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The German Idealism of the Jewish Philosophers

“The Jew can play a creative role in nothing at all that concerns German life, neither in what is good nor in what is evil.” This statement by Ernst Jünger has outlived the anti-Semitism of the conservative revolutionaries in whose name it was written more than a generation ago. I heard the identical assertion just a few years ago in the philosophy department of one of our great universities. As this version had it, Jews at best attain stardom of the second rank. At that time, when I was a student, I did not give it a second thought; I must have been occupied with reading Husserl, Wittgenstein, Scheler, and Simmel without realizing the descent of these scholars. However, the well-known philosophy professor who gainsaid the productivity of his Jewish colleagues did know of their origins. The stubbornness of the components of an ideology whose discrepancies could be conveyed by any lexicon is remarkable. If it were a matter of dissecting into pieces a form of the spirit such as that of German philosophy in the twentieth century, separating it out according to its parts, and putting it on the scales, then we would find in the domain supposedly reserved for German profundity a preponderance of those the same prejudice wants to assign to the outer court as merely critical talents.

It is not my intention here to offer another proof of what has long since been demonstrated. There is another situation much more in need of clarification: It remains astonishing how productively central motifs of the philosophy of German Idealism shaped so essentially by Protestantism can be developed in terms of the experience of the Jewish tradition. Because the legacy of the Kabbalah already flowed

into and was absorbed by Idealism, its light seems to refract all the more richly in the spectrum of a spirit in which something of the spirit of Jewish mysticism lives on, in however hidden a way.

The abysmal and yet fertile relationship of the Jews with German philosophy shares in the social fate that once forced open the gates of the ghettos, for assimilation or reception of the Jews into bourgeois society became a reality only for the minority of Jewish intellectuals. Despite a century and a half of progressive emancipation, the broad mass of the Jewish people had not gotten beyond the formal aspects of equal rights. On the other hand, even the courtly Jews, like their successors, the Jewish bankers of the state of the nineteenth century, never became fully acceptable socially. Indeed, they had not striven so seriously to break down the barriers of their invisible ghetto; a universal emancipation would have threatened what privileges they possessed. Assimilation stretched only a thin protective layer around the permanently foreign body of Jewry. Its medium was a culture gained academically, its seal a baptism often socially coerced. If these cultivated Jews would give back to the culture intellectually as much as they owed to it, their social standing remained so ambivalent right into the 1920s that Ernst Jünger could not only deprecate their productivity as the "feuilleton prattle of civilization" but also put in question the process of assimilation: "To the same extent that the German will gains in sharpness and shape, it becomes increasingly impossible for the Jews to entertain even the slightest delusion that they can be Germans in Germany; they are faced with their final alternatives, which are, in Germany, either to be Jewish or not to be." This was in 1930, when those who could not adapt to a dubious politics of *apartheid* were already being offered the menacing promise that was so gruesomely kept in the concentration camps.

And so, precisely out of the marginal strata that had been assimilated most successfully, there emerged the spokesmen for a turning back of the German Jews to the origins of their own tradition. This movement found its political expression in Zionism and its philosophic expression in the (as it were, anticipated) existentialism of Martin Buber, who fastened onto the last phase of Jewish mysticism. The Polish and Ukrainian Hassidism of the eighteenth century had drawn its ideas from kabbalist writings, but the doctrine had retreated so far behind the personality of the Hassidic holy men that the traditionally idealized figure of the learned rabbi was pushed out by that

of the folkish Zaddik, whose existence was the Torah become entirely and utterly living. In Buber's zeal against the rationalistically stultified teaching of the rabbis and his appropriation of the religion of the people, which was full of mythic legends and mystical faces, a new pathos of existential philosophizing was enflamed:

With the destruction of the Jewish communal spirit the fruitfulness of the spiritual conflict became weakened. Spiritual force is mustered henceforth on behalf of the preservation of the people against outside influences; the strict enclosure of one's own realm, to protect against penetration by alien tendencies; the codification of values in order to fend off every shift in values; the unmistakable, unreinterpretable, hence consistently rational formulation of religion. In place of the God-filled, demanding, creative element there entered the ever more rigid, merely preserving, merely continuing, merely defensive element of official Judaism; indeed, it was directed ever more against the creative element, which seemed to endanger the status quo of the people by its audacity and freedom; it became its persecutor and life-enemy.

The Hassidic impulse first found a philosophical language in the work of Franz Rosenzweig. Rosenzweig, who with Buber translated the Bible into German, had worked on Hegel's philosophy of state as a student of Friedrich Meinecke. In his own great project he attempted – as the title of the three-volume work, *Star of Redemption*, announced from afar – an interpretation of Idealist thought out of the depths of Jewish mysticism. Not only was he one of the first to establish links with Kierkegaard; he also took up motifs of the so-called late Idealism, especially from Schelling's last philosophy; thus he divulged the lineage of existentialist philosophy decades before it was painstakingly rediscovered by the official history of philosophy. The basic question on which the Idealist self-confidence in the power of the concept shatters is this: "How can the world be contingent, although it still has to be thought of as necessary?" Thought labors in vain on the impenetrable fact that things are so and not otherwise, that the historical existence of human beings is so profoundly bathed in enigmatic arbitrariness:

Inasmuch as philosophy . . . denies this opaque presupposition of all life; that is, inasmuch as it does not let it hold good as something real but makes it into nothing, it conjures up for itself the illusion of

presuppositionlessness. . . . If philosophy wanted not to stop up its ears in the face of the cry of anguished humanity, it would have to start from this: that the nothingness of death is a something; that each new nothingness of death, as a new newly fruitful something, is not to be talked or written away. . . . Nothingness is not nothing, it is something. . . . We do not want a philosophy that deceives us by the all-or-nothing tone of its dance about the lasting domination of death. We want no deception.

