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About the Author

Wolfram Eilenberger was the founder and for many years Editor-in-Chief of *Philosophie Magazin*. He has taught philosophy at the University of Toronto, Indiana University, the Berlin University of the Arts and ETH Zürich. His previous books include a study of the thought of Mikhail Bakhtin and guides to the application of philosophy in everyday life. This book, his ninth, was a bestseller on publication in Germany, where it won the prestigious Bayerischer Buchpreis, as well as Spain and Italy, and it has been translated into more than twenty languages.

For Eva

The best that we have from history is the enthusiasm that it stimulates.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe,
Maxims and Reflections

than a decade. A lot had happened in the meantime, but to the Apostles, Wittgenstein appeared almost unchanged. It wasn't just that he was wearing his typical outfit of an open-necked shirt, gray flannel trousers, and heavy, agricultural-looking boots. Physically, too, the years seemed to have passed without leaving a trace. At first sight, he looked like one of the gifted students who had also been invited, and who had previously known the strange man from Austria only from their professors' stories. And, of course, that he was the author of the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, the legendary work that had shaped, if not actually dominated, philosophical discussion in Cambridge for several years. None of those present would have claimed that they had even begun to understand the book, but this fact only boosted its fascination.

Wittgenstein had finished the book in 1918 as a prisoner of war in Italy, convinced that he had found the solution to philosophical questions *"on all essential points,"* and thus decided to turn his back on the discipline. Only a few months later, as the heir to one of the wealthiest industrial families in Europe, he transferred his entire inheritance to his siblings. As he told Russell in a letter at the time, from now on—plagued as he was by severe depression and thoughts of suicide—he would support himself "with honest toil." He would become a teacher at a provincial primary school.

Wittgenstein was back in Cambridge. Back, it was said, to philosophize. The genius, now forty years old, had no academic title and was utterly penniless. The little money that he had managed to save lasted only a few weeks in England. Cautious inquiries about the willingness of his siblings to help him out financially were intemperately dismissed. "Will you please accept my written declaration that not only I have a number of wealthy relations, but also that they would give me money if I asked them to. BUT THAT I WILL NOT ASK THEM FOR A PENNY," Wittgenstein wrote to Moore the day before his oral examination.[3]

What was to be done? No one in Cambridge doubted Wittgenstein's exceptional gifts. Everyone, including the most influential figures at the university, wanted to keep him there. But without an academic title, it proved institutionally impossible to find a research grant, let alone a regular teaching post, for the former dropout, even in the clubby atmosphere of Cambridge.

In the end they hatched a plan: Wittgenstein would submit the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, his first and so far his only book, as a doctoral thesis. Russell had personally advocated for its publication in 1921–1922, and had written a foreword to help the process along, since he considered the work of his former pupil far superior to his own groundbreaking studies in the philosophy of logic, mathematics, and language. No wonder, then, that upon entering the examination room Russell swore that he had "never known anything so absurd in my life."[4] Still: an exam is an exam, and after a few minutes of friendly inquiry Moore and Russell started asking some serious questions. These concerned one of the central riddles of the *Tractatus*, a book not exactly short on opaque aphorisms and mystical one-liners. Take, for example, the very first sentence of the work, strictly organized according to a decimal system: "1. The world is everything that is the case."

Take also entries like: "6:432. How the world is, is completely indifferent for what is higher. God does not reveal himself in the world." Or: "6:44. Not *how* the world is, is the mystical, but *that* it is."

The fundamental impulse behind the book is nonetheless clear: Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* stands in a long tradition of modern philosophy such as Spinoza's *Ethics*, Hume's *An Enquiry into Human Understanding*, and Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. All of these attempt to draw a boundary between the propositions in our language, which are truly meaningful and thus capable of truth, and those that only seem meaningful, and because of that very illusoriness lead our thought and culture astray. In other words, the *Tractatus* is a therapeutic contribution to the question of what one can meaningfully talk about as a human being and what one cannot. It is no coincidence that the book ends with the aphorism "7. Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent." And just before that, under entry 6:54, Wittgenstein reveals his own therapeutic method: "My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.) He must surmount these propositions, then he sees the world rightly."

