹²² CPJ 23/AA 20: 220.

resources for the conceptualization of empirical, historical phenomena like unsocial-sociability, civil society, and even the conceptualization of specific *Naturanlagen* in history.

In the process of concept formation, thought begins from an apprehension of the object in intuition or perception that emerges in and through the work of reflection, which already includes the imagination's concurrent activities of comparing, reflecting, and abstraction. Apprehension thus refers to the reflective comparing of particulars with one another so as to ascertain an image of both the particularity of particulars and their possible coherence in a moment of cognition's absence or its wanting, namely, a moment of reflection prior to concept formation or comprehension. Tracking historical coherence through the processes of unsocial-sociability, pertinent observations would ultimately amount to apprehending the results of that process, that is, comparing the effects of diverse uses of the natural capacities of the human as they unfold social violence and the negation of other historically particular appearances. And, as Béatrice Longuenesse argues, that cognitive operation of *comparison* that examines those results would in no case be something extrinsic or secondary to reflection and abstraction; rather,

only insofar as comparison is conjoined with the two other operations [namely, reflection and abstraction] can it be geared from the outset toward universal representation, that is, the production of a concept. Thus, what we might call "universalizing comparison" differs from merely aesthetic comparison precisely by the fact that it is inseparable from reflection and representations, with respect to their spatiotemporal situations. *Universalizing comparison is a comparison of universal marks which are generated by the very act of comparison.*¹²³

Comparing the results of the empirical, social processes of unsocial-sociability in reflection thus already intends the formulation of the rules for recognizing the developing *Naturanlagen* in history. That reflection opens up and extends itself as the "universal comparison" of the marks

¹²³ Béatrice Longuenesse, *Kant and the Capacity to Judge: Sensibility and Discursivity in the Transcendental Analytic of the Critique of Pure Reason*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001 (116).

or aspects highlighting the consistent development of specific *Naturanlagen*, so as to delineate and delimit specific perceptions of coherence in history. As a result, reflecting on the results of unsocial-sociability means comparing the patterns of consistency or inconsistency that those results yield. Inasmuch as that coherence is not only developed in reflection but is recognized as still *developing* to some unknown end empirically, then the component parts of history's coherence—the rules of the specific *Naturanlagen* in reflection—might suggest the objective purposiveness of history as if it were a whole. The reason that Longuenesse disambiguates this “universalizing comparison” from a merely aesthetic one is because the latter is proper to the aesthetic, reflective judgments of taste and other such problems of subjective purposiveness that follows from the experience of subjective feelings of pleasure and displeasure in reflection, whereas a universalizing comparison is exactly the kind of cognitive labor adequate to the task of “finding the general for the particular,” or as Kant also calls it, formulating lawfulness from the contingent *as such*, i.e., the reflection appeals to an objective purposiveness.¹²⁴

When reflection compares the possible lawfulness of the *Naturanlagen* in history, its labor precipitates the act of comprehension of the perceived purposiveness at play—both with respect to the comprehension of the purposiveness of specific *Anlagen* and thereby the objective purposiveness of history itself. The formulation of the *Naturanlagen* into empirical concepts through reflection thus opens up and makes possible an account of history's coherence as that of objective purposiveness. The reflective operations of apprehension thus anticipate and immanently call for comprehension, as Kant similarly implies in §62 of the “Analytic of the Teleological Power of Judgment,”

¹²⁴ CPJ 14/AA 20: 211; CPJ 20/AA 20: 217.

The purposiveness here is evidently objective and intellectual, not, however, merely subjective and aesthetic. For it expresses the suitability of the figure for the generation of many shapes aimed at purposes (*abgezweckten Gestalten*), and is cognized through reason. But the purposiveness still does not make the concept of the object itself possible, i.e., it is not regarded as possible merely with respect to this use.¹²⁵

Kant is quite careful here not to suggest that the reflective judgment of objective purposiveness begins from some given set of known ends and only thereby traces the development or growth of phenomena. Rather, reflection on objective purposiveness could be said to begin *in media res*, insofar as objective purposiveness is not perceived on the basis of a presupposed end but on the observation of objective purposiveness as such, that is, what Kant calls the generative power for a unified, living thing to take on and persist through a coherent variety of shapes—all the while operating as both cause and effect of itself. From such a reflection on objective purposiveness *without a purpose*, the articulation of discrete organisms through acts of comprehension in empirical concepts becomes possible. The caveat, *without a purpose*, is critical for Kant, because it reinforces that reflection on objective purposiveness should not be considered capable of leaping out of the head and into the world, as it were, thus becoming the manifest, determining concept of the very possibility of the empirical object as such and such an organism, which thought only ascertains in its reflection on its own representations. This framework would analogously apply to the reflecting judgment of the *Naturanlagen*, for Kant, when viewed as if they too were such component parts that signal a unified thing—human history—operating as both cause and effect of itself in the medium of the social processes of unsocial-sociability. The universalizing comparison of the objective reflective judgment reaches its terminus once it effects the legitimate *application* of empirical concepts to the *Naturanlagen* as the “organs” of history’s objective purposiveness or coherence in their progressive development alone, i.e., still

¹²⁵ CPJ 235/AA 5: 362.

without a determinate or known purpose. The culmination of this cognitive process yields a presentation (*Darstellung*) of the lawfulness of the concepts' rules in explicit relation to their possible contents. This moment of presentation marks the full realization of the empirical concept in its application to the object, since it exhibits the internal, necessary connections between its form (the concept of the object) and content (the possible intuitions filling out and absorbing the conceptual form). In other words, the presentation relies upon a presentation of the schema, since schemata express that internal, necessary bond between conceptual form and intuitive contents as a rule for the application of a concept.

This should, however, not be confused with a schema of history as a whole, but only with regard to the specific elements of history that index its coherence as objectively purposive. Indeed, the articulation of this coherence that bolsters insight into a philosophical account of progress (of the *Naturanlagen*) in history runs into a confounding impasse once interrogated as to the meaning of presupposing history *as if it were* a whole, such that theory must answer for a concept of history as such a whole. Progress is, of course, only meaningful as progress toward something. If that something is missing, then the specifically historical account of progress is moot. If the above account does justify the possibility for an intra-historical cognition of historical coherence on the reflective model of objective purposiveness, then it must find an appeal to some thought of history's *completion*, that is, the fulfillment of historical universality that halts and corrects its own history of violence and the plurality of legacies thereof shouldering history's latent irrationality. That point of completion would provide a horizon to history's ever-violent development, such that history would not succumb to a mere "bad infinity" of progress, a constant duress of history changing shapes—*no matter how purposive*—which would entail no conceivable end to its violence and the persistence of the irrationality sealed in

the fates of historical particulars. In other words, we should not be so quick to confuse or substitute the account of progress on the basis of historical coherence with an account of history's completeness, especially since the account of past progress never appears to secure a clear and certain account of progress to come, for Kant. Furthermore, since the account of objective purposiveness must disregard historical particulars, inasmuch as it gets off the ground by a focused tracking and comparison of the specific patterns for the empirical conceptualization of the *Naturanlagen*, it, like every reflective judgment of objective purposiveness, proceeds on the grounds of an aspirational element that it itself does not quite capture. If this aspirational element—at home in the contemplation of the idea of history's completeness—cannot be tethered through the reflective judgments of history's objective purposiveness back to historical particulars, then this theory of history is not all for naught, that is, it would simply iterate the fact that there is no end in sight for historical violence, regardless of however coherent or incoherent.

Another way, perhaps more positively, to position the above reading of a Kantian account of historical coherence would be to suggest that this coherence only becomes recognizable as “progress”—and not a mere bad infinity of historical violence—when it is brought into relation to the idea of history as a fulfilled whole. There is, then, no way to underestimate the importance of understanding Kant's use of the term *Idee* in the technical sense of an idea of reason, since the entire theory of history would be jeopardized otherwise.¹²⁶ Without the wager of an idea of history as a complete whole—whether that be the happiness of the species manifest in each of its appearances, as I have argued from the *Universal History* essay, or even the moral teleology of

¹²⁶ That a reader like Henry Allison, for example, does not take the term *Idee* to communicate universal history as an idea of reason is, perhaps, indicative of the fact that his reading of the *Universal History* essay finds no serious philosophical contributions toward a theory of history, but only an incipient, undeveloped account of the moral teleology of the highest good (see: Allison, “Teleology and History in Kant,” 24-45).

the highest good, as Yovel and many others following him argue—Kant’s theory of history undoubtedly falls into utter incoherence. Yet, as the last chapter concluded, the problem of the two divergent registers of truth in history returns precisely at this point, for if no connection emerges between the reflective judgment of historical coherence and the contemplation of the idea as the hopefulness of or aspirational element among historical particulars, then those two registers of truth would remain extrinsic and indifferent to one another, such that the irrationality of fated historical particulars would appear hopeless and the claim of coherence itself would become essentially meaningless or, at least, inconsequential. This, then, is the moment at which Kant’s theory of history requires some *schema-like* relationship between the account of progress and the idea of history’s fulfillment or completion. And while, admittedly, no schema in the strict sense of the term could intercede in the absence of a determining concept, a clue to this *schema-like* connection between the two registers of truth in history emerges from Kant’s characterization of the schema in the first *Critique* as a “transcendental time-determination (*Zeitbestimmung*).”¹²⁷

When Kant calls all schemata “transcendental time-determinations” the reader should, rightfully, react with some surprise. What is this “time” of which the schema is a time-determination? Previously in “The Transcendental Aesthetic” of the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant accounts for the form of inner sense as the intuitive objectivity or form shaping all subjective perceptions of temporal succession, which only take effect at the level of the faculty of receptivity.¹²⁸ This temporal aspect of inner sense, the intuitive shape of mere succession, adds one of the two basic, sensible constituents to the realm of experience—in shapes of time

¹²⁷ CPR A139/B178.

¹²⁸ CPR A33/B49-50.

and of space—that condition the possible content of cognition. The above question could then be reformulated as: why would a schema need to exhibit a temporal character if the cognizable content of experience is always already temporal? The answer to this question begins from the fact that inner sense strictly refers to this intuitive form of mere (temporal) succession—the perception of being present in time through the serial negation and persistence of an intuited presence.¹²⁹ Yet, insofar as the schema is a rule for the application of a concept’s rule or law, then the schema must somehow arrest that successive, incessant temporal flow of inner sense. Here, the imagination—stepping out from the confines of mere receptivity of and now taking on an active operation as the force of schematism—must effect a *simultaneity* on experience in general that is not given in or by receptivity as such. Where the faculty of receptivity can only appeal to discrete intuitions in experience and a category only speaks to the rule as such, the schematism as a third intercedes to provide for the arresting application or temporality of the rule in experience as a whole. It is this synthetic moment of producing simultaneity between both the arresting of sensible phenomena and the rule of the concept that the schematism provides transcendently in cognition.

In addition to the transcendental schematism of the categories that sets up the determinate temporality of experience as such, we also have schemata at the level of empirical concepts that regulate the organization of content in a specific empirical concept, such that the empirical schema is the rule that is the empirical concept itself. If we were, for example, to regard a series of poorly drawn, imperfect circles, the imagination could in each case adjudicate what would need to be otherwise among those imperfect circles for them to accord with the concept of a circle. It is not simply by iterating the concept itself that the imagination realizes what would

¹²⁹ CPR A31/B47.

need to be different *in the phenomena* so as to hold with the rule, but by already having a rule for the concept's application, namely, the schema, by which imperfect appearances could be thought otherwise than they immediately appear, and not just apprehended negatively as the absence or negation of identity with the concept. And this is exactly what Kant means when he says that the schematism supplies the image of the very lawfulness of the concept itself.¹³⁰ So, the schema not only allows for the imagination to offer up phenomena as “circle” and “not circle” to judgment, but also to think in the other direction as to what could be otherwise in phenomena by virtue of holding them together simultaneously with other appearances and the concept. The time of the schematism thus arises from its arrest of the flowing succession of sensible appearances as held together simultaneously with the iteration of a concept.¹³¹ It is this time of simultaneity that seems so profoundly missing in Kant's theory of history, whereby *both* the “fatedness” of historical particulars *and* history's internal coherence could emerge together in the contemplation of the idea.

A *schema-like* image should then grasp the empirical, successive time contained in the apprehension of historical particulars and reposition them in the shine of the idea, thereby transposing their appearance to an other, non-mechanistic time wherein the historical particular

¹³⁰ CPR A140/B179.

¹³¹ This is, I take it, what Kant means when he argues that the schema is “homogeneous” to both sensibility and the categories (CPR A138/B177). For, that claim of homogeneity is rather perplexing to comprehend, inasmuch as how could any one thing be *the same in kind* to the faculty of receptivity and the understanding without falling into the contradiction that, transitively, the understanding and the faculty of receptivity are collapsed as a same thing? To avoid that contradiction one should, at best, specify that homogeneity as the consummate moment of cognitive identity, which of course always writes itself over and against non-identity so as to be meaningful and not mere tautology or blatant contradiction (for example, as in the case of A=A). The homogeneity, then, is the cognitive identity of an object when held simultaneously in concept and intuition by means of the schematism as a unique temporal receptivity of representations (*viz.*, simultaneity) and the application of a rule for the law of a concept. In this way, one could say that simultaneity is the *temporality* of all schemata in contrast to the emptiness of mechanistic time.

might appear otherwise in thought. That *otherwise* is reflected in and through the very shine radiating from the idea of history as the happiness of the species universally manifest in the appearance of each historical particular, namely, history's completion or fulfillment.

Furthermore, if this aspirational element of the idea of history's completion is the same one that gives rise to the objective reflective judgment of historical coherence—and it seems that must be the case—then this one and the same aspirational element is the only force in thought capable of breathing hope into the time of historical particulars, i.e., the past, so that they might shed their 'fatedness' in the contemplation of the idea. In this way, we could say that the Kantian task of universal history demands the thought of such *schema-like* images exactly, without which the thought and hope for attaining historical universality splinters with all other contents into the heaps of historical fragmentation that we encounter in the merely empirical efforts of historians.

The worry, then, is that historical particulars suffer a kind of "under-determination," in the sense that the empirical particularity that appears in historical narratives not only lacks adjudication and specification in determinate cognition or judgment (due to the absence of any given rule for history independent of experience), but it also stands in no place to generalize any account of history's coherence or what that should mean relative to the fragmenting violence of historical processes. That danger of under-determination would amount to a shattering conclusion of history as a merely fragmenting process of fragmentation, such that every image (*Bild*) of the particularity of particulars would be its own self-contained, inert, local universality, since it would refer to nothing beyond itself.¹³² The schema-like image should, therefore, offer

¹³² Pippin, in an admirable attempt to present the role of empirical concepts in the schematism chapter, at one point suggests this kind of reading of "image" (*Bild*) in contradistinction to a schema, which has no image other than, as Kant argues, the lawfulness of the concept itself. Pippin, Robert B. "The Schematism and Empirical Concepts." *Kant-Studien* 67, no. 1–4 (1976): 156–171 (166).

a kind of presentation (*Darstellung*), albeit *incomplete*, of the appearances of historical particulars amidst their fatedness *simultaneously* with the contemplation of idea, that is, challenging the very dearth of the idea's unknown content as to what an empirically existing universality of the species ought to look like. It still must stand, however, that the idea, as W.H. Walsh forcefully contends, "adds nothing whatsoever to our knowledge of what is the case," and, we might add, that is perhaps even more so the case with the idea of history than with other ideas.¹³³ Nonetheless, the aspirational element of the idea demands a break for the contemplation of the idea in contrast to theory's accounting for the chain and play of forces in history's coherence. In other words, it should be worrisome if the contemplation of the idea only suggests even more thought and reflection on the *what it is* of history and not an intimation of history as it ought to be, that is, history as it could thought be otherwise. These incomplete presentations as quasi-schematic images thus suggest an answer to that looming threat of under-determination. To the extent that these presentations would occasion such contemplation, they would present particulars not as *the inert matter through which the forces of history flow*, but as the specific sites and the very context wherein the thought of history's completion gains a semblance of appearance in stark opposition to the irrationality and fate sealed in those particulars.¹³⁴ The adept presentation of the appearances of historical particulars by means of a

¹³³ W.H. Walsh, *Kant's Criticism of Metaphysics*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 1997 (244). Walsh has a profoundly cynical reading of the ideas, since he contends that the possible content of the ideas could never be specified to any measurable degree, so they are to be understood as strictly ineffable vis-à-vis experience and cognition. While it might be necessarily true that one could not "measure" the specification of the possible contents of the ideas, it seems an entirely other step to disregard the contemplation of those ideas as ideas and move only treat them only as regulative principles for systematic unity, insofar as those ideas would likely be quite meaningless as regulative ideals if there were not something in the contemplation of them that is quite meaningful and not just dogmatic or uncritical, namely, what I have called an aspirational element of completion or fulfillment.

¹³⁴ At one of the only places Hegel actually makes reference to historical particulars in his *Lectures*, where particulars are not already transfigured or elided without a trace into the presentation of world-historical personalities, he implies the relevance of historical particulars to the question of meaning in

transcendental use of the imagination—as that which alone is capable of fashioning presentations—should reflect the shine of the idea and thereby bring it into view inside of history itself.

Therefore, since reflection on objective purposiveness would, by definition, negate and set aside particulars when ascertaining images of the development of the *Naturanlagen*, contemplation of the idea must rescue them, that is, to the extent that thought can capture the aspirational element that reflective judgments of objective purposiveness must only presuppose. Kant, indeed, seems to suggest such an employment or use (*Gebrauch*) of the ideas in the “Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic” from the first *Critique* when he states that, “the idea of reason is an analogue of a schema of sensibility; but with this difference, that the application of concepts of the understanding to the schema of reason is not likewise a cognition of the object itself.”¹³⁵ This provocative line not only implies that the contemplation of the ideas involves reason making inferences on the basis of the legislations proper to the understanding as its object, but that contemplation also calls for a special use of the imagination too. Just as reason would posit or construct the object of its inference, whether that be the concept of a final cause, God, or even the idea of universal history, so too would the posited object—analogue to the understanding as the faculty that alone legislates for the lawfulness of nature—signal the need for a schematism of the cognition of said object. Yet, since those inferences lead to impossible objects (insofar as each of them would circumscribe a thought of the unconditioned in an

history to be strictly inexplicable and incoherent. Significantly, this stranded aside to historical particulars follows the conversation of all the ways in which spirit is free in its self-realization in history, which Hegel describes through this metaphor of the determining power of physical forces in contrast to the senselessness of inert matter, such that historical particulars appear as this inert mater vis-à-vis spirit’s realization (PWH, 53).

¹³⁵ CPR A 665/B 693.

objectified totality), all that remains in thought is this schema-like image of reason for contemplation. But to what extent would the thought-constructs found in the contemplation of the ideas analogously resemble a schema and thereby call for schematizing power of the imagination in that contemplation? The analogy, here, can be drawn from the schema as a transcendental time-determination to the time of fulfillment or completion that reason posits in the ideas.

All ideas intend some objectification of totality, some circumscription of the unconditioned, which, while strictly impossible to know by Kant's critical strictures (namely, that there is no adequate experience of such objects for cognition to adjudicate), those impossible objects also set up the possibility of thought's systematic unity or coherence. The ideas, then, are not just the *memento mori* of dogmatic metaphysics. Rather, the entire purpose of the "Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic" is to recover a positive use of reason's claim to the ideas that would proffer a maximum of systematic unity in and for cognition, namely, the use of the ideas as regulative principles.¹³⁶ As regulative principles, the ideas of the first *Critique*—the psychological, the cosmological, and the theological—all orient cognition and the place of the objects of cognition into a systematic coherence that tends toward the completeness held out in the contemplation of the ideas of the soul, the world, and God, all of which indicate objects of a perfect and eternal totality. Nevertheless, this methodological use of the ideas as regulative principles is well documented, even if it entails a diverse set of interpretations regarding the exact or proper methodological application of them.¹³⁷ What remains at issue here is not so

¹³⁶ CPR A 671/B 699.

¹³⁷ For example, as indicated above, W.H. Walsh argues, "Kant's appeal to particular ideas is of little or no significance. [...] Looked at critically, the whole Kantian theory about the positive role of the ideas of reason turns out to be an essay on the importance and uniqueness of the notion of system in the overall search for knowledge" (Walsh, *Kant's Criticism of Metaphysics*, 246-247). Walsh's overtly formal read

much this methodological use of those ideas vis-à-vis history, but, instead, *over what* the analogy is written between the schematism of the categories and the idea in relation to particulars. If, as I have suggested, the temporality of schemata is one of an arresting simultaneity, then the time to which Kant must appeal in the ideas should also be some type of simultaneity, yet not merely between the successive perceptions of experience and the given concepts of the understanding, but a simultaneity between the incompleteness of historical particulars as particular and the completeness of eternity locked away in the idea. That the temporality of the ideas is one of eternity does not mean an eternity of succession or transience, but an eternity as unconditioned completeness or the fulfillment of time. Yet, should that mean that the upshot of systematic unity through the regulative use of the ideas actually mirrors a temporality of eternity? The answer to this question must be in the affirmative, but only insofar as the ideas emerge as points of orientation for the inquiry into cognition itself, and with that too the need for the imagination in the contemplation of the ideas should become clear. If the contemplation of the ideas is not just to be one of dumbstruck wonderment, then the contemplation of the idea should convey schema-like images of particulars, an incomplete presentation that would catch and reflect the shine of the ideas, stimulating an intimation of the completeness that they suggest and, conversely, what it would mean for particulars to participate in such a time of fulfillment.

of the ideas leaves no response as to why specific ideas, such as the soul or God, are of critical import for orienting the cognition that critique examines, that is, for ideas to operate as regulative ideals. Moreover, Walsh would seem to suggest that the reason ideas are to be employed as regulative ideals is only to aid in the concept or notion of system as such, but not the articulation and unfolding of that system itself. In contradistinction to Walsh, Avery Goldman convincingly argues for an intimate connection between specific ideas of reason and the necessary presuppositions bolstering the subject of critique, presuppositions which only become clear and justifiable through the very exercise of critique. Critique, therefore, offers the means by which specific metaphysical ideas—such as the soul as the supersensible unity of subjectivity—becomes employable as regulative principles that direct the critical use cognition precisely where the grounds for cognition, i.e., experience, recede (see: Avery Goldman, *Kant and the Subject of Critique: On the Regulative Role of the Psychological Idea*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012.).

In this way, perhaps paradoxically, while there can be no experience of objective purposiveness in history or even in experience in general, and thereby no possibility to arrest the aspirational element of history in the philosophical account of historical progress, this presentation of the idea as the thought that makes possible a hope for an otherwise in history might, in the opposite direction, justify the persistence of that aspirational element in history, that is, through the thought-images of the languishing under-determination of historical particulars presented in the shine of the idea. So, the consequence of these quasi-schematic images of the idea's presentation is that they give precedent to the thought of that aspirational element inside history itself, that is, with regard to the hopefulness that theory might save for historical particulars. Whereas, in opposition, those images generated in reflection on history's objective purposiveness can only presuppose the aspirational element lodged in the idea when accounting for history's development.

* * *

From the first attempt to treat the problems following from the *Universal History* essay, we saw Kant introduce the need for a theory of history in the context of the plainly historical world or, as I have called it, the *godforsaken* world, that is, an empirical nexus replete with extrinsically and contingently related historical appearances that are only connected or folded together in the most arbitrary of ways, namely, by the immanent accumulation of historical violence and its successive abstract negations. The hope that moved thought to take up a theoretical approach to history arises specifically from that experience of historical particulars, such that it became clear that the aspirational content at play in the idea of universal history itself

needs to come to light—if it is to occur at all—in the reflection that thought performs on the given historical, empirical manifold. Through that theoretical reflection, Kant’s theory of history attempts to limit the irrationality that historical particulars suffer by presenting in quasi-schematic images the aspirational content of history in the idea of it. The expression of the idea through this theoretical act of reflection and presentation means that the idea is not just a terminus but the reconciled completion of historical processes (unsocial-sociability), such that it makes the fulfillment of historical time intelligible (transposing the fatedness of historical particular to their appearing otherwise in the images of the idea of universal history’s completion). The effort of interpreting such a *theory of history*, in contrast to other of Kant’s historical articulations of agency or moral teleology, should not be overstated either to neglect or to demur the importance of Kant’s practical framework in relation to the theoretical, but, rather, to hold fast and specify the separation between the theoretical and the practical, only after which their interconnection would become meaningful. In other words, the utterly unique problem Kant encounters in describing a theory of history as universal history comes to the fore in the question of whether or not a concept of the object, history, is attainable in cognition or not. Since Kant finds no such judgment of history possible from the standpoint of our human cognition—that is, one might assume such a judgment would be something available to Kant’s *intellectus archetypus*—the problem of historical coherence became a paramount concern, so as to articulate, on the one hand, how history still might consistently develop without ripping itself apart at the seams time and again—what I have called the threat of history as nothing more than a fragmenting process of fragmentations—and, on the other, how that coherence implicates and conveys the need for an intra-historical appeal to the idea. Kant, in fact, returns to this very

problem and its specifically theoretical framework once again, showing his deep dedication to this formulation of the question, in his late publication of the *Conflict of the Faculties* (1798).¹³⁸

In an uncharacteristically abrupt fashion, foregrounding of the theoretical question of cognizing history, Kant begins the second essay of his *Conflict of the Faculties* with an “old question raised again,” namely, whether or not the human species is *always* progressing throughout history. What is rather startling about this later attempt at the problem is just how quickly and unambiguously Kant argues that the answer to this question would necessitate access to an *a priori* account of history itself, which would require the cognition of all possible causes at play in the object independent of its appearances.¹³⁹ So thoroughly does Kant doubt the possibility of such an *a priori* account of history that he likens the type of that cognition to the divinatory knowledge held by the ancient Jewish prophets about the historical downfall of the state of Israel. Only with such a perfect and prophetic knowledge of all intersecting and possible causes could one, according to Kant, construe an *a priori* judgment of history as a whole and thereby the determination of its content, something which even the ancient prophets did not claim to possess in relation to the whole of history, but only in relation to the fate of their own institutions as such a knowledge was rooted in an understanding of themselves as the “authors” of that fate.¹⁴⁰ This strange and, perhaps, surprising explanation of the character of *a priori* cognition as it would relate to the object of history, helps to confirm the consistency of Kant’s position and the argument the past two chapters have endeavored to elucidate, namely, that

¹³⁸ Immanuel Kant, “Conflict of the Faculties.” *Religion and Rational Theology*. Trans. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001. (Hereafter CF.)

¹³⁹ CF 297.

¹⁴⁰ CF 297-8.

history refuses judgment and, *therefore*, the need for a theory of history comes to the fore, for Kant.

In the rest of the second essay from *Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant picks up the fragmentary pieces of this shattering conclusion that history, so riddled with irrationality and so far from anything like the idea of its completion as articulated in the *Universal History* essay, so as to rescue, once again, an indication of the possibility for history's coherence and thereby the progress of the species, even when history appears so hopeless and fractured, as Kant seems to have experienced in the throes of the French Revolution. The clue or signal that Kant finds to save the underlying and fixed possibility for progress in history is the original "fragmentation of the [human] race into peoples."¹⁴¹ While this essay's truncated approach to historical progress differs in many ways from its much more comprehensive treatment in the *Universal History* essay—namely, unlike the *Universal History* essay, here Kant brackets all questions of the intra-historical cognition of history, the idea of history's fulfillment, and the theoretical labors adequate to those matters (which this chapter has elucidated)—this strong assertion that the fragmentation of the species is a permanent ground or condition for progress's possibility should sound familiar. That is, the fragmentation of the species shows in each and every case the lingering possibility and occasion for the exercise and implementation of unsocial-sociability, insofar this social process of historical development affects unity through nothing more than the violent negation of fragmentary divisions. So, as long as fragmentation lingers, the possibility of "progress" lingers too, yet no more than that can really be said to the extent that our approach to the object is forward looking and thereby attempts such a "prophecy." On the contrary, as I have argued in this chapter in particular, it seems doubtful (to say the least) that the account of

¹⁴¹ CF 301.

coherence and its teleological tendency in history would alone be sufficient to show that history as a whole is *meaningful*, especially since when we inquire into universal history we must ask of history as a whole and not just a single fragment of it, which Kant unequivocally states, at the outset of the essay from the *Conflict of the Faculties*, is all we look to when we ask of progress, namely, the future.¹⁴² And the future is of interest—progress toward it is of interest—because it becomes the only conceivable locus of history’s completeness or universality that would accomplish meaning in history, for Kant. Nevertheless, Kant does not once suggest that progress toward universality is itself universal or even a guarantor that history will become universal.

Kant’s project to formulate a theory of history as universal history uniquely compels thought to consider what it would mean for the appearance of each historical particular to take up a meaningful, manifest relationship to history as a whole. Such a thought of history’s completion and fulfillment, as Kant sketches it, could only gain discernibility and definition in the realm of the ideas, not the least of which reason why is that no concept of history is given, as is borne out all too chaotically and violently in experience. That is not to suggest that, for Kant, one begins from the fact of experience to reason inductively that no concept is possible—Kant, in fact, never approaches the problem in such a manner. Rather, because the very nature of history as such *involves irrationality* to such a degree that it rebuffs judgment altogether, thought can only conceive of history’s completion through its access to the idea of reason, which stands prior to not only the account of progress but also in relation to any particular historical appearance. Bringing historical particulars into relation with that idea through quasi-schematic images of them thus becomes the business of contemplation, without which the theory of universal history would sink into a series of disconnected and merely antagonistic images of

¹⁴² CF 297.

meaning in history—antagonism which universal history means to overcome. For this reason, Kant recognizes that the completion of history must be set at the standard of the universality or happiness of the species, namely, a fulfilled humanity as a complete historical totality, so that such antagonistic images or fragmenting claims to meaning in history are dissolved and prohibited in the contemplation of the idea.

We are, therefore, left with what I take to be the central, irreconcilable tension of thinking history that Kant means to communicate in his theory of history: historical development, whether coherent or incoherent, satisfying the goals of historical progress or wrecking even more fragmentation on the negativity of the object—in short, whether rational or irrational—requires ubiquitous and often unchecked social violence. Nevertheless, the idea of history forbids the justification of that violence and, in turn, compels thought to contemplate history as it might appear otherwise, even if the redemption of that otherwise—shining in the contemplation of the idea—can only be thought and must thereby be deferred, as thought persists in and through the repetitions of historical fragmentation.

CHAPTER THREE

EARLY GERMAN ROMANTICISM AND THE LOOMING PROBLEM OF FRAGMENTATION

When Friedrich Schlegel finally met the man whose philosophical work had largely guided his turn from a neo-Classical skepticism of modernity to a “Romantic” embrace of it, he was a bit dismayed, to say the least, after his first conversation with J.G. Fichte: Schlegel reports his complete shock in a letter that Fichte declared to prefer *counting peas* over studying history and throughout their lunch together he found Fichte to be, “lacking in every science *that had an object.*”¹⁴³ No matter how familiar the two would later become, this first confrontation set the tone for what would remain a tense and often troubled relationship between Schlegel himself and the burgeoning project of philosophical idealism, which Fichte so forcefully inaugurates. The extent to which Fichte’s early drafts of the *Wissenschaftslehre* motivated the young Schlegel is matched, perhaps, only by the intensity and constancy of Schlegel’s own efforts to break with a *philosophy of first principles*—a term Schlegel deploys synonymously in reference to Fichte and idealism in general. That the concern for history should be of some pertinence to explain this rift that comes to define Schlegel’s works would seem appropriate, especially since Schlegel later proceeds to present history as the “universal chaos” in which processes of fragmentation are embroiled and, thereby, as the medium in and through which fragments arise and roughly hang together as fragments.

¹⁴³ Friedrich von Schlegel, *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*. Ed. E. Behler et al. Paderborn, DE: Schöningh, 1958-. Vol. I –XXXV (XXIII, 333 – *emphasis added*). (Hereafter FSKA—all translations are original, unless noted otherwise).

Schlegel's understanding of Romanticism—what it means and what it demands from its advocates—emerges in and through this very problem of fragmentation. As early as his first major philosophical work written between 1794-1795, *On the Study of Greek Poetry*, or as it is commonly called, the *Stadiumaufsatz*, Schlegel already insists that the problem of modernity itself palpably appears in its fragmentation, namely, that the striving so ubiquitously expressed throughout modern literature and art seems to have as many aims as there are individual works, such that, “its development (*Bildung*) [has] no specific direction, the sum of its history no regular continuity, the whole no unity.”¹⁴⁴ Since ancient poetry operated under the tutelage of nature, for Schlegel, its profound and eminent beauty derives from nature's internal, objective harmony and its given completeness. Modernity, however, takes its beginnings at the latest, youngest stage of antiquity's historical decay, whereby that ancient thought and experience of completeness in the natural world fractures. As a result, some incipient notion of freedom becomes meaningful in response to the concomitant “development (*Bildung*)” of *human activity*—or, striving—and its outgrowth of “suffering” in a specifically historical world.¹⁴⁵ And although he remains quite reluctant to champion modernity in that early text, Schlegel does argue that the task linking both modern art and science demands the unification of its fragmentary strivings under the principle of freedom that appears to characterize modernity's ideal in contrast to antiquity's ideal that lay in nature.