The deception that has been seen through leads to the insight that the world, in which there is still laughter and crying, is itself caught up in becoming – the appearances still seek their essence. In the visible happening of nature is disclosed the growth of an invisible realm in which God himself looks forward to his redemption: “God, in the redemption of the world by human beings and of human beings in relation to the world, redeems himself.”

Idealism only entered into competition with the theology of creation; still in bondage to Greek philosophy, it did not look upon the unreconciled world from the standpoint of possible redemption. Its logic remained in the grips of the past: “True lastingness is constantly in the future. Not what always was is lasting; not what gets renewed at all times, but solely what is to come: the kingdom.” The meaning of this, of course, is only disclosed to a logic that does not, like that of Idealism, deny its linguistic body; it has to open itself up to the underlying logic deposited in the language – a resonance from the ancient kabbalist idea that language reaches God because it is sent out from God. Idealism condemned language as the instrument of knowledge and elevated a divinized art as its substitute. A Jew actually anticipated Heidegger, the *philosophicus teutonicus*, in this peculiarly heightened awareness.

Toward the end of World War I, Rosenzweig sent home the manuscript of *Star of Redemption* by mail from the field of battle. The way he conceived of the messianic vocation of Jewish exile during his time on the Balkan front is documented by a passage from one of his letters: “Because the Jewish people already stands beyond the opposition that forms the authentically dynamic power in the life of the nations, beyond the polarity of particularity and world history, of home and faith, of earth and heaven, so, too, it does not know war.”

Another Jewish philosopher, Hermann Cohen, had on Christmas Day 1914 testified in the same sense to the students withdrawing

from their studies to the field of battle that the political expression of the messianic idea is eternal peace: "Since the prophets as international politicians recognized evil as existing neither exclusively nor especially in individuals but in the nations instead, so the disappearance of war, eternal peace among the nations, became for them the symbol of morality on earth." Cohen, who so idiosyncratically takes Kant's idea of eternal peace back into the Old Testament, stands, however, in a different camp than Buber or Rosenzweig. He represents the liberal tradition of Jewish intellectuals who were inwardly connected with the German Enlightenment and supposed that in their spirit they might be capable of feeling at one with the nation in general. Immediately after the outbreak of the war, Cohen delivered before the Kant Society of Berlin a remarkable speech ("On the Peculiarity of the German Spirit") in which he exhibited to the imperialistic Germany of Wilhelm II and his military forces the original testimony of German humanism. Indignantly he dissociated himself from the "insulting" distinction between the nation of poets and thinkers and that of fighters and state builders: "Germany is and remains in continuity with the eighteenth century and its cosmopolitan humanity."

Less cosmopolitan is the tone of his apologia: "in us there struggles the originality of a nation with which no other can compare." This kind of loyalty to the state later delivered over those who in deluded pride called themselves National German Jews to the tragic irony of an identification with their attackers.

Cohen was the head of the famous Marburg School, in which there flowed the Jewish erudition of a generation that philosophized in the spirit of Kant and transformed Kant's teachings into an epistemology of natural science. Kant (who, after all, was so amazed at the linguistic power of Moses Mendelssohn that he once stated that "if the muse of philosophy should choose a language, she would choose this one") likewise selected, as a partner in the academic disputation concerning his *Habilitationsschrift*, a Jew: the onetime physician Marcus Herz. Just as Lazarus Bendavid had done in Vienna, in Berlin Herz put his all into propagating Kantian philosophy. The first one to go beyond promulgation to appropriate the new criticism in a productive way, and to push it radically beyond its own presuppositions was the genial Salomon Maimon, who had been inspired in his youth by Spinoza. Maimon went from being a beggar and vagrant to being a scholar protected by a patron; Fichte, who was not the least bit

modest, conceded superiority to him without envy. Maimon, as Fichte wrote to Reinhold, has revolutionized Kantian philosophy from the ground up “without anyone’s noticing.” “I believe,” continued Fichte, “future centuries will bitterly mock ours.” German historians have not taken any impulse from this. This first generation of Jewish Kantians entered into oblivion, as did Kant in general.

It was the polemical writing of another Jew – the cry of Otto Liebmann that “there must be a return to Kant!” – that paved the way for a second Kantianism. Cohen was able to return to the matrix of problems prepared by Maimon. Cohen’s great student Ernst Cassirer summarized his teacher’s intention at Cohen’s grave: “The primacy of activity over possibility, of the independent-spiritual over the sensible-thinglike, should be carried through purely and completely. Any appeal to a merely given should fall aside; in place of every supposed foundation in things there should enter the pure foundations of thinking, of willing, of artistic and religious consciousness. In this way, Cohen’s logic became the logic of the origin.”

Besides the direct “Marburg line,” however, Arthur Liebert, Richard Honigswald, Emil Lask, and Jonas Cohn played a decisive role in the Kantian-tinted epistemology of the turn of the century. Moreover, Max Adler and Otto Bauer developed a Kantian version of Marxism. In this climate there was an exuberant development of the acuity in commentary and analysis that is ambiguously ascribed to the Jews as a natural quality – and that even Martin Buber suspects of a “dissociated spirituality,” “a spirituality dissociated from the matrix of natural living and from the functions of a genuine spiritual conflict, neutral, insubstantial, dialectical, that could give itself to all objects, even the most indifferent, in order to dissect them conceptually or to place them in reciprocal relationships, also without really belonging in an intuitive-instinctual way to any one of them.”

