



Benjamin Contra Kant on Experience: Philosophising beyond Philosophy

Philip Andrew Quadrio

Mystical experiences, daydreams, fantasies and hashish reveries all share a common bond. That bond is constituted by the fact that, *qua* experiences, they are considered by scientific modernity, to be of very low order - they present no facts, they uncover no truths - they are purely subjective experiences. They might be pleasant, they might be vital for the relief of stress and they might be personally meaningful, yet they do not contribute to the expansion of human knowledge about the world and so they are experiences which are seen to be of marginal value, they constitute the detritus of our age. Yet if their value is marginal then it is we moderns who have positioned them as such, we have devalued these forms of experience. So the question arises: What has been excluded through this devaluation? Further one might ask: How has our choice to devalue such experiences impacted upon human experience itself?

For Walter Benjamin the choice to value empirical consciousness¹ at the expense of such 'marginal' forms of consciousness has resulted in a decay of experience. This was a constant theme in Benjamin's philosophy - beginning with his early consideration of the Kantian account of experience and continuing on to his later work on Storytelling, on Baudelaire and into *The Arcades Project*. This essay is a consideration of Benjamin's early work on the Kantian account of experience but does not extend through to considering all aspect of Benjamin's philosophy of experience, which is well beyond its scope. This restriction to Benjamin's early programmatic pronouncements for a recasting of Kant means that some fundamental ideas in his philosophy of



experience, particularly his concern with the dissolution of community, will necessarily be excluded. By focusing on Benjamin's early writings on Kantian experience it is hoped that some light can be thrown on some of the themes which emerge in his later work. The interpretation of Benjamin that this essay presents is one which has grown out of an encounter with a broader range of Benjamin's writings. It is subject to the author's reception of Benjamin's work, mediated by the historical reception of that work in general, and influenced by an understanding of Benjamin as a critical thinker, one who sees philosophical critique as a tool for the transformation of social praxis. Hence, this essay is a reading of Benjamin that interprets his critique of the Kantian account of experience as having a vital social dimension - that Benjamin's consideration of Kantian epistemology is not merely theoretical but also practical.

The essay will proceed through four phases. Initially the discussion will involve rendering a brief summary of the core ideas presented by Kant in *The Critique of Pure Reason*. While it is recognised that any attempt to explicate Kantian theoretical philosophy in the space of a few paragraphs will necessarily result in a crudification of Kantian thought, it is, however, also necessary to provide some account of that philosophy in order to set a point of reference for the discussion which follows. It is hoped that the brevity of this summary will not do too much violence to Kant. Secondly, the discussion will move onto what Benjamin has to say in regard to the Kantian account of experience and a formulation of his program for a recasting of that account. Here the essay is dealing with the early Benjamin, Benjamin the Idealist and speculative metaphysician. It is hoped that the material discussed in this section will shed some light and provoke some interest in Benjamin's early



philosophical work, which to many readers may seem altogether different from the kind of philosophy which is encountered in his later work. Thirdly, a reading of Benjamin's essay 'The Doctrine of Similarity' will be given. However, this reading will be restricted to an examination of what Benjamin has to say about 'reading'. Here our examination will bring together the elements discussed previously and provide a working example for the exploration of Benjamin's critique of Kant. Lastly, the focus will return more specifically to Kant and to the critical dimension of Benjamin's work. It is this consideration which will lead to the conclusive point of the discussion - that Benjamin's reformulation of Kant aims at the emancipation of philosophy from a concept of experience which he considers has only served to limit and impoverish philosophical discourse, that a reformulation of the notion of experience necessitates a reformulation of our notion of philosophy - one that brings philosophy back into a vital relation with the life of culture.

1.

The Kantian account of experience, as presented in *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Prolegomena to Any future Metaphysics*, is based in a scientific understanding of the world. To be more precise Kant presents an understanding of the human experience of the world that, in its basic form, takes the physics of Newton to be the canonical account of how, *qua* phenomena, things are the way they are. The critical dimension of Kant's work in this regard is that he understands the knowledge claims generated by Newtonian science as generating phenomenal knowledge, or knowledge of appearances, and not of the 'things in themselves.' That is, Newtonian physics generates knowledge from the point of view of human consciousness. In the above mentioned works Kant's contribution is largely epistemological, serving to render an account of the



structure of human consciousness that makes possible the safe navigation of a course between the twin perils of scepticism and dogmatism.² This is achieved in Kant through locating the conditions of all knowledge of objects in the experiencing subject - an achievement that for Kant represents a 'Copernican' revolution in metaphysics.³ For Kant knowledge of the world must conform to subjective conditions rather than objective ones⁴ - objects are only objects for subjects - hence his epistemological endeavour consists in an analysis of the subjective conditions of knowledge and experience.