In the oral examination, Russell now focused on this very point. How precisely was that to happen? How can someone be helped through a sequence of nonsense propositions to a—the—correct vision of the world? Had Wittgenstein not expressly said in the preface to his book that "the truth of the thoughts communicated here" seems to him to be "unassailable and definitive"? How could that be so if the work, by the author's own account, consisted almost entirely of nonsense propositions?

The question was not new to Wittgenstein. Certainly not from Russell's lips. Over the years and throughout their lengthy correspondence it had become almost a ritual in their tense friendship. Hence, once again, in Wittgenstein's oral exam, "for old times' sake," Russell asked his question.

Unfortunately, we don't know what Wittgenstein said in his defense. We can assume that he spoke with his usual slight stammer, his eyes glowing, and with an idiosyncratic intonation that sounded less like the English tongue in a foreign mouth than the speech of someone attuned to a different significance and musicality in human language. And eventually, after several minutes of halting monologue, always in search of an elucidatory formulation—that, too, was Wittgenstein's manner—he would have concluded that he had spoken and explained enough. It was simply impossible to make everything comprehensible to every human being. He had said as much in the preface to the *Tractatus*: "This book will perhaps be understood only by those who have already thought the thoughts which are expressed in it—or similar thoughts."

The only problem was (and Wittgenstein knew it) that there were very few people, perhaps not a single one, who had thought and thus formulated similar thoughts. Not Bertrand Russell, author of the *Principia Mathematica*, which, in the end, Wittgenstein considered philosophically limited. And certainly not G. E. Moore, regarded as one of the most brilliant thinkers and logicians of his time, who, according to Wittgenstein, "shows you how far a man can go who has absolutely no intelligence whatsoever."

How was he to explain the ladder of nonsense thoughts that one had first to climb and then push away in order to see the world as it really is? Hadn't the wise man from Plato's cave, once he had

reached the light, failed to make his insights comprehensible to the others still trapped deep inside?

Enough for today. Enough explanations. Wittgenstein stands up, walks around the table, claps Moore and Russell cordially on the shoulder, and utters the sentence that all aspiring doctors of philosophy must dream about the night before their oral exams: "Don't worry, I know you'll never understand it."

That was the end of the performance. It was left to Moore to write the examination report: "In my opinion this is a work of genius; it is in any case up to the requirements of a degree from Cambridge."[5]

The research grant was authorized shortly afterward. Wittgenstein, God, had arrived back in philosophy.

HIGH FLIERS

ON MARCH 17 of the same year, Martin Heidegger must have felt that he, too, had arrived, in the grander sense of the word, when he stepped into the banqueting hall of the Grand Hôtel Belvédère in Davos. From his youth in the Black Forest, he had seen his ascent to these intellectual heights as a matter of destiny. Nothing was to be left to chance. Not his slim, almost athletic, suit, which set him apart from the dignitaries in their traditional tails, not the severely combed-back hair, not his rustic tan, not his late arrival in the hall, and certainly not his choice to mingle with the crowd of students and researchers in the belly of the hall rather than take the seat reserved for him in the front row. Adherence to convention was out of the question, because for Heidegger there could be no philosophizing in falsehood. And just about everything in this kind of learned assembly in a luxurious Swiss hotel must have seemed fake to him.

The previous year Albert Einstein had delivered the opening lecture at the Davos University Conferences. In 1929, at age thirty-nine, Heidegger was one of the main speakers. Over the coming days he would deliver three lectures and, by way of conclusion, engage in a public debate with Ernst Cassirer, the other heavyweight philosopher present. While the venue might have

displeased him, the validation and recognition that came with it stirred Heidegger's deepest wishes.[6]

Only two years previously, in the spring of 1927, his *Being and Time* had been published, and it was acknowledged within a few months as a milestone in the annals of thought. With this the sexton's son from Messkirch in Baden had established a reputation, in the words of his then student (and lover) Hannah Arendt, as the "secret king" of German-language philosophy. Heidegger had written the book in 1926 under enormous time pressure—and in fact it was only half finished. With it he had set the stage for his return from unloved Marburg to his Freiburg alma mater, where, in 1928, Heidegger assumed the prestigious chair of his former teacher and patron, the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl.