Now, it may be that the theories of knowledge and science that considered themselves to be without history and presuppositions did in fact appeal to the inclinations of those Jews who once had to achieve freedom of thought by renouncing tradition. The attachment of the generations brought up in the ghetto to the condition of an enlightened culture was purchased with a break from age-old obligation, a leap into a foreign history; for example, Mendelssohn had to keep his work with German literature secret from his fellow Jews! Perhaps the physiognomy of Jewish thought was also shaped by the fact that something of the distance characteristic of an originally

foreign gaze had been preserved in it. Just as once-familiar things are more naked to an emigrant who has returned home after a long time, so a peculiar sharpness of vision is characteristic of one who has become assimilated. Because he lacks intimacy with the cultural realities that have been cooled down for his appropriation, they relinquish their structures to him all the more easily.

On the other hand, the rabbinic and especially the kabbalistic hermeneutics of the Holy Scriptures had schooled Jewish thought for centuries in the exegetical virtues of commentary and analysis, and the Jewish mind was drawn whenever possible by epistemology because its method gave a rationalized shape to its long-since customary mystical problematic. The mystic obtains the stages of the theogony, the developmental history of the coming to be of the Godhead, by turning the path of his soul toward God; consequently, his knowledge is always mediated by transcendental reflection on the mode of his own experience. It is no accident that Simmel's introduction to philosophy uses the mysticism of Meister Eckhart as the key to Kant's Copernican turn.

Kant's attractiveness to the Jewish mind is naturally to be explained first of all by the way he unfolded the free attitude of criticism based on rational belief and of cosmopolitan humanity into its most clairvoyant and authentic shape (aside from Goethe). Kant's humanism influenced the convivial social interchange – assimilation without insult – that had its moment in the salons of Berlin around the turn of the nineteenth century. What is more, critique was also the means of Jewish emancipation from Judaism itself. It not only secured an urbane attitude and worldly tolerance on the part of Christians; it also offered the philosophical tool with which the grand self-dynamism of the Jewish spirit sought to master its religious and social destiny. Jewish philosophy, in all its versions, has remained critique.

Society does not permit emancipation without a break. Because assimilation assumed forms of submission, many assimilated Jews became all the more Jewish in their private lives as a rigorous identification with the expectations of their environment allowed less and less room for them to present themselves publicly as anything other than emphatically German. This tension, so transparent from a social-psychological point of view, emerges from a posthumous work of Cohen dedicated to the memory of his Orthodox father, "Religion of Reason from the Sources of Judaism." The Kantian rationalism of the

Marburg School stripped away the specific pathos it owed to its Lutheran lineage; the theory was, so to speak, secularized again. But finally the layer of "civilization" to which the *Zivilisationsjuden* (as they were called) seemed so completely to have given themselves over broke open, and the question of the bindingness of the Mosaic Word of God pushed the aged Cohen to the margins of his system. Insofar as the humanity of nations had grown to the amplitude of a culture purified by philosophy and science, they surely shared the same religion of reason. However, the concept of reason, pictured in the image of a primordial spring, was illumined for the first time in history by the testimonies of the Jewish prophets. With utter rigor Cohen sought to salvage the autonomy of reason in relation to the positive nature of revelation. His philosophical conscience came to rest at last with the following tortuous notions: "If I am dependent upon the literary sources of the prophets for the concept of religion, so too would these remain mute and blind if I did not – under their tutelage, to be sure, but not just guided by their authority – approach them with a concept which I made the basis of my learning from them."

Of course, present-day theory of knowledge and science has not been determined by Cohen but by two other Jewish scholars. Inside Germany the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and internationally the logical positivism inaugurated by Ludwig Wittgenstein have become predominant in this period.

In the year of Hermann Cohen's death, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* appeared, opening with the lapidary statement "The world is everything that is the case." Wittgenstein was a major influence on the Vienna Circle, in which the Jews Otto Neurath and Friedrich Waismann were prominent. Later on, Jewish emigrants contributed to the worldwide triumph of the new doctrine. In the United States, Hans Reichenbach was the main influence; in Great Britain, Wittgenstein himself. At Cambridge, Wittgenstein led the life of a reclusive *Privatdozent*. Without publishing anything, and in the quiet of his colloquia with a small circle of students, he brought about the turn from logical to linguistic analysis. The chief concern of linguistic analysis was no longer with the analysis and step-by-step construction of a universal language that would picture facts. It did not serve a systematic purpose but rather a therapeutic one of explaining any given formulations by means of language analysis and expressing their meaning in "perfect clarity." Philosophical responses were

confined to recommendations of this or that mode of expression and ended in the artistry of language games that found satisfaction exclusively in themselves.

After two and a half decades of silence and shortly before his death, Wittgenstein gave in to the urgings of his friends and students and allowed a second book, *Philosophical Investigations*, to appear. He added a foreword full of resignation: "Up to a short time ago I had really given up the idea of publishing my works in my lifetime. . . . I make them public with doubtful feelings. It is not impossible that it should fall to the lot of this work, in its poverty and in the darkness of this time, to bring light into one brain or another – but, of course, it is not likely." In *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein extols as his authentic discovery one that makes us capable of breaking off philosophizing at any given place. Philosophy is supposed to come to rest, so that it can no longer get put in question by questioning itself. Already in the *Tractatus* his deeper impulses had been revealed in the following statement:

We feel that, even when all possible questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched. Of course there are then no questions left, and this itself is the answer. The solution of the problem is seen in the vanishing of the problem. (Is this not the reason why those who have found after a long period of doubt that the sense of life became clear to them have then been unable to say what constituted that sense?)