Schlegel still occupies an evidently Neo-Classical position throughout the whole of the *Stadiumaufsatz*, unsympathetically lamenting the sore lack of beauty, harmony, and completeness in the fragmentary strivings of modern works as they attempt to rise above or

¹⁴⁴ Schlegel, Friedrich. *On the Study of Greek Poetry*. Trans. Stuart Barnett. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001 (17). (Hereafter, SGP)

¹⁴⁵ SGP, 25.

beyond the historically fragmented experience of nature. Nevertheless, the description he provides there of the problematic *character* of modernity will persist and ultimately carry over to—provoked by Fichte’s great ambition to complete the philosophical account of human freedom—his Romanticism. Modernity’s lofty ideal of and need for freedom, for Schlegel, thus stands out, on the one hand, as a melancholic sign and evidence of the historical irreversibility of fragmentation, yet, on the other hand, Schlegel acquiesces that this ideal offers the only means to overcome and not be laid to waste in this distinctly modern, fragmented world. In other words, it is only in response to the fragmentation of the historical world that freedom becomes necessary both theoretically and practically in a way and to a degree that it simply had not been in previous historical epochs. Moreover, it would seem to be of immense significance that Schlegel was not alone on this path from Classicism to a romanticized embrace of modernity—a path blazed by the effort to come to know modernity through its fraught origin in a departure from ancient poetry’s internal relation to a complete and whole nature. Friedrich Schiller publishes a text espousing a version of this argument in 1796, *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, just as Schlegel reports to have finished the *Studiumaufsatz*.¹⁴⁶

It is clear that both Schlegel and Schiller independently arrive at and present this problem of fragmentation as the proper historical context of modernity and the hurdle that modernity must overcome in order to articulate itself and to achieve some kind of self-definition vis-à-vis the animating principle and ideal of freedom. What is less clear in both their studies, and perhaps even left unanswered, is the question *why*, that is: why fragmentation? Schlegel certainly makes overtures in this early work, as indicated above, that some unprecedented, maybe already

¹⁴⁶ In the “Appendix,” or the second preface, to Schlegel’s *On the Study of Greek Poetry*, Schlegel discusses the need he felt to write a new introduction after the publication of Schiller’s text that shares so many concurrences in the object of investigation (see: SGP 95-98).

forgotten, genesis of historical decay can be attributed as a cause. Yet, in general, one would more likely consider decay an effect rather than a causal force. In addition, unlike Kant, Schlegel is loath to suspect progress as such a cause, since his staunch Neo-Classicism hinders him from so much as even considering progress to be of any explanatory power in relation to the given historical state of affairs. Rather, this decay results from the historical accumulation of *loss* pure and simple, as the tensions of that accumulation endure and fester in the fragmenting wounds of experience amidst a plainly historical, godforsaken world.¹⁴⁷ This is, at least, the extent to which Schlegel finds it necessary in the *Studiumaufsatz* to appeal to the historical forces behind the genesis of fragmentation. Schiller's work, on the contrary, pays little attention to strict historical divisions, as he applies the titles of "sentimental" and "naïve" poetries to figures in antiquity and modernity alike. Schiller's worry about modern poetry in particular is that it increasingly threatens to take leave of any naïve closeness and realism in relation to nature's complete actuality, precisely because of progress, such that it would become merely sentimental, estranged from nature, disaffected to its actuality, and abandoned to ruminate on the historical strivings of the human spirit in relation to its ideals alone, in abstraction.

So, unlike Schlegel, Schiller evaluates modernity much more positively, for in its estrangement from nature and its lofty infatuation with the ideals of the historical spirit of the human species, sentimental poetry also creates the occasion for modernity to be a time of

¹⁴⁷ To be clear, what is *godforsaken* is not the loss of some horizon of externality or transcendence from the standpoint of the finite, natural world. Rather, for Schlegel in particular, it is simply through the historical accumulation of loss that the world becomes recognized and experienced as a distinctly or plainly historical one, such that the definitively ancient experience of the concomitant completeness and naturalness of the world fractures. Thus, as a result of the increasing intensity behind accumulating historical tensions of loss, history ascertains a new meaning in modernity not as one element of human experience among others that are dependent upon or answer to the world of nature, but as an independent and defining element of human experience as such. The world as a plainly historical world thereby comes to inform the specific ontological meaning of a godforsaken world, which we will see Schlegel treat in his account of fragmentation.

renewal, in which the ideal of freedom might recapture and take the natural aspect of the world back into itself, although admittedly not in the naïve manner of directly imitating nature through art. Fragmentation in the historical spirit of humankind thus directly provokes its own reconciliation in Schiller, which seems a far less an open and lasting possibility for Schlegel. Schiller remains convinced that as long as the historical spirit remains aimed at an ideal of reason—however far it might immediately be from that goal—it holds the power to unify reason with nature.¹⁴⁸ Nonetheless, despite the profound influence of both Schiller’s and Schlegel’s respective works in the burgeoning project of Romanticism, neither of them, in the end, accomplish a philosophical answer to this specifically historical problem of fragmentation that instigates and inaugurates the problems of modernity that they do look to, namely, the aesthetic and practical striving for some lost unity in the modern, historical world. In short, the question, “why fragmentation,” is really only heightened and intensified in them both.

If fragmentation weighs so heavily on the minds of the Early German Romantics, and maybe Schlegel most of all, who expended more effort than almost any other to define the nature of this Romanticism, then some *partial answer* must be sought to this question. And, yet, one is confounded in the effort to locate any straightforward answer among the early Romantics, much less a unified one. This chapter takes aim at retrieving the specifically historical problem of fragmentation for the Romantics, particularly focusing on this problem as it appears between Schiller and Schlegel. While Schiller’s treatment of the problem of historical fragmentation is squarely within the coordinates of universal history, it is also quite brief and limited to a didactic presentation of the modern philosophy of history. Nonetheless, in his presentation of the

¹⁴⁸ Schiller, Friedrich. *Essays: Friedrich Schiller*. Ed. Walter Hinderer and Daniel O. Dahlstrom. New York NY: Continuum, 1993 (181).

looming threat that fragmentation poses to history's possible unity and thereby its meaning too—as he repeatedly indexes meaning to unity—Schiller finds the uniquely modern context of history in the differing appearances of historical time precisely in the shape of fragments. This problem of historical time, its fragmentation in history, quite clearly escapes Schiller's eye in his own presentation, though it returns to gain an even stronger expression among Schlegel's early aphoristic writings between 1796 and around 1801. Through the implicit and often negative definition of the ontological processes of the historical world's fragmentation in his written fragments, Schlegel attempts to provide a presentation of how fragments hold out and themselves present historical time in modernity. If there is a theory of history in Schlegel, then, it first arrives in the guise history's fragmentation, such that it can only be accessed and presented in thought by the reflection that the fragments themselves afford. The task of theory, therefore, requires thought to exhume the historically changing unity of those fragments by finding their unity not in the material content of fragments as such, but in the medium of their reflection and mutual expression, namely, the idea. Historical universality thus remains the ideality of historical reality—the thought that is the idea—yet what Schlegel finds missing and needed in theory is not so much articulations of the ideality of reality, but the reality of the ideal, hence the essentially historical problem of fragmentation.¹⁴⁹

I. The Problem of Historical Time in Schiller's *Universal History*

¹⁴⁹ In some unpublished notes for a critical review of Fichte's 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre*, Schlegel suggests that his essay would respond to Fichte's lacking thought and definition of the "reality of ideal," i.e., the condition of fragmentation in which the ideal is given and received historically, whereas Fichte only ever busies himself with the account of the "ideality (*Idealität*) of the real" (FSKA XVIII, 38, no.209).

After Schiller received a chair in history at the University of Jena, secured largely through Goethe's advocacy, Schiller gave his inaugural lecture in May of 1789, "What Is, and to What End Do We Study, Universal History?" Already having made a name for himself through his poetry and plays, the lecture room supposedly so overflowed with hundreds of eager students that a significantly larger stage had to be acquired before he could proceed with the talk.¹⁵⁰ After directly appealing to these students as themselves the bearers of history, Schiller begins by haranguing his contemporary academic historians who would approach the object of history as a "bread-science" or "studies for bread," that is, a humdrum, academic chore that awards one's daily means, rather than understanding the study of history as a spiritual vocation that should both anticipate and pursue *the perfection of humankind*.¹⁵¹ In what follows, Schiller poses the question of universal history as a moral end in itself, not merely a scholarly or instrumental matter, but as a matter of accounting for "everything man has taken and given," such that one must bring "the entire moral world" into view when studying history and pursuing a universal history thereof, i.e., a moral totality.¹⁵² Yet, unlike Kant before him, Schiller does not provide any straightforward philosophical armament in which such a universal history would either take or approximate a conceptually determinate shape. Instead, universal history seems to differ from the chronicling of empirical histories only in its rarified moral didacticism for the human species at large, which stands for Schiller as a pre-established abstract universality. Schiller emphasizes and further specifies the all-importance of this moral vocation in direct contrast with the colonial experience of "the savage" and also the "barbaric remnants of the former age [the Middle

¹⁵⁰ Friedrich Schiller, *What is, and to What End Do We Study, Universal History?* Trans. Caroline Stephan and Robert Trout. Washington, DC: Schiller Institute, Inc. 1988 (253). (Hereafter, Schiller, UH.)

¹⁵¹ Schiller, UH: 255.

¹⁵² Schiller, UH: 254.

Ages],” though the latter is only invoked once without much clarification.¹⁵³ In light of this moralized contextualization of *peoples* holding out the phases of history’s development, despite whatever culturally lofty task Schiller gives to universal history itself, he in fact represents some of the philosophically less refined and with that the more socially pernicious, if not squarely racist, versions of universal history. The philosophical consequence of Schiller’s project, although it may seem difficult to detect at first, appears in the outright and frustrating spatial conflicts of historical time that confront him, insofar as such conflicts present direct challenges to and protest against the progress of the species as a whole that Schiller’s universal history intends to capture and to memorialize. From this specific encounter of spatialized historical time follows Schiller’s necessarily failed attempt to convey and present an account of progress as itself a concept of historical universality. A brief survey of Schiller’s lecture is therefore worthwhile, as it shows one account of historical time in the wake of Kant that also stands diametrically opposed to the direction that Schlegel will develop in response to the same problem with his articulation of historical time in an ontology of fragmentation.

Because Schiller’s universal history is almost more akin to a *Bildungsroman* of the species than a philosophical theory of history itself, a general absence of method pervades his presentation. There is precious little detail with respect to the social processes that develop and concentrate the being of historical forces, except for rather abstract and ethnically charged appeals to *tradition (Tradition)* as the storehouses of history’s raw materials.¹⁵⁴ As a result, the approach to historical universality is, as we might say, merely *additive*.¹⁵⁵ Beginning from the

¹⁵³ Schiller, UH: 260, 261.

¹⁵⁴ Schiller, UH: 266.

¹⁵⁵ In Walter Benjamin’s *On the Concept of History*, Benjamin critically compares the lack of method in modern philosophical programs of universal history to historicism, since both, according to Benjamin,

historical derivation of some sorry, archaic state from which humankind has worked itself beyond, the historian counts all the modes and manners of progress as an infinite perfectibility of the human species; asking, what definite steps transport humankind “from *one* extreme, from the unsocial troglodyte, to the ingenious thinker, the cultured man of the world? Universal history gives the answer to this question.”¹⁵⁶ Schiller’s understanding of universal history involves a subtle yet consequential inversion of the conceptual status of historical universality. From the outset, Schiller invokes a given, universal *arche* of the human species in a quasi-Hobbesian state of nature, replete with inhospitable violence, lawless freedom, and an ignorance of marriage that follows from no basic understanding of property.¹⁵⁷ Since Schiller identifies this retrospectively posited, ‘natural’ origin as the universal claim marking the human species from the beginning—whereas Kant consistently maintains the problematic historical status of the universality of the species—every step beyond those origins counts as the universally posited elements or fragments of human progress, the content of which now grows in its capacity to define and to give moral value to the previously lacking meaning of the human’s rational yet unlawful form. The inversion of historical universality, then, begins from a presupposed abstract universality of the species itself that serves to forge fragmentary elements and appearances of progress as themselves universal *for the very species in question*. As a result, history attains no definite

attempt to treat *the things themselves* of history without a serious inquiry into history’s structure(s): “Historicism rightly culminates in universal history. It may be that materialist historiography differs in method more clearly from universal history than any other form. Universal history has no theoretical armature. Its procedure is additive: it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time. Materialist historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle” (Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1940*. Ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2006 (396). Schiller would here seem to exemplify the sort of “additive” method of universal history that Benjamin has in mind, since he does not attend to the question of history’s structure and, instead, takes on a quasi-inductive approach to history as it is given vis-à-vis history as it ought to be morally.

¹⁵⁶ Schiller, UH: 262.

¹⁵⁷ Schiller, UH: 259-60.

form of universality, but only exhibits a series of indefinitely related, antagonistic, fragmentary contents that are compulsively added onto one another, all resting atop an abstractly negated (i.e., merely ruled out or canceled) and groundless origin. In other words, Schiller's account of progress entirely balks at the philosophical effort to bridge the gap between history's contents and the form of their inter-relation, that is, the issue of *both* why the form is necessary for the content *and* how the content might itself exert a claim on its reflection into that form (the latter of which is what Kant isolated as the aspirational element of historical appearances relative to the idea of history as a complete or fulfilled whole).

In Schiller's model, the aim of studying history is simply the positive construal of its fragmentary episodes and the abstract elements of moral progress therein that prepare the way for a symbolic and didactic universal history of humanity, which concludes as the mere tallied sum of humankind's moral strivings. How then should these students, whom Schiller addresses as the *bearers of history*, see themselves in the reception of such a task to safeguard the burgeoning universality of progress? Does not even the additive method of progress as the 'universalized' history of the species—in contradistinction to a more definite, theoretical claim of historical universality—confront some possibility of progress buckling into regression? Schiller's answer, unsatisfying as it might first appear, is for his students to devote themselves to the cultivation of a "philosophical mind," as one with a philosophical mind pursues *the new*, according to Schiller, and the philosophically-minded person therefore knows that,

everything is intertwined in the field of the understanding as well as in the material world, and his [a philosophically-minded person] zealous drive for harmony cannot be satisfied with fragments of the whole. All his efforts are directed toward the perfection of his knowledge; his noble impatience cannot rest until all of his conceptions have ordered themselves into an organic whole, until

he stands at the center of his art, his science, and until from this position outward he surveys its expanse with a contended look.¹⁵⁸

These directives for the philosophically-minded agent of progress are subsequently brought into immediate contrast with Schiller's historical characterization and figure of the colonial "savage,"

tribes which surround us at the most diverse levels of culture, like children of different ages gathered around an adult, reminding him by their example of what he used to be, and where he started from. [...] how shaming and sad is the picture these people give us of our childhood! And yet the level at which we see them is not the first. [...] In some places, there was not even the simple bond of marriage, as yet no knowledge of property, and in others the flaccid soul was not even able to retain an experience which repeats itself every day; one saw the savage carelessly relinquish the bed on which he slept, because it did not occur to him, that he would sleep again tomorrow. War, however, was with them all, and the flesh of the vanquished enemy was not seldom the prize of victory. [...] we see him utterly miserable on the other extreme of lawless freedom.¹⁵⁹

Schiller's presents these two historical figures of the philosophically-minded agent of progress and "the savage" as an explicit, epitomizing historical conflict: the conflict that marks the very historical context of *the new*. It is from an animosity toward and hatred of all things new that the "savage" is inhospitable toward foreign travelers and rejects any political organization that would restrain and make their freedom lawful.¹⁶⁰ The "savage" thus holds out the terror of the *arche* of the human species—an origin to be overcome in the endeavor of "all thinking-minds [that] are bound together by the bond of world-citizenry."¹⁶¹ Schiller's pursuit of the new through progress positively includes the construction of an as-yet unknown organic, historical

¹⁵⁸ Schiller, UH: 257.

¹⁵⁹ Schiller, UH: 258-60.

¹⁶⁰ It is notable here that Schiller here performs the colonizer's inversion of colonial space: it is not colonizers and explorers who are encroaching on and surrounding indigenous peoples and their communities, but the colonizer who is surrounded on all sides by the "savage."

¹⁶¹ Schiller, UH: 261.

totality, yet the “savage,” the historical time of whom repeatedly points to the incompleteness of such a rounded historical totality of progress, creates the very conflict in historical time that unlocks the intelligibility of the new. In other words, the new can be only be imagined and thereby approximated to the extent that the “savage” can be surpassed and, in fact, subjugated by progress.

Due to Schiller’s absence of any straightforward account of historical structures and the forces that would fill them out, it might seem a bit far-fetched to take any philosophical account of historical time or temporality from such a work. Yet, in the antagonistically opposed figures of history between the philosophically-minded agent of progress and the “savage,” Schiller indirectly expresses the crux of the problem of historical time in modernity, that is, the fact that *modernity names a world marked by and fraught with confluences of opposed historical times*. In Schiller, this conflict in historical time appears written in the scars and wounds of colonial violence, which he seems to advocate and supposedly to surpass by means of further, i.e., progressive, violence. This violence reappears in the final theoretical task that Schiller leaves to his abstract and merely additive method of universal history. The philosophically-minded agent of progress, according to Schiller, has the burden of imposing order and “harmony” on the otherwise fragmentary facts left behind in a separate and detached past, such that, “he [the philosophically-minded one] brings a rational end (*vernünftigen Zweck*) into the course of the world, and a teleological principle into world history.”¹⁶² The facts of history attain no purposiveness and unfold no tendencies of their own. It is not even clear that these fragmentary facts attain any distinct relations, except to the historically determining agency of the philosophically-minded ones. History, here, is somehow already objectified into individual

¹⁶² Schiller, UH: 269—modified trans.

‘facts’, waiting to be taken up into the teleological orientation that the philosophically-mined agents of progress, that is, to the extent that some organization of those facts appeals to *their* purposes. Yet, on the one hand, that kind of imposed unity and order only concerns the practice of the agents of progress observing history, lying in wait for the ‘facts’ to emerge. On the other hand, when speaking of history as a whole, Schiller will also make such observations that, “[t]he entirety of world history, at least, were necessary to explain this single moment.”¹⁶³ This line appears rather incongruent with the presentation of history expressed in the agents of progress and their experience of historical time in violent opposition to other, obsolete sedimentations of historical time in the present, namely, the “savage.” What is perhaps different about this line, that is, if slightly detached from its context, is that it might seem to suggest some objectively purposive relationship among the fragmentary facts of history that is not merely imposed by arbitrary wills seeking the new against the old, but that would belong to the past and the present in some unique, temporal unity. Yet, immediately after uttering this line, Schiller destroys this possibility and returns to index the particularity of his own historical situation to the result of a universal process of progress, notably in the figure of Schiller’s assumed historical totality of white, European, Christian nation-states, as the first signs of history’s progress are evidenced to Schiller in the history of the Catholic Church, whose etymologically promised universality was of course one borne on the backs of all *others*.¹⁶⁴

What is altogether wanting and missing in Schiller’s account of universal history is the theoretical account of historical universality that rises beyond the play of abstraction and antagonistic presentation of historical time in history. Progress is fated to fail as such an account

¹⁶³ Schiller, UH: 263.

¹⁶⁴ Schiller, UH 263-4.

of historical universality, because progress operates, as was already the case in Kant, by means of externally opposed, antagonistic negations, such that the force of its effect would be to contradict any given positive universality, in order to effect some alteration in history and the further definition in whatever is given historically. This is, in fact, the very reason why a good deal of suspicion surrounds Kant's argument in the *Universal History* essay, namely, that progress as a set of antagonistic and fragmenting historical processes—by which specific *Anlagen* are specified and developed—will at some point transform into some rounded, historical universality. The idea of history itself was Kant's answer to the shortcomings of progress as a process of fragmentation and abstraction. Schiller's attempt to integrate the fragmentation of progress into the abstract, arbitrary agency of his 'philosophically-minded bearers of history' only reproduces the problem, insofar as his fragmentary 'facts of the past' are only unified to the extent that these agents of history can beat back the experience and presence of some *other* historical time. The temporal experience of such an other historical time, however, is the very experience of history that gives definition to the new—and in this Schiller capitalizes on the singular, motive force of the new in history. Schiller may, therefore, raise the stakes of progress as a fragmentary process of fragmentation by appealing to its internal conflicts of historical time, although he offers little to no conceptual resources to answer how that fragmentation might achieve some kind of unity beyond the repetitions of its violence in history. This is a universal history that not only gives little to no clue as to how universality relates to history, but also no indication that universality would portend any redemptive possibility for the meaning of history. As a result, one might be rightly suspicious of the extent to which Schiller's presentation of universal history shows any need or exigency in history for universality.

II. Between the Fragment and Fragmentation in F. Schlegel

Schlegel's works, especially those from his decisive early years in Jena (1796-1801), come together around a single, repeated problem that demands an answer: whether (and why) processes of fragmentation—be it in the spheres of history, literature, politics, or being itself—would yield anything other than (more) fragments. Above all, this question asks if *the act* of fragmentation itself and its operative forces can be *conceptually comprehended* and are thereby rationally articulable. Parallel to Fichte's critical question, one might ask: is there a form of the form (of fragmentation) itself? To decide if Schlegel 'solves' this problem, we can frame the issue as a question of whether or not one can isolate a *concept of the fragment* in Schlegel's works.

If one were to insist upon the philosophical possibility for a formal concept of the fragment as such, as does Rudolf Gasché, who largely follows the lead of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's and Jean-Luc Nancy's *Literary Absolute*, then it would appear that Schlegel offers the resources to articulate how processes of fragmentation come to realize and to answer to a *concept of the fragment as such*.¹⁶⁵ This interpretive path follows an idealist trajectory or logic, as Fredrick Beiser argues, since it finds fragmentation to be an ultimately rational process of conceptual development that gives itself entirely to and is fully absorbed into thought, even if the process itself remains obstinately incomplete, such that it necessarily appears and recurs in the

¹⁶⁵ In an introduction to a collection of Schlegel's fragments, Gasché argues that the task of Schlegel's fragments in general is to define a concept of the fragment as such. Gasché, Rodolphe. "Ideality in Fragmentation." Friedrich Schlegel and Rodolphe Gasché, *Philosophical Fragments*. Trans. Peter Firchow. Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota UP, 1991 (vii-xxi). (Hereafter, IF.) Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*. Trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Leser. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1988. (Hereafter, LA.)

shape of fragments.¹⁶⁶ The possible meanings of particular fragments thus become the mere thought of them or what practical thought can do with them, so as to produce inevitably more fragments in progressively more comprehensive unities. The only hint of fulfillment or completeness left to the fragmentation enduring under the concept of the fragment issues from its very own “constitutive” incompleteness.¹⁶⁷ The answer to the question of a form of the form of fragmentation, here, would be in the positive: the concept of the fragment represents and defines the “essential” or “constitutive” incompleteness of the fragment as such, which unfolds a rather self-defeating account of the absolute as the “absolute individuality” of fragments themselves under the concept of the fragment as such.¹⁶⁸ While such a reading is not altogether without basis, one might also call this idealist reading of a *concept of the fragment* an *unironic* one by

¹⁶⁶ See: Frederick C Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism, 1781–1801*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008 (437). (Hereafter, *Idealism*.)

¹⁶⁷ Gasché uses this term “constitutive” to describe the incompleteness that belongs to the concept of the fragment as such, whereas Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy describe that incompleteness as “essential” (IF, xxx; LA, 44). In both cases the respective modifier is meant to convey that the fragment is not a fragment because of some lost whole nor is it a fragment relative to a whole that is yet to come; instead, the distinctly Romantic concept of the fragment that Schlegel inaugurates, according to Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, marks the fragment as that which “aims at fragmentation for its own sake” (LA, 41). This thought of ‘fragmentation for its own sake’ is the center of the concept of *the fragment as such*.

¹⁶⁸ Thus Gasché: “In paradoxical terms: Only because the absolute is the fragment is there an absolute—absolute individuality” (IF, xxx). For Gasché to call this interpretation of Schlegel’s deployment of the absolute “paradoxical” is putting it a bit lightly. If the absolute is given in the supposed “absolute individuality” of fragments themselves, it is unclear what the meaning or incentive of striving after the absolute in all its various guises—for example, the unity of romantic poetry as it is defined in *Athenaeum* no. 116—would be (see: FSKA II, 183 no. 116). It is confounding, to say the least, to imagine why Schlegel would endorse such a striving, if thought accesses the absolute in the concept of the fragment as such and as “the absolute individuality” of fragments as such. This thought appears in direct contradiction with the fatal character of striving that defines Romantic poetry in its use of irony as a way to express an absolute that attains beyond or outside the matrix of subjectivity, i.e., concepts. As prominent Schlegel scholars such as Elizabeth Millán has aptly noted, the defining claim of Schlegel’s interpretation of Romanticism as distinct from other post-Kantian idealisms is that “we cannot positively represent the Absolute in knowledge” (see: Elizabeth Millán, *Friedrich Schlegel and the Emergence of Romantic Philosophy*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2008 (41).). If that is true, Gasché not only seems to misconstrue the meaning of the absolute in Schlegel, but, furthermore, it hardly even seems “paradoxical” to claim that what is absolute is the final, unalterable incompleteness or irreconcilability of fragmentation.

Schlegel's own standards, insofar as Schlegel understands "irony" as a critical gesture wherein thought maintains and highlights the irreducible difference between the totality of fragments—i.e., the fragment itself—and the being of the absolute. Any instance of irony thus necessarily involves a gesture that infers the absence of the absolute, namely, that the effects or gaps of the absolute's otherness can be highlighted, even as the reality absolute itself remains that other to and cut off from possible experience. To pick up the fragment *unironically* means eliding those gaps of the absolute's absence with more fragments or a generalized concept of the fragment.

Contrary to the above, perhaps one-dimensional, reading of Schlegel, it would seem a great disservice to his work if we were to force Schlegel back into the very tradition from which he so desperately sought a departure.¹⁶⁹ Revising the idealist reading of Schlegel requires the introduction of a two-fold argument against the authority of a concept of the fragment as such in Schlegel. On the one hand, one must dispense with any notion of a concept of *the fragment as such*, since a rational articulation of the form of the fragment belies the very thinking of *fragmentation* from the standpoint its fragments, which Schlegel pursued under the moniker of his *anti-foundationalism*. In other words, Schlegel does not once suggest (especially after 1796) that the presentation of conceptual necessity in thought could articulate or exhaust the nature of

¹⁶⁹ There is a surplus of notes from around the years 1796-7, where Schlegel begins to articulate his separation more and more forcefully from the idealist reading of Kant as principally advanced by Reinhold and Fichte. For example, in the *Critical Fragments*, we read: "The revolutionary rage for objectivity (*Objectivitätswut*) in my early philosophical writings has a little something of that rage for foundations (*Grundwut*) that was so forcefully pervasive under Reinhold's consulship in philosophy" (FSKA II, 155 no. 66). In notes for an uncompleted critical essay on Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, Schlegel again returns to Reinhold as the source of Fichte's foundationalism, which isolates his idealism; there, Schlegel refers to Reinhold—and by extension Fichte too—as a "*Grundsucher* (foundation seeker)," which, for Schlegel, consequently makes Reinhold "first among the Kantian sophists" (FSKA XVIII, 12). At issue here is Schlegel's strong identification of foundationalism in general with a supposedly uncritical version of philosophical idealism, of which Reinhold is the origin and Fichte the successor. This identification of foundationalism with idealism will be treated below with respect to Schlegel's own *anti-foundationalism*.

the ontological processes at play in fragmentation. Yet, on the other hand, one must also answer for the lingering irrationalism that would plague any account of fragmentation that does not present the source or origin of its development in a rational foundation or principle. The true beating heart of Schlegel's presentation of fragmentation, for better or for worse, appears in the defining philosophical tension of his *anti-foundationalism* that simultaneously commits him to fragmentation as an extra-conceptual, ontological process and also to the human intellect's internal need for system. Spirit demands unity or form from fragmentation in order to strive for *its own completion*, yet the completion that it pursues and might effect through concepts—the lawful terms of spirit's autonomously constructed unities or *forms*—is emphatically not the same thing as or identical to the ontological processes that comprise fragmentation itself, hence the distress over an ineluctable irrationalism at the ontological core of Schlegel's philosophical program of anti-foundationalism. Nonetheless, as that may stand, one does not disarm or resolve the problem of fragmentation through the construction of totality in thought, especially not by an appeal to such an empty formalism as 'the fragment as such'.

This ineliminable division between thought (fragments) and being (process of fragmentation) unfolds the intersecting lines that map the very problem of contemplating and striving for the absolute in Schlegel. Since the genesis of fragments, i.e., fragmentation, precedes thought itself, those generative processes can only be approximated, inferred, presupposed, or allegorically expressed in thought—whether that thought takes effect in philosophy, the material sciences, or the arts will determine the intellectual shape of the relation between the fragment and the implicit, unfathomable expanses of fragmentation lurking behind those lines shooting out from fragments in all directions. History, for Schlegel, is only the most encompassing, ontologically complex process of fragmentation that thought confronts. In

history, the processes of fragmentation in being repeatedly collide with the rational, autonomous striving of spirit for a completeness that it would posit as absolute (which emerges only as an abstract, indeterminate universality in human thought that demands systematic organization and limitation, namely, the abstract and problematic thought of *the unconditioned*). In that striving, the task of spirit is to construct unity between “the material” and “the moral” plain and simple, that is, to find content in the fragments that would give expression to and reflect their unity in the conceptually bound unity of spirit itself. From that intra-historical standpoint of representing spirit’s internal unity, thought infers and attempts to know the processes that give rise to fragments, yet they remain problematic and other than thought, since those processes are not positively contained in the fragment itself. The philosophical problem of the fragment that lurks in the proper context of history is that this seemingly total context—supposing all the historically received fragments of history reflectively breathed into spirit—would suggest a universal systematic organization that outlines how spirit (rational, autonomous thought) takes control of the object (the fragments of fragmentation) through which it realizes itself. Schlegel, however, in a critical attempt to curtail this drive to realize the absolute among its fragments or, worse, a fatalistic absolute of the fragment as such, moves to preserve an *anti-foundationalist* account of the fragment as the ironic presentation of the historical time of the absolute, the complete, rounded totality of which remains forever beyond the objectifying power (positing) and the conceptual comprehension (reflection) of thought.

Since so much of Schlegel’s understanding of his own “Romanticism” follows his criticisms of philosophical idealism and—ostensibly in contradistinction—leads to the embrace of a philosophical *anti-foundationalism*, that anti-foundationalism bears explaining as to how it informs Schlegel’s interpretation of history as an object of theory. In the simplest of terms, anti-

foundationalism intends that thought does not and cannot immanently attain access to a principle through which a complete account of the totality of being, i.e., the *absolute*, can be comprehended or positively articulated as an object of (conceptual) cognition. This means the absolute definitively stands beyond that which is thinkable and everything that is thinkable is a fragment vis-à-vis that which exceeds it, such that even “the greatest system is still only a fragment.”¹⁷⁰ With this line, Schlegel means to draw a critical boundary around the limits of philosophical thinking. It is no stretch to imagine, here, that Schlegel again has Fichte in his sights. For, in the aforementioned notes for a critical essay on Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*, Schlegel argues that transcendental philosophy only makes deductions with regard to the “absolute ideality of the real,” such that the “absolute reality of the ideal” remains absent, especially because it is something that one cannot deduce, according to Schlegel.¹⁷¹ Together these two invectives make a significant impact on the interpretation of Schlegel’s simultaneous devotion to and critical skepticism of systematic or transcendental philosophy. That even the greatest system would, in the end, remain a fragment suggests that no matter how encompassing of however many fragments, a system as such either lacks or excludes some *other* that, if included, would make the system greater than the sum of its parts—that is, absolute in the sense that it is without any other(ness). That one cannot deduce such a claim, moreover, would mean that its foundation is not internal to conceptual thought, but an inference thought makes at its own boundary, namely, the boundary of the fragment.

A system as a web of internal, conceptual relations clarifies how things “hang together” through articulations of conceptual necessity, that is, positing how things or fragments gain

¹⁷⁰ Friedrich Schlegel, *Literary Notebooks: 1797-1801*. Ed. Hans Eichner. London, UK: The Athlone Press, 1957 (103 no. 921). (Hereafter LN – all translations provided of this text are original.)

¹⁷¹ FSKA XVIII, 38 no. 209.

mutually determining relations in and through their reflection into thought. Thought, then, as an internally unified and conceptually unifying activity of positing and reflection, follows out an internal tendency to construct the ideality of the real in a systematic form. Where Schlegel goes a step further, however, is not that the realization of this systematic ideal of the real accessed through the self-explication of thought—commonly invoked as transcendental philosophy—stands internally incomplete or even that it is not a linear but a circular path. The internal incompleteness of a system is not so much Schlegel’s worry as the extreme limits of any possible system in general, which not only indicates a necessary incompleteness of systematic thinking as such but also the need for systems in the plural. Schlegel suggests that even if we were to accept Fichte’s pretension to complete the task of transcendental philosophy by immanently realizing a conceptual account of totality in thought through the self-positing identity of thought—a purported accomplishment that Schlegel consistently contests—such an account of totality in thought both remains a fragment insofar as it is objectified in thought and thereby excludes the “absolute reality” that thought reflects as a fragment (in thought). Thus, by way of his anti-foundationalism, Schlegel means to distinguish between two divergent concerns in philosophical thinking: on the one hand, philosophy as the inquiry into the nature of thought itself requires the immanent access to transcendental conditions that take a presentable shape as principles for the systematic organization of thinking; on the other hand, that self-critical, philosophical task necessarily jettisons the absolute reality of which thought is but a fragment, something which thought comes to know in and through its critical self-explication and the striving for its completion. That absolute reality, the infinity that cannot be objectified in thought inside the transcendental unity of consciousness, is the teeming, material, existing source of fragmentation in being that engenders, envelops, and exceeds the fragmentation of fragments as such. Anti-

foundationalism thus does not disregard transcendental philosophy, though it does seek to implement an ontological proviso that one cannot make inside the limits of transcendental inquiry, namely, Fichte's first principle of all knowing—the absolute identity of thought's self positing (*Ich=Ich*)—must presuppose and exclude the being (the copula) in which the fact of its existence is ensconced in order to arrive at the validity of its identity. The very cognitive ideal of identity as such presupposes and excludes an account of the absolute reality of which it is an ideal expression, i.e., a distended fragment.¹⁷² The absolute is the infinite, of which the objectified thought “existence” is also but a fragment.