The structure of the Kantian account of experience is based on the relationship of three faculties: the faculty of sensibility, the faculty of understanding and the faculty of reason. It is these three faculties that define the bounds of human experience as well as defining what lies outside of those bounds. To understand the limits of experience and the nature of the Kantian account of experience more generally, one must understand the interaction between the faculty of sensibility and the faculty of understanding. In order to understand what lies beyond the bounds of experience one must understand the nature of the faculty of reason. The faculty of sensibility is a passive faculty which receives intuitions, the immediate data of experience;⁵ the faculty of the understanding is an active faculty which cognises these intuitions and brings them under conceptual determination. Without the intuitions of the sensibility the understanding is contentless, but without the concepts of the understanding sensibility is a buzzing flux of meaninglessness, or to quote Kant: "Thoughts [concepts] without content [intuitions] are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind."⁶



Kant's faculty psychology is further complicated by his discussion of the structure of sensibility and understanding, both of which have their own particular - *a prioristic* - conditions. The structure of sensibility is described according to the forms of intuition - space and time. The structure of the understanding is described according to the twelve categories of the understanding. The forms of intuition, space and time, are the *a priori*, or transcendental, forms of all empirical intuitions (sensations), and it is within these forms that all empirical intuitions are posited and ordered. All intuitions are structured in terms of these two forms - they are the conditions for the possibility of all intuition. They are not derived from any experience and are the pre-requisites of all experience - for Kant all experience is, *a priori*, spatio-temporal experience. Experience is just the understandings determination of spatio-temporal intuitions. Yet in order to determine the intuitions of sensibility the understanding must bring them under conceptual determination, it must be possible for the understanding to make universally and inter-subjectively valid judgements about those intuitions, so it too must have an *a prioristic* basis. This is described through the twelve concepts of the understanding - the categories - which are the *a priori* basis for all conceptual judgement, the conceptual conditions of all knowledge.⁷ The interaction between sensibility and the understanding is definitive for the Kantian account of experience, all experience is the understanding's conceptual determination of the intuitions of sensibility. All legitimate concepts arise through the understanding's determination of spatio-temporal intuitions, hence all experience is ordered in a strictly causal spatio-temporal nexus.

Humans also, however, seem to use concepts which have no spatio-temporal intuitions corresponding to them - God, freedom, the universe as a whole -



these are concepts for which there are no intuitive correlates, they are beyond the bounds of experience, they are concepts which can have no legitimate empirical employment. In the Kantian account these concepts are provided by the faculty of reason. For Kant the faculty of reason is a distinct and autonomous faculty that finds formal employment in syllogistic reasoning, it shows how knowledge is linked in such a way that certain pieces of knowledge follow from other pieces of knowledge in a chain of reasons. Such reasoning has two functions: a descending function which deduces conclusions from given premises - moving from the conditions to the conditioned; and an ascending function which moves from a given piece of knowledge to the conditions from which it is derived - moving from the conditioned to the conditions.

It is in the process of this ascending function that reason encounters the problem of an infinite regress of reason. It is possible that this syllogistic reasoning could continue indefinitely and without end, producing an infinite regress of conditions that would seem to undermine the very function of reason - to disclose the conditions of our judgements. The only way to stop this regress is to discover the unconditioned condition of all our judgements, an unconditioned totality - the absolute. Reason is forced to stave off the threat of the infinite by positing an absolute end or an absolute beginning of all that is knowable. The ideas of reason serve just this function, they are the unconditioned condition of all our judgements. Nevertheless, such conditions are beyond the bounds of experience and so it is impossible for us to legitimately form a concept of such unconditioned totalities. Hence, reason, in the realm of theoretical knowledge, can only serve a regulative function by orienting the progress of knowledge through the ideas. The ideas of reason



are completely beyond the bounds of experience, we can have no intuitive knowledge of them, they are pure postulates that only serve a regulative function, they can never be known - they can never be the object of experience. Kant produces a metaphysics of experience which is based on the presupposition that empirical consciousness is the sole realm of experience and the sole source of theoretical knowledge. Any metaphysics that moved beyond empirical consciousness were as the dreams of a spirit seer - a Swedenborgian fantasy.

2.1

The gain of the Kantian system is that it secures certain knowledge by situating the conditions of that knowledge in the subject. Yet this gain comes at a cost, we have to pay for it by giving over all knowledge of the non-empirical, thus abnegating any possibility for a speculative metaphysics, a metaphysics of the absolute. The gain of Kantianism cuts one adrift from all knowledge of absolute realities - but this is a price that not all are willing to pay. It is the desire for the certainty of the Kantian system coupled with an unwillingness to pay the price which that system demands that set the context for post-Kantian thought. In particular the philosophies of Fichte, Schelling, Hegel and the Romantics all attempted to overcome the perceived difficulties of the Kantian system; they sought to overcome the radical dualism between subject and object; they tried to rethink the Kantian categories of understanding and they tried to overcome the Kantian exclusion of knowledge of the absolute from theoretical philosophy.