Wittgenstein does not hesitate to apply this insight to his own reflections: "My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: Anyone who understands them eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them – as steps – to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up to it.) . . . What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence." Such a silence has a transitive meaning. Even what has been uttered must be taken back again into the broken silence. Rosenzweig's remark that "there is nothing more Jewish in the deeper sense than an ultimate misgiving toward the power of the word and an inward trust in the power of silence!" reads like a comment on this. Because Hebrew is not the language of the assimilated Jew's everyday life but is removed from this as the sacred language, he is deprived of the ultimate and most obvious freedom from constraint

in life, which is to say, in his torment, what it is that he suffers: "For this reason he cannot speak with his brother at all, with him the look conveys far better than the word. . . . Precisely in silence and in the silent sign of discourse does the Jew feel even his everyday speech to be at home in the sacred speech of his ceremonial hour."

The Kabbalah differs from many other mystical writings in its complete lack of autobiography. Gershom Scholem, the historian of Jewish mysticism, reports that the kabbalists were bound to silence or to oral tradition; most manuscripts were abolished, and few of those that were still extant reached print. Seen from this vantage, Wittgenstein's use of language in speaking about the mystical appears thoroughly consistent: "There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical."

In contrast, Husserl sought to ground philosophy as an exact science precisely on the basis of a rigorous description of phenomena that make themselves manifest "by themselves" and are "given" intuitively in unmediated evidence. Transcendental phenomenology shares its intent with logical positivism, but not its path. Both fasten on the Cartesian starting point of doubt that never despairs of itself; however, the things [*Sachen*] to which Husserl would penetrate are not semantically and syntactically analyzable sentences of natural or scientific languages but achievements of consciousness out of which the meaningful network of our life world is constructed. Husserl did not wish to derive these intentions and their fulfillments, but simply to let them be seen from their "ultimate conceivable experiential standpoint"; in this he distinguished himself sharply from the Neo-Kantians and from the older Idealism in general. One day Plessner accompanied his teacher Husserl home after a seminar; he recalls the following: "When we reached his garden gate his deeper displeasure erupted: 'I have always found German Idealism in its entirety disgusting. All my life I' – and here he drew up his slender walking stick with the silver handle and pressed it against the gateposts – 'have sought reality.' In an unsurpassably plastic way the walking stick portrayed the intentional act and the post its fulfillment."

Husserl was isolated in his Freiburg home as the political horizon began to cloud over. He could lecture publicly about his mature philosophy only outside Germany, in Vienna and Prague. Unlike Wittgenstein, he did not withdraw the systematic claim into the self-complacency of linguistic glass-bead games or into the stillness of the

mystically unspeakable. Instead he attempted a great final project that was supposed to apprehend the crisis of the European sciences as the crisis of European humanity and to overcome it. Against the waves of fascist irrationalism, Husserl wanted to erect the claim of a renewed rationalism: "The reason for the failure of a rational culture . . . lies not in the essence of rationalism itself but solely in its being rendered superficial, in its entanglement in 'naturalism' and 'objectivism.'" In a genuinely Idealist fashion, he believed he could head off the disaster if only he could successfully ground the *Geisteswissenschaften* in a phenomenologically exact way. The crisis seemed to be rooted precisely in that a rationalism rendered superficial sought its grounding in a false and perilous way, by a natural scientific reduction of all spiritual phenomena to their physically explainable substructures. Instead of this, Husserl believed that the spirit should climb back into itself and clarify the achievements of consciousness hitherto hidden to itself. Husserl placed his trust in the world-moving force of this "theoretical attitude": ". . . this is not only a new cognitive stance. Because of the requirement to subject all empirical matters to ideal norms, i.e., those of unconditioned truth, there soon results a far-reaching transformation of the whole praxis of human existence, i.e., the whole of cultural life."

Though he had a rather questionable way of phrasing it, Husserl would have liked to bestow on philosophers the vocation of "functionaries of humanity." In his earlier works he had worked out the procedures through which phenomenologists would be assured a correct cognitive attitude. A kind of derealizing of reality was supposed to dissolve their interested involvement in the process of real life in order to make pure theory possible. In this withdrawn state, which he called *epoche*, Husserl daily exercised an admirable asceticism. He meditated for months and years, and from the written reports of his meditations grew the mountains of posthumous research manuscripts – documents of a working philosophy neither lectured on nor published. What Husserl practiced, then, was a methodological exercise. When politics drew him away from contemplation, however, the old philosopher attributed to it a bearing on the philosophy of history. The theory that grew out of a withdrawal from all praxis was supposed in the end to make possible the "new sort of praxis" of a politics directed by science – "a praxis whose aim is to elevate mankind through universal scientific reason according to norms of truth of all forms, to transform it from the bottom

up into a new humanity made capable of an absolute self-responsibility on the basis of absolute theoretical insights.”

This little mantle of philosophy of history was already threadbare before Husserl drew it over his doctrine, which was unhistorical to the core. Still he persisted in his stance; he fought for his lost cause with pathos and with the illusion of pure theory.