Schlegel's anti-foundationalism thus means to disabuse us from the 'old' philosophical pretension that totality, either will yield to or, in the end, is identical with the form in which it is thought, namely, a system. For, if the absolute exists, even if only as an impossible possibility of thought, the account of it should include the whole of both all processes of fragmentation *and* all fragments. Yet, the fragment itself only ever stands as a posited objectification vis-à-vis the processes that give rise to it, such that it necessarily obfuscates, covers over, or maybe even altogether excludes the thought of the processes that once gave rise to it. Anti-foundationalism culminates in neither a method nor a determinate philosophical task, such as, for example, thought's internal demand for a presuppositionless access to itself as its object. Rather, anti-foundationalism speaks to a pervasive and consistent skepticism on Schlegel's part that follows from transcendental philosophy: since the object in thought is always and already an objectification of thought and yet thought strives to know that which is outside or other than itself, one must *ironically* infer from the standpoint of rational thought that thought's foundation

¹⁷² J.G. Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge: With the First and Second Introductions*. Eds. Peter Heath and John Lachs. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

is ontologically other than itself, namely, that the ineffable ontological processes of fragmentation that give rise to thought as a fragment of existence or the infinite cannot possibly be shown in the fragment itself. This is, indeed, the very meaning of the fragment as “ruin,” in Schlegel, that is, not the fragment is a fragment of a prior unity, but that the subsequent unity of reflection and consciousness will always miss the being of those ontological processes of fragmentation.¹⁷³ The philosophical thinking possible in such a world of universal fragmentation and “ruin” thus requires irony, since the thought of each fragment and the fragments of thought (such as discrete concepts) all implicitly trace and memorialize processes that are excluded in the thought of them and, yet, the fragment could not be without them. If the ontology of Schlegel’s anti-foundationalism holds out the relation of the fragment and fragmentation through such an ironizing standpoint—one that might seem to be more the concern of aesthetics than metaphysics—what then is the purpose of the Romantic character of ‘striving for the absolute’? Is not the absolute infinitely out of reach of every expression of it?

After the deployment of anti-foundationalism as an ontological rejoinder to his studies in transcendental philosophy, Schlegel becomes consumed with task of reorganizing philosophy around a critical use of that irony which his anti-foundationalism makes necessary. This task, I take it, is the unifying task of Schlegel’s collections of fragments during his Jena years that culminate in his lecture course, “On Transcendental Philosophy,” at the University of Jena in 1800-01. It is in the context of these collections of fragments, the *Critical* or *Lyceum Fragments*, the *Athenaeum Fragments*, and *The Ideas*, over the years of 1796 to around 1800 that Schlegel sharpens his articulation of concepts such as *romantic striving* and *irony* and, moreover, where history reappears time and again as a stand-in for the ontologically complex context of

¹⁷³ See: LA 42-3.

fragmentation, wherein the rational, romantic striving of spirit intersects with the extra-conceptual, fragmenting processes of being in its fragmentation. History, or “historical unity” (*historische Einheit*), is the object of spirit’s striving for unity, but history, as a whole, is also ironically more than spirit.¹⁷⁴ Not unlike Kant, then, Schlegel realizes that to theorize history either from the standpoint of the rational self-legislation of the will or from some given theoretical concept would misunderstand or misconstrue the object itself. With his philosophical anti-foundationalism, however, Schlegel goes one step beyond anything we see in Kant’s attempt to wager a theory of history of universal history in response to history’s cognitive recalcitrance and the irrational gaps and episodes of violence that recalcitrance opens. That is, Schlegel attempts both to raise irrationality into the proper, genetic, positive context of history itself and, in so doing, to modify the presentation of historical universality into fragmented, ironizing expressions of the idea of the totality of fragmentation, namely, the absolute.

Striving after the absolute is, for Schlegel, by definition an ironic endeavor, since it involves an attempt to objectify and to bring into experience that which exceeds it. Nevertheless, that does not make it fatalistic or cynical. For, that irony can be prepared and harnessed in better and worse ways. The “better” employment of irony is what preserves striving, what keeps it in-check, signals its relevance, and prevents it from its own superfluity and dissolution. Striving in all cases is the work of spirit (*Geist*), for Schlegel, and its proper realization of irony ultimately makes it wit (*Witz*). One of Schlegel’s evident tasks in the early *Critical Fragments* is to mark spirit’s inner character and logic of striving: “sense (*Sinn*) (for a particular art, science, or person, etc.) is divided spirit; self-restriction is thus a result of self-creation and self-negation”; “wit is

¹⁷⁴ LN, 39, no. 217 and 219.

unconditioned social spirit, or fragmentary genius”; “wit is logical sociality” (*Geselligkeit*).¹⁷⁵ Spirit, for Schlegel, is the most abstract, the most universal, synthetic concept that reflection can immanently attain. Spirit is the very living, self-positing, developing, and historically variant unity of consciousness that can only but begin from or as divided fragments, which subsequently become unified in and through spirit’s acts of reflection amidst its very fragmentation. As a result, in striving for unity both in itself and for the unity of *what is*, the material and historical fragmentation of spirit that would appear first or primary in experience becomes, for spirit, second to the self-consciousness unity of spirit in its reflection. The oscillations of spirit between “self-creation” and “self-negation” are simply the most general, internal criteria by which spirit repeatedly posits itself and in turn fragments historically in those diverse positings, only to return to itself again. The moment of the return to and in itself—or, spirit’s self-consciousness by means of internal reflection on fragments—signals the semblance of spirit’s constitutive presence in society as nothing other than society’s ideal, conceptual articulation. Spirit alone can bridge the gap between the ideal (spirit’s reflective unity and self-identity) and the real (spirit’s social and historical fragmentation). By delineating the contours of that gap between the real and the ideal, spirit itself becomes and satisfies as a transcendental principle, according to Schlegel.¹⁷⁶ Society remains and persists as the fragmented reality of spirit as spirit itself reflectively unfolds its own ideal logic of self-positing. The philosophical representation of spirit, mapping its logics and presenting reflective accounts of its historical self-creation and self-negation, is really the most that theory can aspire to, that is, a kind of “genius” in the context of

¹⁷⁵ FSKA II, 148 no. 8; 149 no. 28; 154 no. 56.

¹⁷⁶ “[T]ranscendental is exactly that which makes reference to the connection or the separation of the ideal and the real” (FSKA II, 169 no. 22). This fragment and the larger issue of Schlegel’s understanding of the transcendental is treated more fully below.

fragmentation, whereby the nature or essence of spirit is drawn out from its historical becoming that at once violently fragments and hopefully posits itself anew out from its fragmentation. The motive force of spirit is its very striving character to find a total and complete synthetic unity of itself and what is, yet this striving for two aspirations in one aim or purpose is also the principal source of spirit's turmoil and the return into splintering fragmentation due to a lack of critical restraint and therewith of self-knowledge too, something, if achieved, Schlegel will often portray as the capacity for wit (*Witz*).

Wit is truly one of the unmistakable and emblematic concepts of the *Frühromantiker*, and perhaps none more than Schlegel makes an effort to elucidate it not as an ossified, timeless concept but as the truth of intellectual experience in general. In notes for a 1797 essay on philosophy, Schlegel argues, "Wit itself does not lie in the sphere of the absolute, but, of course, the more absolute, the more formed (*gebildeter*) it is."¹⁷⁷ Wit, above all, belongs to the sphere of experience, the sphere of fragmentation that appears in the shape of discrete fragments. The discreteness of fragments is tantamount to their discontinuity or fragmentation as it appears to the unity of experience. The striving toward the absolute that wit exhibits—the very striving, inner character of spirit itself to achieve a synthetic unity of itself and existence—is demonstrated by bringing the unity of fragments to appearance in experience. As Manfred Frank describes it, wit is a "selective flashing of the unity within unity and of the infinite in the finite."¹⁷⁸ Wit belongs to spirit no matter how divided and fragmented spirit appears, insofar as wit shapes the realization or the synthetic act of spirit itself. In this, the appearances of wit gains

¹⁷⁷ FSKA XVIII, 113 no. 1002.

¹⁷⁸ Frank, Manfred. *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*. Trans. Elizabeth Millan-Zaibert. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2008 (209). (Hereafter *Foundations*.)

in resemblance to the absolute inasmuch as spirit encounters nothing other than itself, but only finds spirit again in the positing that is each fragment, such that it returns into itself as it reflects on and bridges the discontinuities separating and fracturing fragments in general. In this respect, wit certainly approximates the absolute with these acts of establishing spirit's internal unity as the unity of fragments in experience in and through its own progressive development, but that development never goes so far as to correct for or alter in any way the inevitable return of fragmentation. Wit is, therefore, limited to this flashing resemblance to the absolute.

The positing that is each fragment represents a moment of spirit's self-creation that becomes cognizable as such in the objectification of the positing as a fragment. In each attempt to get behind the fragmentation that spirit encounters, spirit only finds itself again in fragments. This is due in no small part to the fact that spirit itself is at the root and cause of the existing fragmentation, that is, fragmentation arises, at least in part, because of spirit's very attempt to absorb and take into itself that which is other than it. Reflection—which can only take place on the heels of or, better still, through the objectification of a positing into a fragment—negates the immediacy of any given fragments, so as to find spirit in it as the determining element of the fragment. Through the tandem cognitive powers of spirit's positing and reflection, spirit grows in its progressive striving toward a positive representation of the totality lurking behind it and fragments in general. Schlegel describes the ironic element in the experience of this striving to reconcile spirit with its excluded, ineffable other as 'the almost': "In Kant's family tree of original concepts I begrudgingly miss the category of *the almost*, which certainly operates in the world and in literature—no matter how twisted—as much as any other category. In the spirit of the nature-skeptic, it taints all remaining concepts and intuitions."¹⁷⁹ The almost is a moment of

¹⁷⁹ KFSA II, 157 no. 80—emphasis added.

slippage or, simply, finitude. Schlegel's proposition that "the almost" (*Beinahe*) is a lawful category of the understanding as much as any other is a playful yet serious attempt to address spirit's relation of *approximation* to the absolute. The almost is not about the Kantian relation of phenomena to some inferred noumena—in the sense of coherent and complete accounts of objects independent of human experience. One can be legitimately sure of that by reference to the second sentence, that is, the "nature-skeptic" (*Naturskeptiker*), the figure of which suggests a plain skepticism toward and no need for a return to some pure immediacy of nature independent of human experience or cognition. The problem is emphatically not the "thing in-itself." Rather, in the opposite direction, *the almost* refers to the lunging, striving attempt on the part of spirit to take into itself that which escapes it—the being of the infinite as absolute—and the ontological structure of that escape from an impossible absolute standpoint of the infinite itself. To posit that standpoint beyond spirit's reflecting power would result in spirit's abandonment of wit and irony altogether. That does not prevent or forbid the positing of ideal standpoints from which some absolute claim could be wagered on the infinite, such as some regulative ideal would offer with respect to a totalizing concept like God, the soul, or world, that is, for the sake of critically regulating spirit's systematic organization. So, to the extent that the synthetic unity of fragments can be found and demonstrated in and by spirit itself, wit brings unity to bear on fragments in experience.

Wit cannot proceed without irony, and this is categorical for Schlegel, because in each attempt to effect unity wit knows that the ideals through which the unity of fragments appears still falls short of fulfilling a positively represented idea of the absolute itself. "Cognizing" (*erkennen*) already indicates a conditioned knowledge (*ein bedingtes Wissen*). The

unfathomability (*Nichterkennbarkeit*) of the absolute is thus an identical triviality.”¹⁸⁰ In this respect, wit is witty in that it knows the inner necessity of spirit to tend and strive toward a synthetic unity of itself and what is, yet it also knows that such a unity requires its objectification and it, therefore, always will and must fall short of the idea of the absolute that it posits for itself. Irony stands at the impasse of wit and thereby the very peak of wit: the reflective unity of spirit that wit effects would seem to mirror the absolute, in that it too seemingly encounters no otherness in its reflections and only finds itself as it strives and traverses fragmentation. Wit and irony are thus two moments internally bound together in Schlegel’s concept of spirit (*Geist*). Without irony spirit loses the witness of wit, as it were, such as would be the case if spirit posits itself beyond the limit of its reflective and objectifying capacity, i.e., the unity of consciousness. Ultimately, spirit is limited by nothing other than itself, that is, the very reflective means by which it clarifies itself vis-à-vis its objects in consciousness. That means, however, it can only articulate itself for itself by separating from some object or withdrawing from an other—hence the infinite, the absolute as such, that defies positive representation as an ‘object,’ i.e., a limited *thing*, in and for consciousness. The triviality, or even the tautological character to which Schlegel appeals in the quotation above, lies in the fact that just as evidently as consciousness is a finite thing by definition, so too must the absolute by definition be unfathomable (for consciousness). By means of ironic expression alone, then, can spirit gain a witty expression of its totality that is *simultaneously universal and not absolute*—in this respect, Schlegel noted that what romantic poetry is to the arts as a whole, wit is to philosophy.¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ FSKA XVIII, 511 no. 64.

¹⁸¹ This analogy, of course, comes from the well-known *Athenäeum* fragment no. 116, where Schlegel attempts to define romantic poetry by its transcendental function relative to the arts in general. In that effort Schlegel notes that, “[a]mong the arts romantic poetry is what wit is to philosophy [...] the romantic type of poetry is still in becoming—indeed, that is its particular essence, that it becomes

Along the lines of a simply reconstructive effort, it would by all means stand to reason that wit offers the only plausible standpoint from which the theoretician could conduct philosophy of history for Schlegel. Historical universality—the sense of the abstract possibility of its meaning—is nothing other than spirit in its most general self-identity, gaining in definition through its striving to become absolute (without otherness between its inner unity and what is). The presentation of the universality of that striving for the absolute thus requires the formulation of an idea of spirit’s reconciliation and fulfilled totality from the standpoint of its fragmentation. While this issue of presentation grips the *Athenäeum* fragments as a whole, Schlegel illustrates the issue, perhaps, nowhere better than *Athenäeum* no. 121:

An idea (*Idee*) is a concept completed to the point of irony, an absolute synthesis of absolute antitheses, the constant self-creating alteration (*Wechsel*) of two conflicting thoughts. An ideal is at once idea and fact. If ideals do not have as much individuality for the thinker as the gods of antiquity do for the artist, then all preoccupation with the ideas is nothing other than a boring and tedious game of dice with hollow formulae [...] Nothing is more pitiful and contemptible than this sentimental speculation without an object. One should not call this mysticism, since that beautiful, old word is for absolute philosophy, from which standpoint spirit contemplates everything as mystery and as wonder, which it naturally finds from other points of view as either theoretical or practical—those points of view being as useful as they are indispensable. Speculation *en detail* is as rare as abstraction *en gros*, and yet they make the whole substance of scientific wit—they

eternally, that it can never be completed” (FSKA II, 183 no. 116; cf. 204 no. 238). The idea Schlegel tries to communicate throughout this extensive and rich fragment is that romantic poetry is a type of poetry whose object is poetry or the poetic act, that is, it seeks an artistic expression of the foundations of expression itself. That this task is an eternal or a permanent one—not itself “infinite”—means that it follows from the original, separating, and unifying act of subjectivity itself, whereby consciousness posits and articulates itself in its division from the infinite. Every romanticizing act of artistic expression attempts to return to the active (non-objectified) origin of that division only to unfold more expressive content to take up again as an object of expression, such that the object supposed to be at the foundation is shown to be still in motion (from which one should infer that—instead of a single, unified object—romantic poetry uncovers a relation at the foundation of expression). It is this structure of inquiry into an object that is ricochets into inquiry in motion that Schlegel likens to the role of wit in philosophy: just as romantic poetry works backward from the arts in general to the ground of artistic expression itself as an object or condition without which the arts as a whole could not operate, so too does wit find and show in philosophy the unity of all conceptual unity in the internal unity of spirit as a self-positing fragment of existence.

are the principles (*Prinzipien*) of heightened critique, the uppermost levels of spiritual development (*geistige Bildung*).¹⁸²

The presentation of an idea arrives through the perfection of a specific concept to the degree that it would purport an absolute synthesis and integration of all conflicting fragments—including the fragment that is spirit itself with respect to the infinite. Once again, Schlegel uses irony to describe the admittedly problematic character of any act of thought, even the presentation of the ideas, as *actually* absolute. The idea alone, nonetheless, must serve the perennial object of what Schlegel calls “absolute philosophy” since it is the maximum use of spirit’s own principle—the self-positing of its internal identity—that would construe and objectify the infinite into an object for consciousness and thereby the absolute totality of spirit itself. By reference to this idea, all of systematic philosophy, the formulation of empirical concepts (the speculation *en detail*) and transcendental deductions (the abstraction *en gross*), becomes possible and necessary. In short, with the approximating implication of the absolute at work in the ideas, spirit would gain precedent to fashion the unreconciled, fragmenting fragmentation of the infinite answer to the fragment—thus striving and the potentially unironic character it would assume in positing itself (its concepts) beyond itself (the reflecting power of consciousness). That spirit’s fragments could stand, like the gods of antiquity, over and against the breach of a constant unfolding *agon* of fragmentation in which they emerge is *the absolute pretense* of the ideas. Thus even the greatest system remains a fragment and the ideas—those would-be Archimedean points from which thought would capture the meaning of the absolute—remain gestures of irony.

It is revealing to note that Schlegel, in *Athenäum* no. 121, makes an explicit attempt to rescue the vocabulary of mysticism, inasmuch as mysticism is not misconstrued to refer to some

¹⁸² FSKA II, 184 no. 121.

leap outside of experience and to fall aimlessly outside of it with respect to no specific object. Instead, of that “sentimental” or reactionary version of mysticism, Schlegel appears to suggest that a critically modified and therewith ironic absolute philosophy would actually operate as a kind mysticism, if for no other reason than this inner compulsion of absolute philosophy to unify the infinite more than it already *is* by nature, that is, to effect a synthetic unity of the infinite in and with spirit. Yet, the infinite always ensconces the antagonisms of all fragments—it is that very unfolding of antagonism—and, in that, it seems to promise nothing more than (more) antagonism, and nothing more from the infinite’s fragmenting processes of fragmentation. Everything to which spirit would make reference to gain an upper hand on the infinite as an unreconciled and fragmenting absolute falls short, such as Schlegel suggests in regard to time itself: “Time is only eternity brought in from disorder.”¹⁸³ Even time, just as the ideas, always refers to some order (of spirit), some delimitation of the infinite in and by the finite, such that it too must fall short of ‘clocking’ the infinite. What mysticism appears to suggest for Schlegel—that irony apparently does not inside this context of the fragment(ary)—is the location of some necessary link between the fragment and the infinite that is not just the striving pretension of spirit to capture the absolute, which, so aggrandized, would seem an un-ironic insistence that spirit is and thereby should reconcile the *nature* of the infinite, that is, the eternity outside of and antagonistic to order.

Schlegel’s early works are pervaded by the anxious apprehension of a growing gap between experience and what makes experience possible, a gap that the edge of every fragment touches and bumps up against, only to fall back behind. If irony is able to resemble and indicate the striving for the unity of the absolute brought to bear in and by spirit itself, then history shows

¹⁸³ FSKA X, 550.

an approach to or approximation of the absolute by different means, that is, by an allegorical expression at the level of the fragment itself. As Manfred Frank incisively notes, Schlegel's understandings of irony and allegory split from one another in the modes of their expression of the absolute: "in wit the tendency toward unity without plentitude is presented; in allegory the tendency toward the infinite, removed from unity, is presented."¹⁸⁴ Wit takes into itself and demonstrates in discrete appearances the synthetic nature of spirit that defines its striving character, i.e., its inner necessity or compulsion to reconcile the infinite in a positively articulated absolute. In this effort, wit places all emphasis on the conceptual articulation of unity—such that it deliberately sacrifices the fragmentary being or multiplicity of the infinite—to draw an ironic, striving image of the absolute into appearance. Allegory, on the contrary, approximates the absolute "removed from unity," that is to say, not in fragmentation's reconciliation in and by spirit, but the being of the infinite in its fragmented otherness. Schlegel clarifies this in some notes around 1800 that were likely either in preparation for or recorded during the first phases of his lecture course, *Über Transzendnetale Philosophie*, at the university of Jena:

The tendency of principles is to negate the shine (*Schein*) of the finite. They only leave space for the ideas. — They are merely the transition from error to truth.

The shine of the finite and the allusion to the infinite flow into one another [...] the infinite task of nature is to realize divinity.¹⁸⁵

The task of spirit is a system, that is, to leverage immanently ascertained principles of conceptual unity against the fragmentation it encounters inside the parameters of experience, so as to demonstrate that experience itself holds together on the ropes of conceptual necessity. In this, spirit profits immensely to the very degree that it reflects the unity of experience in the veracity

¹⁸⁴ Frank, *Foundations*, 210.

¹⁸⁵ FSKA XVIII, 416 no. 1140, 1141.

of the ideas as ironic configurations of the absolute. Yet, the necessary result of spirit's labors includes—even mandates—negating the shine of the finite. I translate *Schein*, here, as “shine” and not either “semblance” or “illusion,” if only because this is evidently a positive use of the term in the sense that Schlegel means to communicate what is lost or sacrificed by spirit in its striving for a systematic presentation of the absolute. The shine covered over here is the very shine of the unreconciled absolute as it would appear—or to the very extent it can—inside the context of the fragment itself. So, despite the unreconciled nature of its fragmentation, the fragment as fragment already makes an appeal to the infinite, even if only an allegorical one—one that does not and maybe cannot say what it means without destroying its negatively figured truth.¹⁸⁶ So, where spirit leaves only “space” for the ideas—as the coherent and cohesive medium in which spirit can operate and gradually work to overcome its fragmentation—the fragment left to its fragmentation preserves an allegorical shine of the infinite in which it is always antagonistically entrenched—its “natural” or unreconciled state.

Just as wit condenses the synthetic unity that is spirit into unified appearances or acts working within the medium or space of the idea, so to does the “historical sense” of fragments as allegorically evocative of the infinite provide an abbreviated yet lasting expression of the infinite. Schlegel appears to be experimenting with this thought in one of the more difficult fragments from the *Anthenäeum* collection:

A project is the subjective germ of an object in becoming. A completed project must be at once wholly subjective and wholly objective—an indivisible living individual. According to its origin, wholly subjective, original, and only in this spirit possible; according to its character, wholly objective, physically and morally necessary. The sense (*Sinn*) for projects, which one could call fragments

¹⁸⁶ In other words, as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy would have it, to formulate this too as a “concept” would both put us back in the idealism Schlegel intends to subvert and annihilate the meaning of the expression.

from the future, differs from the sense of fragments from the past only by direction—the one is progressive, the other regressive. [...] Since the transcendental is exactly that which makes reference to the connection or the separation of the ideal and the real, thus one could very well say that the sense for fragments and projects is the transcendental element of the historical spirit.”¹⁸⁷

Here, in a complex arrangement, Schlegel would bring together simultaneously the striving character of spirit with the allegorical significance of the fragmentation of fragments. We have here, then, two mutually exclusive routes to the absolute, two diametrically opposed modes of articulation: the historical sense for fragments that plunges us into the becoming and the fragmentation of isolated and distended fragments *and* the reflection of those fragments into spirit itself, which refers back to spirit as the only possible transcendental principle that could navigate the possible unities of that fragmentation. In the above fragment, Schlegel cuts this divergence along the lines of the objective and the subjective dimensions of fragments in general. This should be taken as a clue, therefore, that objectivity for Schlegel is emphatically not limited to the objectivity of subjectivity.¹⁸⁸ The “sense for fragments,” therefore, appears to refer to spirit’s power to operate within a stream of becoming that exceeds it, in which it may plant a seed or a germ (*Keim*), but wherein spirit is far from the lone generative or determining force. That sense (*Sinn*) thus opens up a series of lines shooting out from the fragment in different and conflicting directions, whether it be drawn in spirit or in the disordered, antagonistic image of the infinite, the later of which shines in the fragment as the allegorical ruin of an unreconciled nature, the extra-conceptual, “chaotic universality” that is the being of fragmentation.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ FSKA II, 169 no. 22.

¹⁸⁸ This is contrary to the idealist reading made so popular by Fredrick Beiser—see, for example, his *Idealism*, 3.

¹⁸⁹ FSKA XII, 440.

This allegorical expression of the fragment as a fragment of unreconciled nature—not a fragment of a lost totality or a totality yet to come—comes to inhabit a temporal register relative to what Schlegel, above, calls the “task of nature,” namely, “to realize divinity” as the incongruous eternity of the infinite’s antagonistic disorder and fragmentation. Here, the fragment does not just express and memorialize the extra-conceptual or even irrational activity at the source of its being, but, through the shine of its wearing and withering, it relates the very unreconciled nature of the infinite. So, when Schlegel notes that, “every allegory intends (*bedeuten*) God and one cannot but speak of God allegorically,” we should hear that invocation of the divine as the eternity of unreconciled nature as opposed to spirit’s idea of the infinite that it works out through establishing and presenting the synthetic unity of itself with what is.¹⁹⁰ The time of spirit is the time of idea, the temporality of all that which is and can be saved, to the extent that spirit’s vocation is a rescue project vis-à-vis the splintering irrationality and forgetfulness of fragmentation. The time of the fragment—the allegorical shine and expression of historical time—is a confluence point of spirit’s inner compulsion to rectify a historically fractured nature and the return of nature back into an eternity of disorder, the absolute otherness of which thwarts spirit. Thus the time of fragment, not its temporality, but the specific time it has *brought in from disorder* or clocked, the content it holds out as a fragment, is only possibly borne out in conflict, in erosion, and decay that allegorically expresses the confluence and intersection of spirit with the fragmenting processes that the infinite unleashes on all fragments as the irrecuperable fragments or “ruins” that memorialize the unfathomable absolute.

¹⁹⁰ FSKA XVIII, 347 no. 315.

It would seem that this notion of the fragment as “ruin” is the source of contemporary readings of Schlegel that flock to his ontology of the absolute’s fragmentation in order to find its incompleteness as (self-)redeeming—much in the manner as Rudolf Gasché argues for the constitutive incompleteness of the concept of the fragment. Schlegel, however, never appears to indicate that either the allegorical mode of the fragment’s expression of the unreconciled nature of the infinite as eternal or divine is superior to the task of spirit and its striving to positively articulate and comprehend the absolute. In fact, contrary to championing one over the other, Schlegel most often appears to indicate their mutual implication that plays out in conflict in fragments—a conflict he often summarized as that between absolute philosophy or mysticism and systematic philosophy or skepticism.¹⁹¹ Nonetheless, the conflict is as irresolvable as it is productive and generative, for Schlegel. As a result, it would seem confounding to imagine why the incompleteness of the fragment as ruin would suggest either dialectically or ironically the (self-)fulfillment of the fragment altogether, which would put out of play and forget the meaning of inhabiting the fragment as spirit, namely, the striving character of the fragment. Fulfillment or completeness is precisely what lacks all the way down throughout Schlegel’s philosophy—even after his conversion to Catholicism in 1806 this problem does not fundamentally alter in Schlegel’s philosophical works.

¹⁹¹ Though we saw Schlegel appeal to this distinction in *Athenäum* no. 121, he plays this out in what he will often refer to as the *Wechselerweis*, or *Wechselkonstruktion*, or *Wechselgrundsatz* of philosophy in general. This alternating construction or proof or principles refers to the conflict of spirit and the being of the absolute and, thus, is a fundament of Schlegel’s anti-foundationalism. Schlegel’s first mention of this notion of a *Wechselerweis* emerges in his 1796 review of Jacobi’s novel, *Woldemar* (see: FSKA II, 72). Unlike Jacobi’s notion of faith as the only and necessary starting point of philosophical thinking, Schlegel employs this thought of two alternating standpoints that would accord with the core of his understanding of anti-foundationalism, which always maintains that neither spirit nor the absolute can be reduced to one another. The truth of one cannot be communicated in that of the other, such that the truths of systematic philosophy (skepticism) and that of absolute philosophy (mysticism) refer to two different “proofs” or “constructions.”

The problem of the fragment, for Schlegel, always involves tracing and knowing the ontological processes that gave rise to it and yet exceed their objectification in the fragment itself. Spirit's striving to construct a conceptually bound and coherent synthetic unity of itself with "what is" accounts for one path from the fragment to the absolute that would end in a positive, ideal articulation of all received fragments (historical contents or appearances) reflected in the absolute form of their (historical) universality. As has been shown, Schlegel understands such a task of spirit to strive to present its totality as absolute through the ideas to be a necessary and also an impossible one, an imperative and yet an unbearable task. Where wit brings the unifying, synthetic power of spirit into appearance by finding the unity of received fragments of the past in itself, irony holds spirit back from the oblivion of further fragmentation, only allowing an abbreviated gesture beyond the impasse of the fragment by reference and appeal to the idea. Yet all that is still along the trajectory of positively articulating the absolute, the failure of which returns thought back to the fragment with another, less direct path beyond the boundary of the fragment: the allegorical shine of the fragment in its destitution as an irrecoverable expression of the historical time of the absolute in its very infinite, unreconciled nature. Schlegel repeatedly denies the possibility of any unity between the task of spirit and the fragment as an allegorical expression of the absolute. To collapse those two paths from the fragment to the absolute into one would require a knowledge of their mutual end that both lack. Since there is no such straight line from the fragment to the absolute—as accords with Schlegel's anti-foundationalism—the most that theory can afford is to alternate back and forth between those two paths (Schlegel's *Wechselerweis*) given what is available in a present, that is, depending upon how and to what extent the fragments of the past emerge in a present alongside the burgeoning becoming of fragments of the future, as Schlegel describes in *Athenäeum* no. 22.

The processes by which those fragments from the past emerge in the present—such that spirit confronts them as the fragments of what is—can only be known and unified to the degree that they are identical to spirit, and that may even be a great deal. In this way, as indicated previously, spirit may attain universality—specifically, its own historical universality—yet that universality *must* fall short of the “final synthesis” of spirit and the being of the absolute.¹⁹² The ontological processes of the fragmentation of fragments thus always exceed spirit, whether that is made explicit through irony or through allegory is, in truth, of secondary importance for Schlegel.

Romanticism, and this is true for both Schlegel and Schiller, has its provenance in the tireless thinking of the fragmentary, a thinking that is prefigured already in Kant in the questionable relationship between experience and the ideas. Schiller certainly recognizes the fragment as the center-piece of historical experience, as the problem to be solved in and by the mounting forces of progress in history. He thus treats progress specifically as the moral progress that would culminate in the historical universality of a morally perfected species, even if the historical process of that progress is mired in violent antagonism and a repeated play of abstraction without any articulated conceptual structure filling it out, hence the merely “additive” method of his analysis. Yet, in Schiller’s seemingly perpetual antagonism carried out through the abstractive social process of progress, he also gives voice to the defining historical character of modernity in the problem of historical time, that is, the contents of the past that carry over and persist into the present as ruins, precisely because they are not reflected into or reconcilable with

¹⁹² Schlegel expresses this sentiment exactly in his description of the meaning of universality in one of the last fragments from the *Athenäum* collection: “Universality is the alternating satiation of all forms and substances. Universality attains harmony only through the connection of poetry and philosophy: even the most universal and most complete works of isolated poetry and philosophy seem to lack the final synthesis. Still close to the goal of harmony, they stand uncompleted. The life of universal spirit is an unbroken chain of inner revolutions; all individuals—the original, eternal ones [ideas]—live in it. [Spirit] is a true polytheist and bears in itself the whole of Olympus” (FSKA II, 93 no. 451).

(the form of) the present. This is characteristic of modernity (*Neuzeit*), for only in modernity do we see the integration and disintegration of historical time become a problem relative to the historically changing form of the present. For Schiller, as a result of his additive method, the best for which he can hope is to beat back the incongruities, thus the apparent sanctioning of immoral hostility to “the savage” in the name of moral progress.