If John Maynard Keynes had captured something of Wittgenstein's transcendent otherworldliness with the title of "God," Arendt's choice of the term "king" is also revealing. The will to power and social dominance that it implies were immediately apparent to all who met Heidegger. Wherever he appeared, wherever he turned up, Heidegger was never one among many. In the banqueting hall at Davos he staked out this claim once again with his refusal to take his assigned place among the other professors of philosophy. People whispered, muttered, and even turned around to look: there's Heidegger.

Now things could begin.

MAINTAINING ONE'S COMPOSURE

ERNST CASSIRER WOULD HAVE EXCUSED himself from the general muttering and murmuring in the hall. Don't let anything show: keep up appearances—and above all maintain composure. That was his motto. It was also the core of his philosophy. And what, after all, did he have to fear? The bustle and ceremony of a large academic conference were hardly new. The fifty-four-year-old professor had held his chair at the University of Hamburg for the past ten years, and for the winter semester of 1929–1930 he would even hold the rectorate there—only the fourth Jew in the history of all German universities to do so. The son of an affluent Breslau businessman,

THE THEME CHOSEN by the organizers of the Davos meeting sounded appropriately revolutionary: "What is a human being?" The question was a leitmotif in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Kant's entire corpus of thought proceeds from an observation as simple as it is irrefutable: Humans are beings who ask themselves questions that they are ultimately unable to answer. In particular, these questions often address the existence of God, the conundrum of human freedom, and the immortality of the soul. According to a first approximation of a definition, then, a human is for Kant a *metaphysical being*.

What conclusions can be drawn from this? For Kant, these metaphysical riddles, precisely because they cannot be conclusively answered, open up a horizon of potential perfection. They guide us in our efforts to bring as much as possible into experience (cognition), to act with as much freedom and self-determination as possible (ethics), to prove as worthy as possible of possible immortality (religion). In this context Kant speaks of a *regulative* or a leading function of metaphysical inquiry.

Until the 1920s, Kant's premises remained crucial to German-language philosophy—indeed to modern philosophy as a whole. Philosophizing meant, not least for Cassirer and Heidegger, thinking in the wake of these questions. And the same went for the aforementioned attempts, with their logical orientation, by Ludwig Wittgenstein to draw a firm boundary between that of which one can and cannot speak. Crucially, however, Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* forayed beyond Kant in considering the fundamental human impulse to ask metaphysical questions—and hence to philosophize—as amenable to treatment, and in using experimentally the methods of philosophy as a kind of therapy. So, for example, he writes in the *Tractatus*:

> 6:5 When the answer cannot be put into words, neither can the question be put into words. The riddle does not exist. If a question can be framed at all, it is also possible to answer it.
>
> 6:51 Doubt can exist only where a question exists, a question only where an answer exists, and an answer only where something can be said.

> 6:53 The correct method of philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science—i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy—and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions.

It was typically hoped at the time that metaphysical questions could finally be left behind, that they had been superseded by the spirit of logic and natural science, which appeared ascendant. These aspirations were on display in the work of many participants at the Davos conference, including the Privatdozent (unsalaried lecturer at a German university) Rudolf Carnap, then thirty-eight years old and the author of books with such programmatic titles as *The Logical Construction of the World* and *Pseudo-Problems in Philosophy* (both 1928). After immigrating to the United States in 1937, Carnap became one of the leading lights in the "analytic philosophy" movement that sprang from Wittgenstein's works.