How much this cause was lost became evident in 1929 in the famous dispute between Cassirer and Heidegger in Davos. The theme was Kant, but in truth the end of an epoch was up for discussion. The opposition of the schools paled beside that of the generations. Cassirer represented the world to which Husserl belonged against his great pupil – the cultivated world of European humanism against a decisionism that invoked the primordially of thought, whose radicality attacked the Goethe culture at its very roots.

It is no accident that the Goethe cult at the start of the nineteenth century was created in the salon of Rachel Varnhagen, for it is certain that no one else strove with such intensity to live in accord with the model of Wilhelm Meister, who understood the “cultivation of personality” so peculiarly and so deceptively as an assimilation of the bourgeois to the nobleman, as did those Jews who were also called “exceptional Jews of culture.” What they expected of that model has been expressed by Simmel: “Perhaps no one has lived as symbolic a life as Goethe, since he gave to each only a piece or facet of his personality and yet at the same gave ‘the whole to everyone.’ To live symbolically in this manner is the only possibility of not being a comedian and a role player.” The interiorized Goethe promised not only the way to assimilation, but also the solution to the Jews’ ordeal of constantly having to play a role without being capable of being identical with oneself. In this twofold respect, the culture of German classicism was socially necessary for the Jews. Perhaps it is precisely for this reason that we owe to them the most sensitive aesthetic reflections, from Rosenkranz and Simmel, through Benjamin and Lukács, down to Adorno.

In the course of the conversations at Davos, a student put three questions to Cassirer; each of his responses closed with a Goethe citation. Heidegger, however, polemicized against the flaccid aspect of a human being who merely made use of the works of the spirit; Heidegger wanted “to cast [things] back upon the toughness of fate.” The discussion came to an end with Heidegger’s refusal to take Cassirer’s outstretched hand. What Heidegger announced four years

later, at the Leipzig election rally of German scientists in the name of Hitler's party, reads today like a continuation of these events:

We have broken with the idolization of a thinking without grounding and power. We are seeing the end of a philosophy capable of serving it. . . . The primordial courage in the confrontation with what is – either to grow from it or to be shattered by it – is the innermost motivation behind the inquiry of a science rooted in a national people (*völkischen Wissenschaft*). For courage lets us go forward; courage releases us from what has held true up to now; courage risks the unaccustomed and the incalculable.

It was this incalculable factor that Cassirer had at that very moment to escape. Emigration led him to the United States by way of Sweden and England. There he wrote his final work, *Myth of the State*, whose closing chapter deals with the technique of modern political myths and ends with a commentary on a Babylonian legend: "The world of human culture could not arise before the darkness of myth was vanquished and overcome. But the mythical monsters were not definitively destroyed."

Heidegger's questionable victory over the humanitarian intellectuality of Cassirer takes on a special inexorability from the fact that he convicted the enlightened position of a real weakness as well: In the face of the thought now proclaimed as "radical," the roots of the eighteenth century do not reach sufficiently deep. Before the eighteenth century there was no Jewish West, only the Middle Ages of the ghetto. A return to the Greeks, whenever it was attempted by Jews, always had about it something of a lack in power. Power secretly resided only in the depths of their own tradition, the Kabbalah.

Over the centuries the kabbalists had elaborated the technique of allegorical interpretation, before Walter Benjamin rediscovered allegory as the key to knowledge. Allegory is the counternotion of symbol. Cassirer had conceived every content of myth, philosophy, art, and language as the world of symbolic forms. In that world's objective spirit, human beings communicated with one another, and in it alone were they able to exist at all, for in the symbolic form – as Cassirer believed himself capable of saying with Goethe – the inconceivable is wrought, the ineffable is brought to speech, and the essence is brought to appearance. But Benjamin recalled that history

– in all that it contains from the outset of the untimely, the painful, the failed – is shut off from expression through the symbol and from the harmony of the classical pattern. Only allegorical representation succeeds in portraying world history as a history of suffering. Allegories are in the realm of thoughts what ruins are in the realm of things: “To preserve the unfreedom, imperfection, and brokenness of the sensible, the beautiful physis, was essentially denied to classicism. Precisely this, however, the allegories of the baroque, hidden beneath their bold pomp, bring out with hitherto unanticipated emphasis.”

Before the gaze schooled in allegory the innocence of a philosophy of symbolic forms is lost; before it is disclosed the fragility of that foundation – firmly and conclusively established, so it seemed, by Kant and Goethe – of an enlightened culture of beauty. It was not as though Benjamin had given up its idea, but he saw in its roots the schizoid nature of precisely those “cultural values” and “cultural treasures” that Jews were discussing so naively. In truth, history was the triumphal procession of the rulers over those lying on the ground: “According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures. . . . There is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to the other” (Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York, 1969), p. 256).

Benjamin took his own life in 1940 when, after his flight through southern France, the Spanish border officials threatened to deliver him over to the Gestapo. The theses on the philosophy of history that he left behind are among the most moving testimonies of the Jewish spirit. In it the dialectic of the Enlightenment, which in its broken progress dominates the as yet undecided course of history, is held fast in the form of an allegorical interpretation. The ninth thesis says

A Klee painting named “Angelus Novus” shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and

hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (*Illuminations*, pp. 257–8)

Benjamin was not the first to break through the circle of Jewish thought devoted to the theory of science and to epistemology, which later was expanded to encompass the philosophy of history. Already Simmel, who had been a friend of George and Rilke as much as of Bergson and Rodin, had crossed the boundaries of the then dominant academic philosophy: “There are three categories of philosophers: one group hears the heartbeat of things, a second only that of human beings, a third only that of concepts; . . . [the philosophy professors] hear only the heart of the literature.”