Schlegel, on the contrary, seems to embrace the problem of historical time in the irrecoverable nature of the fragment, but, as irrecoverable suffering, he also envisions no possible reconciliation for this effect, this fragment of unreconciled nature. Such a reconciliation is the very impossible imperative that spirit takes up in its attempt to identify with, to own, and to master unreconciled nature, the infinite—an effort fated to impossibility from the beginning. As a result, the more fragmentation wrecks havoc on spirit and as the fragments of historical time only grow with time, the more the absolute becomes the only possible site to envision the happiness that is so impossibly out of reach and absent in history. Schlegel, perhaps more than any other German Romantic, endeavors to provide the resources adequate to save some intelligible relationship between fragments and their home in absolute, even if that relationship will always also be mediated by the irrational element of the absolute that thwarts spirit’s identity of its own, positive totality and the universality of what is, such that the fracturing of absolute returns again in the historical splintering of fragmentation. Ultimately, even prior to his conversation, Schlegel seems to accept that generative aspect of the absolute’s irrationality or unreconciled nature. For, without it, the fragment would persist only as a fragment of an incomplete totality of spirit—nothing of it would suggest anything else, more, or otherwise. Without the acceptance of the fragment as the irrecoverable element and the only possible locus of meaning in history (and the concomitant acceptance of the unreconciled nature of the

absolute), there would be little left to distinguish Schlegel's gambit to wager the sum of meaning in history on the fragment from history's mere incompleteness and disintegration. Schlegel does not hedge his bets, here, and for that reason it is difficult to assess the outcome of Schlegel's theory of history decisively. For, one either goes all in with the fragment as the only possible site of meaning in history—the fragment as the only possible level of, yet a wounded historical universality—to be saved only to the extent that it can be acknowledge as the irrecuperable historical time of the absolute; or, one simply rejects that this rescue project rescues anything, since it fails to rehabilitate any hope that the fragmentation that is history could ever be otherwise than the fragment.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDING PASSAGE: FROM THE GODFORSAKEN WORLD TO REDEMPTION IN LUKÁCS AND BENJAMIN

Friedrich Schlegel's romantic theorization of history, as the last chapter attempted to show, depended upon a double insight into the problem of fragmentation. On the one hand, fragmentation is the problem of history *par excellence*, namely, the problem of the godforsaken, historical world that amounts to no more than fragmenting processes of fragmentation. Since history can only develop through its repeated integration of and disintegration back into ontological processes of fragmentation—and the being of those processes always exceeds or retreats from their objectification in the terms and concepts of spirit—historical universality is restricted to the imperfect locus of the fragment. The totality of spirit as a fragment is thus *universal and not absolute*. It is an aspirational striving at best, but, more likely, just downright problematic, since the absolute reserves the ultimate ground of possibility and it is at the same time strictly impossible. As a result of that slip between universal and absolute, a persistent and ineliminable element of irrationality pervades Schlegel's theorization of history as the fragment, because the fragment only ever emerges after the event of fragmentation, *post festum*, in the absence of the absolute. On the other hand, the task of theory when it confronts history—or, particularly in the case of Schlegel, the task of *the historical critic*—consolidates in the effort to convey the historical time of fragments as indirect expressions of the absolute, whether that be by spirit's tandem use of wit and irony or through the allegorical shine of the lone, irrecoverable fragment as ruin. Schlegel's effort, there, is “romantic” both in the sense of its imperative to

strive to rescue a relation of the fragment to the absolute and also, in other sense of “romantic,” with his ultimately fatalistic identification with unreconciled nature. While caught in this emblematically romantic tension, Schlegel gives voice to the growing, yawning gap between epistemic account of experience and the being of those forces informing experience, such that the most theory can expect from itself in the face of history is to make good on the imperative—here, the cognitive gap becomes spirit’s self-imposed, ethical imperative—to collect the broken shards of the “absolute reality” or being of fragmentation and to preserve their irrecuperable meaning as the extant fragments of the fragmented absolute. It was with this very romantic limit in mind that György Lukács notes in an early essay on the *Frühromantiker*, especially focused on Novalis and Schlegel, that they “strove to embrace the world, and this made them into slaves of fate.”¹⁹³ If there is any truth to that biting assertion, then what is to become of universal history—has this theory really sunk so quickly from Kant’s effort to save the aspirational element of historical universality in the idea of universal history to no more than a story, a *Geschichte*, of fragments that all capitulate to the unreconciled nature in which they are ensnared?

In truth, Kant appears to have already anticipated this problem when, in the last and seldom treated thesis of the *Universal History* essay, he confronts the possible misunderstanding of his attempt to theorize history as nothing more than “*ein Roman*,” a novel.¹⁹⁴ There, putting his cards on the table, Kant admits that *in the absence of the idea* nothing could remain of the thought and theory of historical universality except a pleasing, didactic novel that recounts some

¹⁹³ Georg Lukács and Judith Butler. *Soul and Form*. Ed. John Sanders and Katie Terezakis. Trans. Anna Bostock. New York, NY: Columbia UP, 2010 (73).

¹⁹⁴ IUH 118/AA 8: 29.

plausible unity of past events or historical appearances. In addition, it is worth recalling that this ninth thesis is also the place where Kant most straightforwardly acknowledges the task of *writing* such a universal history as a sort of addendum to the exercises of empirical histories—what Kant, there, incisively equates to “state-histories” (*Staatengeschichte*), that is, histories that either for explicitly politically motivated reasons or not fail to see or to engage history beyond the empirical historian’s immediate social trappings.¹⁹⁵ The theoretically driven task of universal history, in response to the readily evident limits of those empirical histories, requires the transportation of the would-be object beyond those merely empirical, fragmenting histories to the ideal unity of the idea. In other words, it is only through the contours of the idea that an object—historical universality—emerges in and for contemplation. A novel, on the contrary, constructs a representation of historical unity that either lacks or forfeits the promise of historical universality vis-à-vis the given, empirical fragmentation of history. Nevertheless, what the “novel form” of historical life would appear to offer is a rescue of historical unity as something historically and socially effected, while simultaneously recognizing the fact that this unity does not (and cannot) result from the self-legislation of the will—since history, i.e., the past and its emergence into the present, is not a kind of object that thought can constitute as it does freedom—nor does history, as an object, rise to the level of some conceptual lawfulness, as it is irresistibly pervaded by an element of irrationality. The “novel form” is, therefore, an idealized, aesthetic form or representation of unity that does not actually give form to history, such that one might call its form “reactionary” in the sense that its unity retreats into abstraction from the *nexus effectivus* of history itself, viz., society. As a result, the novel acquiesces to that romantic, impossible gap between historical experience and the forces making that experience possible, the problem with which Schlegel contended so assiduously. The danger of this “novel form” of

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

historical unity, then, is the evident resignation from universality to a merely didactic unity represented in the throes of the godforsaken, historical world. It is a move away from the rescue of an aspirational element internal to the object history toward an aesthetic and aestheticizing direction, which amounts to a doubling-down on the godforsaken world as the only possible historical world.

Lukács' 1916, *The Theory of the Novel*, takes up this very problem of the novel, namely, that the novel both rather audaciously attempts to provide historical unity where it socially lacks and, yet, can only do so in a reactionary, aestheticizing form. The novel emerges and develops itself in and through a tarrying with the godforsaken, historical world of modernity. Lukács' theoretical task thus concerns an effort to interpret the historical conditions in which the novel becomes possible and to excavate the utopian element the novel seeks to retrieve and to express in its own particular form. The answer he finds is that if the godforsaken world is the only world in which a novel can possibly, as it were, "make sense"—a condition he describes in that text with the concept *transcendental homelessness*—then the utopian element of history to which the novel lends its voice is the lost form-giving power and (spontaneous) unity of a now abstract subjectivity, which godforsaken historical world has rebuked, damaged, and made historically *irrelevant*. Here, the novel appears doomed or fated, because the very answer it envisions in its reactionary, aestheticized form runs contrary to the very redemption it would seek in and of the godforsaken world beyond its merely abstract unity. So, in the course of Lukács' critical analysis of the "novel form" of historical unity, it becomes increasingly clear that the novel is a *symptom*, so to speak, of the godforsaken world and, thus, inevitably fails each time its representations attempt to save some account of the historical unity of subjectivity *in absentia* of historical universality. J.M. Bernstein endeavors to comprehend this fundamental problem of

subjectivity's abstraction from the historical world in *Theory of the Novel* by situating it as the unsolved problem that *History and Class Consciousness* answers through its socially critical recourse to the historically excluded narrative of the historical consciousness of the proletariat, the introduction of which into consciousness itself would resolve the problem of the abstraction from the concrete historical world. Nonetheless, while such a retrospective reading of *Theory of the Novel* from the standpoint of the later work may well stand, Bernstein's reading of *Theory of the Novel* itself repeatedly falls short of answering *why* the utopian character of the novel—what Bernstein often calls its “ideological” character—prevents it from establishing material or actual unity in the godforsaken, historical world.¹⁹⁶ In other words, if the admitted danger of Lukács' argument in *Theory of the Novel* is an “unfounded utopianism,” as Lukács himself states in his 1962 preface to the text, namely, that “a natural life worthy of man” might still emerge from the fragmentation and disintegration of the historical world of modernity, it is a danger because that utopianism repeats the very problem of the novel itself: to propound the unity of some new historical totality that is, in fact, only another historical fragment or abstraction.¹⁹⁷

The “novel form” of historical unity is therefore not merely inadequate to the idea of universal history, but, in fact, it dispenses with the defining aspirational element of history that Kant meant to rescue from the fragmented heaps of empirical history, that is, the idea of the complete *happiness* of the whole in each of its appearances. The issue of redeeming that aspirational element in the idea of historical universality itself thus becomes tantamount to a defense of the theory of universal history. To that end, this chapter culminates in a reading of

¹⁹⁶ J. M. Bernstein, *The Philosophy of the Novel: Lukács, Marxism and the Dialectics of Form*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984 (67, 91). (Hereafter, *Philosophy of the Novel*.)

¹⁹⁷ Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*. Trans. Anna Bostock. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1973 (20). (Hereafter, TN.)

Walter Benjamin's "Theological-Political Fragment" to locate a response to the reactionary, aestheticizing unity of the "novel form" of historical unity. Benjamin certainly accepts Lukács' presentation of the godforsaken world as an irreparable challenge to the possibility of saving universal history as a historically relevant theory in modernity, but Benjamin also endeavors to rescue that aspirational element of history that Lukács cuts loose. For, if universal history is to retain any relevance in modern history, that relevance can only be gauged by the either enduring or diminishing shine of its own aspirational element—what Benjamin will simply refer to as *the idea of happiness* in the profanely historical world. Benjamin, indeed, leaves it to the labors of theory to save such a relationship between the trivialized and irrelevant existence of historical time in the godforsaken world to the idea of history's completion in happiness, namely, an idea of historical universality, such that one should name the operation of that theory a *universal history*.

I. Lukács on the "Novel Form" of History

As Lukács recounts in his 1962 preface to *The Theory of Novel*, he wrote the text between the years of 1914 and 1915, in which time, as the First World War raged across Europe, the hopefulness that once filled modernity evacuated and nothing but an empty shell seemed to survive. In response, Lukács' text intends to expose the ignorance or the naivety ensconcing that kernel of fatefulness he discerns in romanticism—retrospectively drawing a straight line of descent from it to his present—only to awaken now in world that forbids one the opportunity to keep or to feign such innocence in the face of that ripened fatefulness. And, if that fatefulness has its origin in a capitulation to the unreconciled nature that returns in the historical outgrowth

of suffering and the concomitant decay of history's aspirational element, then the romantic identification with the "novel form" of historical unity holds the key to understanding exactly how the romantics in general "strove to embrace the world," to which one might add, *as it is given*, "and this made them into slaves of fate."¹⁹⁸ For, if one is to fall into the bondage of fate in the time of modernity (*Neuzeit*), it must be through some concession to the godforsaken world as the only possible historical world. With that, Lukács recognizes that the romantics deliberately became synonymous with the novel as *the new* representation of life: not only were they (and Friedrich Schlegel most of all) the first to take up the novel as a problem that demands philosophical thinking, but they affirmatively recognized themselves in the novel too, explicitly defining *Romantik* with and through the *Roman*.¹⁹⁹ Operating explicitly in this legacy, *Theory of the Novel* is an unmistakably romantic text not just in the philosophical source and orientation of its problem, but in that Lukács, too, turns to the novel as something both *new* and old—both promising and a repetition of something unresolved—in a state of exasperation and exhaustion with the actual, overwhelmingly violent, historical trajectory of the received philosophical idealism that would purchase the historical unity of its life through the conceptual necessity emerging from the given logic of the present.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁸ Lukács, *Soul and Form*, 73.

¹⁹⁹ TN 41.

²⁰⁰ Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* is a text that begins from the thoroughly abstract, discursive articulation that only a pure concept of the will would entail a free will and then ends with a reading of universal history—or, as Hegel was more fond of calling it with some modicum of honesty, *world history*—that shows the only tenable objectivity of history to be the state. Out of all the irrealities that impose themselves on reality and proceed make claims on it, too, in Hegel's philosophy, the idea of historical universality is not one. In the context of *Philosophy of Right*, world history is nothing other than the concept of antagonism generalized to such a wide extent so as to show that no other objectivity of historical subjectivity could emerge that would countervail the concept of the state without also destroying the concept of freedom, whose locus of autonomous or self-reflecting agency—the republican constitution—preserves the only meaningful reality or consequential aspect of individuals in history, that

Where idealism—for Lukács, specifically with respect to Hegel’s theory of art—finds art to become more “problematic” as society becomes more perfectly rational, Lukács premises the entire project of *Theory of the Novel* on an inverse trajectory: as history has become increasingly burdened under the yoke of irrationality, art—in the modern form of the novel—has retreated into itself for the sake of accomplishing a more coherent and aesthetically complete form. The issue as to how art can attain such a coherent form in a world that itself unambiguously lacks one thus becomes the central theoretical problem of the text. Recalling this question, Lukács states in his 1962 “Preface” that,

the problems of the novel form are here the mirror-image of a world gone *out of joint*. This is why the ‘prose’ of life is here only a symptom, among many others, of the fact that reality no longer constitutes a favourable soil for art; that is why the central problem of the novel is the fact that art has to write off the closed and total forms which stem from a rounded totality of being—that art has nothing more to do with any world of forms that is immanently complete in itself.²⁰¹

Lukács’ apparent allusion to *Hamlet* above is instructive in this instance.²⁰² Here, art, in becoming modern, plays out the very fate of Hamlet himself: since art can no longer find its

is, it defines the possible agency and self-relation of those ‘individuals’ subsisting through and surviving under the sign of a state. (See: G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*. Trans. H.B Nisbet. Ed. Allen W. Wood. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991 (§§341-343).) As a result, it is safe to say that nothing *new* ever happens in history, for Hegel. History has no claim to the new nor would any effort of the philosophy of history attain the power to elucidate something new emerging from the object. World history, on Hegel’s account, is a mere abbreviation of real, historical tensions as unreal, past, ossified traces of incompleteness and positivity in a given concept. The reality of the past is sealed up in the retrospective claim of the concept thought in abstraction from the past, such that the effect, the unreconciled fragmentation of the pastness of the past, now becomes reconciled to the emergent necessity of the present as its result and, therefore, its truth. This is, in effect, the very grounding of the state as the objectivity of history’s slaughter-bench—that which is given or resultant is the truth of the past, since there are no other available means to think *what was* in *what is*.

²⁰¹ TN 17—emphasis added.

²⁰² August Wilhelm Schlegel translates the relevant line from the end of Act I of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, “Die Zeit ist aus den Fugen” (Germany, SPIEGEL ONLINE, Hamburg. “Hamlet. Übersetzt von August Wilhelm von Schlegel von William Shakespeare, Projekt Gutenberg.” Accessed June 20, 2019. <https://gutenberg.spiegel.de/buch/hamlet-ubersetzt-von-august-wilhelm-von-schlegel-5600/2>.); Lukács

positive reception in a world where life and form are identical or, at least, reconcilable, it must take on the burden of a world “out of joint”, that is, it must seek the unlikely reconciliation of life in the face of a world that is as historical as it is unfulfilled by form or, as a result, even where form is harmful to life. In response, the unity at which the novel aims is the bare minimum of a unity of lived experience in the godforsaken world. The unmistakable mark of the godforsaken world thus both mediates and is absorbed into that aesthetic representation of life, since it is only in the godforsaken world that such a bare, plainly historical unity of life—the projected unity of the “novel form”—would possibly give any meaning to life. One could, then, go so far as to say that meaning, or even just the façade of it, appears in the “novel form” only to the extent that lived experience can be unified at all in opposition to the looming threat of fragmentation in the godforsaken world. This unity is alone what stamps out the novel’s lackluster heroes, despite however unimpressive, ridiculous, or even repugnant they might be or act otherwise. Without such a basic unity of lived experience, any meaning in the “novel form” would become wholly imperceptible and inconceivable, regardless of the absence of some consummately meaningful form of the world as a complete, “rounded totality of being.” Nevertheless, no matter how unified, the unity of lived experience found in the “novel form” remains an ineluctably problematic one, because the merely aesthetic form of its representational unity presupposes and is thereby premised on the “writing off” of the historical world of forms as a world no longer capable of offering the possibility of a complete totality of form, in which that unity of life would be reflected and at home or concrete. The world of the “novel form” is, therefore, the abbreviation of a historical world no longer capable of meaning, a world in which life cannot be at home, a godforsaken world.

writes here, also in German, “ein Welt, die aus den Fugen geraten ist” (Georg Lukács, *Theorie des Romans*. München, DE: Luchterhand Literaturverlag, 1971 (11).)

In order to examine the novel in the relief of the uniquely *historical* situation that conditions it—a condition Lukács will outline with his concept of *transcendental homelessness*—Lukács looks to how the novel takes shape in contradistinction to its predecessor, the epic. From the retrospective, explicitly historical standpoint of the novel, the epic has its defining course in the representational narration of an unhistorical, closed, and complete world-totality filled with mythic symbolism and significance, the prime and unambiguous example of which Lukács finds in the Homeric world of ancient Greece. Lukács argues that the aesthetic form or genre of the epic, to which he will join the aims and justification of classical tragedy too, belongs exclusively to those “integrated civilizations” that were still able to live in a “complete correspondence between the subject’s *a priori* needs, his metaphysical sufferings, which provided the impulse for creation, and the pre-[e]stablished, eternal locus of the form with which the completed work coincides.”²⁰³ The epic thus tells of the trials and tribulations—the sufferings—through which life in the visage of its individual instances or, in a loose sense, its ‘agents’, immanently achieve reconciliation with a meaningful *form*, specifically in Lukács’ sense of *a rounded totality of being*, that is, a form beyond a merely aesthetic one. This form is the mythic essence of a closed or complete totality of existence, that which the novel, conversely, “writes off,” as Lukács suggested above.

Tragedy, like epic, also lives in this same world where there is an explicit, pre-judged, pre-established identity between the possible meaning of an agent’s action and the form of the world, but that identity and its reconciliation appears out of the reach for some particular and outstanding agents, who incidentally become tragically blameworthy inasmuch as they stand in error or perpetuate some criminal error. The need for tragedy, instead of epic, belongs to those

²⁰³ TN 40.

times of “crisis,” according to Lukács, wherein that identity from which artistic expression leaps forward suddenly appears troubled or is thrown into error on the side of life and its particular agents, such that some atonement by means of a violence against life is called for on behalf of the given rightfulness of that pre-judged form sanctioned from eternity that identifies the meaning of subjectivity inside the mythic totality of existence.²⁰⁴ Nowhere among the very best examples of epic and tragedy from the ancient Greeks—e.g., *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Oresteia*, *Oedipus Rex*, *The Bacchae*, and the *Medea* of Euripides—do we witness a redemption of suffering or imperiled life for the sake of life alone. Instead, the various achievements or reconciliations illustrated among all those artworks take their meaning from and under the aegis of that unimpeachable mythic totality in which life gains appearance and must thereby accept its all-encompassing, fateful forces and, as a result, whatever demands it places on life.

Neither in epic (where life does immanently achieve or become the essence of its transcendental locus) nor in tragedy (where life falls short as blameworthy life and must atone vis-à-vis the quasi-transcendence of the essence of its transcendental locus) do we glimpse anything that would approximate the problem of the godforsaken world. Life might fall into error with respect to that unfailing and internally complete correspondence between the meaning of the subject’s “a priori needs”—i.e., the conceptual coordinates through which subjectivity clarifies itself to itself—and the mythic totality of existence as a totality of form, but such errors become, in turn, the source and inspiration for these divergent artistic expressions of epic and tragedy, which ultimately return life home to the consummate, mythically closed world of its forms. Here, we witness an uncreated, mythically fixed harmony of both created and natural forms, that is, of the first and the second natures. Though the great woes of the epic heroes—

²⁰⁴ TN 35.

and this holds just as true for the heroes of classical tragedy as well—are always irreversible and tragically irreparable, they also become palpably meaningful when objectified in the work beyond the aesthetic fact of the representational unity of the heroes’ lives, such that, as Lukács notes, the *Iliad* requires no formal beginning or end to tell us the tale of Achilles and his acceptance of his fateful fame.²⁰⁵ So, too, in tragedy, reconciliation comes at a violent cost to life, but it comes nonetheless. The meaningfulness of the hero’s life takes up permanent residence and is at home in an internally reconciled, harmonious cosmos. The mythic totality and complete form of the world among such “integrated civilizations” that would still allow epics, despite the litany of either great feats or great crimes possibly committed in life under that form, is not yet itself problematic, damaged, or wrong—for that is the provenance of the novel and the “transcendental homelessness” it endures in the godforsaken world.

So much of Lukács’ analysis throughout *Theory of the Novel*, it must be admitted, relies on a philosophical approach that the author himself did not find the time to elucidate in the speedy, original publication of that text (and was of no interest at the time of its republication).²⁰⁶ Nonetheless, Lukács will state without any obscurity that his historico-philosophical task is to interpret what transpired in the shape of the world between Dante, on the one hand, and Shakespeare or Cervantes, on the other, such that the writing of an epic was so evidently out of

²⁰⁵ TN 67.

²⁰⁶ In a brief review of the 1920 republication of Lukács’ text spearheaded by Ernst Cassirer, Siegfried Kracauer suggests that the one drawback of Lukács’ text and the source of its “distortions” in the typology of the novel—Kracauer suggests a gross overestimation of Dostoevsky’s place as the peak of the formal execution of the novel—result from the not yet clarified “metaphysics” behind the historical account of transcendental forms (See: Siegfried Kracauer, “Theorie des Romans.” Berlin, DE: *Die Weltbühne*, v. 17: 2, 1921 (pp. 229-230).). That metaphysical apparatus to which Kracauer refers was clearly one that Lukács adopted from Georg Simmel, whose classes Kracauer and Lukács (conveyed through his friend, Ernst Bloch) attended together in Berlin. For a brief yet suggestive discussion of Simmel’s influence on Lukács, see: Bernstein, *Philosophy of the Novel*, 77-81.

the question for those latter authors, while it was still very much so an extant possibility for Dante.²⁰⁷ Lukács is certainly convinced beyond all doubt that modernity does not admit the writing of epics, that the two are, indeed, mutually exclusive. Consequently, the novel is left to stand in its place both as the inheritance of its artistic imperative and as a terminal problem: to unify life in its representations, but, *now*, in a world bereft of any such complete, harmonious totality that consummately unites the created, historical world of social forms with the uncreated world of nature. In his analysis of this problem, Lukács entirely separates the *what it is* question of the “novel form”—the interrogation of the structure of its imperative to unify life—from the questions of *why* the epic’s relationship to its “transcendental locus” of a complete and harmonious world totality ultimately broke down. That is, to no extent does *Theory of the Novel* provide or investigate an exhaustive genealogical account of the genre of the “novel form” or, much less, its historical and formal condition of transcendental homelessness. Nonetheless, as indicated above, Lukács does locate resources in discussing the epic and tragedy to aid a typological description and specification of the “novel form” on the basis of its definitively *historical* condition, yet those merely negative comparisons—comparisons, as it were, not mediated by some third to which the two objects are internally related in some distinct fashion—are by no means to be exaggerated into an account of a *genesis* or some precise historical transition in itself. *Theory of the Novel*, rather, offers only a hermeneutic mapping of that transition’s effects to the extent that those effects gather and consolidate in the “novel form” itself. As previously stated, Lukács explains his analysis of the epic as one made singularly possible by the standpoint of the “novel form” of the historical world in which the success of an epic has lost all purchase on life, becoming irrelevant, despite the lasting imprint of its imperative to unify life, hence the aim of the “novel form” to comprise an individual

²⁰⁷ TN 54, 68.

representation of lived experience. In this way, the well-known concept of “transcendental homelessness” that Lukács employs to diagnose the specificity of the “novel form” can initially be defined on the basis of the forgoing typological discussion as, simply, *not epic*, such that it entails the irretrievable loss of a transcendental locus or home wherein life’s totality is positively articulable and on the basis of which artistic representations of life would have their meaning welcome and sheltered in the world beyond the work.

Lukács’ concept of the *transcendental home* or *locus* that belongs to specific genres and inheres among the characteristic works therein is the historicizing principle on which his periodization of particular works is grounded. But the effect of this concept also elevates the labor of periodization from merely historicist or relativist coordinates to conceptually specific and normative ones, that is, the transcendental locus tells of the conditions for the possibility of the meaning of discrete works with regard to the world they presuppose and the socially charged symbols that they inhabit and must make use. That the novel belongs to a condition of “transcendental homeless” means some breakdown in the meaningfulness or relevance of the transcendental locus or form has occurred vis-à-vis life: “It means the old parallelism of the transcendental structure of the form-giving subject and the world of created forms has been destroyed, and the ultimate basis of artistic creation has become homeless.”²⁰⁸ Lukács appears to intend this initial description of the novel’s historical condition to ring in sharp contradiction with his earlier general definition of the “transcendental locus” as that which lends determination to “every impulse which springs from the innermost depths [and] is coordinated with a form that it is ignorant of, but that has been assigned to it from eternity and that must envelop it in

²⁰⁸ TN 40-1.

liberating symbols.”²⁰⁹ The transcendental locus pertains to the issue of drawing a *center-point* around which a reconciling identity between inner and outside would unfold. It speaks to the innermost, hidden depths of subjectivity, that part of it that would seem un-derivable from anything except itself, that spontaneous element first by nature *inside* and perhaps the last to emerge in an examination of experience, namely, the soul as the fountain of thought. It is only the “transcendental home” that arrives to tell of the soul’s unbreakable connection with that which is *outside* it. It is, therefore, only because soul, the inner fountain of thought, and the outside historical world of forms are fundamentally and irreducibly distinct that such a structuring and reconciling center-point of a “transcendental locus” attains an unmatched, critical philosophical importance in Lukács’ analysis. Insofar as the transcendental locus or form captures this totality of forms both inner and outer, it also retains an element of spontaneity that prevents its unifying act of “form-giving” from being reduced to a merely dominating or arbitrarily imposing itself. In other words, the transcendental locus is that which gives every concept belonging to a distinct configuration of subjectivity an authoritative place out in the material, historical world, such that the historical (self-)explication of subjectivity becomes the authorship of that world. It is that which gives form to life, quite literally, and thereby makes life’s perpetual coming to be and passing away recognizable and meaningful. A breakdown here must, then, entail one in life too. For, what could become of any supposed aspirational element in life when that form loses the spontaneity of its form-giving power, such that form is left wanting, closed to life, and life thereby appears damaged?

The fundamental problem of transcendental homelessness boils down to the peculiar disarticulation or *abstraction* of form from life that it suggests once the spontaneous, mutually

²⁰⁹ TN 29-30.

determining relation of “form-giving” between form and life collapses. For, these two, form and life, would certainly seem quite inseparable, that is, if we are not going to proceed to appeal to them simply as two empty abstractions between which hangs the object of history in the balance, aloof and doubly abstract. Nevertheless, this is exactly the problem of abstraction that belongs to the very core of the “novel form,” namely, that the abstraction is no longer merely occurring in the thought of one element separate from the other, but that this *separation* actually and materially takes root in experience. As Lukács argues throughout *Theory of the Novel*, one cannot account for this precarious and seemingly unjustifiable abstraction contained in the “novel form” regarding life’s historical unity without implicating the presupposed, necessary disarticulation of form that surrounds it, such that:

the elements of the novel are, in the Hegelian sense, entirely abstract; abstract, the nostalgia of the characters for utopian perfection, a nostalgia that feels itself and its desires to be the only true reality; abstract, the existence of social structures based only upon their factual presence and their sheer ability to continue; abstract, finally, the form-giving intention which, instead of surmounting the distance between these two abstract groups of elements, allows it to subsist, which does not even attempt to surmount it but renders it sensuous as the lived experience of the novel’s characters, uses it as a means of connecting the two groups and so turns it into an instrument of composition.²¹⁰

What is essential about this diagnosis of the novel’s affliction with abstraction all the way down is that the nature of each element can only exist as such through its mutual dependence on the distance that separates it from every other element and thereby jettisons them all into abstraction. The nostalgia of the novel’s individual characters ushers them into the abstraction of their own utopian longing: they are “seekers” adrift, who long to return to a time of belonging to the outside world, to overcome their exile into and abandonment in a godforsaken historical world

²¹⁰ TN 70-1.

without the shelter of such a transcendental home.²¹¹ As they play out this utopian path of searching for the lost unity of life—to whatever extents the characters are compelled or actively come by themselves to regard it as a utopian problem is secondary—they must confront the “peak of absurdity” that reveals the ultimate consequence of the godforsaken world, namely, “the futility of genuine and profound human aspirations.”²¹² For example, Goethe’s first two novels, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, come together as a pair of divergent efforts to show two opposite realizations of one and the same futility that Lukács describes as exemplary: Werther, in his road from overwhelming enthusiasm to suicide, and Wilhelm, in his development (*Bildung*) through an aesthetic education made possible only by his disillusioned withdrawal from the *Bürgerlicheswelt*. For Lukács, there is no mistaking the life or death consequences that he finds entrenched in the novel’s forced recognition of the futility or rejection of any ‘genuinely human’, utopian aspirations on the part of the novel’s characters. Indeed, what else could such a utopian path entail for the fragmented, lived experience of those individuals seeking an idealized unity of life, if not the bitter recollection at some decisive point that the historical world of social forms has become an irreversibly godforsaken one? Such fragmented social forms are but the “long-dead interiors” of past, objectified life that now appear as bleak and unpromising as a *charnel house*, to which Lukács compares them from the

²¹¹ The word nostalgia and its German translation, *Heimweh*, both already and evidently contain the etymological clue of this utopian kernel, to which Lukács appeals. Nostalgia derives from the ancient Greek of the “pain” or “distress” (ἄλγος) one is afflicted with when wishing for and wanting a “homecoming” or “the return home” (νόστος). And, so too is *Heim-weh* an expression of the woe or distress that one feels in the absence of one’s home. The longing to return home in the explicit absence of one, however, thrusts one into a *utopian* situation of a search for a place that is good and it is good because it is nowhere or no part of the *here*, which, in this case, that “here” is the godforsaken world (thus the irony behind the Latinate single transliteration of the two, homonymous Greek prefixes into one meaning: *eu* (good or well faring) + *topos* and *ou* (no/not) + *topos* = utopia).

²¹² TN 60.

standpoint of the unredeemed life left wanting in the “novel form.”²¹³ The godforsaken world is a world predicated by the despondent obsolescence of forms in general and the decay of the life that would risk taking up a residence in those forms.

This inheritance of a social world of objectified, lifeless forms from the past haunts the novel, and in so doing defines or mediates its limits too. Lukács famously names the collapse of this historical reception of the past into the present as the advent of a “second nature” that has interrupted and eroded any internal connection from history to (first) nature.²¹⁴ This “second nature” both speaks to what is missing from the “novel form” and it simultaneously exposes any hope to return to those past homes to be as desolate as the dead remnants and anonymous bones that fill the dilapidated interiors of each “charnel house.” *Second nature* thus names the perverting, counter-intuitive moment of an un-received and un-digestible past, supplanting and becoming ossified nature in a historically specific configuration of the present that is proper to modernity alone. This second nature, then, involves the historical persistence of an inexorably unreconciled nature at the heart of the “novel form.” Both modernity’s and the novel’s reactionary and often fetishizing fixation on the future as a ‘wound’ in the lived experience of the present would thus, on Lukács’ reading, be standing-in for the becoming-nature of an unreconciled past that throws one forward, fleeing into the utopian future to escape the presently non-existent chance for any reconciliation of the given historical tensions animating life. Second nature is the unreconciled history, the frustrated form, and, by extension, the deciding fate of the possibility for the “novel form.” Therefore, second nature cannot analytically be separated from the effort to specify the undigested past in relation to the given, lived experience demanding

²¹³ TN 64.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

unity in the “novel form,” but, in the aesthetic practice of the novel itself, it is exactly what must be relegated to mere scenery, seemingly inconsequential obstacles or ornaments, and all but absent. As a result, turning from that conditioning of the “novel form” amidst its transcendental homelessness to the perceived aim of the novel’s authorship or “form-giving” in the face of the godforsaken world of this second nature, Lukács insists that the most the novelist can do to bestow representational unity on life is to render that abstract and fragmenting lived experience “sensuous,” i.e., to *aestheticize* the unity of the life of utopian longing precisely where it materially and only apparently arbitrarily lacks in the empirical recounting of and striving for life’s unity.

This aestheticization of life’s unity is, as Lukács says above, the principal “instrument of composition” in the “novel form,” operating with only an unreflective urgency to effect an immediate, representational unity of lived experience.²¹⁵ It supplies the normative directive for the novelist’s form-giving in place of some reference to an actual, concrete, historical form or that form’s principles. It is for this reason exactly that Lukács likens the empty objectivity of the novel’s aestheticized form to “a glass wall against which men beat in vain, like bees against a window, incapable of breaking through, incapable of understanding the way is barred.”²¹⁶ What

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ TN 90. Lukács uses this illustration to argue that the novelist is forced into a position of irony, insofar as the novelist implicitly knows that this aestheticized form of unity is cut off from or “writes off” the historical world that conditions its abstract, utopian search for the unity of lived experience. The novelist, in giving representational, aesthetic form to this problem can, at best, only *suggest* or *gesture* at the historically conditioned impasse itself, which refuses explanation in aesthetic terms, such that the work remains all too transparent a lens through which the godforsaken world could appear as the presupposed problem of the novel. J.M. Bernstein falls into a trap of, perhaps, overestimating the critical contribution of the novelist in Lukács’ account. He tends to elide the analytic difference between the problem of aestheticization as the uncompromising, unhelpful limit on any critical significance of writing novels in general and Lukács’ *historical explanation* of the problem of abstraction that defines the specificity of the “novel form.” The reason for Bernstein’s overestimation of the novelist is, therefore, likely stimulated by his coupling of those two analytically distinct issues in one and the same problem of “ideology,” which he

except for the godforsaken world itself could possibly account for this regressive, if not reactionary, tendency in the “novel form” to repeat its very own abstraction from historical unity as the shape of life’s unity—and so too must this not be the case with all other repetitions of this aestheticizing unity where the unity of form or universality appears imperceptible among given historical phenomena?