Walter Benjamin's relation to Kant revolves around just these issues. In a series of writings from 1917 to 1918 Benjamin calls for a recasting of the Kantian system which would make room for a speculative metaphysics whilst staying within the general spirit of Kantianism.⁸ The most sustained discussion of this recasting is presented in Benjamin's 1918 essay "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy." The following through of this program would be a goal that Benjamin pursued in various ways throughout his career. Benjamin's return to Kant "rests on the conviction that this system ...has, by virtue of its brilliant exploration of the certainty and justification of knowledge, derived and developed a depth that will prove adequate for a new and higher kind of experience yet to come."⁹ The Kantian system has, through its examination of the subjective conditions of knowledge and its epistemic justification, cleared a space for certainty - albeit a limited space - based in what Benjamin considers to be an impoverished notion of experience, a notion historically and subjectively conditioned by Kant's identification with the enlightenment. The conceptual identification of experience perse with the more restricted field of empirical experience has, for Benjamin, resulted in a concept with a minimum of significance and emptied of humanly relevant meaning. That there were alternative conceptions of experience open to Kant is evident from his communications with J.G. Hamann,¹⁰ the path of the enlightenment was not the only one open for Kant, yet it was one that he felt compelled to follow. Of course in taking that direction Kant was not only affirming Enlightenment philosophies, he was also implicitly denying those philosophies that move against the spirit of the enlightenment.

2.2



For Benjamin the challenge for philosophy is to found a higher concept of experience in keeping with the spirit of Kantian philosophy but one which could extend experience beyond the sphere of empirical consciousness to include the possibility of an experience of the absolute - the infinite and unconditioned condition of all experience. The task of the philosophy of the future would be to decide just which elements of Kant needed to be rejected, which needed careful reformulation and which must be kept. In this regard Benjamin believes that it is possible to reject Kant's view of the structure and limits of experience whilst still retaining the "highest determinants of knowledge"¹¹- the synthesising and configuring function of the categories. Hence for Benjamin the system of categories as it stands in Kant is too restrictive and he rejects the detail of that account. It is the capacity for the categorical configuration of experience that Benjamin sees as vital to Kant's system and it is this which must be preserved. For Benjamin, as will be made clear below, all experience is the experience of an active and categorical configuration of appearances - experience is a presentation to consciousness, an appearing, of configurations ordered categorically. Kant understood this, yet, unable to move beyond the limits of enlightenment thought, he limited himself to a description of one particular set of categories, one which was apt only for the configuration of empirical consciousness.

Kant's theoretical philosophy has presumed a notion of experience that is reduced to the human empirical consciousness of the realm of objects. This notion is a refusal of any knowledge of the absolute hence it is a refusal of the possibility of mystical or religious experience, which for the early Benjamin is evidence of the deficiency of this notion of experience. Yet, despite its importance in the early work of Benjamin, one does not have to construe this



experiential bankruptcy narrowly in the sense of the loss of the possibility of religious experience. Indeed, one could consider religion as a field of experience in a more critical light recognising that its experiential 'richness' was not all positive, as it also had the potential of promoting closed minded ignorance and intolerance. This is the case with some monotheistic and universalistic religions, religions that delegitimize other religious forms, demonstrating that religion also has the potential to narrowly define the limits of legitimate experience.

The new form of experience that Benjamin presages could take on other forms, forms that go beyond the framework of religion, Freudian psychoanalysis being one of them. Through a Freudian paradigm the human relation to language and imagery is significantly changed. These can be experienced at two levels, understood straight forwardly as communications or as manifestations of the unconscious. By considering language as being constituted by multiple layers we open up the possibility for a more fulfilled experience of human communication - indeed it opens linguistic dimensions hitherto unexplored. The danger lies, however, in privileging one dimension over others, in closing off dimensions of experience through marginalising and de-legitimizing them. This is just as much a problem for divergent paradigms such as Freudian analysis and religion as it is for dominant paradigms such as the scientific conception of the world.

It is this opening of closed dimensions which for Benjamin brings us to a broader conception of experience. For Benjamin the tendency of the modern world to narrow the notion of experience is the refusal to acknowledge any dimension beyond the sphere of empirical consciousness. For Benjamin, this

refusal denotes a poverty of experience that originated in the Enlightenment and carried over into the 19th and 20th centuries. The poverty of experience expressed in Kant's writing is a modern one; it is our own poverty; it is a self-restriction that narrowly limits the range of legitimate experience. So the coming philosophy which Benjamin presages is a radical reformulation of the Kantian account of experience. It is a reworking that transforms Kant's transcendental philosophy, which focuses on the conditions of the experience of empirical consciousness, into a speculative metaphysics of experience¹² - one that dissolves the bounds of Kantian experience and opens the experiential possibility of the absolute. The Kantian account of experience is a finitist one, an account that restricts experience to the boundaries of empirical consciousness. It cuts the absolute off from experience. Benjamin recasts the Kantian structure by dissolving the strict boundaries between Kant's three faculties in a speculative metaphysics of experience where the absolute is manifest in the very experience of the finite. Manifest only in a fragmentary and inadequate way, the absolute manifests only as a trace.¹³

2.3

Benjamin explodes philosophy out of the bounds of empirical verification. His speculative metaphysics of experience is such that it could include spiritual dimensions and even acknowledges clairvoyance and soothsaying as fields of legitimate experience from the past. For Benjamin these are forms of experience which have been both legitimate and effective for particular historical communities, they are evidence of a broader notion of experience and hence they open up the possibility of a new understanding of experience which moves beyond the field of empirical consciousness, a notion of experience yet to come. It opens philosophy to the exploration of possibility



instead of limiting it to the description of actuality. Benjamin uses examples such as soothsaying, not because he is convinced of its efficacy or because it is a practice that he would seek to pursue himself. These examples are forced upon him by the fact that he seeks to presage a new notion of experience, one that is not yet actual, one whose actuality lies in the future. Benjamin is forced to use examples of past forms of experience as a vehicle to destabilise the Kantian notion of experience because he cannot say what the future will bring.