In Simmel’s posthumous writings there is a characteristic fragment on the art of the drama that deals with an experience that often lends a nervous dynamism to the private lives of assimilated Jews. Hannah Arendt, the clever historian of anti-Semitism, has described how the philo-Semitic circles in *fin de siècle* Paris accepted cultivated Jews with the curious compliment that one could no longer even tell their descent; they were supposed to be Jews, but not to be like Jews:

In this ambiguous back and forth each of the individuals in question was an accomplished actor; it was only that the curtain that should have normally brought the play to an end would never again be lowered and the people who had made a theatrical role out of their entire lives no longer knew who they really were, even in solitude. If they entered into society, they instinctively detected those who were like them; they recognized one another automatically from the unusual mixture of arrogance and anxiety that had determined and fixed each of their gestures. Out of this there arose the knowing smile of the clique – which Proust discussed at such length – which . . . only indicated secretly what everyone else present had long known, namely that in every corner of the salon of Countess So-and-so there was sitting another Jew who was never allowed to admit it, and who without this in itself insignificant fact would oddly enough never have arrived in the much sought after corner.

On top of this, Jews who were held personally responsible for the pitilessness of their environment in terms of an “enigmatic demonism of mask changing” could not but become sensitive to the role character of human existence in general. If I bring one of Simmel’s insights into connection with this sharpened sensibility, this does not bring its validity into doubt. It goes as follows:

We not only do things to which culture and the blows of fate induce us from without, but we inevitably represent something that we really are not. . . . It is very seldom that a person determines his mode of behavior in complete purity out of his very own existence; usually we see a preexisting form before us which we have filled with our individual conduct. Now this: that the human being experiences, or represents a predesignated other as the development entrusted to him as most centrally his own, so that he does not simply abandon his own being, but fills the other with this being itself and guides its streams into those manifoldly divided arteries whose paths, though running a preset course, absorb the whole inner being into this particular shape – this is the pre-form [*Vorform*] of the art of theater. . . . In just this sense we are all somehow actors.

Helmut Plessner, too, developed his general anthropology out of his “anthropology of the actor.” The human being does not merely live in the midst of his body, like the animal. Without being able to eliminate this centering, he also falls outside it; he constantly has to relate to himself and to others, to lead a self-enacted life in accord with the “director’s instructions” of the society:

As a relation-to-himself the actor is the person of a role, for himself and for the spectator. In accord with this relationship the players and spectators only repeat, however, the distancing of people from themselves and one another that pervades their daily life. . . . For what is this seriousness of everydayness in the end but realizing-oneself-bound-to-a-role which we want to play in society? To be sure, this role-playing does not want to be a performance. . . . the burden of image-projecting for our social role is taken from us by the tradition into which we were born. Nonetheless, we, as virtual spectators of ourselves and the world, have to see the world as a stage.

An anthropology that apprehends the human in terms of his compulsion to play a role finds its continuation without any break whatsoever in sociology. Simmel, like Plessner, worked in a sociological

mode; so, too, did Max Scheler, the real founder of philosophical anthropology. During his last years, Scheler taught sociology at the University of Frankfurt, which had gained fame, in virtue of the influence of Franz Oppenheimer, Gottfried Salomon, Carl Grünberg, and Karl Mannheim, as a center of sociological research. There Max Horkheimer united his chair in philosophy with the directorship of the Institute for Social Research, and even Martin Buber became a sociologist.

The Jewish spirit dominated sociology from the days of Ludwig Gumplowicz on. The Jews' experience of society as something one runs up against was so insistent that they carried along a sociological view, so to speak, right from their doorsteps. In neighboring disciplines, too, it was they who were the first to employ a sociological point of view. Eugen Ehrlich and Hugo Sinzheimer founded the sociology of law. Ludwig Goldscheid and Herbert Sultan were the leading sociologists of finance.

The fantasy of Jewish scholars in general was sparked by the power of money – Marx, especially the young Marx, was an example of this. In this regard the intimate enmity of the cultured Jews toward the moneyed Jews – that sublime intra-Jewish anti-Semitism against the stratum whose *imago* was minted by the Rothschilds – might have been a motive. Simmel, himself the son of a salesman, wrote a blatant “Philosophy of Money.” In Simmel, however, one also finds the other typically Jewish interest besides the sociological: the interest in a philosophy of nature inspired by mysticism. His diary includes this: “. . . treat not only each human but also each thing as if it were an end in itself that would result in a cosmic ethics.” The mystical link between morality and physics is again encountered here, in Kantian terminology. Simmel's friend Karl Joel wrote about the “Origins of Philosophy of Nature from the Spirit of Mysticism.” In the 1920s, David Baumgardt undertook to repair the so-called injustice done to Baader, whom a positivistic age had forgotten so completely. In Baumgardt's “Franz Baader and Philosophical Romanticism,” a Jew comes across the golden vein of those speculations on the ages of the world – so pregnant for a philosophy of nature – that lead from Jacob Böhme via Swabian Pietism to the Tübingen seminarians Schelling, Hegel, and Hölderlin. Even before this, Richard Unger had recognized in Hamann's tension-filled relationship to the Enlightenment the “realistic strain” of Protestant mysticism, which, with its acceptance of a

ground of nature in God, is differentiated from the spiritualistic mysticism of the Middle Ages.