Throughout *Theory of the Novel*, we see Lukács repeatedly emphasize and trace all defining problems of the “novel form” back to its central, utopian tendency that romantically drives toward capturing a unity of life with complete indifference or, at least, resignation to the lack of any implicit relationship to a formal account of totality. This utopian drive typifies the novel’s fascination to speak directly to life itself in the immediacy of its lived experience, such that all novels have their formal origin in that deliberate “writing off” of the already, historically bankrupt aspiration for any universality in an account of the historical world of forms. It is this collapse of any possible relationship between aesthetic form and a totality of historical forms that indelibly marks the work of art’s *autonomy*, or, the socially self-referential abstraction of aesthetic form. Yet, despite that collapse, one should not presume that novels themselves, as the aesthetic representations or works of this “novel form,” would be wanting in *aesthetic* form. In fact, the opposite appears to be the case: with the leap into socially self-referential abstraction, artworks attain the occasion for a more coherent and internally complete form, even if they still lack a single meaningful or consequential relation to all else outside them. In this very way, all novels strive to make good on the same indefatigably utopian and hopelessly fractured tendency localized in their aesthetic form—there, the aesthetic tendency concentrates into an individual

understands the novelist to be deliberately exposing as the abstract totality of life (see Bernstein, *Philosophy of the Novel*, 91). Lukács, on the contrary, does not necessitate such insight from the person of the novelist as some ironizing artificer of life’s unity, but, rather, interprets that general element of irony in the aestheticization of form as a defining symptom in the problem of the “novel form” itself.

imperative: to unify life alone and to seek life's redemption in that utopian unity. By mutually implicating the mimesis of life that is proper to art in general and the specifically aestheticized, form-giving power that novels exercise over life, that imperative *to unify life itself* stands as the organizing imperative of art's autonomy in the "novel form," which only emerges through its peculiar historical condition of the godforsaken world. As a result, it is only the philosophy of history that can provide an adequate understanding of *why* (transcendental homelessness) and *how* (aestheticization in the context of art's autonomy) the "novel form" misfires or necessarily fails at its extra-aesthetic—i.e., social—end (saving life from the clutches of second nature), while it does proceed to satisfy all its straightforwardly aesthetic ends. If the "novel form" were able to suggest anything beyond its fateful, aestheticized attempt to redeem life's lost unity—that is, if the novel were able to muster a positive relationship to that which stands in need of redemption in life—we would necessarily be discussing a different historical form of the world and not the present, godforsaken one, for Lukács.

Nonetheless, novels, as genuine works of art, do give artistic expression to the modern sentimentality for the lost, ideal epic unity of life, which they accomplish directly through a mimesis of life as it appears. The novel raises life out of its fragmentation amidst second nature, and its aimless yet ardent utopian seeking therein, into an aesthetic unity of the truly fragmented, lived experience of the individual. This mimetically rendered representational unity of lived experience, in turn, offers the decisive criteria for why bad novels read as mere gossip about life stories and why good novels preserve the unity sealed in the lives of unforgettable individuals—a unity which is not itself perceptible or given to experience in the lives of individuals when they appear without relevance or relation to any given historical form. That is, the only unity of life that the "novel form" can attain remains at the level of a *merely* "biographical" representation,

such that novels fare well when they mimetically preserve the unity of lived experience as artistic expression of life's ardent, utopian seeking vis-à-vis its transcendental homelessness.²¹⁷ For, if the novel's unity is only that of its own objectified, aimless striving, then the novel's heroes must become "seekers" without any organizing, categorical search or, at least, only a futile, utopian one—and it is this aesthetic element of biography alone that gives structure to the novel's representational, abstractive unity.²¹⁸ Lukács thus understands the biographical model of novels as the *one-dimensional unity of life that stands-in for life's unity with form*. Therefore, just as much as the fragmented and desolate historical world of forms is reduced to the "long dead" and seemingly irrelevant scenery of *second nature* from which the "novel form" springs into action, so too are the individual, discrete characters reduced to mere objectifications of the "form-determining intention" of the novel's authorship, which knows no home in the outside, historical world. All the gaps and fragmentation of the historical world of Lukács' *second nature* do not simply disappear at the mere aestheticizing wave of the novelist's hand, even if displaced as scenery. The rents and gaps pervading that seemingly irrelevant scenery once known as the historical world make their return, in the last analysis, in the necessarily incomplete unity of the biographical representation of life, that is, once it abruptly cuts off and is arbitrarily ended with an unfulfilled death. That death is "unfulfilled" as a result of the abstractive, aestheticized unity of the "novel form" itself, since that life does not lead into anything other than itself and evidences that "the way is barred" for any return to be at home in the historical world of forms. Death thus offers the Archimedean point from which the novel mimetically and aesthetically

²¹⁷ TN 77.

²¹⁸ TN 60. Of course, the exemplar of such a "seeker" who touches the very core of the "novel form" and the constant dissonance of its ideal unity of life with the long dead, hopeless historical world of second nature is emblematically captured in the figure of Don Quixote, as Lukács himself subsequently suggests (TN 104).

reconstructs life's unity, but it is also the 'proof,' so to speak, of the finality the fate with which the "novel form" seals itself up and sacrifices any connection to the *outside* world. In the face of death, above all, the idealized, aesthetic unity of the "novel form" exposes itself as an abstract utopia, that is, as "the epic of the godforsaken world (*gottverlassene Welt*)."²¹⁹

As Lukács turns from the first part of the text where he primarily keeps his attention on providing the typological specification of the "novel form", he initiates the move into the second part by diving into analyses of the great novels from this modern aesthetic tradition. There, he draws and circles around an analogy of the legacy of "abstract idealism" that falls into a *romanticism of disillusionment* to the legacy of the novel's increasingly unstable introjection of historical unity into the biographical aestheticization of life's unity. The analogy, for Lukács, is sustained on the shared vanishing of a fixed center-point in the transcendental locus, such that the outside world of senseless, second nature becomes a recurrent threat of fragmentation to both the aestheticized unity of life in the biography of the novel's 'seekers' and also the conceptual unity that subjectivity gives to nature that is seemingly other than nature:

a threat arises only when the outside world is no longer adapted to the individual's ideas and the ideas become subjective facts—ideals—of his soul. The positing of ideas as unrealizable and, in the empirical sense, as unreal, i.e. their transformation into ideals, destroys the immediate problem-free organic nature of the individual. Individuality then becomes an aim unto itself because it finds within itself everything that is essential to it.²²⁰

The individuality that becomes an aim apart from the world and known only to itself as such is precisely the logical terminus of the aestheticizing, biographical model of life's unity in the "novel form." It is, however, precisely this closing up into itself as an abstract unity that allows

²¹⁹ TN 88—modified trans.

²²⁰ TN 78.

the novel to achieve a complete form where one lacks materially, i.e., socially and historically—for, that withdrawal into itself is also why second nature can only appear in novels as ornament or inert obstacle, that is, scenery, vis-à-vis life’s abstractive unity. As a result, the threat of the outside world is at once both *real* and a projection on the part of the “novel form.” In the artistic effort of the novelist, the outside world appears through a problem of repetition: a repetition of the looming *threat* of fateful fragmentation and its incommensurable, if not anonymous, disintegration that shadows all of life’s becoming and the utopian search therein to unfold unity. Yet, that threat can only appear as such after the “writing off” of any explicitly effective, conditioning relation of totality. This is the moment in novels that Lukács speaks of as a “narrowing of the soul,” since it involves the transaction or substitution of ideals for ideas: the forgetting and relinquishing of *any distance* between ideal and idea “concludes that the idea, because it should be, necessarily must be, and, because reality does not satisfy this *a priori* demand, thinks that reality is bewitched by evil demons and that the spell can only be broken and reality can be redeemed either by finding a magic password or by courageously fighting the evil forces.”²²¹ It is at this impasse, guarded by fateful demons and spells stronger than and even supplanting nature itself, that the ideal unity of life’s content (history, *Geschichte*) should become a self-sufficient or self-redeeming one lifted into an internally coherent, closed subjectivity, but, as it were, all of the sudden, the idea that would smoothly transport that abstraction—‘the objectivity of subjectivity’—into a residence in the outside world either absconds or crumbles, and with that so, too, the proper locus of the hopefulness for life’s unity to be at home in the outside, historical world.

²²¹ TN 97.

On the one hand, the culmination of Lukács' critique of the "novel form" might appear to trace a rather straightforward Hegelian critique of Kantian philosophy—a parallel that Lukács seems to suggest with his repeated analogy between "abstract idealism" and the "novel form." Following the often recited line from the 1962 "Preface" where Lukács notes that *Theory of the Novel* marked his transition from Kantian to Hegelian philosophical commitments, one could certainly imagine an application of Hegel's phenomenological analysis of consciousness latching onto an echo of the "unhappy consciousness" embedded in the "novel form," in which case Hegel's concept of spirit would emerge as a rationally hopeful answer for the lost unity of inner and outer that plagues the novel's reactionary aestheticization of that recurrent gap. Yet, on the other hand, Lukács does not go quite so far as to imply that Kant himself is in any way responsible for the problem of the novel's apparent "abstract idealism." For, surely, Kant himself did not forget or elide the distance between *ideal* and *idea*, even if his championing of the systematic application of the ideas as regulative ideals does often appear to eclipse the thought of the ideas as anything other than ideals for the critical organization of our cognition. The legitimate use of the ideas as regulative ideals is a long and hard fought battle of antinomy in the first *Critique* that is won only after the critical inventory of any cognitive, theoretical objects that might offer a ground for the unity of cognition, but also exceeds the limits of possible experience. Furthermore, as noted at the start of this chapter, one place where we do witness Kant unambiguously insisting on that distance between idea and ideal—thereby not indexing the significance or relevance of the ideas to their exclusively subjective use as ideals—is in his effort to preserve the idea of historical universality in the *Universal History* essay.

Without the appeal to the idea as an idea of a complete form of the outer, historical world, the very thought of universality "crumbles like dry clay at the first contact" and any hope

for a theory of history vanishes.²²² The “novel form” in its utopian longing, its reactionary aestheticization of the unity of lived experience where it materially lacks, and its fateful repetitions of all the rents and fragmentation of the historical world that keep its structure of abstraction under duress—all this points back to the same vanishing of any center-point that the transcendental locus should offer between inner and outer, thus revealing the stamp of the godforsaken world. One way to diagnose this complex pathology of the “novel form” is to bring into focus the abasement of any sense of a *rational hope* for the complete reconciliation of life’s diverse, abstractive strivings vis-à-vis the second nature that shadows them, tethered in each one’s raucous or incongruous rising and the abbreviating downfall of an unfulfilled death to follow. As a result, Lukács’ critique of the “novel form” of historical unity actually seems to mirror Kant’s own critical remarks against it in the *Universal History* essay on a most important point, namely, the anti-utopian invective that intends to rescue a specifically rational sense of hope, which the idea of historical universality would hold together. As Kant notes in the last thesis of the *Universal History* essay, if we were “to praise the splendor and wisdom of creation in the nonrational realm of nature,” yet fail to retrieve any rational sense of completeness in human history, then the historical world would have to remain a “ceaseless objection” against one’s hope for redemption in another world, since the presumed hopefulness of the created world would be undermined by the godforsakenness of the historical one.²²³ In other words, without the rescue of any rational sense of hope, i.e., the aspirational element of completeness that the

²²² TN 90.

²²³ The full passage, in the form of a suggestive rhetorical question on Kant’s part, runs as follows: “For what does it help to praise the splendor and wisdom of creation in the nonrational realm of nature, and to recommend it to our consideration, if that part of the great showplace of the highest wisdom that contains the end of all this – the history of humankind – is to remain a ceaseless objection against it, the prospect of which necessitates our turning our eyes away from it in disgust and, in despair of ever encountering a completed rational aim in it, to hope for the latter only in another world?” (IUH 119/AA 8: 30).

idea presents vis-à-vis the plainly historical world, history is fated to repeat its origin in unreconciled nature. It is, therefore, disconcerting that Lukács, unlike Kant, finds no philosophical resources in *Theory of the Novel* to rescue such an aspirational element inhering in and proper to the object of history itself.

Lukács, staying strictly within the specifically interpretive parameters of his approach to the problem of *Theory of the Novel*, simply leaves his evaluation of the degree and kind of hopefulness in the “novel form” thus: “freedom—the constitutive relation to redemption—remains inexpressible.”²²⁴ If the hope that the “novel form” tries to preserve is not the rational sense of hope indicated above by Kant, but simply a utopian hope, that is because it sacrifices the possibility for any unity of life with the form of its conditioning in order to ascertain a merely empirical unity—a fragment—of lived experience through the form-giving technique of the novelist. The novelist operates always in the exclusion of any *real* freedom beyond the aestheticizing, form-giving one, since the historical forms *out there* are always too rigid and sharply edged fragments that would dominate and do violence to life’s unity as its own, i.e., the *novel* (new) ‘form’. So, the utopian kernel of that “novel form” ultimately shows itself in this reactionary urge for life’s unity as a ‘freedom from’ the dictates of form. It is there that irrationality abounds, even if those fragmented, historical forms are nonetheless truly inimical to the present unfolding of life. The freedom that then remains inexpressible in the “novel form” is the freedom to access one’s conditions, to take them back into life, to redeem life in the face of them, and, thereby, even if only slightly, to alter them.

Between Lukács and Kant there is, perhaps, a common, implicit understanding of a need for the idea to retain its independence as a fully-fledged idea and not to be relegated to an

²²⁴ TN 91.

“ideal,” empirically unreal, status. This independence is so desperately needed because it alone affords the idea the power to rescue and to shelter the unreconciled, imperiled, historical *appearances* of life’s incompleteness in the godforsaken world. The “novel form” simply cannot express such a thought as it must always “write off” any conditioning relationship to totality and thereby already presuppose the irreversibly tattered and unredeemably fractured forms of the godforsaken, historical world, but precisely in order to develop what it takes to be *novel* or new there, namely, the creaturely unity of mere life absent life’s unity under a complete form. Although, that is not to say that the “novel form” is fictitious just because it is utopian; rather, it is, indeed, an adequate and artistic mimesis of its own, very real set of conditions in the godforsaken historical world. Nevertheless, the unity of life in the “novel form” cannot overcome that condition that remains external to it, the very impossibility pervading the godforsaken world—a fate to which it repeatedly must capitulate and therewith submit to the unreconciled, fragmenting second nature of an unreceived and undigested past that returns to disrupt the novel’s false continuity of past and present, specifically in the biographical representation of life. This danger, here, is what Lukács—and Kant would also agree—means to identify as the loss of any experience of “transcendental space,” specifically the space or distance set between idea and ideal, as an experience of a “reality.”²²⁵ Without such an experience, it is unclear that the idea has any content or meaning beyond its cognitive function as an ideal, and it is clear that no such experience is afforded in the “novel form,” for Lukács.

To recover the (empirical) reality of that distance, the independence of the idea from the question of the ideal ‘objectivity of subjectivity’, requires some kind of mirroring act to reflect the idea’s shine as a not-yet existing transcendental locus. And, although the idea could only and

²²⁵ TN 97.

at most be thought as such a not-yet locus, its shine would still suggest an intellectual medium for the presentation of history's aspirational content, a context holding it all together *outside* in a moment of simultaneity and arrest, through which the contemplation of the idea raises the not-yet existing object of historical universality from mere hopefulness to an intellectual or quasi metaphysical experience of the given, empirical reality. As Adorno articulates it, such a notion of "metaphysical experience" could be said to describe this act of contemplating the idea's aspirational content:

Happiness (*Glück*), the only part of metaphysical experience that is more than impotent longing, gives us the inside of objects as something abstracted from objects. Whoever enjoys this sort of experience naïvely—as though clasping one's hands on what it suggests—succumbs to the conditions of the empirical world that one wants to transcend, though they alone furnish one the possibility of transcending.²²⁶

That the idea to which Adorno refers is an idea of happiness and not some empty, ineffable, romantic idea of the absolute as such, or life's mere unity, indicates that content matters here. Happiness (*Glück*) names that as yet intangible, reconciled condition in which the thought of the inner unity and essence of objects—the outer, historical appearances—would not be comprehensible at the expense of their abstraction, but that inner unity (of life) would appear in the reality of those appearances through their manifest connection to the idea. In contemplating the idea of happiness, one must find or present the aspirational content proper to it; for, without that, this intellectual, metaphysical experience would utterly sink from the horizon of possibility, such that universality would once more fall irretrievably mute and inexpressible under the cover of the godforsaken world. The idea of happiness as the idea of historical universality, a coupling which Kant himself avowed, calls for that very same redemption that, according to Lukács, the "novel form" left "inexpressible"—that exact tension traces the experience to which Adorno

²²⁶ ND 374—modified trans.

refers as metaphysical. The exigency for redemption, experienced in the rising of the empirical to a near- or quasi-metaphysical reality of that which lies beyond experience—namely, the idea—cannot be thought or experienced in separation from the empirical reality of the object, but it is also clear that the empirical cannot alone offer, save, or preserve such a possibility left to the devices of fragmentation in the godforsaken world.

Metaphysical experience is the experience of the need for redemption and the withdrawal—not the absence, though—of that which would make it possible. In other words, metaphysical experience suggests the justification of redeeming the aspirational element proper to the object, namely, the fulfillment of historical universality, which experience alone cannot justify, even if experience does provide the resources for its inference. The rescue of the very possibility for such redemption, therefore, is the *responsibility* and the task of theory: the theorization of such a not-yet existing object like historical universality, i.e., the idea of happiness. Metaphysical experience thus calls for and puts theory under its charge, which should, in response, save and justify the messianic possibility that only implicitly emerges in metaphysical experience as a real, existing possibility. In such a philosophical effort, the contemplation of the idea through its semblance—that which is beyond but not unrelated to experience—follows the threads of the idea’s shine irradiating from the rising of the empirical borne out in theory.

II. The Problem of Redemption in a Godforsaken, Historical World

Throughout Lukács’ analysis of the “novel form” of life’s unity in the godforsaken world, we witness a demotion, as it were, of the question of redemption. No longer can we

straightforwardly ask *how* or by what means or at what cost is it possible, such as the question might appear, for Lukács, in a historical context where tragedy would still emerge as an extant possibility. In the context of modernity, however, defined as it is at once by the newness promised in the “novel form” of life’s unity and the second nature of its godforsaken world—a situation that dispenses with the necessary conditions for tragedy’s conciliatory sway over life and form—one must first ask, not *how*, but *if* redemption is even possible.²²⁷ In the terms from Lukács’ analysis, one should ask: what could redemption even mean when form and life are as disarticulated as they are in the condition of transcendental homelessness or, what amounts to the same, the godforsaken world?

Such a question stands at the center of Walter Benjamin’s text known as the “Theological-Political Fragment.”²²⁸ For, there, Benjamin probes the question of redemption as

²²⁷ This position on the historico-philosophical limitations or demarcation of tragedy is an argument that Lukács first outlines in an early essay from *Soul and Form*, “The Metaphysics of Tragedy,” and that he repeats in *Theory of the Novel* (see: *Soul and Form*, 175-198). Benjamin himself later appeals to that essay throughout the first part of his *Trauerspiel* study, aptly titled “*Trauerspiel und Tragödie*.” There, Benjamin makes a Lukácsian argument—citing the above essay six times—about the emergence of the aesthetic form of the *Trauerspiel* in the context of the historico-philosophical absence for the possibility of tragedy (see: Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Trans. John Osborne. New York, NY: Verso, 2009.).

²²⁸ This text, untitled and unpublished in Benjamin’s lifetime, posthumously became known under the now common title of the “Theological-Political Fragment.” There is a rather serious debate about its origin and the date of this text. In 1955, Adorno recalled that Benjamin had read this piece aloud in their last meeting in Italy in 1937, while Scholem identifies the piece in 1970 as one that belonged to Benjamin’s preparatory materials for Benjamin’s 1921 essay, *Zur Kritik der Gewalt*. Scholem’s position, which previously had no substantiating evidence beyond Scholem’s own insistence, has been strengthened by the examination of the kind of stationery on which the fragment itself is written—this paper was commonly found among Benjamin’s manuscripts from Berlin in that early phase of his work (prior to the publication of the *Trauerspiel* book) and is not found in his later period manuscripts (of Adorno’s dating) when Benjamin was working predominantly in Paris (see: Eric Jacobson, “Understanding Walter Benjamin’s Theological-Political Fragment.” *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, 8:3, 2001 (pp. 209).). While this issue of the date of authorship does not affect the reading and interpretation here, it has admittedly informed and been at the center of debates about the possible meaning of redemption in the fragment itself for those readers who find some major break between Benjamin’s supposedly early “theological” phase and a later “Marxist” one (c.f.: Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994 (107-8); Howard Eiland and Michael W.

an issue of articulating the relationship between the object of history and the sphere of divine perfection—what Benjamin will predominately refer to as the Kingdom of God or, simply, the messianic (*das Messianische*). Benjamin’s fragment consists of only two paragraphs, the sharp divide between which suggests two *mutually exclusive* configurations of that relationship between history and the messianic, that is, two opposed configurations of redemption itself. And the reason these paragraphs would deserve the designation of *mutually exclusive* results from the overt presence of a messiah—literally, the “anointed one”—in the first paragraph and the rather conspicuous absence of any such messiah or “anointed one” in the second.²²⁹ While Benjamin does not specify a particular historical locus for each apparently mutually exclusive articulation, it is at least clear that the first account of redemption can only emerge from a context where the actual presence or the coming of a messiah belongs to it as a *real* possibility. Yet, the second paragraph—containing the majority of Benjamin’s efforts in the fragment itself—takes up the perhaps unlikely case of redemption in the absence of a messiah, that is, an *intra-historical*

Jennings. *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2016 (129-130).), yet such a selective, blithely interpretive reading of some purportedly demonstrable “break” among Benjamin’s works is not employed here.

²²⁹ Throughout the present discussion of Benjamin’s presentation of the term and concept of the “messiah,” I will often opt for the etymological significance of this word as the “anointed one” (anointed with oil), which, in *Tanakh* and the Christian “Old Testament,” often bears the meaning of one who stands in King David’s line of succession (for example, Cyrus as a messiah, see: *Isaiah* 45:1). This use was itself a development of the previous use or description for priests, who are all “anointed” (for an example in the same book, see: *Isaiah* 61:1). Yet, with this alteration that specifically refers to the Davidic line of succession, the sense of “messiah” became the “anointed one” *who will inherit the kingdom*, from which the Christian “New Testament” use and significance of the term developed. Benjamin himself employs the term with explicit reference to the messiah as a redeemer, but his understanding of the nature of that redemption can only be clarified from the larger philosophical context of the fragment itself (in other words, that is to put aside the possible relevance of theological discrepancies between the Messiah ben David (deriving from the above sense, one who gathers and reunites the people of Israel in preparation for end times) and Messiah ben Joseph (the so-called “suffering” messiah).) For a more theologically attuned reading of Benjamin’s text, see: Eric Jacobson, “Understanding Walter Benjamin’s Theological-Political Fragment.” *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, 8:3, 2001 (pp. 205-247).

account of redemption in the context of the godforsaken world. In this way, the second paragraph attempts to develop resources in the effort to recover the lost and fractured relationship between the godforsaken, incomplete, plainly historical world and a messianic sphere of perfection or completeness, insofar as that relation creates the single possibility for history to accomplish its own completion or fulfillment that would redeem godforsakenness for happiness.

The first paragraph of the fragment details a seemingly extra-historical configuration of redemption, that is, one where the condition for the possibility of redemption is positively located in the coming of a messiah, who, as it were, breaks into history from outside it.

Benjamin begins the fragment thus:

The messiah only completes all historical happenings, and it is in this sense alone that he redeems (*erlösen*), completes (*vollenden*), and creates (*schaffen*) the relation of the historical happenings to the messianic. That is why nothing historical is able to compel a relation out of itself to the messianic. That is why the kingdom of God is therefore not the *telos* of the historical *dynamis*; it cannot be posited as the goal (*Ziel*). It is not seen historically as the goal, but the end (*Ende*). That is why the order of the profane cannot be constructed on the thoughts of the Kingdom of God.²³⁰

One thread that unites this first paragraph in its, perhaps, extra-historical configuration of redemption through the coming of the messiah to the second's godforsaken, intra-historical context is their mutual understanding of the historical world as a fundamentally *incomplete*

²³⁰ Walter Benjamin, "Theologisch-politisches Fragment." *Zur Kritik der Gewalt und andere Aufsätze, Mit einem Nachwort von Herbert Marcuse*. Frankfurt am Main, DE: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1965 (95). (Hereafter, TPF). All given translations are original, as the popular English translation is riddled with inconsistencies. For example, in this passage alone the English translation leaves *telos* as it appears in Benjamin's text, but translates his use of the Greek correlate *dynamis*—as it also appears in Benjamin's text—as the English word "dynamic," thus concealing the philosophical relationship between those two concepts from the history of philosophy that Benjamin clearly intends to invoke together (see: Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*. New York NY: Schocken, 1986 (312).).

one—this is, in fact, a ubiquitous understanding of the historical world in Benjamin’s works.²³¹ Here, it is the messiah who comes solely to redeem that internally incomplete, historical sphere by creating (*schaffen*), completing or fulfilling (*vollenden*), and redeeming (*erlösen*) the relation of it to the messianic sphere of total perfection or universal completeness. Following the pronouncement of the claim of the messiah in the first line, Benjamin provides an exegetical series of that claim’s attending consequences, each one of which he clues to the reader with the repetition of “darum” (here, translated as “that is why”). The first consequence of the messiah as the redeemer cancels the possibility that redemption could be decided through a voluntarism or ‘self-perfection’ on the part of the historical in and through itself—this line above all requires and emphasizes the extra-historical character of the messiah. If the historical world is truly so terminally incomplete in its ineliminable, historical repetitions of social tensions and thereby fractures amidst the pervasive, recurring echoes of unanswered suffering, then the meaning of redemption vis-à-vis the messiah is not to get anything more or to go anywhere *historically*, but to end or to finish that incomplete, extant, and continuous suffering held out as the sum of things in the historical world.

²³¹ For example, among some of Benjamin’s earliest writings, such as the public lecture, *The Life of Students* from 1915 and among his private notes in preparation for the *Trauerspiel* book (the twin notes from 1916: *Trauerspiel and Tragedy* and *The Role of Language in Trauerspiel and Tragedy*), we see Benjamin characterize the problem of history in general as that of the incomplete and unfulfilled nature of historical time as such (see: Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926*. Eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2004 (37, 55-56, 60).). This understanding of historical time as *naturally* and in itself incomplete evidently continues into Benjamin’s last works too. For example, in a 1937 correspondence between Benjamin and Max Horkheimer concerning the publication of Benjamin’s essay on Edward Fuchs, Benjamin contends with Horkheimer to preserve the fundamental incompleteness of historical time. Benjamin, apparently so struck and concerned by Horkheimer’s contention that the incompleteness of the past would necessitate a Last Judgment, that is, a theological posit in history, copies this passage from Horkheimer’s letter directly into the center of his methodological discussions in “Konvolut N” of the *Passagenwerk* (see Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2002 (471, [N8,1]).). Thus, from the earliest works to the last, there remains an indubitable consistency on this position that historical time in itself is incomplete and thereby unfulfilled, such that redemption emerges, for Benjamin, as the question of a countervailing response to that incompleteness and, as a result, redemption stands as the prevailing philosophical problem among Benjamin’s works as a whole.

Redemption, on this model, is not so much an issue of achieving a golden age or any other utopian image of history's completion inside of history itself, such as one might expect to find outlined in a *telos* that would retroactively assert a path through history in order to actualize the current *dynamis*, i.e., the given potentiality of historical forces as retrospectively described and brought to light by the goal itself, on the way to a realization of history's potential for its own universal completion. The messiah, instead, comes simply and only to put a stop to history, and, in that particular sense alone, to complete it. The messiah does not come to activate or to begin a process of realization, rather to end one, namely, history. As a result, violence—the destruction of life's animating and repeatedly inherited historical tensions—can even gain a positive messianic likeness or significance in this model, inasmuch as that violence operates as the veritable work of a messiah by halting and ending the repetition of historical tensions and the fatefulness thereof, which would otherwise confirm and perpetuate history's incompleteness. This theological or, at least, extra-historical introduction of the messiah thus means that universality can only emerge vis-à-vis history on an extra-historical plane, the arrival of which necessitates history's destruction, the sinking or divesting of the empirical from the universal. Whether that divestment of the empirical from the universal is affirmatively construed as “sacrifice” or negatively as an abolition of “guilt” or “blameworthiness” is wholly secondary. What is decisive, here, is that the profanely historical world cannot be ordered by or erected upon the thoughts of the Kingdom of God, as Benjamin insists, since the being of each sphere retains its meaning only in the antagonism with its other. Benjamin thus names “theocracy” as the single historical program or, in the most banal sense of the term, the ‘politics’ of this configuration of redemption, since, in truth, it can have no *polis*, no goal, nor communion in the historical world as such. Theocracy, unlike the goals of any genuine politics, looks neither to

establish a utopian “Kingdom of God” on earth nor to preserve something *sacred* from and in history—both goals or *telo*i would be wholly untenable in a theocratic order’s self-understanding. Therefore, theocracy has no political meaning but only a “religious” one in its unwavering commitment to the extra-historical, according to Benjamin.²³²

It is clear that Benjamin’s reading of theocracy is a terse and even a dismissive one, so much so that he concludes it with a quick gesture to Ernst Bloch’s *Spirit of Utopia* as a text that has already done us the service of neutralizing and rejecting the theocratic motivation in philosophy of history.²³³ Yet, it is less clear, in fact, quite doubtful, that theocracy offers the best historico-philosophical resources to leverage an interpretation of the meaning of redemption in a context informed by the (possible) coming of a messiah. For example, in his preparatory research for the *Trauerspiel* study, we see Benjamin give a messianic likeness to the tragic hero as one whose action redeems by effecting a transition between “historical time” and “tragic time.”²³⁴ In this instance, the “anointed one” would not designate that which breaks into history from the otherworldly outside, but the one who saves the internal connections and linking between history’s contents and the eminently extra-historical substance of their form. Such a messianic figure of tragedy would, just as Benjamin describes in the first line of the fragment, convey historical time from its inherent incompleteness to a time fulfillment and completion in tragedy.

A reading of Benjamin’s first paragraph that is, perhaps, even more fruitful for the philosophy of history can surface in its connection with the foregoing analysis of Lukács’

²³² TPF 95.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Walter Benjamin, “Trauerspiel and Tragedy.” *Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926*. Eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2004 (56).

interpretation of the historico-philosophical situation of redemption in modernity and its predecessors, that is, in order not simply to disregard Benjamin's first paragraph as mutually exclusive with and, therefore, unrelated to the second paragraph's contextualization of redemption. So, *for whom* is the coming of the messiah, that is, an "anointed one," possible?—this is a question we should not hesitate to ask from Benjamin's text. The messianic act, the almost unprecedented flash of its coming, has the whole of its meaning in completing history through the relation that the messiah itself is and bears to the messianic as such. There is, then, no possible separation to find or to isolate between the messiah's arrival and the "creating," "completing," and "redeeming" of a relation between the historical and the messianic. The messiah's coming should, accordingly, be a possibility in whatever context such a relation between the historical and its immediate fulfillment or completion is possible. In this way exactly, the tragic hero acts and operates as an "anointed one," that is, who redeems life by iterating and consecrating life's necessary, internal relationship to its transcendental form or locus, which is *assigned to it from eternity*, as Lukács notes.²³⁵ The tragic hero, for Lukács, offers redemption by returning life—despite its erring and its faults—home to its rightful mythic form, regardless of whatever burden that gives to the hero, who is a hero in spite of that burden.