Whilst discussing soothsaying, clairvoyance, animism and insanity Benjamin makes the remark that the Kantian account of knowledge "is very much a mythology like those mentioned."¹⁴ This statement could be taken as an outright rejection of the Kantian account of knowledge. Yet by saying that Kantianism is just as much a mythology as the knowledge attained by clairvoyance or through insanity it is also possible that Benjamin is implying that Kantianism, *qua* paradigm of all empirical consciousness, is a blinkered, and therefore limited, understanding of experience - that Kant presents an understanding of the nature of experience but not the definitive understanding of experience. Soothsaying and fortune telling as forms of experience are seen by Benjamin as no less mythical than the Kantian conception of experience and knowledge. Kant's account reduces the knowable world to a causally determined and meaningless mechanical system of interacting spatio-temporal objects and in its inability to get beyond that perspective it constitutes but one more limited understanding of that world.



This interpretation could be supported by Benjamin's 1917 fragment entitled "Perception is Reading" where Benjamin states:

In perception, the useful (the Good) is true. Pragmatism.
Madness is a form of perception alien to the community. The
accusation of madness levelled at the great scientific reformers.
Inability of the masses to distinguish between knowledge and
perception.¹⁵

Here Benjamin is saying that all perception is pragmatically orientated and as such identification of the objects of perception is framed in terms of what is useful for the community. What does not fit into this pattern is a form of perception that is deviant or mad. Both the madman and the great innovative scientist have such deviant forms of perception, they see things differently, they identify objects according to unusual and unaccepted forms. The community on the other hand identifies its historically particular form of perception with the general possibility of knowledge thus excluding all alternate forms of experience and knowledge. The community claims an eternal significance for its own way of identifying and experiencing objects, it claims eternal significance for what is historically conditioned and pragmatically effective. This implies that deviant forms of perception, the perception of the madman and the great innovative scientist, are forms that do not accord with community values, leaving open the possibility of bringing something useful from these forms of perception. The problem for the insane person, the scientist and the community alike, is not to mistake a form of perception for absolute knowledge. In valuing one form of perception there is the possibility that one can forgo what is beneficial in other forms; in valuing one form of perception it is possible to become blinkered to the



benefits of alternative modalities. This is the general direction of Benjamin's reformulation of Kant, he calls into question the paradigmatic status which Kant ascribes to his own account of experience and opens the possibility of a broader realm of experience, one which includes the possibility of an experience of the absolute.

3.1

Before considering what Benjamin has to say in "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy" it will be helpful to explore the understanding of Benjamin's recasting of Kant that is developed by Howard Caygill. In particular, Caygill employs the terminology that Benjamin developed in his philosophy of colour as an interpretative device that brings out crucial elements in Benjamin's proposal for a recasting of Kant.¹⁶ The most important terms in this regard are: surface and configuration.¹⁷ It has already been shown that Benjamin's main claim against Kant is that the Kantian account of experience is only one of an infinite number of possible experiences. For Caygill Benjamin is claiming that Kant's understanding of experience describes the transcendental grounds for the configuration of only one of an infinite number of bounded surfaces of experience - that the Kantian account of experience with its basis in a scientific and mechanical understanding of the world (Newtonian) is only one type of experience and not an account of experience *per se*.

This point is admirably demonstrated by Caygill's discussion of an enigmatic fragment from 1917 entitled "On Perception Itself." In this text, Benjamin defines perception as a reading of configured surfaces - all perception is an active reading of what is perceived, perception is not a passive reception of



sense data conceptualised in terms of an eternally fixed set of *a priori* categories. The text claims that the condition of the possibility of reading, the transcendental condition of all possible readings, is the active configuration of a surface. Reading (perception) would be impossible without an active configuring of a surface that could be read, hence a configured surface is the transcendental ground of all reading (perception). Benjamin then makes an important move, positing that the condition of the possibility of configuration is that there be a surface for configuration. It is here, Caygill claims, that Benjamin introduces the speculative dimension by claiming that not only can there be an infinity of configurations of any given surface, but also that any given surface of configuration is only one surface of a possibly infinite number of surfaces. Each surface is an appearance, it constitutes a fragmentary and inadequate manifestation of the absolute. The absolute is present in such experience yet present in a veiled form. It is impossible from a human perspective to lift the veil and obtain a pure experience of the absolute. The human perspective can only ever access the absolute in some kind of configured and determinate form, hence the absolute is only present in distorted and inadequate forms - it is only present as a trace. By opening the speculative dimension Benjamin opens the possibility for an exploration of divergent manifestations of the absolute and therefore of a more fulfilled experience.