Even Scheler's and Plessner's sketches of a philosophy of nature exhibit a certain strain of this tradition. Despite all their sober elaboration of materials from the particular sciences, they still betray a speculative bent that stems from nature mysticism; Scheler's cosmology even reverts explicitly to a God that becomes.

However, all these Jewish scholars seem not to have attained full awareness of what force had set them on the path of this special tradition. They had forgotten what was still generally known at the close of the seventeenth century. At that time Johann Jacob Spaeth, a disciple of Böhmean mysticism, overcome by the consonance of this doctrine with the theosophy of Isaac Luria, went over to Judaism. A few years later, the Protestant pastor Friedrich Christoph Oetinger (whose writings Hegel and Schelling as well as Baader had read) sought out in the ghetto of Frankfurt the kabbalist Koppel Hecht in order to be initiated into Jewish mysticism. Hecht responded that "Christians have a book that speaks about the Kabbalah more clearly than the Zohar;" what he meant was the work of Jacob Böhme.

It was this kind of "theology" Walter Benjamin had in mind when he remarked that historical materialism would have been able to accept motifs of kabbalistic mysticism without further ado if only it were capable of assuming theology into its service. This reception actually happened with Ernst Bloch. In the medium of his Marxian appropriation of Jewish mysticism, Bloch combines sociology with the philosophy of nature into a system that today is borne along as is no other by the great breath of German Idealism. In the summer of 1918 Bloch published *The Spirit of Utopia*, which holds up a Marxism confined to economics to a mirror. *The Spirit of Utopia* is comparable to a *Critique of Pure Reason* for which the *Critique of Practical Reason* still needed to be written. Bloch writes

Here the economy is sublated; but what is missing is the soul, the faith for which room is to be made; the clever, active gaze has destroyed everything, to be sure, much that needed destroying. . . . Also it disavowed with good reason the all-too-arcadian socialism, the utopian-rationalist socialism that had reemerged since the Renaissance in the secularized guise of the Thousand-Year Reich, and often enough merely as a formless drapery, the ideology of very sober class goals and economic revolutions. But of course the utopian tendency is not adequately conceived in all this; nor is the substance of its wish

images met and judged; and the primordial religious desire is certainly not disposed of . . . being realized in a divine fashion, of finally installing ourselves chiliastically in the goodness, freedom, and light of the *telos*.

In Lurianic mysticism the idea is developed of the universe's arising in virtue of a process of shrinkage and contraction; God withdraws into an exile within himself. In this way the primordial impenetrability and power of matter is explained, as well as the positive character of evil, which can no longer be facilely evaporated into a shadow side of the good. On the other hand, this dark ground remains a nature in God; the nature of God remains a divine potency, the world soul or *natura naturans*. Into these depths reaches the notion Bloch lays at the basis of speculative materialism: Matter is in need of redemption. Since the time of that theological catastrophe described by the Zohar in the image of a shattering of a vessel, all things bear within themselves a break; they are, as Bloch expresses it, abstracted forms of themselves. The process of restoration was almost already completed when Adam's fall once again threw the world down from its proper stage and threw God back into exile. This new age of the world, with the ancient goal of the redemption of humanity, of nature, and indeed of the God knocked off his throne, is now the responsibility of humans. Mysticism becomes a magic of interiority, for now the outermost reality depends on what is most inward. (An old saying from the Zohar guarantees the redemption as soon as only a single community does perfect penance.) Prayer becomes a manipulative activity with significance for the philosophy of history.

For Bloch, political praxis replaces religious practice. The chapter "Marx, Death, and Apocalypse" also bears the subtitle "On the Way of the World, How What is Turned Inward Can Get Turned Outward." In this chapter is found the following statement:

For ages matter has been an embarrassment not only for those seeking knowledge, but an embarrassment in itself; it is a demolished house within which the human being did not come forth; nature is a rubbish heap of deceived, dead, rotted, confused, and wasted life. . . . Only the good, thoughtful person holding the key can usher in the morning in this night of annihilation, if only those who remained impure do not weaken him, if only his crying for the Messiah is inspired enough to stir up the saving hands, to ensure for himself in a precise way the

grace of attainment, to arouse in God the forces drawing us and himself over, the inspiring and grace-filled forces of the Sabbath reign, and thus to swallow up in victory the raw, satanic, breathtaking moment of conflagration of the apocalypse and straightaway to vanquish it.

Bloch's five-part work *The Principle of Hope* contains his clearest elucidation of this early vision and of its place in intellectual history. He has now sublated the Schelling of *Ages of the World* into the Marx of the *Paris Manuscripts*:

Human abundance as well as that of nature as a whole . . . , the real genesis, is not at the beginning, but at the end; and it starts coming to be only when society and human existence become radical, that is, take hold of themselves at the roots. The root of history, however, is the toiling, laboring human being, who develops whatever has been given and transforms it. Once he has apprehended himself and grounded being without estrangement and alienation in real democracy, there thus arises in the world something that appears to everyone during childhood and yet within which no one ever was: home.

Because Bloch recurs to Schelling, and Schelling had brought from the spirit of Romanticism the heritage of the Kabbalah into the Protestant philosophy of German Idealism, the most Jewish elements of Bloch's philosophy – if such categories have any meaning at all – are at the same time the authentically German ones. They make a mockery of the attempt to draw such a distinction at all.