Though the tragic hero surely does not end history as a whole—as the extra-historical resonances of the messiah might suggest in Benjamin's first paragraph—the hero's great deeds and acts do redeem life by stopping or arresting life's incomplete and unfulfilled history to some significant degree. The tragic hero's definitively *heroic* action remedies life by bringing certain problematic historical tensions to the peak of their contradiction and incommensurability with

²³⁵ TN 30.

form, which, once finally touched by form, are expunged and obliterated from life. And,

Benjamin himself shares in this insight with Lukács in his early notes for the *Trauerspiel* study:

At the very least, we may surmise that the tragic marks out a frontier of the realm of art at least as much as of the terrain of history. At specific and crucial points in its trajectory, historical time passes over into tragic time; such points occur in the actions of great individuals. There is an essential connection between the idea of greatness in history and those in tragedy—although the two are not identical. [...] In tragedy, the hero dies because no one can live in fulfilled time.²³⁶

Here, like Lukács, Benjamin insists on the historical reality of tragic forms beyond their aesthetical representations, that is, he agrees the art of tragedy is only possibly meaningful (that is to say, successful) in specific historical forms or configurations. In historical forms that allow for tragedy, the hero's coming is one that marks the transition from unfulfilled historical time into a time of fulfillment or completion, namely, "tragic time." The hero's great action brings historical time *home*: a tragedy displays and unfolds the very stages of the hero's action as it effects that tragic transition from blameworthy life to a time of fulfillment, a time of the form's presentation of its own unmitigated and undamaged perfection vis-à-vis life. Of course, just as in Lukács' analysis, Benjamin notes that the tragic hero must die—that the sufferings of the tragic hero are irreversible and irreparable—but that is also because, "no one can live in fulfilled time. He dies of immortality [...] This time of the tragic hero [...] describes all his deeds and his entire existence as if with a magic circle."²³⁷ The tragic hero's time is complete in life only when life is shown to be completely reconciled with and fulfilled by its form—this demands the death, the consecrating end of the hero's life, whereby that life can merge into the completeness of its form. Without the passage of death, no transition to tragic time could occur and, thereby, the historical time of the hero's life could not take up its permanent residence in the eternal life of the form. If—and this is really unimaginable in tragedy—the time of the hero were to outlast

²³⁶ Benjamin, *Trauerspiel and Tragedy*, 55.

²³⁷ Benjamin, *Trauerspiel and Tragedy*, 56.

life's reconciliation, something would evidently be amiss on a grander, graver scale. That is, it would betray some incongruity or abstraction between life and form that tragedy could not hold sway over or redeem, such that the form would flounder, unable to rise above and to serve as that unifying, extra-historical center of all life. In that instance, form would be no more than an abstract, outmoded, and fragmented *historical* form, in the plainest, most trivializing sense of "historical"—i.e., something *past*. In such a condition, for Lukács, when historical tensions persist beyond the time of their resolve, they become nature, retreating into the "scenery," taking on the ossified, historical life of *second nature*. As a result, for Benjamin, historical time only becomes a *real* problem when it cannot be redeemed by some "anointed one," some hero, who tragically takes on the burdens of the historical world in order to reconcile life and form; in short, historical time only becomes a problem in the profanely historical, godforsaken world.

The second paragraph marks Benjamin's turn away from the extra-historical as the cypher of redemption—whether that be construed theologically or with regard to the extra-historical status of form in the historico-philosophical context of tragedy—and, instead, places us squarely in the profanely historical world as the historical world *par excellence*. Contrary to any other historical contextualization of life, this *godforsaken* one holds out historical time as a problem in the sense that it alone encompasses the historical sphere, namely, a content seemingly bereft of form. Here, historical time is not the time of some form waiting to be reflected into that form, nor has this fragmented historical time shown itself capable of redeeming the promises of an epic, which would immanently unfold some essence from an exceptional configuration of historical time itself. The thoroughly profane status of historical time thus gains appearance through either the hopeless antagonism among the charnel houses of outmoded, past forms or in the unredeemed, past, fragmented unities of life loosely held together in the "novel form," both

of which, for Benjamin, cannot but fall prey the specifically historical problem of repetition: “[t]he nature of repetition in [historical] time is such that no unified form can be based on it.”²³⁸ That which is historically incomplete is so through its repetition. What Benjamin will name “the profane order of the profane” in the second paragraph of the *Fragment* is, as a result, one and the same with Lukács’ godforsaken world.²³⁹ In both cases, the merely historical world appears on the empirical plane of historical experience in a seemingly new, yet seemingly disconnected or fragmenting possibility: the possibility of life’s unity as its own in a uniquely aesthetic form (i.e., in the absence of any mythic form of totality), and, yet, that problem of aestheticized form only gets off the ground with the repetition of a very *old one*, namely, the dogged repetition of unreconciled (second) nature that includes the countless repetitions of unredeemed, objectified past suffering continuing into the present, which returns even to interrupt historical time itself and provoking further and further fragmentation thereof.

Where Benjamin appears to take one step beyond Lukács’ identification of the inescapable historical turmoil that is objectified in the *second nature* of the “novel form” is with his appeal to the philosophy of history as a rescue project operating inside that godforsaken world of profane, historical existence. For Lukács, that is, the Lukács of *Theory of the Novel*, the philosophy of history is certainly the method or path by which he takes critical distance from the “novel form,” yet it is not entirely clear that the philosophy of history actually provides him any insight beyond the failed promises concentrated in the “novel form”—indeed, that is the overarching impasse Lukács countenances in that text. Lukács fully recognizes that the “novel form” has its aspirational element caught up in a fatalistic, romantic cycle of utopian longing: a

²³⁸ Benjamin, *Trauerspiel and Tragedy*, 57.

²³⁹ TPF 95; TN 88.

blindly driven, vitalist impetus to reach a unity of life beyond life's historical fragmentation and a resultant bottoming-out of that utopian, reactionary desire in waves of historical decay signaled by unfulfilled death and thereupon saturated with the profane repetitions of an uncountable, incomplete historical suffering that has *become nature* in the wake of its unfulfillment. As Lukács himself attests in his criticisms of the "novel form": "the profound melancholy of the historical process, of the passing of time, speaks through this work [the novel], telling us that even a content and an attitude which are eternal must lose their meaning when their time is past: that [historical] time brushes aside the eternal."²⁴⁰ As was argued in the previous section of this chapter, this is exactly where we witness the symptoms of second nature, insofar as it shows the lasting effects of second nature's disruption of the aestheticized, biographically construed, abstract, and ultimately false unity of historical life in the "novel form." That historical contents, viz., historical time, in their outstanding, incomplete, and unanswered suffering must eventually brush even the eternal aside is the pinnacle expression of their transcendental homelessness, that is, their unredeemed fatefulness, interrupting and fragmenting not just the biographical unity of historical time, but the historical continuum as a fractured whole. And, yet, it is for this very reason that Benjamin returns us to the philosophy of history, not as an antidote or answer to the entire problem of the godforsaken world, but as a refuge for the aspirational element of history itself: "[t]he order of the profane has raised itself up on the idea of happiness. The relation of this order to the messianic is one of the essential teachings of the philosophy of history."²⁴¹ The idea of happiness within the "profane order of the profane" is the very idea of history's completeness, that is, the spectral, aspirational element suffused throughout historical time that tethers that time to the promise of an end to history's own godforsakenness.

²⁴⁰ TN 104.

²⁴¹ TPF 95.

If the problem of the godforsaken world essentially amounts to a problem of the irreversible fragmentation and thereby the fateful historical repetition of unreconciled, incomplete historical time to such a degree that any recourse to the given, decayed historical forms is utterly *hopeless*, then, in turn, the idea of happiness can only be the inferred idea of history's completion in the sense of suspending that godforsaken process that catches and wraps historical time up in its fateful nets of (historical) repetition. In other words, the idea of happiness must contain and hold out the hope that, although historical fragmentation may be irreversible, that its vicissitudes are *not irreparable*. The idea of happiness is hopeful, then, in its promise of an *intra-historical* rescue of a meaningful, dynamic connection between the past and its present, a relation which is categorically trivialized in the godforsaken, historical world. Philosophy of history is certainly not to be mistaken with any visage of the messiah, here, but what it does accomplish, for Benjamin, is the retrieval of that possibility for the relationship between the fragmented and wanting incompleteness of empirical history in the godforsaken world and its completion, a possibility that can, *now*, only be preserved in and through the contemplation of the idea. Theory—that solely philosophical endeavor that begins from the contemplation or inference of the idea in its schema-like relation to the empirical—steps in to preserve the possibility of a relationship between the godforsaken fragmentation of the historical world and the idea of its universal completion in the idea of happiness.

In the rest of the second paragraph of the *Fragment*, Benjamin proceeds to give clues as to how it might be the case that philosophy of history could preserve a messianic possibility in the godforsaken, historical world, namely, by saving a relation of the empirical object of history to the idea of happiness. As Benjamin himself insists, the concealed potential of philosophy of

history to save this possibility or power can be initially described through, what he simply calls, an “image” (*Bild*):

And, indeed, it [the relation that philosophy of history preserves between the object, history, and the idea] is the precondition for a mystical conception of history, the problems of which can be expounded in an image. If an arrow’s shot marks the goal, in which the *dynamis* of the profane operates, another marks the direction of the messianic intensity, such that the search for the happiness of a free humanity naturally strives away from this messianic intensity. However, just as a force through its own course can promote another force in an oppositely directed course, so too is the profane order of the profane able to promote the coming of the messianic kingdom. The profane is thus not a category of the Kingdom of God, but it is indeed the most appropriate category of its most quiet approach. For, in happiness everything earthly aspires (*erstreben*) to its downfall (*Untergang*), yet it is only in happiness that the downfall is determined to find it.²⁴²

The image expresses a fundamental contradiction—a speaking against itself—absorbed into the rigidifying divisions that structure historical time amidst its ceaseless repetition in the godforsaken world. On the one hand, the historical striving for “a free humanity” marks the *telos* or goal of any given historical *dynamis* in the godforsaken world. At every given historical present, the aim of all historical powers, forces, and projects consolidate into a single effort—however internally disagreeable or particularly fraught—to realize a free or liberated human existence in the profanely historical world. Lukács’ analysis would evaluate this historically shaped tendency as the effort to make good on the form-giving, spontaneous power of subjectivity that is relegated to an aestheticized form in the “novel form.” To reach and to accomplish such a historically *new* possibility is both an attempt to transcend the condition of transcendental homelessness and, yet, it cannot but repeat all the problems of godforsaken world, no matter how worthy that end might appear and inevitably reappear cast in ‘new’ trappings. So, on the other hand, against the grain of this emergent historical trajectory that unfolds from that

²⁴² Ibid.

gap or *rarity* in the present called “the new”—a gap that the conciliatory powers of form used to inhabit—a “messianic intensity” points in the opposite direction or tendency (*Richtung*). The need for redemption does not belong to the gaps in the future or its possibility in general; rather, it belongs to that which cannot be included in and is excluded from that possibility, namely, *what is past*, that which has “gone under” or “passed-away.” So, as “the profane order of the profane” merges into the historical trajectory of the new, and as the past is thereupon exiled from that hope for a free humanity, redemption is an answering for or response to that which has become *irrelevant* to history—viz., the history that has become ossified, fallen, and second nature—and, implicitly in itself, that which holds the key to the past shedding its godforsakenness in becoming *relevant* for the living in the trajectory and accomplishment of a free humanity.

The central argument in Benjamin’s second paragraph suggests that the idea of happiness itself lends history a messianic chance through the idea’s very own intra-historical configuration of the godforsaken world. It is the task and teaching of philosophy of history, according to Benjamin, to trace and to highlight the changing, eminently historical contours of that intra-historical configuration, through which a relation from the merely historical appearances to the idea of their universal completion can be saved. While the exercise of that philosophical task is by no means fully elaborated in the confines of the text of Benjamin’s fragment itself, it is nonetheless clear that such the task of philosophy of history would only operate and gain purchase in—as it is an emphatic response to—the specifically *godforsaken de-formation* of the historical world into a plainly historical world and, at the same time, it would also transcend the condition of that godforsaken world in preparing for the redemption of the messianic chance of history’s fulfillment vis-à-vis the idea of happiness. It is, therefore, no exaggeration to state that the messianic fulfillment, i.e., redemption, of the incomplete, irrelevant, and fallen fragments of

historical time (of the past) depends entirely on the configuring of this webbed, intra-historical context or connectedness, without which no connection of historical phenomena to the idea of happiness could become possible in any present in general.²⁴³

This intra-historical contextualization of the object in the present affords the messianic chance to fulfill or to redeem history's becoming-nature—its irrelevant “pastness”—by explicitly connecting it to the struggle for a “free humanity” in and through the idea of happiness. Redemption thus fulfills incomplete historical time, inasmuch as it shows that completing *what is past* belongs to happiness just as much as and that it is mutually, internally linked to the promise of a “free humanity.” Redemption, here, is not a sacrificial promise to the past or a sacrificial service to some indeterminate future, but a rescue: a *taking-up of that which has gone under*. In other words, the very notion of a specifically “intra-historical redemption” is mutually exclusive with any such invocation of sacrifice, as it intends only the redemption of godforsakenness for happiness, that is, redeeming the incompleteness of historical time for its fulfillment in and by some present. So, if the ultimate problem of a godforsaken world is that it only allows for and terminates in “the profane ordering of the profane” or, by extension, fragmenting processes of historical fragmentation, wherein the empirical processes of history empty and violently divest historical phenomena of any meaningful relationship to those same processes in which they are caught up and whereby they “go under” or sink, then, conversely, redemption calls for and would save a fighting, messianic chance for historical phenomena to attain a fulfilling relationship, i.e., overcoming their being laid to waste in empirical, historical causality, to the idea of history's completion—the idea of historical universality. As a result, what is to be redeemed is the missed hope that historical phenomena could be otherwise than they have become: that they could in

²⁴³ The next chapter takes up the issue of elaborating exactly what this task of philosophy of history constitutes when it operates in the service of preserving that hope for redemption in the idea of happiness.

fact appear in and reflect the fulfillment of the hope they are exiled from—a hope that is alone lodged in the idea of happiness. This hope, paradoxically, is sustained by and repeats, according to Benjamin, in the “totality” of history’s perpetual going under or passing away (*Untergang*), which, again, only belongs to history in its *both* intra-historical *and* godforsaken context.²⁴⁴

Benjamin never appears to suggest that the idea of happiness is a guarantee or some rule for pursuing happiness in the profanely historical world, that is, as some yardstick that would measure or guide the realization of the new. Instead, the idea of happiness as an idea of history’s completion culminates in a thought of the cessation and arresting of incomplete, unanswered, historically repeating suffering, such that it is in the shine of that completeness that everything aspires (*erstreben*) to in its end (*Untergang*) and it is only by *ending* that redemption becomes possible. Where tragedy arose from the possible transition of historical time to a time of resolve in which “no one could live,” that is, where life was redeemed by form’s judgment and obliteration of unresolved historical tensions, the idea of happiness in the profanely historical world can only indicate a semblance of redemption in the temporally complex, intra-historical context, that is, where the idea of history’s completion becomes the universal medium through which the irrelevant past can attain relevance for the living and also through which the living can find the relevance of the time of their action to the historical goal of a liberated humanity amidst the godforsaken, fractured incompleteness of history. Redemption thus unambiguously intends the redemption of godforsakenness for happiness in the sense of completion and an ending of incomplete suffering, yet the hope for that redemption is still not to be overstated. Redemption in the profanely historical world cannot stand-in for the absence of form just as much as it does not promise some new epic yet to come. If redemption, here, still means the redeeming of a

²⁴⁴ “For, nature is messianic due to its eternal and total transience (*Vergängnis*)” (TPF, 96).

relation of the empirical, fragmented object of history to the messianic sphere of perfection or fulfillment, then, paradoxically, even redemption itself cannot escape the effects of fragmentation in the godforsaken world. So, since there is still no transcendental home that remains a fixed, extra-historical center of a reference point for everything that transpires historically, redemption can only take effect piecemeal, in its own fragmentation, that is, it can only take effect on fragments. There is no possibility for the hero, no messiah or “anointed” one, who receives the unanswered, incomplete historical tensions and, by their great deeds and actions, conveys those tensions to the redemptive, extra-historical forces of form. Instead, redemption *must* turn to the fragmentation of historical time in the fragmented present vis-à-vis the particular instances of historical time that have become irrelevant (nature), that which is past and yet repeats incompletely. To aspire to this in the “politics” of the living, as Benjamin notes in the last line of the fragment, would methodologically entail a kind of “nihilism” in the philosophy of history, not only because there is no beyond or extra-historical form to which one can appeal to fix or to guarantee the meaning of redemption, but also because the hope given is not for us—the living—but for those stages of history that are already relegated to nature, supposedly sealed as complete and inconsequential in their individual, fated historical time.²⁴⁵ Yet, unlike theocracy, this does entail a genuine “politics,” according to Benjamin, because that aspiration or striving (*erstreben*) for a specifically intra-historical redemption would make possible the hitherto impossible, sacrosanct communion in history between what is past and what is present, that which has gone under and that which rises, the dead nature of history and the living. It is in the idea of happiness alone that what is supposedly complete and decided throughout history, namely, the “past” that has become nature, rises to a level of extant

²⁴⁵ TPF 96.

incompleteness in the present and, through the inversion of that movement, too, does the incomplete aspect of history's godforsaken repetitions of unanswered suffering gain a messianic chance to end.

The utopian tendency, much like the one Lukács finds in *Theory of the Novel* in his 1962 preface to that text, to disclose or to intimate the true, liberated nature of a free humanity in exclusion of its downtrodden and downfallen past would contravene the very hope that Benjamin means to recover in the *Theological-Political Fragment*.²⁴⁶ Instead of that desperate, utopian attempt to discover the new (unity of life) outside received history, the image of redemption that Benjamin provides is a redemption of that part of history, viz., the past, that has broken off from history and in doing so became unredeemed, dislocated “nature,” that is, it is a redemption of the hope for happiness inside of and internal to history's “downfall” (*Untergang*) or, what amounts to the same, the godforsaken totality of fragmented, historical time. One can justifiably assert that that arriving at this uniquely intra-historical configuration of redemption in a godforsaken, historical world culminates the entire purpose of Benjamin's fragment, since it rescues or, literally, redeems, that relation of history to the messianic sphere of completeness through the idea of happiness. Whereas the “novel form” of historical unity, for Lukács, was compelling to the extent that it implicitly comprehends the barren desolation of the plainly historical world and, in the face of that looming desolation, propounds a *new* unity of historical phenomena and life in an extravagantly hopeful, aestheticized form, the “novel form,” nonetheless, repeats the very problem from which it seeks to escape: the affirmation of the historical world's destitution in the extravagantly utopian, romantic striving of life's attempt to transcend history. The danger in this version of a utopian conflict with history itself—a struggle in which freedom or liberation is

²⁴⁶ Cf. TN 20.

posed against and in exclusion from history's godforsakenness—is simply that it would sacrifice the very hopefulness sealed in the idea of history's completion that rises from the tides of repetition amidst history's godforsaken fragmentation. If Benjamin's *Theological-Political Fragment* outlines an account of how philosophy of history would create (*schaffen*), redeem (*erlösen*), and fulfill (*vollenden*) the messianic possibility of history's relation to the idea of its complete happiness, it does so with the express expectation that the idea of happiness would, there, make explicit the merely implicit, unarticulated responsibility in the historical goal of a “liberated humanity” to the downfall of the past, such that the fulfillment of historical universality is indexed piece by piece in the fragmentation of “those stage of humankind that are nature.”²⁴⁷ And, if philosophy of history has a role to play here, it is in showing that such an indexing is not utopian or one that can be discounted, as it were, but that it belongs specifically to the intra-historical context that is already implicit in the idea of history as an idea happiness, namely, the idea of a historical universality that would be complete in and of itself.

From Lukács' *Theory of the Novel* to Benjamin's “Theological-Political Fragment,” the possibility of responding to and answering the godforsaken desolation of the plainly historical world wholly depends upon the elucidation of the idea of its end(ing). That idea itself is the sign and seal of the hopefulness latent within even a plainly historical world, that is, a historical world devoid of any possibility for the extra-historical, reconciling judgment of form over historical time or, what Lukács would simply have called, life. The hope of which one should speak in the philosophy of history, then, is not some far-flung abstraction for a hope outside of received history, but the hope that belongs to the idea of history itself and is thus internal to history at the same time—for, this is the hope made accessible in and through the specifically intra-historical

²⁴⁷ TPF 96.

context of historical phenomena in the idea. The idea's hopefulness is always, therefore, that of the fulfillment or completion of history, since the idea is that through which the redemption of the relation of incomplete historical happenings—the past—to the messianic in the shape of the idea of historical universality can take effect. So as for Kant, so too for Lukács and Benjamin: without the recovery a rational sense of completeness internal to history, history remains a “ceaseless objection,” to use Kant's words, against the recovery of any sense of hope whatsoever.²⁴⁸ Thus, where Lukács found the relation the “novel form” to the idea to be a hopeless state of despair and disrepair—that same *de-formation* of the historical world Benjamin captured in the “profane existence” of the merely historical world—there he found the limits of the “novel form” too.

The novel is both the only work of art adequate to representing the lived experience of historical life in the godforsaken world and, at the same time, it is also a problem or a riddle to be solved—this riddle is the connection of the “novel form” to “the new” at the metaphysical level of history's transcendental homelessness, which goes beyond the aesthetic pomp and circumstance of discrete novels themselves, for Lukács. To put it plainly, novels opt to save a sense of the new in their aestheticized, representational unities of lived, historical experience, which cannot take effect without already giving up on the idea of history's completeness as a whole, i.e., historical universality. Indeed, it is from that position that Lukács understands the “novel form” to take up the problem of uniting the historical fragmentation of lived experience as the very problem of unfulfilled historical time. So, if novels ‘know’ history in spite of buying into the “unreal” status of the idea as the idea's irrelevance to historical time, then all that novels

²⁴⁸ IUH 119 /AA 8: 30.

come to know and to represent is, as Lukács named it, “the epic of the godforsaken world.”²⁴⁹ As a result, Lukács certainly gives philosophy of history the right task in inquiring into the historico-philosophical conditions under which the work of the novel is possible, since philosophy of history answers the ontological or “what it is” question of history perfectly well for him, namely, it uncovers the urgency of the new in the “novel form” to unfold from the utopian drive to unite historical time in exclusion of the history’s desolation and sinking in second nature. Yet, where Lukács perhaps goes wrong in *Theory of the Novel*, that is, to the extent that the purpose of that text is or should be the rescue of the rational sense of hope in profane historical existence, is that he nonetheless sides with normative claim of the “novel form,” despite the unhelpful findings of philosophy of history therein. In other words, there is a profound sense throughout *Theory of the Novel* that *because* this historical world is godforsaken, that we must take leave of it. To commit to that end(ing) is to commit to the “novel form,” that is, it is to commit to an end that does not end, but repeats. Benjamin, for his part, will concur with Lukács on the “what it is” of this profane historical existence, yet he refuses to submit to the necessity or fate of the unreconciled nature of the godforsaken world, such that redemption must become a dynamically intra-historical end(ing) of history’s internal incompleteness. In this instance, redemption would redeem the aspirational inference at play in Adorno’s notion of metaphysical experience, namely, the rising of the empirical out of its fragmentation in and through the contemplation of its truth content lodged in the idea of happiness

Benjamin’s return to rescue the relevance of the idea to history, despite its “unreal” status in the empirical reality of fragmented historical time, is an attempted rescue of that hope that can only be found in the idea, namely, the truth of that aspirational element in history that can only

²⁴⁹ TN 88—modified trans.

be represented through the idea, that is, the relation of incomplete historical phenomena to the idea of their fulfillment or happiness. If, then, the past asserts a claim to be redeemed, as Benjamin will argue in the second thesis from *On the Concept of History*, the truth content of that claim is found in the idea itself and the power of its redemption is one preserved by the theoretical exercise of philosophy of history, insofar as its task is to instruct in the relationship of fragmented, historical phenomena to the idea happiness, as we have seen Benjamin argue in the “Theological-Political Fragment.” The name that Benjamin ultimately gives to the theorization of that relationship between the idea and the incomplete fragmentation of historical time is “constellations.”

CHAPTER FIVE

PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY FROM THE STANDPOINT OF REDEMPTION: ON WALTER BENJAMIN'S THEORY OF THE IDEAS

If it stands at this point that the task of philosophy of history fundamentally concerns how theory might convey incomplete, fragmentary, plainly historical phenomena to the thought of their completeness and thereby bring their possible completion or fulfillment to light, then it should also be clear that the medium of that relation—the spectral universality in which theory gains purchase on those plainly historical phenomena—is the idea of historical universality. Without such a reflective relation between historical phenomena and the idea of their completeness, the possible fulfillment of those discrete, empirically fragmented phenomena becomes wholly unintelligible, as, simultaneously, the theoretical task of philosophy of history itself would slip into utter incoherence or, at least, relativism. For this very reason, time and again, a perhaps unlikely connection has emerged throughout the course of this inquiry into the philosophical coordinates and the guiding aspiration of philosophy of history as a theory of universal history, that is, that the *idea of historical universality* should be an *idea of happiness*. The reason for the “unlikely” character of this connection belongs to the transitions among the qualities of the philosophical claims involved. On the one hand, theory can only but begin with the essential question of “what it is,” namely, the questioning of what history is made up of, including accounts of both its motivating social processes and how the ‘stuff’ of history thereby either hangs together or not. This *what it is* question, then, already implies a concomitant question of how theory comprehends what it proclaims to know, that is, by what justifiable,

cognitive means do we come to know the nature or essence of historical appearances. These two questions necessitate one another in a rather unproblematic and coherent manner, especially if it is the case that one would *do well* to distrust an account (*logos*) of something without an account of the account. Yet, even with that qualifying statement, *one would do well to*, etc., the same unlikely link emerges again, namely: a normative claim intervenes to justify or to secure the issue of how it is that one knows *what it is*. So, on the other hand, the theory of universal history distinguishes itself by making its philosophical beginning with a commitment to the aspirational aspect of a normative claim proper to philosophy of history: one cannot know the truth of historical appearances *in history* without an appeal to their aspirational participation in the idea of historical universality, such that to know historical phenomena involves knowing how they *ought* to be, that is, how it is they tend toward and fill out the aspirational claim of the idea of happiness. In other words, to know historical phenomena *in* or *amidst* history requires knowing more than their given appearances, such that, insofar as they remain incomplete in their completeness or their “pastness,” that knowledge requires an account of how they could be otherwise—and that points to the domain of the idea alone. It would follow, therefore, that philosophy of history must commit itself to a theory of universal history, inasmuch as philosophy of history can, at all, provide an answer as to how incomplete, plainly historical phenomena would gain a relation to the idea of their fulfillment or completion. This is, indeed, the problem we have seen emerge throughout a line of inheritances that is, perhaps, just as unlikely as the series of claims involved in universal history itself, that is, from Kant, to Schlegel, to Lukács, and now Benjamin too.

For Kant, the endeavor to comprehend historical phenomena proved problematic for one principal reason: history appears neither to attain to the lawfulness requisite for conceptual

comprehension or cognition nor does it submit to the practical logic of the will's self-adjudication. As a result, although history is not altogether without coherence for Kant, that coherence was in severe danger of meaning absolutely nothing, since history as a whole seemed to be going nowhere, as it were. The plan for a universal history, according to Kant, thus begins with a refusal to capitulate to the meaningless coherence of historical causality, one which is sealed by capricious uses of violence and would amount to a kind of 'bad infinity' of one thing arbitrarily struck down on the way to the next, wholly devoid of orientation or any rational sense of completeness. In short, against the instrumentalizing tides of that merely mechanical causality of history's social processes, the theoretical construction of some end on the horizon of empirical history appears desperately needed, hence the idea of a historical universality. The normative underpinnings of such a refusal of historical appearances *as they are given* or *as they appear* compels Kant to look to the idea of history's completion, insofar as that idea would give grounds to say, quite simply, historical phenomena are *not* as they ought to be and that their given, merely causal lines of connection are hopeless ones. It was argued that such a rational inference of the idea, for Kant, could only emerge through the contemplation of the empirical appearances along the aspirational threads that connect them to and link them together in the idea—what I have previously called the shine of the idea in the rising of the empirical through its schema-like presentations. This inference of the idea of historical universality itself, then, supplies Kant with the normative foundation as to how and why the account of history's coherence could become meaningful, that is, insofar as theory shows that account of the objectively purposive coherence of historical processes to rely upon the aspirational element of idea. In this way, Kant sought to articulate how historical phenomena might gain a meaningful relationship to the idea of history as a complete whole and thereby to save in and through contemplation itself the hope that

historical appearances could appear otherwise than their given empirical fragmentation through a relation to the idea, even if such a relation to the idea had to remain quite speculative, aspirational, or “theoretical,” in the somewhat cynical sense of that term.

An irreconcilable tension ultimately transpired for Kant in a conflict between history’s social processes that require repeated, immense amounts of fragmenting violence in order to develop the coherence, i.e., progress, of historical phenomena as a whole and the fact that such violence contradicts the very idea of historical universality itself, namely, the fulfilled happiness of the species, whereby *each appearance* would hold out a meaningful relation to the whole. Historical violence appears both necessary to the theory of universal history ostensibly taking root in history and it is also the very problem this theory aspires to transcend. This tension marked the persistent, frustrating problem of a bifurcation of two registers of truth in history in Kant’s account. On the one hand, the truth of history as it is empirically experienced includes the violence of its social processes of development—the arbitrary negation of appearances for the sake of development—which becomes justifiable only in the account of the “progress” of the species prior to its fulfillment or completion. On the other hand, amidst this ensuing historical causality as one borne out in violence, the truth of Kant’s original question of the aspirational link between the empirical and the idea is relegated to an unreal, simply aspirational status, which becomes the single, intelligible locus of thinking the meaningful relationship phenomena *ought* to have to history as a whole, that is, if they were to transcend the unfulfilled, completed, past condition that they languish in historically. It was therefore argued that what remains palpably absent and needed throughout Kant’s plan for a theory of history as a universal history is some description of how exactly theory would present those empirical phenomena in some schema-like arrangements so as to catch and reflect the shine of the idea, such that the idea

would emerge through the effort of contemplation as nothing other than an idea of the empirical, that is, not hypostatized or even outside of history itself. In that way, the normative appeal to be otherwise would not be some abstract, utopian claim, but a claim emerging from and for the empirical itself.

In response, Schlegel's theorization of universal history as "the fragment" includes, in short, not only his admission that the gap between the empirical and the ideal has no hope of closing, but that it even shows a danger of tearing abysmally apart, hence the definitively romantic and fatal character of all human striving in history. Schlegel argues that the threat of irrationality and its fragmenting vicissitudes within empirical history does not merely result from rational processes gone awry, as it belongs to the nature of the absolute itself that encompasses and conditions those rational processes of striving. Universal history, as a result, retains a specifically transcendental function in Schlegel's case, since it is the task of such a theory of history to show that history retains the possibility to be more than merely fragmenting processes of fragmentation, even if such a claim can only arrive at the peak of a philosophical use of irony. So, the extent to which Schlegel succeeds in this task is also quite doubtful and, for that reason, it was argued that Schlegel's theory of history catches both the most aspirational and, at the same time, fatalistic aspects of romantic philosophy in its reception of philosophy of history. The leftover, persisting problem of a godforsaken, historical world was, therefore, the concern of the collapse of theory in the face of history's fragmentation.

The Lukács of *Theory of the Novel* shows himself to be an astute reader of the history of German Idealism and particularly with an emphasis on, what he calls there, "the philosophy of history of forms," which begins from the distinctly modern, godforsaken situation wherein the fragmentation of historical time emerges from the loss of any unifying, extra-historical form.

The fragmented outgrowths of lived experience in history—historical time—thus stand in dire need of a *new* form of unity, i.e., the “novel form,” and are thereby thrust into a utopian condition, hopelessly seeking for rekindled hope in a godforsaken world. There was, as a result of that condition, no ambiguity for Lukács that historical phenomena are *not* as they ought to be. Moreover, Lukács explicitly argued that historical phenomena are themselves unable to present such an iterative claim, namely, that they are as they ought to be, because that claim would in any case belong to the predominance of form as such as it stands over life, in order to guarantee the possibility of meaning in it. In the godforsaken world, however, these plainly historical, *deformed* phenomena, surprisingly, do still wager a claim, but it is only a negative claim: that they are *not* as they ought to be, languishing as fragmented as incomplete. The manifest problem, there, is that the condition for the possibility of their appearing otherwise remains lost or absent in the godforsaken world, such that historical phenomena repeatedly fell prey to the desolation of that plainly historical world and its returns of an unreconciled or “second” nature.

Benjamin’s “Theological-Political Fragment” enters this conversation as an explicit rescue project, namely, to recover the role that philosophy of history should play in linking the empirical, plainly historical, godforsaken world to the idea of happiness, such that a hope for historical appearances to be otherwise than they appear could be saved and possibly even redeemed. Benjamin, therefore, occupies the difficult position that, indeed, the godforsaken or the “profane” existence of the historical world means it is irreversibly fragmented and, yet, the violence and the damage of that fragmentation does not go so far as to dispense with or obliterate the aspirational claim of plainly historical phenomena in general, that is, they still very much so ought to be other than they appear. The *idea* of their happiness—of their possible fulfillment and an end to their godforsaken repetitions of incompleteness—thus requires a uniquely intra-

historical contextualization of redemption, which, in turn, makes a claim on theory to take up the task of preserving the possibility for redemption as it might appear through the relation of phenomena to the idea. In this way, Benjamin certainly agrees with Kant that philosophy of history must commit itself to a universal history, insofar as what it means to know historical phenomena necessitates knowing how they *ought* to be, which accordingly requires the rescue of their appeal to the idea of historical universality or happiness. Nonetheless, Benjamin also takes leave of certain key features of Kant's plan for a universal history as he almost entirely abandons any concern for the conceptual articulation of how history's development would establish its own internal coherence so as to prove, as it were, the positive connection between history as it appears and how it ought to be.