Caygill claims that Benjamin is true to the spirit of Kant because this argument is firstly a transcendental one - it specifies the conditions of the possibility of perception and experience. Secondly, that it specifies that the object of that experience as an appearance as opposed to the actual, or to use Kantian terminology - the thing-in-itself. Where Benjamin moves off from the



Kantian account is by placing the transcendental conditions as a particular set of conditions of possibility within the speculative context of an infinite configuration of surfaces. In Caygill's reading of Benjamin the "transcendental but speculative philosophy"¹⁸ is one in which the Kantian transcendental conditions in fact apply to a particular surface - one surface in an open ended set of surfaces. To see this as the only mode of configuration is a result of our impoverished way of configuring which limits us to this one surface. The Kantian transcendental conditions give the conditions for the possibility of experience in terms of that surface and that surface only - but there remains the speculative possibility of an infinite number of surfaces of experience. While Benjamin is true to the Kantian methodology there is also a radical recasting through the injection of a speculative dimension into that philosophy in Benjamin's move from a metaphysics of experience to a speculative metaphysics of experience. Caygill's discussion of surface and configuration provides an important way into Benjamin's recasting of Kant and it is through this understanding that an understanding of Benjamin's "On the Program for the Coming Philosophy" will be developed.

3.2

Benjamin's desire to recast Kant stems from a rejection of the scientific/mechanistic basis of the Kantian account of experience, which is only one possible reading (mechanistic and mathematical) of one possible surface of experience (empirical consciousness). This rejection leads Benjamin in the direction of a new concept of experience that is programmatically described in his essay "On the Program for the Coming Philosophy." This new concept is in fact a return to the metaphysics rejected by Kant, but not a dogmatic metaphysics based in authority. The emphasis of this metaphysics is



always upon the justification of knowledge. Benjamin seeks a metaphysics that takes its justification from a Kantian categorical configuration of perception and experience, which seeks the transcendental conditions of divergent modes of experience. It is a speculative metaphysics of experience, a return to metaphysics that entails the development of a speculative concept of experience. Only through such a development will it be possible to reclaim the metaphysics that Kant rejected.¹⁹ Experience itself becomes "the logical place and the logical possibility of metaphysics."²⁰ The structure of the Kantian account is transformed, in that space and time and the categorical organisation of space and time through the understanding are decentred. Whereas in Kant's writings these are the only vehicles for knowledge - vehicles which are well equipped for providing scientific, mechanical and mathematical knowledge - in Benjamin's writings this one sided and mechanical understanding of experience is integrated into a "theory of orders."²¹

While Benjamin is vague in this essay as to the exact nature of this theory of orders, one gets the impression that the theory is a layered structure corresponding to the different surfaces of experience as discussed by Caygill. Each order corresponds to a surface where all appearances are governed by their own transcendental structure, their own modalities of configuration. In the theory of orders, Kant's categories are only one set of higher ordering concepts of philosophy,²² part of an extended set of concepts which include the categorical forms of configuration for other experiential surfaces and which open the concept of experience to a richer field, one which includes mystical experience, fantasy and dreamscapes on the one hand and psychoanalytic explorations of the unconscious on the other. The extended



set of concepts becomes the new transcendental logic - providing the possibility conditions of the categorical configuration of all surfaces and hence the possibility conditions for all reading (perception).

The Kantian account is subject to the belief that empirical consciousness is experience *per se* and hence it cannot move beyond the confines of that particular surface of experience, it is caught in the circle of its own limiting beliefs about experience - it mistakes the particular for the universal. Here the danger is that one particular surface of experience has been over-valued and erroneously made the absolute ground for all experience, that one surface will become the paradigm of experience *per se* rather than integrated "into an experience which is multiply gradated."²³ When this is the case other forms of experience can only manifest as distortions and illusions. They are derided and relegated to the margins of experience where they exist as the absurd. Like the sudden appearance of a clown in a circus performance, they appear as a break in the seriousness of the real, a surreal and dreamlike image of reality - images which are easy to dismiss and refuse.

4.1

Benjamin's 1933 essay "The Doctrine of the Similar" is a useful illustration of certain key points made so far. One of the aspects of this essay is Benjamin's following of the idea that perception is a reading of configurations on a surface and shows that when a variegated concept of reading is reduced to a single type of reading the result is marginalisation. More broadly this essay is Benjamin's exploration of the mimetic faculty of human beings, an exploration which is pursued both ontogenetically and phylogenetically.²⁴ In his exploration of the phylogenetic origins of the mimetic faculty he tells a story



about pre-historic people for whom all perception was a "reading of what was never written."²⁵ The people of pre-history read the sky and made predictions about the weather, read nature and natural signs, the entrails of slain beasts to tell the future, embers in the fire and the stars to determine fate. All of this was a reading of what was never written, a reading of the various surfaces of perception. Nature supplied the conditions of perception (the conditions for all possible reading), configuring the surface of perception and provided the conditions of legibility.

The reading of what was never written eventually passed over into a new kind of reading - of inscriptions made on surfaces. This kind of reading is the beginning of human writing. Written symbols graphically inscribed on surfaces become a form of reading that results in the decay of reading more generally, as the reading of written words becomes reading *per se* rather than a particular form of reading. The result is the reduction of the speculative dimension, one that seems to be a peculiar characteristic of modern human beings - that they reduce their reading to that of only one surface of experience. Benjamin underlines that the mimetic faculty, which is employed in the disclosure of sensuous and non-sensuous similarity, has completely and without loss been transferred into language and writing.²⁶ Here the non-sensuous similarity of the written word to the spoken word, and both to the object intended by them, has redefined the nature of the mimetic faculty so that its employment passes into them without any residue of the magic of past forms of reading. In other words the mimetic faculty has passed into the field of language without carrying over the magic which was present in the reading of other forms of non-sensuous similarity such as soothsaying.