Just as Bloch (from the Schellingian spirit) and Plessner (from the Fichtean spirit) appropriated German Idealism and made good its prescient insights in relation to the present state of the sciences, so too it was Jewish scholars (friends of Walter Benjamin) who thought out Hegel's dialectic of the Enlightenment to a point where the ongoing beginning opens up a view of the still outstanding end: Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse, preceded by the early Georg Lukács.

I wrote this piece for a series of radio programs devoted to "Portraits from German-Jewish Intellectual History." Thilo Koch, to whose initiative the series must be credited, requested all contributors to record in concluding the experiences they had as authors during the course of working on their theme. My conclusion follows.

Wherever genuine philosophizing begins mere reportage comes to an end, and my task was only the latter. I had hesitations about undertaking it. Would not this undertaking – despite the high hopes with which it was planned – pin a Jewish star on the exiled and the beaten once again?

At the age of 15 or 16 I sat before the radio and experienced what was being discussed before the Nuremberg tribunal; when others, instead of being struck silent by the ghastliness, began to dispute the justice of the trial, procedural questions, and questions of jurisdiction, there was that first rupture, which still gapes. Certainly, it is only because I was still sensitive and easily offended that I did not close myself to the fact of collectively realized inhumanity in the same measure as the majority of my elders. For the same reason, the so-called Jewish question remained for me a very present past, but not itself something present. There was a clear barrier against the slightest hint of distinguishing Jews from non-Jews, Jewish from non-Jewish, even nominally. Although I had studied philosophy for years before I started on this study, I was not aware of the lineage of even half of the scholars named in it. Such naiveté is not adequate today, in my opinion.

Scarcely twenty-five years ago the cleverest and most important German theorist of state law – not just some Nazi, but Carl Schmitt himself – was capable of opening a scientific conference with the horrible statement that “we need to liberate the German spirit from all Jewish falsifications, falsifications of the concept of spirit which have made it possible for Jewish emigrants to label the great struggle of Gauleiter Julius Streicher as something unspiritual.” At that time Hugo Sinzheimer responded from his exile in Holland with a book on the Jewish classics of German jurisprudence. In his conclusion, Sinzheimer turns his attention to this same Carl Schmitt:

If one attends to the origins of the scholarly activity of the Jews at the time of the emancipation, it is not a matter of an influence of the Jewish spirit on German scientific labor. . . . Perhaps nowhere else in the world has the spiritual life of Germany celebrated greater triumphs outside its origins than precisely in this period when the ghetto was opened up and the intellectual powers of the Jews, held in check for so long, encountered what were the heights of the culture of Germany. It is the German spirit that lies at the basis of the Jewish influence.

To repeat this truth and to confirm it once again in connection with the fate of the Jewish philosophy is, of course, not unimportant, and yet it is still based on a question dictated by the opponent. Meanwhile the question of anti-Semitism itself has been disposed of – we have disposed of it by physical extermination. Hence, in our deliberations it cannot be a matter of the life and survival of the Jews, of influences back and forth; only we ourselves are at stake. That is to say, the Jewish heritage drawn from the German spirit has become indispensable for our own life and survival. At the very moment when German philosophers and scientists started to “eradicate” this heritage, the profound ambivalence that so eerily colored the dark ground of the German spirit was revealed as a danger of barbarism for everyone. Ernst Jünger, Martin Heidegger, and Carl Schmitt are representatives of this spirit in its grandeur, but in its perilousness as well; that they spoke as they did in 1930, 1933, and 1936 is no accident. And that this insight has not been realized a quarter of a century later proves the urgency of a discriminating kind of thinking all the more. This has to be one with that fatal German spirit and yet split with it from within to such an extent that it can relay an oracle to it: it must not cross the Rubicon a second time. If there were not extant a German-Jewish tradition, we would have to discover one for our own sakes. Well, it does exist; but because we have murdered or broken its bodily carriers, and because, in a climate of an unbinding reconciliation, we are in the process of letting everything be forgiven and forgotten too (in order to accomplish what could not have been accomplished better by anti-Semitism), we are now forced into the historical irony of taking up the Jewish question without the Jews.

The German Idealism of the Jews produces the ferment of a critical utopia. Its intention finds no more exact, more worthy, more beautiful expression than in the Kafkaesque passages at the end of Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*:

Philosophy, in the only way it is to be responsive in the face of despair, would be the attempt to treat all things as they would be displayed from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but what shines on the world from the redemption; everything else is exhausted in reconstruction and remains a piece of technique. Perspectives would have to be produced in which the world is similarly displaced, estranged, reveals its tears and blemishes the way they once lay bare

as needy and distorted in the messianic light. To gain such a perspective without caprice and violence, utterly out of sympathy with the objects – this alone is worth the thinker's while. It is the simplest thing of all, because the situation cries out urgently for such knowledge, yes, because the completed negativity, once it is brought entirely into view, includes the mirror script of its opposite. But it is also something utterly impossible, because it presupposes a vantage point, even though it might concern a minute matter, which is removed from the range of human existence, whereas, of course, any possible knowledge does not have to be bullied merely by that which is in order to prove normative; but precisely for this reason it is itself fraught with the same distortion and neediness it intended to evade. The more passionately thought girds itself against its conditionedness for the sake of the unconditional, the less consciously and hence more perilously does it fall to the world. It even has to conceive its own impossibility for the sake of possibility. In relation to the exigency that thereby impinges upon it, the question about the reality or unreality of redemption itself is almost a matter of indifference.

Translated by Frederick G. Lawrence