So if the fragmentation of this plainly historical world, as opposed to the messianic sphere of perfection, is as irreversible as it is persistent, as Benjamin seems to acquiesce, then the hope for phenomena to be otherwise than they are is not a hope to transcend the godforsaken world, but to fulfill and redeem the possible relationship of fragmented historical time to the idea of happiness. As a result, the enlightenment notion of progress must, for Benjamin, be refused in the godforsaken, historical world, as any possible justification of historical violence against phenomena contradicts and mutes the very aspirational element of the idea among phenomena. That historico-philosophical notion of progress always takes its first step alongside the presupposition that the historical world *can* and thereby, presumably, *ought* to develop a correspondence of itself with the messianic sphere—something Benjamin categorically refuses from the outset of the “Theological-Political Fragment” as a disastrous error. And, this dissertation has argued Benjamin is quite right to address it as a disaster, since the logical maneuver from *can* to *ought* in the sphere of history is one bridged and effected only by further

violence, more fragmentation, and the stupefying duress of repetition in the face of problem for which no concept is an explicitly synthesizing condition, hence the turn to the idea as the aspirational truth of “what is” historically. So, building on the “Theological-Political Fragment,” Benjamin proceeds to develop a concept of “weak messianism” in his essay, *On the Concept of History*, so as both to shift the normative claim away from any confusion of justifying hitherto historical violence for the sake of historical development and, at the same time, to rescue the aspirational element of universal history in the normative claim of historical appearances themselves, namely, that they are not as they ought to be, that they persist historically as *damaged* or *at a loss*. Benjamin then argues that the “secret index” through which this “weak messianism” returns as a possibility in the present is in the idea of happiness itself, such that the very aspirational aspect of happiness comes to permeate Benjamin’s entire philosophical understanding of the ideas in general. What, therefore, remains to be examined is the question of how Benjamin constructs his theory of ideas, which he will also refer to as “constellations” after his *Trauerspiel* book, as a task that charges theory with preserving the hope and possibility for redemption.

In his *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, Walter Benjamin provides by far the most encompassing articulation of his theory of the ideas that, after that grand-scale study, would become a hallmark of his philosophical works as a whole. As Benjamin would subsequently often proceed to deploy his theory of the ideas or, as he calls the ideas, “constellations,” without much of an explanation or sometimes even so much as a hint as to what a “constellation” means apart from the presentation of a particular one, the preface to the *Trauerspiel* study remains an invaluable elaboration and certainly Benjamin’s most extensive defense of constellations as theory of the ideas. In this chapter, I will provide a reading of that theory of constellations as

Benjamin presents it in the preface to the *Trauerspiel* book. There, Benjamin shows that the theory of constellations proceeds from a task charged to theory, namely, the charge *to save the phenomena*. One cannot take up this charge responsibly, for Benjamin, with the theoretical construction of the identity of phenomena in and as an object of consciousness; rather, to save the phenomena means a rescue of that relationship to the idea of their fulfillment as it emerges from the phenomena themselves, that is, it requires the presentation of idea's unity as the constellated unity of the historical truth content of phenomena. As a result, it will become clear that the justification of the idea as constellation relies on the mark of happiness that all ideas attain as such, such that the constellation holds out that medium through which the redemption of phenomena becomes explicitly intelligible and the real possibility thereof is preserved. With that explication of Benjamin's theory of constellations, I will turn to the essay *On the Concept of History* where Benjamin deploys his theory of constellations in order to clarify the messianic nature of the idea of universal history. There, in the *On the Concept of History* essay and the manuscripts surrounding its drafting, Benjamin comes into polemical conflict with universal history, decrying its "historicist" approach or "method" of presenting history's reality. Yet, Benjamin also makes explicit overtures to save the idea of universal history from its supposedly historicist trappings. The reading of constellations from the preface to the *Trauerspiel* book can, as a result, help to illuminate why Benjamin draws this distinction between that part of universal history that must be ruthlessly criticized and the idea that requires saving, that is, insofar as the idea of historical universality is the very messianic idea of happiness through which all constellations ostensibly retain a redemptive promise.

I. Benjamin's Constellations: A Theory of the Ideas

In the “Erkenntniskritische Vorrede” to the *Trauerspiel* book, translated into English as the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue,” Benjamin prefaces his larger inquiry into the peculiar form and character of the baroque *Trauerspiel*, or “mourning play,” with a sweeping methodological meditation on the relationship of philosophical ideas to life. Benjamin understands the proper context of this confrontation to be that of history itself, wherein the exact relationship between life and the ideas comes to the fore through a philosophical theory of the ideas that Benjamin titles “constellations.” As Benjamin argues there, “[t]he ideas relate to entities as constellations do to the stars.”²⁵⁰ Elaborating the vast implications of this line for both philosophy and the endeavor of art criticism becomes Benjamin’s single purpose in that preface, especially because this particular theory of the ideas holds the key, for Benjamin, to the only methodological route adequate to understanding the precise nature of those definitively modern, dramatic works known as *Tauerspiele*, that is, in contradistinction to tragedy and the specific historico-philosophical conditions that make tragedies possible in general. For, if tragedy’s purpose belongs to the extra-historical actuality and force of form over life, then the essence of tragic works concerns the depiction of how and, ultimately, the fact that that historical time submits to the tragic time of its form. This means that the *nexus effectivus* of the tragic work belongs not to historical time as such, but to the transcendental locus of the tragic, i.e., “myth,” as we saw Benjamin insist in the previous chapter.²⁵¹ So, in an effort to displace the tradition’s conflation

²⁵⁰ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Trans. John Osborne. Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2009 (34 – modified trans.). Walter Benjamin, *Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels*. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Frankfurt a. M., DE: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1978 (16). (Hereafter cited in English and German as OTD/UT.)

²⁵¹ Benjamin, *Trauerspiel and Tragedy*, 56.

of the forms of tragedy and *Trauerspiel*, Benjamin argues that the *Trauerspiel* begins from a historico-philosophical condition wherein historical time's connection to myth has become obsolete and decayed, such that myth cannot be the objective or the objectivity of the *Trauerspiel*. Benjamin thus understands the *Trauerspiel* to belong to the plainly historical, godforsaken world as both its artistic reflection and its resounding lamentation. The theory of constellations, as a veritable theory of ideas, should offer an avenue to represent the unity of these works *in history*, configuring the implicit relations of the historical time sealed within them. Constellations, as both a critical and a metaphysical model of interpretation, would presume to rescue the spectral unity of an idea's promise as a real one *in history*—even in the fragmentation thereof—by finding the unity of that aspirational element among the phenomena themselves as they appear in the *de-formed*, godforsaken historical world. A fuller account of this theory should, as a result, aid in the understanding of how Benjamin's theory of constellations may contain within itself a linking of all ideas to the idea of happiness, from which connection Benjamin's reception of the theory of universal history can be elaborated.

In a 1923 letter to his close friend at that time, the theologian Florens Christian Rang, Benjamin offers a concise communication of his understanding and intention of the *Trauerspiel* book, which he would later submit in 1925 as his *Habilitationsschrift*. In this letter to Rang, which was certainly penned as Benjamin was writing the *Trauerspiel* book, Benjamin outlines the specific interpretive task of constellations in strong opposition both to a one-dimensionally philosophical or cognitive approach and also in even stronger opposition to art history:

I have been reflecting on the way in which works of art relate to historical life. In so doing, I proceed from the conviction that there is no such thing as art history. [...] Art is essentially ahistorical. The attempt to insert the work of art into historical life does not open new perspectives into its inner existence, as is the case with the life of nations, where the same procedure points to the role of different generations and other essential factors. The current preoccupations of

art history all amount to a history of contents or forms, for which works of arts seem to provide merely examples or models; a history of the works of art themselves is not considered. They possess nothing that links them extensively and essentially; they have nothing comparable to the hereditary relationships between successive generations which supply the extensive and essential connections in the history of nations. The essential links between works of art remain intensive [...] The specific historicity of works of art is likewise one that can be unlocked only in interpretations, not in ‘art history.’ For the process of interpretation brings to light connections between works of art that are timeless, yet not without a historical dimension. The same forces that become explosively and extensively temporal in the revealed world (that is, history) emerge intensively in the taciturn world [*Welt der Verschlossenheit*] (that is, the world of nature and art). [...] the idea are stars, in contrast to the sun of revelation. They do not appear in the daylight of history; they are at work in history only invisibly. They shine only into the night of nature. Works of art, then, may be defined as models of a nature that awaits no day, and thus no Judgment Day.²⁵²

At only the most preliminary stage of things, we can begin to gain an intimation of the profound consequences locked within Benjamin’s dictum that the ideas would relate to the phenomena of historical life as constellations do the stars. What “art history” lacks—so much so that it shrinks from the merit of its name, according to Benjamin—is an account of these modern works themselves. In other words, the critical interpretation of these works is not benefited by a history of their common motifs, diverse productions, or their historically variant receptions. Instead, it requires an account of the works as united in working out a single problem or essence. The task that “interpretation” faces in these works is not a question of cognizing a single, univocal style that underlines the possibility of their many timeless expressions; rather, it is a question of *how* those timeless expressions fold together *in history*. Interpretation—what Benjamin proceeds to designate also as the genuine aim of “criticism” in the above letter—should, therefore, include

²⁵² Walter Benjamin, “Letter to Florens Christian Rang.” *Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926*. Eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2004 (388-9). Rang, who died less than a year after this letter exchange (1924), had been a mentoring figure and close friend to Benjamin at that time, and, in addition, acted as the intermediary between Benjamin and Hugo von Hoffmannsthal. After Rang’s death prior to the book’s completion, Benjamin confessed that the *Trauerspiel* book had lost “its only authentic reader” (see: Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994 (82).).

presenting the connection between the inner form of the individual works alongside their “extensive” place, i.e., their relations to other works, in the larger context of the prevailing problem or essence, much like, following Benjamin’s analogy, the history of a nation would presumably include descriptions of particular generations and the reverberations of them in the larger unity and project of that nation itself. So, although the inner form of works or phenomena remain both “timeless” and “ahistorical,” according to Benjamin, the relation of the work or phenomenon to its relevant problem or essence absorbs the whole host of historical tensions affecting the problem in which the work itself continues to participate, just as the political relevance or meaning of some particular generation to a nation may very well change throughout that nation’s history. The provenance, then, of the mutually binding connection between the intensive and the extensive dimensions of works—between the empirical seal of individual phenomena that are only as complete as they are past and the ongoing problem in which they incompletely persist—is the idea. It is, in short, the task of the theory of constellations to explain the nature of that dialectical connection held together in and between the luminescent idea and the phenomena across which its shine is scattered and, in turn, reflected together.

Taking Benjamin’s brief yet dense articulation of the idea as the historically unifying essence (*Wesen*) in the letter to Rang as it stands, it would appear as if two discrete and almost impossibly separate ontological levels emerge: on the one hand, the empirical or real, particular works fragmented in history and, on the other hand, the virtually unifying, unreal ideas, such that the ideas, not altogether unlike regulating ideals, might simply offer critically modified organizations or ‘constellating’ arrangements of our cognition of the given, which would aid interpretation in defanging the closed nature of works or phenomena as empirically completed, dislocated, and detached in their pastness. Yet, to presume that the interpretation of the idea as

constellation offers some contingent ‘chance’ for a heuristic arrangement of concepts concerning the material content of phenomena would annihilate the entire issue of *essence* as one of *being*.²⁵³ Constellations, thus, cannot be handled and manipulated as mere heuristic concoctions to pick up in interpretations, since the presentation of a constellation, for Benjamin, follows from theory’s charged responsibility to find in its interpretation of historical phenomena the unity of their aspirational element in the idea itself and, by extension, to highlight the idea’s real presence *in history* through the schema-like presentations of nothing other than the empirical itself. In this way, we might say that phenomena, by virtue of what or “how” they are—historical appearances that are only as completed as they are past or unfulfilled—aspire to be what they are not: to take part and participate in the idea of their fulfillment or happiness. As a

²⁵³ It is an unfortunate trend that some commentators who take themselves to be addressing Benjamin’s theory of constellations replace and misconstrue the relationship Benjamin describes between the idea and things or entities (*Dingen*) as a relationship between the idea and concepts, without so much as even acknowledging the immense philosophical difference between a constellation of entities and that of concepts, which would constitute two entirely distinct arguments. For example, Samuel Weber notes that the theory of constellations “indicate[s] how a certain ‘non-synthesis’ could nevertheless relate concepts to one another while preserving their difference and without subordinating them to a totalizing continuity or unity” (Samuel Weber, *Benjamin’s -Abilities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010 (168)). Weber’s notion of such a “constellation” of concepts is, at most, a heuristic, that is, it evacuates all the metaphysical purchase or the very question thereof that Benjamin insists upon in the preface to the *Trauerspiel* book. So, if the whole problem that the theory of constellations opens up for Benjamin is the issue of the *real* mediation at the level of the truth-content of phenomena, for which an appeal to the idea stands in need, a *constellation of concepts*, on the contrary, would elide the driving question of mediation and replace it with one of the totality of mediating *conceptual* relations among comprehensive concepts of the material content of phenomena. Furthermore, if that arrangement of concepts is *not* a synthetic one, as Sam Weber suggests, then it would seem to resemble what Aristotle also calls a “heap” or a “hodgepodge” (σωρός) (Aristotle, *Metaphysica*. Ed. W. Jaeger. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1957 (1044a4).), that is, the referent so manifestly lacks any substantial unity that it cannot even counted as a “one,” i.e., with any amount of discreteness. It is my suspicion that Sam Weber’s particularly misconstrued presentation of Benjamin’s theory of constellations seems to result from an injudicious mapping of Adorno’s use of constellations in *Negative Dialectics* back onto Benjamin. In that text, Adorno deliberately adopts Benjamin’s metaphysical theory of constellations into a critical device for an expressly epistemological framework and framework, namely, a constellation of concepts, yet he does not once identify this as Benjamin’s own theory: “there is no step-by-step progression from the concepts to a more general cover concept. Instead, the concepts enter into a constellation. The constellation illuminates the specific side of the object, the side which to a classifying procedure is either a matter of indifference or a burden” (Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*. Trans. E.B. Ashton. New York, NY; Continuum, 2007 (162)).

result, one would do well to say that theory does not construct or concoct constellations, so much as it traces a constellation in the shifts and turns of the history absorbed in it. Nonetheless, that is not to minimize the labor of theory here: the task of theory is “to save the phenomena,” as Benjamin insists in his reading of Plato’s *Symposium* in the “Preface” to the *Trauerspiel* book.²⁵⁴ To save the phenomena thus means preserving them in the mix of the real mediation that binds and mutually realizes the idea and historical life as a constellation—indeed, it means showing the phenomena as the very points fixing that mediation for and in the constellation.

The “critical” task of philosophy of history in the theory of constellations, then, is not to show the all-encompassing identity of the “material content” of phenomena with the cognition of the laws determining their given appearance for thought, but the interpretation of the unity of fragmented phenomena through their truth-content in their historical *essence*, i.e., their aspirational link to and as the incomplete, not yet fulfilled content of the idea. This is what Benjamin means when he says in the letter to Rang that the ideas cannot appear as revelation would in the manifest “daylight of history,” but that they “shine only into the night of nature,” inasmuch as nature, here, as in the “Theological-Political Fragment,” refers to those stages of humankind that have become nature, past, and irrelevant vis-à-vis history’s persistence. The idea is not the goal of history’s becoming, but it does, nonetheless, emerge from that process of becoming as the question of making good on or redeeming that which fragments and falls into irrelevance vis-à-vis history’s persistence. So, putting aside for a moment the issue of the presentation of the schema-like images of the empirical to catch and reflect the idea, as explaining that is the work of the “Erkenntniskritische Vorrede,” a decisive dialectical

²⁵⁴ OTD 33 /UT 16.

relationship aspires to intercede here between the aspects of completeness and incompleteness that critically holds the key to the metaphysical import of constellations.

Constellations depend upon and realize a dialectical configuration of completeness and incompleteness in the idea. The exceptional, intra-historical moment of the idea, on the one hand, emerges from the phenomena themselves as a result of their fragmented, empirical dispersal that leaves the claim of their truth content under duress in the godforsaken, historical world, such that the claim of that truth-content is itself a wager against their irrelevant, fragmented completeness or pastness vis-à-vis the present. The claim of their truth-content thus should convey them to the ongoing or incomplete problem of their essence (*Wesen*) in history, that is, as it emerges in and conditions some present.²⁵⁵ In this way, on the other hand, the idea of the completeness or happiness of past phenomena renders what was sealed as both unfulfilled and completed—historical phenomena—open to a chance to be otherwise in the truth content of their *essential* being and thereby a chance for what is historically incomplete or missed—happiness itself—a possibility for fulfillment or redemption, even if only as a fragmented possibility amidst the transient totality of historical life in the manifest absence of any judgment of history itself. The dialectical entwining of completeness and incompleteness saturating and relating the two sides of both the phenomena and the idea thus stands at the center of the philosophical problem in Benjamin's "Erkenntniskritische Vorrede."

²⁵⁵ Benjamin uses the term *Wesen* throughout the *Erkenntniskritische Vorrede*, so it is worth noting that, much like how the Latinate English term "essence" directly derives from the Latin verb "to be," *esse*, *Wesen* also retains an emphatic etymological connection to the German verb, "having been," *haben gewesen*. In this way, the philosophical question of essence or *Wesen*, for Benjamin, already clearly implicates a question of *that which has been*, such that to answer for a historical *Wesen* or, literally, "the past" means answering for the relation in question of *what has been* and *what is*. Since the English term essence still retains an affinity with this dynamic in the German, I use the term "essence" to translate *Wesen*, which in other philosophical contexts might just as well be translated into English as "being," "nature," or "substance."

As Benjamin announces in the first lines of the “Erkenntniskritische Vorrede,” since all philosophical doctrine is always rooted in and relies upon its “historical codification,” “it must continually confront the question of presentation (*Darstellung*).”²⁵⁶ There, already, a gulf intervenes between the labor of theory, namely, presentation (*Darstellung*), and what it is that theory strives to present, that is, doctrine in its once and for all “finished form” (*abgeschlossene Gestalt*).²⁵⁷ The fact that philosophical contemplation is tasked with presentation in the crux of its historical codification, that there is this perennial, enduring gulf set between it and its object, then, shows the disrupting and dislocating effects of a godforsaken historical world: *things* remain constantly in motion or embroiled in historical processes of what Schlegel would simply call fragmentation. Contemplation, therefore, is compelled to accept that it, too, remains affected and is thereby punctured by history. Contemplation must adopt not only its object’s but also its own “historical codification,” since, as Benjamin argues, “it does not lie within the power (*Gewalt*) of mere thought to confer such completeness (*Abschlossenheit*) on [doctrine],” that is, thought is not what determines the “finished form of doctrine,” untouched by history’s vicissitudes, or what Benjamin also calls “revelation” in the letter to Rang.²⁵⁸ For this reason, theory must take on the task of presentation as one that essentially implicates philosophy of history, so as to show how that which undergoes change continues to connect to that which is other than it, i.e., the enduring aspirational truth claim in the idea.

The inner perfection of the idea itself belongs to its semblance character that gains appearance through the folding together and mutual reflection of the totality of the truth content

²⁵⁶ OTD 27 – modified trans./UT 9.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

claims from phenomena. In this, the whole of the idea radiates in the unity of that aspirational claim from phenomena to be otherwise than their given historical appearances of irrelevance and fragmentation. The idea as such, therefore, contains and preserves the index as to how each past phenomenon ought to be or might be altered in its pastness. It follows from this exactly, then, how it is that the idea effects a unity of historical time, namely, as a unity of its truth content: the idea is a unity of a historical time both other than and arising from the one given. While the idea is complete in and of itself as an idea *of* that which changes and fragments, the idea is, nonetheless, also incomplete *in history*, in its essential being, or, as Benjamin says in the letter, that it shows only in “a night of nature that awaits no day”—to mark that shine and not to let it squander in the night is the charge of theory in the contemplation of the idea. If presentation, then, is the presentation of the mediation between the two spheres in the midst of its changing codification, insofar as the mediation would include the structure of historical codification, then the goal of presentation is not the incorporation of phenomena or even the idea itself into consciousness via the concept, yet, all the same, it would be confounding to think that presentation could do without concepts.

One of the most crucial distinctions that Benjamin draws in the “*Erkenntniskritische Vorrede*,” if not the decisive distinction, develops between the use of concepts for cognition and the use of concepts for the presentation of the ideas. This distinction, for Benjamin, must bring into focus how thought deploys concepts vis-à-vis phenomena, that is, whether the concept is employed to comprehend the order of the material content of the phenomena as they appear (in experience) or to unlock their aspirational element uniting them in their claim to be otherwise than they appear. Both employments require the use of concepts—as, Benjamin seems to acquiesce, thought always does for the sake of any determinacy whatsoever—such that the issue

of the use of concepts, again, is no heuristic, but an issue located at and, perhaps, breaking the metaphysical limitations of conceptual determinacy itself:

Truth, made present in the roundelay of the presented ideas, escapes any kind of projection into the realm of cognition. Cognition is a possessing (*Erkenntnis ist ein Haben*). Its very object is determined by the fact that it must be taken possession of – even in a transcendental sense – in consciousness. The ownership character (*Besitzcharakter*) remains. [...] For cognition, method is a way of acquiring its object – even by generating it in consciousness – whereas, for truth, the presentation of it is given with it and therefore as form [to a content]. Unlike the methodology of cognition, this form does not appertain to the coherence of consciousness, but to a being (*einem Sein*). Again and again the statement that the object of cognition is not identical with the truth will prove itself to be one of profoundest claims of philosophy in its original form, the platonic theory of the ideas.²⁵⁹

Benjamin's insistence that cognition operates in order to possess or to own phenomena revolves, in short, around the epistemological claim to identity. Here, identity in the epistemological register does not merely mean that thought can fashion itself adequate to a phenomenon in its outward appearance, but that the phenomenon's appearance is conditioned by thought itself, hence the character of "ownership." In that particular sense, Benjamin states, identity is the definitively cognitive operation of concepts in general. Concepts intend to demonstrate that nothing in or a part of experience itself is ineffable or beyond the power cognition, since cognition "sets up" or conditions experience to the very extent that it is determinate. And, surely, Benjamin does not suppose to be setting out altogether new ground, here. Rather, the point is to reposition a kernel of truth already in Kant's Copernican turn. That is, cognition is a possessing insofar as its philosophical question remains one of the conditions operative in the immanence of thought that autonomously fixes that immanence with rules governing experience, such that experience can be clarified for and by itself as more than a merely ineffable immediacy (even if ineffable aspects remain at the extremes of this transcendental *methodos*, viz.,

²⁵⁹ OTD 29-30 – modified trans./UT 11

spontaneity at the inner limit of a determinable source of experience and the ideas delineating the outer limits of experience's self-legislating justification in the world). As a result, in the case of the cognitive or the "identity" use of concepts, the spontaneous and ever immanent coherence of thought is the guiding presupposition of every possible conceptual synthesis and, furthermore, every possible conceptual synthesis iterates the prevailing coherence of consciousness as the yardstick of experience.

When Benjamin thus returns to Plato to insist that the object of cognition—even with and because of its Copernican turning—is never identical to the question of the truth of phenomena, that occurs in explicit and direct response to the admission that the prevailing objective of cognition still remains the object's identity in and with consciousness. The objective of asking "what is true," on the contrary, refers specifically to the *being* of phenomena, not in the total absence of thought, yet this question of truth must at least bracket the introjection of phenomena into the *a priori*, synthetic character of concepts that hold together and (self-)legislate the immanence of experience. In other words, the nature of the philosophical questioning of truth has as its referent not the object in the consciousness of it, but the object in its being, inasmuch as the truth of *that being alone conditions the capacity for it to be otherwise than it is given*. The coherence of such a thought requires an appeal to the ideas, because the idea is, in short, the idea of the coherence of truth in its being. So, insofar as thought and being are *not* ontologically identical—that the cognitive instance of their identity is possible or only meaningful because they are not the same *thing*—thought, therefore, does not authoritatively or exclusively condition the power of phenomena to be otherwise than they are given, such that the truth of that thought must be located and thereby rescued in the aspirational unity of the idea. Ideas are, therefore, simply and ineliminably necessary for thought to think being, for Benjamin, *because and for the*

sake of their non-identity. Here, then, the evidently metaphysical claim surfaces in the thought of the idea, for which the presentation of the idea is responsible.

If the presentation of the ideas is not a question of the cognitive identity of phenomena with the consciousness of them but the place and meaning of phenomena as they participate in an idea, then the issue of “truth” should not be construed as the truth of phenomena divested of and unformed by thought, i.e., the issue of incorporating or expressing some ‘thing in itself’, but, instead, an issue of thinking the unity of phenomena through a medium other than the epistemological claim of identity, that is, the idea as a medium for “that part of the object” left out of the claim of identity, as Rolf Tiedemann argues in his reading of Benjamin.²⁶⁰ So, once again, concepts do prove necessary for the thought of the idea and its presentation, just not for the sake of demonstrating the identity of appearances with the pure, determining power of consciousness over experience; rather, in the mode of the presentation of ideas, thought requires concepts in order to unlock and rescue *how* phenomena participate in the ideas:

Phenomena do not, however, enter the realm of ideas in their crude empirical state, which is mixed with illusion (*Schein*); rather, they are saved only through their elements. They are divested of their false unity, so that, thus divided, they participate in the genuine unity of truth. In this, their division answers to concepts, for it is the latter which fulfill the resolution of entities into their constituent elements.”²⁶¹

Phenomena do not and cannot dissolve into the ideas while persisting at the level of their empirical reality. Indeed, if phenomena were to be dissolved into the idea from their “crude” or “raw” empirical state, the present theory of ideas would not be one of constellations, but a theory where the idea conditions the existence of phenomena as such, rather than unifying and

²⁶⁰ Rolf Tiedemann, *Studien Zur Philosophie Walter Benjamins*. Frankfurt am Main, DE: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1973 (36).

²⁶¹ OTD 33 – modified trans./UT 15.

making explicit the claim of their truth content. Since the idea is not the unity or identity of appearances as they appear or as they exist, the unity of their aspirational claim—the truth content of phenomena as they would or ought to be—must, therefore, be lifted or divided from the “crude state” of phenomena so as to be “saved” or preserved in the idea. And, it is because the idea is as ideally complete or perfect in its claim of an otherwise as it is, at the same time, materially incomplete or immaterialized in history that theory must avail itself of concepts to isolate the elements of that otherwise languishing in phenomena among their “false unity” or the merely empirical pastness of the past or completed phenomena. In this way, the task of theory in the presentation of the ideas is, as Benjamin quotes Plato, “to save the phenomena” (τὰ φαινόμενα σώζειν) from their false unity and to redeem their aspirational unity in the idea, which cuts along the lines of the “material elements in the concept” of phenomena, such that, according to Benjamin, the ideas furnish “the objective interpretation of phenomena.”²⁶² The role of concepts in the presentation of the ideas, then, is to distinguish between that which is informed by the semblance of their “false” or merely historical, empirical unity and that which is aspirational and admits of being otherwise than it appears, for this latter claim is indexed, again, not to the coherence of consciousness, but to the internally perfected coherence of the idea as the idea of a fulfilled completeness or happiness. Presentation must, therefore, be the presentation of the historically variant mediation at play and absorbed in the specific, scientific concepts employed to distinguish between the empirical unity of phenomena that gives rise to the claim of their truth content—namely, the claim to be otherwise, to be fulfilled in the claim that their power to be otherwise is not dependent upon *what is* but the idea itself—and the timeless unity of that truth content itself in the idea, such that one could, as Benjamin does, call the idea the

²⁶² OTD 34/UT 16.

“objective” (*objectiv*) interpretation or “representation” (*Repräsentation*) of phenomena, insofar as the objectivity of the representation is the historically incomplete and, yet, enduring being of the idea.²⁶³

The constellation of the phenomena as the shine of the idea’s unity in its being thus depends upon and requires the labors of theory to unlock how it is that phenomena participate incompletely in the internally complete idea and to present the incomplete being of the idea through the material elements of completed or past phenomena absorbed in the concepts of those phenomena. That means the contemplation of the ideas is, in short, the labor of theory, inasmuch as contemplation cannot take effect or mean anything without the attending presentation of the idea. Presentation thus accomplishes a dynamic act of rescue, as Benjamin insists: “the saving of the phenomena is fulfilled through the idea, [as] the presentation of the idea in the medium of the empirical is fulfilled,” such that “the universal is the idea.”²⁶⁴ This is the crowning claim in Benjamin’s presentation of the theory of constellation in the preface to the *Trauerspiel* book, namely, that ideas are themselves the universals, because they hold together and are the context itself of both the possible fulfillment of empirically real phenomena and the medium in which their power to be otherwise than they appear becomes reflected and accessible through the presentational labor of theory. The arresting of the idea in and through its presentation thus includes the lifting of phenomena out of their contingent, irrelevant, finished pastness and relays them to the being in which their truth content gains an appearance, the totality of which is the universal purchase of the idea as an idea of completeness and in relation to which the fragmented fulfillment of discrete phenomena becomes both intelligible and possible. This universal aspect

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Ibid – modified trans.; OTD 35 – modified trans./UT 17.

of the idea in general is brought to the fore in the idea as the unifying medium for the reflection of the aspirational truth content of phenomena, such that what is universal in every idea is the very idea of happiness or fulfillment. As a result, the idea gains appearance, or its shine, as nothing other than the constellation of the truth content of the material aspect of phenomena, that is, their claim to be otherwise than they appear. The constellation thus saves the phenomena through its linking of them to and in the idea as an idea of their happiness, such that all ideas, inasmuch as they would live up to and make good on Benjamin's argument for its universality, must implicate and involve the idea of happiness in that part of past phenomena that persists in being. The contemplation of the ideas is, therefore, not an alternative to cognition nor can it dispense with the need to borrow concepts from cognition for its own end. Yet, contemplation, as the work of the idea's presentation, is distinct from cognition, insofar as in cognition "the process of abstraction remains incomplete," as Tiedemann argues, in the sense that the being of phenomena in their historically mediated becoming is bracketed from the cognitive question of their *conceptual lawfulness*, whereas in contemplation, for Benjamin, the task of presentation is exactly "to establish the becoming of phenomena in their being," and therein to preserve in that presentation the claim of how they might be otherwise than they appear, as that very being is the object of contemplation.²⁶⁵ The presentation of a constellation, that which unifies the truth content of phenomena in relation to one another through the persistence of those relations in their historically essential being, stands as the presentation of how phenomena ought be, that is, from the standpoint of redemption. In this, the presentation of how phenomena might be otherwise through the idea is their only claim to universality in being, for Benjamin, that rises beyond the suspicion of seeking the cognitive possession or capture of universality.

²⁶⁵ Tiedemann, *Studien zur Philosophie des Walter Benjamins*, 36; OTD 47.

II. Universal History and Happiness in *On the Concept of History*

In what was likely Walter Benjamin's last completed work, the essay *On the Concept of History*, Benjamin takes up his theory of constellations as it specifically relates to and, presumably, operates as the methodology of his "materialist" philosophy of history. Throughout that essay and its "Parlipomena," which is a manuscript containing Benjamin's relevant notes and a series of proposed amendments to or withdrawn contents from the essay, Benjamin repeatedly comes into open conflict with universal history as a theory of history in an apparent stark opposition to the one he is setting out there. For example, in the last paragraphs of *On the Concept of History* itself, Benjamin wagers an outright, generalized attack on theories of universal history, declaring: "[h]istoricism rightly culminates in universal history. [...] Universal history has no theoretical armature (*Armatuur*). Its procedure (*Verfahren*) is additive: it musters a mass of data to fill homogeneous, empty time. Materialist historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle."²⁶⁶ This coupling undoubtedly amounts to a counter-intuitive portrayal of universal history and historicism, too. Surely, most adherents of historicism would and did abjure the philosophical theory of universal history—for example, both Herder and Ranke maintained a rather critical distance from universal history. Historicism, following Ranke's dictum, would maintain that *all epochs are equally close to God* and that the Enlightenment notion of a progress toward some universal(izing), rational end is just that, namely, a wide-eyed Enlightenment 'theory'. For Ranke, the arch historicist, it is theory that foists its unresolved problem of universality onto history, whereas the authentic task of history

²⁶⁶ Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History." *Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1940*. Eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2006 (396). (Hereafter, OCH.)

originally belongs to and terminates in the question, “wie ist eigentlich gewesen?”²⁶⁷ A theory of universal history, in sharp contradistinction, would argue that a theory of history becomes necessary because of the manifest gulf between history as it appears and the absent achievement of universality, whereby the claim to universality holds the key to understanding something *more* about history than is given in its wanting, fragmented, or unfulfilled appearances. In short, historicism would argue historical appearances are just as they ought to be, whereas universal history would argue for an otherwise with specific reference to the aspirational claim of historical universality. And, nonetheless, Benjamin forces together these two diametrically opposed philosophical positions as equally far from the “constructive principle” (*konstruktiv Prinzip*) operative in his “materialist historiography,” namely, constellations. Yet, with a surprising turn in the “Parlipomena” to *On the Concept of History*, Benjamin advances these lines of rescue intended for universal history specifically:

Only in the messianic realm does a universal history exist.

The idea of universal history is a messianic idea.²⁶⁸

How, then, should we understand the place of universal history for Benjamin’s argument in *On the Concept of History* and why is it that the idea of historical universality would escape universal history’s fateful pairing with historicism only in its assignment to the messianic sphere alone?

While Benjamin repudiates universal history particularly with respect to its “procedure,” or the method of its theoretical justification, that is, concerning the deployment of progress as a

²⁶⁷ “How was it actually?” Leopold von Ranke, *The Secret of World History: Selected Writings on the Art and Science of History*. Ed. Roger Wines. New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 1981 (57).