For Benjamin this is a positive yet potentially dangerous development as in passing over into language, the mimetic faculty's capacity to produce and read non-sensuous similarity could become limited solely to language, narrowly defined as the spoken and written word in their most prosaic sense, such a development would represent a decay of the mimetic faculty. The result of the emergence of the written word is that the reading of surfaces inscribed by humans becomes the paradigm of all reading and the reading of what was never written becomes a marginalised form. Here Benjamin takes up the example of fortune telling as a form of reading what was never written to illustrate his point. With the narrowing of the notion of reading, other more primal forms of reading begin to lose their significance. Astrology, palmistry and other forms of fortune telling are discarded, they become the refuse, the derided leftovers, an embarrassing reminder of a past long transcended. They are dismissed as fantasy.

4.2

Benjamin's is not a reactionary call for a return to some ideal past when fortune telling was a vital social practice - it is merely illustrative of a broader point. But the power of this example lies in the speed with which this social practice is dismissed, it lies in our readiness to push this form of reading into the margins. What Benjamin is doing is pointing out the crisis of the present by identifying possibilities which we have at some point chosen to discard. These discarded possibilities indicate that the choices that modern society has made are not the only ones possible, that things could be otherwise. Here Benjamin is presenting a critique of social praxis by demonstrating that our choice to value certain modalities of life is one of many choices and that in choosing one form other forms are devalued. The possibility to redeem the



concept of reading lies not in a return to the past but in opening the realm of possibility of reading itself. The image of the fortune teller within the context of a discussion of reading becomes a dialectical image - it is impossible to think of the fortune teller as engaged in a valid form of reading without opening up a broader notion of reading.

Yet Benjamin does not entirely restrict himself to the reading of archaic forms of non-sensuous similarity, he also has one important contemporary example which opens the possibility of a new form of reading what was never written. His example is psycho-analytic graphology, in which an individual's handwriting is used as a way of analysing manifestations from that individual's unconscious. In this practice the analyst considers such details as the pen pressure used in the writing of certain words and other relationships between the meaning of a word and the way it is inscribed. This is a form of reading that reads what was written but reads it otherwise than as written. It represents a new way of configuring the surface of a written document, configuring it in terms of graphological analysis instead of in terms of standard semantics. The reading of conscious meaning and the reading of unconscious meaning emerge from the same page, from the same surface through divergent configurations of that surface. The same could be said about the analysis of the spoken word, one could understand or configure any speech act in terms of conscious meaning or in terms of unconscious meaning, each opens a different dimension of the surface of the spoken word and each adds depth to the meaning of speech. Again, one mode of configuration is not totalised at the expense of another, each mode of configuration is valid within its own order. The danger that one mode of configuration comes to dominate another is the danger that experience becomes too narrowly



defined. It would be just as experientially limiting to restrict a reading to unconscious meaning as it is to restrict a reading to conscious meaning.

The importance of opening up the field of reading through a consideration of the divergent modes of configuration is that one can open a broader field of meaning, a broader field of possibility, not to substitute one totalising paradigm for another. Similarly, fundamentalism or other forms of religious literalism are recognised as reactionary and closed minded relations to the world, relations that absolutise one mode of understanding and marginalise others, relations that take their own social and historical perspective to be eternal and absolute. Totalitarianism in politics raises the status of one political discourse to the level of the absolute by delegitimising and marginalising other forms of discourse in a manner that is unquestionably reactionary. So too any discourse, be it that of the empirical science or that of psychoanalysis, can ascribe to itself an eternal and absolute significance and raise itself to the status of a false absolute and hence marginalise other forms of understanding and configuring experience. In order to fully open the field of experience one must be able to move between different orders of categorical configuration and not take one order to be absolute.

5.1

What bearing does this have on Kant's critical philosophy and Benjamin's reformulation of it? Perhaps the discussion has drifted too far afield into the realm of social critique. However, this is the proper location of Benjamin's encounter with Kantian philosophy, for that encounter is by no means a mere theoretical reformulation of Kantianism, it is also a practical reformulation of Kantianism and a dissolution of the boundaries of philosophy. Benjamin's



reformulation of Kant is the reintroduction of the absolute and the infinite into the structure of experience, a reformulation that must inevitably have practical consequences, one that gives philosophy an infinite scope.

Benjamin's encounter with Kant rejects the scientific (Newtonian) underpinnings of Kant's concept of experience²⁷ - yet this rejection is not an invalidation of the Newtonian view nor is it an attempt to generally invalidate the scientific understanding of the world, it is merely a rejection of the one sided and incomplete nature of that view, it is a rejection the very idea of a form of experience which is raised to a universal status.