²⁶⁸ Walter Benjamin, “Parlipomena to *On the Concept of History*.” *Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1940*. Eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2006 (404, 405).

justificatory claim for history as it appears, at the same time, he evaluates the idea of historical universality as a messianic idea. This assignment of the idea of universal history to the messianic must depend upon the idea as nothing other than the holding out of a medium through which historical universality would emerge as a standpoint for redemption vis-à-vis the historically persisting truth content of historical appearances. So, carrying forward the results from the above reading of the “Preface” to the *Trauerspiel* book, namely, that the theory of constellations means all ideas are ideas through their connection to and preserving of the idea of happiness, it would seem that the idea of universal history becomes salvageable only to the extent that its idea is the idea of the happiness of historical phenomena alone and that it is thereby held in strict, uncompromising division from any justification of the motivations and conflicts in the given, profane existence of the historical world as Benjamin argues in the *Theological-Political Fragment*. In the profane order of the profane existence of historical life, the suffering that languishes in the irrecoverable pastness and downfall of historical time must be evaluated as simply unjustifiable, such that, in response, the idea of a universal happiness of phenomena becomes their prostrate appeal to the messianic from that godforsaken world. To promote the redemption of that aspirational element or promise sealed in the idea of a complete, historical universality is theory’s charge, for Benjamin, and the responsibility borne throughout *On the Concept of History*.

Yet, the reappearance of this strict division between the internally perfect idea from the messianic sphere and the profane, past historical time, once again raises the question of how the ideas actually relate to that profane existence of phenomena on the issue of their intra-historical redemption, for Benjamin. In other words, if the idea of universal history belongs exclusively to the messianic sphere and redemption takes place intra-historically amidst the fragmented remains

of the godforsaken world, how would the idea as a constellation of truth content claims aid or promote redemption among the lackluster, profane, historical existence of phenomena?

Benjamin's answer to this question in *On the Concept of History* brings the meaning of historical universality as happiness full circle, namely, the connection of idea to phenomena is the entire issue of how theory secures the promise of meaning in history. The thought of happiness is only justifiable, for Benjamin, as that claim from the truth content of phenomena to partake in and fill out the idea of their own fulfillment, namely, the claim sealed in the internally perfect idea of historical universality. This relation alone provides for the claim to meaning in history, which becomes the object of redemption—that which is to be redeemed—in the intra-historical context of the “weak messianic power” that Benjamin isolates in *On the Concept of History*. That specifically intra-historical moment of Benjamin's notion of “weak messianism,” whereby the past confers the power of its redemption on the living, comes to light through the labor of theory, namely, the presentation of the idea. The possible changes in that constellation, whether it be via the redemption that lifts historical time into the shine of the idea or further fragmenting diremption, points to what Benjamin had called “origin” (*Ursprung*) in the preface to the *Trauerspiel* book and what he calls “shocks” to a constellation in *On the Concept of History*. Benjamin thus makes two decisive moves concerning universal history in the *Concept of History* essay, the first of which is to drive a wedge into the theory of universal history by aligning its “method” with historicism, after which the idea of universal history can be rescued in its specifically messianic valence: the idea of that intra-historical context that opens up an infinite array of hopeful lines connecting the past to present in the moment of redeeming their possible fulfillment or happiness, i.e., the moment of an intra-historical, weak messianic power.

If the “method” of universal history should prove problematic, as Benjamin insists, that must ultimately come down to the means with which it would relate the historical world to the idea of historical universality. Whether the idea of universal history attaches itself to historicism or to the “constructive principle” of Benjamin’s “materialist historiography” is, therefore, determined by either the employment or rejection of progress in *On the Concept of History*. On that basis, in the “Parlipomena,” Benjamin prepares three major points of attack against “historicism” that he intends to affect with his critique of progress in *On the Concept of History*: the first of these he simply names as the notion of a “universal history” itself without so much as a single hint of disambiguation between it and historicism; the second follows from that as the “epic moment” of historicism’s abstract contextualization of history itself, which very much resembles the problems locked in Lukács’ “novel form” of historical unity; and the third is historicism’s pervasive “empathy with the victory,” which ultimately concerns the normative claim that historical appearances *should be just as they appear* and thereby the issue of justifying the violence involved in all the empirical or social processes shaping given appearances.²⁶⁹ Suffice it to say, none of these three points would appear to catalogue the traditional self-understanding of historicism as presented by Ranke or others. So, Benjamin’s notion of the problem of historicism is not without a touch of idiosyncrasy, as the elements brought together

²⁶⁹ The majority of the rather long passage from the “Parlipomena” runs thus: “This [criticism of progress] would threaten the three most important positions of historicism. The first attack must be aimed at the idea of universal history. Now that the nature of peoples is obscured by their current structural features as much as by their relationships to one another, the notion that the history of humanity is composed of peoples is a mere refuge of intellectual laziness. [...] the second fortified position of historicism is evident in the idea that history is something which can be narrated. In a materialist investigation, the epic moment will always be blown apart in the process of construction. The liquidation of the epic moment must be accepted, as Marx did when he wrote *Capital*. He realized that history of capital could be constructed only within the broad, steel framework of a theory. [...] The historical construction is dedicated to the memory of the anonymous.—The third bastion of historicism is the strongest and the most difficult to overturn. It presents itself as ‘empathy with the victor.’ The rulers are at any time the heirs of all those who have been victorious throughout history. Empathizing with the victor invariably benefits those currently ruling” (Benjamin, “Parlipomena,” 406).

here certainly seem far more expansive than traditional conceptions of historicism.²⁷⁰

Nonetheless, the key to their unity is this: the alliance of historicism and the fateful part of universal history meet in a justificatory narrative of the given social processes of history, i.e., those processes bolstering the “victors,” that Benjamin evaluates as the supposed ‘epic’ of progress.

Progress, for Benjamin, functions as a normative claim *imposed on* historical appearances, namely, that they ought to be just as they appear. The nature of this claim as an *imposition* demonstrates that it must belong to something other than the past in its downfall—it belongs, instead, to the present in a state of abstraction, that nothing more than their pastness needs to be said of past phenomena. As a result, Benjamin’s critical reflections on historicism will effect an unexpected repurposing of the conventional criticism against it, that is, its pitfall of relativism: no matter how far “historicism” may go to justify the supposed rightfulness of the given as history’s result and, therefore, as the truth of what ought to be historically, it can only do so while simultaneously capitulating to the total relativization of the truth content of particular, historical phenomena. For, if the process is *rational*, the result is thereby always *right*—in this way, the victor’s champion depends upon *retrospectively* affirming the empirical causality of history’s social processes as “rational,” which is, in turn, supported by *the fact* of the given result. The consequence of this is the loss of any particular claim from past historical time persisting in a historically relevant problem or essence, such that (historical) time in general collapses as a medium for the reflection of tensions in historical problems. Historical time

²⁷⁰ As Fredrick Beiser notes, the most basic and unifying goal of the German historicist tradition is the assumption the study of history should attain the cognitive status of a science, even if most historicists disagree about the exact methodological underpinnings justifying that scientific status—for example, whether that method upholds naturalist or anti-naturalist commitments further complicates the particular account of historicism. See: Frederick C. Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015 (6-9).

becomes untethered from the self-recognition of progress and time itself is detemporalized as a vacuous and empty thing. The nature of progress's claim thus becomes an epic without form, an idea without structure, and a justification without a purpose beyond itself. To understand Benjamin's evaluation of this devastating alliance between historicism and universal history, each of Benjamin's three component parts of the historicist "method" of universal history require further explanation in opposition to his use of a "constructive principle," namely, constellations, in *On the Concept of History*, which works to save the messianic character of the idea of historical universality.

The first point of intersection identifying this peculiar alliance of historicism with universal history in "method," according to Benjamin, is likely recognizable as the popular reading of universal history and it also bears striking similarity to the version that Kant provisionally invokes in *Conflict of the Faculties*, that is, the notion of a universal history of "peoples," who historically rise above their particular divisions and come together to realize some unifying, homogenous *cultural* achievement. Though, as Benjamin explicitly notes in a fragment from the *Arcades*, Kant himself declined to advance "culture" as such a single, unifying end of history's progress, such that one might instead recognize the sign of romanticism in the narrowing of historical universality down to an achievement of "culture," wherein the end is a retrospective justification of all past strivings as past or overcome, as was seen particularly in the case of Schiller's notion of universal history.²⁷¹ Benjamin addresses this legacy of the narrowing

²⁷¹ "Simmel touches on a very important matter with the distinction between the concept of culture and the spheres of autonomy in classical Idealism. The separation of the three autonomous domains from one another preserved classical Idealism from the concept of culture that has so favored the cause of barbarism. Simmel says of the cultural ideal: 'It is essential that the independent values of aesthetic, scientific, ethical ... and even religious achievements be transcended, so that they can all be integrated as elements in the development of human nature beyond its natural state.' Georg Simmel, *Philosophie des Gelds* (Leipzig, 1900, pp. 476-477" (Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2002 (480 [N14, 3])). Benjamin sees it as a

of universal history into a single, self-justifying end of progress in aphorism XIII of *On the Concept of History*, stating:

[progress] was, first of all, progress of humankind itself (and not just advances in human ability and knowledge). Second, it was something boundless (in keeping with an infinite perfectibility of humanity). Third it was considered inevitable—something that automatically pursued a straight or spiral course. Each of these assumptions is open to criticism. But when the chips are down, criticism must penetrate beyond these assumptions and focus on what they have in common. The concept of mankind’s historical progress cannot be sundered of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time. A critique of such a progression must underlie any criticism of the concept of progress itself.²⁷²

Here, we see Benjamin clarifying the theoretical consequences latent within his claim that the method of progress retains no “armature” or skeletal structure, such that its only operation is to amass mere *data*—literally, that which is given—and to marshal examples from the given in order to fill up the empty time it confronts in history. Progress works much like a ‘rabbit from a hat’ trick in the sense that, following the old magician’s adage: there’s no trick to pulling a rabbit from a hat, the trick is getting one in there. So, too, is there no elaborate trick when taking “progress” out of the hat to justify any given historical state of affairs relative to past ones—there are always victories to locate and to recite among the living. If progress is shown to be *real*, the invocation of its very existence is the single, inductively generalized justification for *all* previous

resistance on Kant’s part to reject the dissolution of specific historical tensions into a single, leveling aim for all of theory and history to be deposited into, as if such an end would do anything other than justify hitherto historical fragmentation as rightful. Of course, the one place that Kant does employ such an aim of culture is in §83 of *The Critique of the Power of Judgment*, yet steps have already been taken in the first section of chapter three to differentiate that conversation of moral agency in history from matters of philosophy of history or historical universality itself. In addition, that section of the third *Critique* is still operating within the (he)autonomous domain of judgment, into which the object of history does not quite so easily integrate or dissolve. That difference in Kant between history and the faculty of judgment is brought into sharp relief by the way that, contrary to Kant, Schiller explicitly invokes an a single unifying, historical end of culture for a model of historical universality, after which all the violence—whether, in his case, explicitly racist or not—of progress becomes justifiable and right (see the first part of chapter four for this reading of Schiller).

²⁷² OCH 394-5.

appearances as they appear. Benjamin, of course, unequivocally rejects any such historical “reality” of progress, which is not to deny that past progress might have taken place with regard to specific applications of “ability” or “knowledge,” as Benjamin notes above. Rather, it means denying progress’s *historical reality* as something that would actually structure historical occurrences or happenings, that is, as if the feats of past progress were somehow to arise *historically* to condition the possibility of history in general, which rightly seems a confused notion about the (non-)metaphysical status of progress.²⁷³ Consequently, the “filling-in part” of the given is where the trick must take place, that is, in the application of (empirical) examples to sustain a normative claim, namely, that there ought to be progress on the basis of past progress. Benjamin thus points the operations of the trick in making progress in all cases proper to humanity as such, such that progress must be as boundless and unlimited as the abstract potential for humanity to grow beyond and negate past appearances, and that the seed of this feat is preserved, if by no other means, in the negation of the given. It cannot matter for Benjamin, therefore, if this progress is abstractly contextualized as either specifically moral or technical. For, if progress were *real* historically, it would presuppose and require the achievement of its end, namely, a fulfilled humanity, in order to begin.

²⁷³ In aphorism XIII, Benjamin begins by framing the concept of progress in question here as one that “does not refer to reality, but to a dogmatic claim instead” (OCH, 394—modified trans.). The English translation, here, significantly plays down the sharpness of Benjamin’s point. Where the translation reads that this concept of progress “bore little relation to reality” Benjamin in fact states that it *lacks* a relation to reality (*Wirlichkeit*), and that it, instead, refers itself to something else. Benjamin does not say that the something else is “dogmatic claims” in the plural, as if to suggest any sort of dogmatic claim out there would work *in general*, but to *one* dogmatic claim (*Anspruch*) in the singular, which Benjamin then expounds throughout the rest of aphorism, namely, that progress would move through history without accumulating or having to answer for the stuff of history’s *real* or material tensions. This is a dogmatic claim because it amounts to the thought that no matter how high the rise of troubled and frustrated social tensions, no matter how destructive or disastrous, those tensions will never be reflected back into the conceptual logic that entails their disaster—this is the “high price” one pays for a “stubborn belief in progress” that Benjamin points to in aphorism X (OCH, 393).

To move beyond those historicist assumptions or generalizations, for Benjamin, means to cut to the core that sustains them, that is, it entails looking at *what is* in order to understand how the historicist articulation of progress functions. What is peculiar to the account of progress is the notion of ahistorical contents being transferred throughout and across historical occurrences or moments. The account of progress—as an account of the end before the end—is forced to dictate the right state of affairs in its incipient emergence against the wrong, such that progress requires antagonism for its very iteration in history. History must therefore become an amorphous, leveled plane, on which the same pieces can be arranged and rearranged until all the “treasures,” as Benjamin calls the objects of this cultural aim, can be collected together among the victorious. It is in this sense that Benjamin notes that “empathizing with the victors” must always simultaneously include the justification of all previous victories, that the history of the victors is in all cases the congratulatory history of the given—that nothing ought to be otherwise.²⁷⁴ The temporality of the history of the victors is of a single, vacuous ‘historical time’—in truth, such a temporality lacks and dispenses with historical time, which is by its very nature particular and socially specified in any present.

That Benjamin calls the matrix of this aggregate of contents in progress an “empty time” can be explained, following the analysis of the *Theological-Political Fragment* in the previous chapter, by the empty, irrelevance of historical time as the result of the de-formed, godforsaken world of transcendental homelessness. Yet, the sense of empty time, here, is even a bit more destructive than Lukács might have imagined, as it pertains not just to the disarticulation of form and content in historical life, but also to the utterly meaningless relationship of any one segment or unit of historical time in relation to any other. In other words, the problem of historicism must

²⁷⁴ OCH 391.

also presupposes that time as a medium for the reflection for historical life is irreversibly fragmented and broken, even if historicism does not take up that presupposition as active principle for its own operations. In the problem of empty time, then, we begin to see the full implications of the relativist presupposition about phenomena *in history*—the relativization of their relation to history—in the historicist model: “Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal nexus among various moments in history. But *no state of affairs having causal significance is for that very reason historical*. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years.”²⁷⁵ The only significance that phenomena can have for progress in history is a causal one, that is, whether or not phenomena function either positively or negatively to advance the antagonistic causes of progressive elements in history. Yet, as Benjamin incisively points out, if the contribution to elements of progress is the question of the meaningfulness of historical phenomena, then there is nothing historical about those phenomena. A causal decision entails the defeat of history, rather than its perpetuation, insofar as history is *nothing* without a question of perpetuity or persistence, that is, history is a fundamentally dynamic question of the past *and* its presence, or, even, the past *in* the specific, alternating durations of its presence. Progress as a question of historical causality annihilates the (intra-)historical question of history. As a result, no one moment in history could carry any specificity or specific meaning vis-à-vis the others for historicism, but each as *empty* as any other undifferentiated, and thereby mutually indifferent. Empty time means that time itself is no longer the very contraction of historical tensions folded up and atop one another, but the empty, abstract space of a plane over which the contents of history shuffle and pass by.

²⁷⁵ OCH 397—emphasis added.

In the historicist model, historical time attains no structure in the sense of no meaningful set of relations tethering form and content, such that it remains de-formed and irrelevant in the constant upheaval of the social processes of progress that repeat this mutual irrelevance between historical time and empirical, historical causality sealing that time's fate or downfall. Empty time, in this sense, cooperates with and even necessitates historicism's relativization of the truth content of phenomena, such that phenomena at any one moment are just as likely to promote positively or negatively and, ultimately, to dissolve into the unlimited, amorphous perfectability of a not yet existing human species without so much as a trace remnant of any specific element of that historical time, that is, without any anything of it that endures *historically*. This is what it means to call progress an epic without form, a justification without a purpose other than or beyond itself. The epic moment of historicism thus precipitates a second downfall for the past:

Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it 'the way it really was.' It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger. [...] The danger threatens both the content of the tradition and those who inherit it. [...] The only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious.²⁷⁶

The causality that stands-in for history becomes strictly "narritable," immaterial, and unchanging in the historicist shape of epic, such that historicism's image of the past is frozen in a single image of verse that tells of a 'historical' progress of ahistorical elements. Conversely, to articulate the past *historically* means capturing a specific image of the past as it rises into the present or, rather, its presence from the past. That, for Benjamin, makes all the difference between "appropriating a memory" as an internal, definitively historical connection of the past and *its* historically specific present as distinct from the present articulating dislocated, de-historicized past 'stories,' "the way it really was." The reception of that memory folded up in the

²⁷⁶ OCH, 391.

historically changing, transient image of the past is what would burst open and break free from the seal that historicism leaves on the past as past. The arresting of this essentially historical and, for that reason, transient memory entails, of course, not only the fate of historical contents but also those who would inherit that fate. The loss and decay of that memory—to miss the reception of that unique, fleeting image of the past in the moment of its historically transient presence—means a loss of the possibility for a *meaningful, historical relationship* altogether. Historicism is defined by its hardened, coldness of forgetting this memory and, in contrast, “the spark of hope in the past” can only gain definition through the labors of recovering that memory in the moment of its presence, which, for Benjamin, requires saving its place in the idea—and this is what it means to articulate the past *historically* in contradistinction to historicism.

For Benjamin to say that not even the dead would be safe if the chance is missed to kindle that spark of hope in the past is synonymous to saying that without the reception of that historically transient image of the past—an image filled with inherited memory—emerging in the present, the very intra-historical context in which redemption can become intelligible or apparent would dissolve and crumble. The loss of hope in the past means the past would lose out on its own definitively *historical* afterlife, namely, the endangered relevance of its truth content as one that continues to participate, repeat, and incompletely taking a place in the plainly historical world. The onus is, therefore, upon the present, the living, to take up the image of that which was missed, the past, in its repetition as missed and past, in order to save the hope that those fallen phenomena still might become otherwise in their historical persistence:

[t]he historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time takes a stand [*einsteht*] and has come to a standstill. For this notion defines the very present in which he himself is writing history. Historicism offers the “eternal” image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past.

He [the historical materialist] grasps the constellation into which his own era has entered a long with a very specific earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception [*Begriff*] of the present as now-time shot through with splinters of messianic time.²⁷⁷

The operation of theory in the present is one that ultimately determines the concept of the history in it, that is, theory either construes the present moment as one which “takes a stand” or one that is a “transition.” The notion of the present as such a transitional moment belongs to historicism, as every present moment becomes as indifferent to every other as it itself is empty, such that it does not rise above a merely causal codification into a clearly historical dynamic and concentration of time. For this reason, as stated previously, truth content—that semblance-like part of past phenomena that aspires to the present by virtue of the fact that its pastness predicates presence in general—is always relativized and scrambled in historicism’s image of the past. If time is to take a stand, on the contrary, that means the present must come to itself as a construction conditioned by that which is past and has passed. The construction of such a moment is not a presence in abstraction from that which is other than it, or one that relates to the past as an abstraction, but it is a present that breathes in the aspiration of its past as a conditioning of its being there, in a historically specified “now” of that historically persisting past. The labor of theory through which this concept of now-time would be utilized is, for Benjamin, that of presentation. Now-time is that specifically intra-historical context, wherein the stand that time takes is one that refuses and rebuffs the causal appearances of historical phenomena, so as to supply an experience, as Benjamin says, of history or the past as that which conditions history historically, where such an experience lacks—this experience is what theory’s work of presentation would save, but to make good on it would mean to redeem it in actuality. Thus what ultimately differentiates the use of Benjamin’s constructive principle from historicism

²⁷⁷ OCH, 396, 397.

is not just that it supplies a uniquely historical and historically specific experience of the past, but, moreover, it is the fact that it supplies an *experience* with the past at all, a communion with the dead otherwise barred by the godforsaken world.

It should, at this point, come as no surprise that throughout Benjamin's *On the Concept of History* that a profound and inexorable sense of peril surrounds the historical essence of historical phenomena, and that this demands that theory should work to save the phenomena from persisting in tatters or hopelessly fragmented. Of course, the place in this essay most often isolated as the cipher of that peril is the ninth aphorism on the image of "the angel of history." Rolf Tiedemann, in fact, goes so far to say that while the title Benjamin's essay would seem to promise us a veritable concept of history, we, instead, only get this perplexing image of "the angle of history" to decipher.²⁷⁸ While there is much to say about that image and many, including Tiedemann himself, have taken up its interpretation with great care, it nonetheless seems to be the case that Benjamin does supply a rather specific concept for history's interpretation by the end of the essay, namely, the concept of an intra-historical context of "now-time" (*Jetztzeit*), as it is made clear throughout the essay that this is the implementation of Benjamin's "constructive principle" as applied to the present, as opposed to the "empty time" of the present as a merely casual, transitional moment, which is upheld in the alliance between historicism and universal history. Surely "now-time" is not the kind of "concept of history" that would unlock the hidden, unrealized goal of a concealed origin, nor is it a concept that would bring together the totality of all historical concepts in a reconciled identity with some historical consciousness; rather, it is a concept of how the specific object of history, viz., the past, historically concentrates or folds and thereby gains the shine of a presence in the present. In

²⁷⁸ Rolf Tiedemann, "Historical Materialism or Political Messianism? An Interpretation of the Theses 'On the Concept of History.'" Trans. Barton Byg. *The Philosophical Forum*, XV, no. 1-2 (1983-84): 72.

other words, it is a concept that one would use to present the being of the past at the moment of its intra-historical intersection or contextualization in the present. As a result, this concept allows for theory to correct for the truth of the being of the past as it is *by nature*—that the past is the condition of the presence of the present as such—and a truth that nevertheless lacks *in experience*, namely, that in experience the past is simply past and its incompleteness has thereby passed into complete irrelevance. Theory must, therefore, construct the framework of that missing *historical* experience in need of redemption, for which an appeal to the idea proves necessary. And this shows, once again, the profound depth locked in Benjamin’s letter to Rang when he says that the ideas are the stars shining in the night of nature—the missed of what ought to be by nature—that awaits no daylight in history, that awaits no Judgment Day, no ultima, but persists in that night.

Benjamin’s turn to a decidedly “weak” messianism in *On the Concept of History* shows his consistent devotion to framing theory’s work to present the idea as one that simultaneously preserves the possibility of the redemption of happiness or fulfillment where it was missed *historically*, as was also seen last chapter in the reading of Benjamin’s *Theological-Political Fragment*. Since the presentation of the idea entails presenting the unity of the enduring truth-content of historical phenomena, the claim fixed in the truth-content of phenomena must provide the threads with which theory can draw up past phenomena from the ongoing, empirical, social processes wherein they remain caught-up in their own silence and historically repeat as unfulfilled. The hope in the past that Benjamin names as a “weak messianism” in the second aphorism is not a hope to reverse the irreversible fragmentation of historical time—as such a messianism would require some “revelation” to intervene in the godforsaken, historical world, which, as Benjamin notes in the preface to the *Trauerspiel*, thought alone does not retain or

attain that power to confer such a decision on its objects.²⁷⁹ Rather, weak messianism would only alter that fragmenting irrelevance that seals the incompleteness of the past as merely or completely past. Weak messianism is, therefore, unintelligible without the concept of now-time as that specially intra-historical context, but weak messianism also implicates something in the being of the past that goes beyond the presentational task of theory itself, namely, it calls for the redemption of what ought to be by nature and was missed historically, i.e., happiness:

the idea of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the idea of redemption. The same applies to the idea of the past, which is the concern of history. The past carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to redemption. Doesn't a breath of the air that pervaded earlier days caress us as well? In the voices we hear, isn't there an echo of now silent ones? [...] If so, then there is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Then our coming was expected on earth. Then like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim.²⁸⁰

Here is where Benjamin makes his only mention of weak messianism throughout *On the Concept of History*, and, yet, it is one that shows every subsequent mention or hint of redemption to presuppose the wrenching and explicit construction of such an emphatically *historical* moment of weak messianism. Benjamin is unambiguous, in addition, that the responsibility of this construction of now-time, through which weak messianism becomes articulable in the present, is theory's responsibility specifically, since it is the past that endows the present with this power, this power to answer for what was missed and thereby what ought to be redeemed. This is where the idea of historical universality shows its messianic nature for Benjamin, that is, insofar as the idea of historical universality is that idea of the complete fulfillment of a meaningful relationship from each, fragmented, past appearance to the whole, that is, it is an idea that explains what the

²⁷⁹ OTD 27/UT 9.

²⁸⁰ OCH 390.

fulfillment of happiness for the whole and thereby meaning for the particular should mean in history. And, since no revelation intervenes to correct what ought to be by nature and is missed in history, the fragmented and piecemeal persistence of the phenomena in the night of this nature can only “come together in a constellation in a single moment,” “in its ultimate form, as a moment of humanity.”²⁸¹

That happiness remains bound to redemption, for Benjamin, means committing to happiness as ontologically meaningful, that is, that it refers to and requires the fulfillment of some aspect of the being of phenomena (rather than a merely subjective, capricious thought). For Benjamin that aspect capable of being redeemed is just that part of past phenomena that repeats into the present, namely, their aspirational element to be otherwise than they are, to gain a meaningful historical fulfillment vis-à-vis that fulfillment or happiness that was missed. Redemption of the past, therefore, cannot do without a redemption of that missing, meaningful experience and internal connection between the past as the condition for the historical presence of the present—the claim the past makes on us, the living—but that decays and withers in the godforsaken world where the enduring aspect of historical phenomena languishes. There is, then, a decided “asymmetry,” to use the words of Richard A. Lee, Jr., between the past and present that precipitates the moment of their intersection, namely, the now-time of theory’s reception of the historically transient image of the past.

It is because of this asymmetry between the present and the past that the past can make a claim on the present in a way that the present cannot make on the past. What the past makes claim to is the “weak messianic power” that we have, because, Benjamin insists, our being on the earth was awaited. Here again we have a relation between past and present that is asymmetric. The fact that our being on the earth was awaited means that the past is a condition for our being. When, however, I trace the conditioned, that is, my being on the earth, back to its condition, the past, that is when I find any past moment as shot through with

²⁸¹ Benjamin, *Parlipomena*, 403.

perhaps infinite moments, any one of which could be. The traditional, at least since Kant, way to express this would be to say that what has a condition and therefore is conditioned, that I am on the earth, has a condition that, since shot through with infinite—or at least indeterminate—moments that could be future, must be unconditioned. That about which Benjamin seems most insistent here is that this fundamental asymmetry is the basis for both a claim the past has on me and a power I have, however weak, to redeem that past.²⁸²

Lee's reading of Benjamin's second aphorism in *On the Concept of History* gets to the heart of Benjamin's essential understanding of historical time that Benjamin carries from, at least, the *Trauerspiel* book forward, that is, that "historical time is infinite in every direction and unfulfilled at every moment."²⁸³ The downfall of the past, the history that has become fallen nature, to paraphrase Benjamin from the *Theological-Political Fragment*, is, without doubt, past, such that the incompleteness of its fulfillment was missed, and nothing can change that, especially in a godforsaken, plainly historical world. Nonetheless, since it remains past in a manifestly uncompleted manner, a specifically aspirational part of the object—not the whole, bare, empirical phenomenon—still endures, which Benjamin calls "truth-content." The truth content is the shine of what is passed over historically as incomplete and also dialectically implicates and becomes "the secret index" to that which persists as incomplete and unfulfilled in the present, i.e., happiness. It is this aspirational truth content rising from the merely empirical pastness of the past that spills onto the present as a condition of its being, such that the conditioning of the conditioned is invested with this claim to make good on the possibility for historical phenomena to be otherwise than merely or completely past or over, and irrelevant historically, namely, to correct for what ought to be by nature but is missed in the experience of the past fixed in the empty time of the godforsaken world.

²⁸² Richard A. Lee, Jr., *The Thought of Matter: Materialism, Conceptuality and the Transcendence of Immanence*. London, UK: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2015 (124-125).

²⁸³ Benjamin, *Trauerspiel and Tragedy*, 55.

The thought that the unfulfilled and covered-over phenomena repeat as such incompletely or continuously is matched only by the seemingly infinite possibility that also repeats to redeem them *historically*, that is, to make good on the weak messianic power for past phenomena to be fulfilled by a return of them into a meaningful, internal connection to the present as the presence their past conditions by nature. And if the pastness of the fallen historical time shoots out in infinite directions into the present, then the conditioning of that weak messianic power that defines the present of a historically specific and ontologically specifying past, then the conditioned is conditioned by the “unconditioned” itself, such that Benjamin here recovers how redemption brings together that infinite perfection internal to idea with the historically transient truth of the past. In the idea of historical universality, all can be saved or retained, but such a rescue does not transpire if the phenomena are left to the causal, divesting and forgetful effects of the social trappings in the present empirical processes wherein the past remains ensnared. Redemption, however, goes even one step further: redemption does not just trace the hopeful lines of the constellation of phenomena’s truth content in the moment of now-time, but it alters that constellation—it gives it a “shock,” as Benjamin says.²⁸⁴ Redemption redeems unfulfilled irrelevance of fallen historical phenomena for a new, meaningful relationship to its presence, i.e., the present, and in this way what was only as complete as it was missed and incomplete can be fulfilled.

For Benjamin, the idea of historical universality is messianic in that it is the idea of the fulfilled interconnection and unity of redeemed historical phenomena. The idea of universal history is, therefore, the constellation of historical time itself. The shine of happiness that the idea promises and expresses is squandered, if theory fails to respond to it with a presentation of

²⁸⁴ OCH, 396.

the constellation itself—to make good on such a response, I take it, was exactly the work that Benjamin saw himself advancing throughout the *Arcades Project* (and, perhaps, this helps to explain how *On the Concept of History* relates as a methodological excursus to that great, incomplete project of Benjamin’s). Theory’s labor of the idea’s presentation is such a work of preservation: a preservation of the weak messianic power of the living, and thereby a preservation of another time in that of the present that persists to make a claim on us, such that it is ultimately a preservation of the possibility of redemption of the phenomena in the shine of the idea itself. So, as long as that promise of happiness remains incomplete and repeats as such in history, the complete totality of happiness that the mutually reflecting shine of the constellation of historical time promises remains to be fulfilled in the theoretically clarified and presented moment of now-time. In this remains the messianic chance for the past to emerge anew into the present, even if it must be still piecemeal and fragmented in this godforsaken world, for Benjamin, that is, since only “a redeemed humankind [that] is granted the fullness of its past—which is to say, only for a redeemed humankind has its past become citable in all its moments.”²⁸⁵ That “citable” that would only be completed with the fulfillment of a redeemed humanity, again, takes theory back to the only place in which such a thought can be expressed, namely, the idea. For, where the task of empirical histories will always capitulate to the violently and haphazardly compelled coherence of given appearance, that is, “with arbitrarily elaborated causal chains,” the philosophy of history responds with an effort to rescue the fact that “history affords an idea of the fundamental citability of its object, this object must present itself, in its ultimate form, as a moment of humanity.”²⁸⁶

²⁸⁵ OCH, 390—modified trans.

²⁸⁶ Benjamin, *Parlipomena*, 403

Benjamin, not unlike Kant, thus finds the idea of historical universality to be messianic in that it alone retains the power to confer meaning where it otherwise lacks, that is, in history. The presentation of the idea is such an effort to light up those invisible, metaphysical, hopeful threads that knot together the past and the present in the promising moment of inheritance, the definitively historical moment, wherein the truth content of historical phenomena—in and despite their downfall—endures into and makes a claim on the presence of the present. In other words, that presence of *what is* historically, or, the historically present, signals the intra-historical context proper to the idea itself, because the idea is that reflective medium other than thought whose coherence is indexed not by and for thought itself, but the aspirational aspect of the object, namely, the weak messianic power absorbed in the layers of definitively historical traces shot through in the presence of the present or “now-time.” To be sure, this aspirational, ineluctably metaphysical coherence of the idea cannot and will not justify or reconcile the disputed accounts of the coherence concerning empirical history’s incoherence. Yet, just as Kant strove to make clear in the last thesis of the *Universal History* essay, that does not mean that one can think the idea of universal history, like the internal lawfulness of a concept, in separation from its content. The idea is a reflection of the content, of the downfall of historical appearances, specifically that part of them that endures against the grain of history’s persistence, that recurs as semblance, and that thereby aspires to be in some conditioned being otherwise than it appears. Thus, what was missed and remains incomplete in the pastness of the past returns in the shine of the idea to light up the otherwise empty expanse of the night, and in this the constellations array to signal not what ought to be the case come the demands set in daylight of history, the goal to come, etc., but to tell of that hope that lingers for those who were robbed and cheated out of it. In that moment, the idea stands-in for that which was missed, what ought

to be by nature and remains missed in experience, namely, the lacking meaningful relationship of each to the whole, the irrelevance of the downfall of the past vis-à-vis history's persistence, and over and against that breach the idea of historical universality stretches and extends the promise of a redeemed humanity.

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