Kant, in restricting himself to an enlightenment understanding of experience, has constituted an understanding of the human relationship to the world that for Benjamin has reduced it to a minimum of significance. It is a notion of experience that is religiously and historically blind, for it takes human experience to be primarily a mechanical experience where the subject is experiencing objects in motion and at rest. Such an understanding does not require a religious dimension and it certainly does not require a metaphysics as it is traditionally understood. Such a notion of experience restricts philosophy to the description of the actual and to the justification of existing theoretical practices, it severs philosophy from the life of a culture by locating the realm of philosophy in a concept of experience which has been reduced to an experience which takes the scientific understanding and empirical consciousness of the world to be paradigmatic. By exploding philosophy out of Kant's finitist concept of experience and into the realm of the infinite, Benjamin brings philosophy back into a relationship with the vital life of culture; he brings philosophy into a relationship with art, and literature, into a



relationship with the world experienced by the hashish smoker and the religious devotee alike.

5.2

Benjamin never really provides any concrete examples of what the new form of experience might be, he only hints at the fact that practices such as psychoanalysis have the potential for opening up dimensions which lie beyond the empirical. Benjamin does not seek to return to past forms of experience but rather anticipates a new human relationship to the world. Such hints presage Benjamin's later work, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility," where he discusses the possibility of the exploration of what he calls the optical unconscious via film and photographic media and the effects that this could have upon human experience. He claims that this new media can offer us presentations of the world that we are never fully conscious of, presentations that would normally slide past our everyday perception. He also indicates that the Kantian *a priori* forms of intuition, space and time, can be radically changed by film offering us ways of experiencing space and time which would have been impossible prior to the development of these technologies,²⁸ they present new ways of configuring spatio-temporal phenomena. He points to the capacity for photographic media to make objects seem impossibly distant or impossibly near, offering us presentations of the world which would be otherwise unattainable, thus reorganising our experience of space. Likewise the capacity for film to transform our experience of human and animal movement through slow motion offers us a presentation of the world where we experience a different form of temporality. Such presentations destabilise the familiarity



that we have for our ordinary, empirical experience of objects in space and time, they give the familiar the feel of the unfamiliar.

For Benjamin such changes represent a transformation of the human sensorium itself. These forms of experience have only become available through technological innovations, they are experiences unknown in times past. The field of possibility for the technological and artistic expansion and reconfiguration of experience has become even broader since Benjamin's death, the internet and virtual technology opening up new forms of human relations and the possibility for experiences of realities which are entirely constructed through technology. The cyber world opens up a whole new surface of experience for human beings to configure a surface which is infinitely malleable. But these technologies do not just offer up new opportunities for experience, they also destabilise our familiarity with our own cultural institutions and practices. Benjamin presages the possible destabilisation of the boundaries between art and science by considering the idea that photography could be artistically employed within the sciences. Indeed one might consider the genre of documentary as a partial merger of science and art. This possibility is greatly expanded by current technologies that offer, for example, virtual tours through the human body or virtual journeys through our solar system. The possibility for fantasy has also expanded, entertainment has seen the merger of art and play in interactive computer animations and virtual fantasy worlds are well within the realm of possibility. These changes open up new fields of possibility for human experience, new surfaces of configuration and new ways of configuring familiar surfaces all of which, in turn, leads to new possibilities for human enquiry.



Technologies can disrupt our familiarity with 'reality', they can provide us with presentations of ourselves and the world that are otherwise unattainable, and they can offer us completely new and fantastic 'virtual' experiences. Practices such as psychoanalysis or semiotics can likewise destabilise the familiarity we feel with ourselves and our world by offering a mode of access to non-empirical and unconscious aspects of our being, ways of reading the familiar which are completely unfamiliar. This destabilisation of what is familiar corresponds to the idea of the dialectical image, as when the familiar is rendered unfamiliar we have to re-orientate our understanding and our experience. Such dialectical images open the possibility of expanded understandings and expanded notions of experience that destabilise our familiarity with the world. Familiar distinctions between various cultural forms and practices such as art, entertainment, learning and science become unstable and begin to merge. With an expanded notion of experience philosophy ceases to be the under labourer of science and becomes the voice of the multifarious and variegated life of culture. Benjamin restores dignity to philosophy, by opening the possibility of a richer concept of philosophy itself - a higher concept of philosophy - or, as Caygill calls it, a "philosophising beyond philosophy."²⁹

The Kantian account of experience has raised the status of one kind of experience to a paradigmatic status - it constitutes empirical consciousness as consciousness *per se*. It represents a decay in experience, the speculative dimensions of experience pass over into a paradigm which is based in a mathematical and mechanistic understanding of experience. Kant's account is only one particular case in a broader field of experience, but in being raised to



the status of experience *per se* it devalues the broader speculative picture and relegates other forms of experience to the margins. As such, its internal structures become unstable spatio-temporal intuitions, the categories of the understanding and reason's judgements are not fixed for all time and can only maintain their privileged status through a violent restriction of the notion of experience. Here the absolute can only manifest in the warps and breaks that occur within the surface of empirical consciousness. Yet these warps and breaks present the possibility of a redemption of experience, and it is through these that a broader conception of experience can be glimpsed. The refuse and the marginalia of the paradigmatic conception of experience point to the fact that experience transcends that paradigm. Religious experience, drug experiences, dreams, fantasies, games and creative inspiration - all experiences whose truth status the scientific conception of the world has shunned and denigrated - these point to a broader concept of experience. The idea that the prophecies of the soothsayer and the visions of the mystic have the capacity to open the field to experience to a broader more fulfilled notion is not one based in a belief in their concrete content. Rather it resides in their difference from modern experience, in the fact that in the past they were forms of collective experience that were significant and effective. Moderns have chosen to value the scientific understanding of the world and to devalue other forms of experience. Benjamin's reformulation of Kant is one that opens up a path of access to these discarded aspects of experience, to a fulfilled notion of experience that is not violently restricted to a single paradigm.

By describing the modern decay of experience Benjamin is not calling for a return to the dogmatic speculative metaphysics of the pre-modern world, a return to past glories. Rather, he is pointing out what has been lost through



the process of decay. It is a call for the rejection of those elements of modern philosophy that restrict its scope and define its limits too narrowly.

Importantly Benjamin seeks to hold onto the spirit of Kant. What he rejects is that aspect of Kant which restricts philosophy and has aided in the modern decay of experience - the Kantian conception of experience. The decay of experience which is presented in Benjamin's encounter with Kant is based in the loss of a broader notion of experience in favour of a restricted notion.

Dazzled by the power of science the modern has become blind to what lies outside science, what is left behind by the scientific understanding of the world. Benjamin's critique of Kant is one that acknowledges the power of Kantian thought, but in moving Kantian metaphysics of experience out of the range of empirical consciousness and towards a speculative metaphysics of experience it points to forgotten and discarded possibilities, awakening possibilities for new forms of experience. In recasting the Kantian account of experience to include them one is not making a retreat into the past but drawing elements that are suppressed in the present out into the open. By exploring these discarded possibilities one can gain a sense of the limits of the present paradigm and a sense that things could be otherwise. The rags and refuse of modern experience are not a symbol of hope for the future they are a dialectical image which explodes the current paradigm into a world of suppressed possibilities. By becoming the rag picker of modern experience the philosopher does more than hold out the hope of redemption, the hope that things could be otherwise, he creates a destabilising image which makes the violent restrictions of the current paradigm untenable. When these restrictions become untenable then the understanding of experience broadens, thought moves on to a higher more fulfilled notion of experience. When philosophy is restricted to an impoverished notion of experience it is itself



impoverished. The Kantian approach is especially significant in this regard as it is a philosophy that defines the boundaries of legitimate experience, hence it is a self-limiting philosophy. Yet in defining the limits of experience it fails to take the critical step of reflecting upon its own concept of experience, of subjecting its own conception of experience to critique. By redefining the notion of experience, by exploding experience out of the bounds of empirical consciousness, Benjamin opens a richer field for philosophical exploration - he opens the possibility of a 'philosophising beyond philosophy.'



Notes

¹ Best understood as the consciousness of isolated individuals (subjects); such consciousness is considered to consist in the pre-given ordering or categorisation of passively received sense data which the subject ascribes to various objects, thus constituting them as objects of experience and therefore objects of knowledge.

² See C. Beiser Frederick, "The Context and Problematic of Post-Kantian Philosophy," in *A Companion to Continental Philosophy*, ed. S and Schroeder Critchley, W.R. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999).

³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: McMillan Press, 1988). B xvi - xvii. p. 22.

⁴ Kant, 1988. B xvii. p. 22.

⁵ Kant, 1988. A19/B33. p. 65.

⁶ Kant, 1988. A51/B75. (p 93).

⁷ The categories are: unity, plurality, totality, reality, negation, limitation, inherence, causality, community, possibility / impossibility, existence / non-existence, necessity / contingency. Kant, 1988. A80/B106. p. 113.

⁸ See Walter Benjamin, "On Perception," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings - Volume I 1913-1926*, ed. M. and Jennings Bullock, M.W. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996). and Walter Benjamin, "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings - Volume I 1913-1926*, ed. M. and Jennings Bullock, M.W. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

⁹ Benjamin, "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy." p.102.

¹⁰ See C. Beiser Frederick, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

¹¹ Benjamin, "On Perception." p.93.

¹² See Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

¹³ Caygill, p. 2.

¹⁴ Benjamin, "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy." p. 103.

¹⁵ Walter Benjamin, "Perception Is Reading," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings - Volume I 1913-1926*, ed. M. and Jennings Bullock, M.W. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996). p. 92.

¹⁶ Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*. p 10-12.

¹⁷ Caygill, p. 3.

¹⁸ Caygill, p. 3.

¹⁹ Caygill, p 24.

²⁰ Benjamin, "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy." p. 106.

²¹ Benjamin, "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy." p. 106.

²² Caygill, p. 24.

²³ Benjamin, "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy." p. 107.

²⁴ Walter Benjamin, "The Doctrine of the Similar," in *The New German Critique* (1933). p. 65.

²⁵ Caygill, p. 5. Here the focus will be restricted to what Benjamin has to say about reading and not range into the broader issue of mimesis.

²⁶ Benjamin, "The Doctrine of the Similar." p. 65.

²⁷ Caygill, p. 23.

²⁸ See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility," in *Benjamin Reader* (Sydney: University of Sydney, 2000).

²⁹ Caygill, p. 23.