WITHOUT FOUNDATION

REGARDLESS OF THE TENDENCY or school with which the philosophers at Davos aligned themselves—idealism, humanism, *Lebensphilosophie*, phenomenology, or logicism—they were in agreement on one essential point: The view of the world and above all the scientific foundation on which Kant had once erected his impressive philosophical system had been undermined, or at least were in need of significant reform. Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* was clearly based, not least in its understanding of space and time, on the physics of the eighteenth century. But Einstein's theory of relativity (1905) had displaced the Newtonian model. Space and time could no longer be considered independent of each other, nor were they in an identifiable sense a priori, based on theoretical deduction rather than experience. Darwin's theory of evolution had already swept away the idea of human nature as eternally unchanging, as something that did not develop over time. With

Darwin's theory of natural selection, which would be influentially translated by Nietzsche from nature into the field of culture, the prospect of a teleological, reason-based account of history was rendered implausible. The complete transparency of human consciousness to itself—a starting point of Kant's transcendental method of investigation—was no longer self-evident by the time of Freud. More than anything else, however, the horrors of anonymized killing on an industrial scale in the First World War stripped all credibility from Enlightenment rhetoric about the civilizing progress of humanity, and the power of culture, science, and technology to realize this process. The political and economic crises that followed the war made the question "What is a human being?" more urgent than ever, even as the foundations of the accepted answer were deemed structurally unsound.

The philosopher Max Scheler—the author of *The Human Place in the Cosmos* (1928)—captured this sense of crisis in one of his last lectures: "In the roughly ten thousand years of history, ours is the first period when man has become completely and totally problematical to himself, when he no longer knows what he is, but at the same time knows that he knows nothing."[10]

This was the backdrop to Cassirer and Heidegger's meeting on the mountain at Davos. Over the previous decade that backdrop had inspired both thinkers to create their most significant works. Bur rather than attempt to directly answer Kant's question "What is a human being?" Cassirer and Heidegger concentrated on the tacit question that lay behind it, and it is there that their originality is to be found.

Humans are beings who must ask themselves questions that they are unable to answer. Fine. But what conditions must in fact exist so that they can actually ask themselves these questions? How is that asking possible? What is the source of this capacity to ask questions about questions? Cassirer's and Heidegger's answers are to be found in the titles of their main works, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* and *Being and Time*, respectively.

TWO VISIONS

ACCORDING TO CASSIRER, the human being is above all a sign-using and sign-making creature—an *animal symbolicum*. In other words, we give ourselves and our world meaning, support, and orientation through the use of signs. Our most important sign system is our mother tongue. But there are many other sign systems—*symbolic forms* in Cassirer's terminology—those of myth, art, mathematics, or music. These symbols, be they linguistic, pictorial, acoustic, or gestural, are never self-explanatory; they need interpretation by other human beings. The process by which signs are placed into the world, interpreted, and augmented by others is the process of culture, and it is the ability to use signs that enables human beings to ask metaphysical questions, indeed any questions, about themselves and the world. For Cassirer, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* becomes an investigation of the formal symbolic systems with which we give meaning to ourselves and our world and thus is really a *Critique of Culture* in all its inevitably contradictory breadth and diversity.

Heidegger, too, stresses the importance of the medium of language in human existence. He sees the actual foundation for humanity's metaphysical essence as lying not in a distributed system of signs, however, but in a distinctly individual feeling—anxiety. More precisely, the anxiety that grips individuals when they become fully aware that their existence is essentially finite. Knowledge of one's own finitude, which defines human beings as "existence (Dasein) thrown into the world," inaugurates the task of grasping and realizing one's own possibilities of being, of working toward a goal that Heidegger calls *authenticity*. Humanity's form of being is further distinguished by its ineluctable subjection to time. On the one hand because of the unique historical situation into which its existence has been thrown unasked, and on the other because of the knowledge that that existence has of its finitude.

For that reason, in Heidegger's view, the sphere of culture and the use of sign systems identified by Cassirer distracts human beings from their finitude and hence from the goal of authenticity, and it is the role of philosophy to keep human beings open to the true abysses of their anxiety and thus, in an authentic sense, to liberate them.

AT A CROSSROADS

KANT'S OLD QUESTION of what a human being is leads to one of two fundamentally contradictory ideals of cultural and indeed of political development, depending on whether we attempt to answer it in terms of Cassirer's or Heidegger's thought. It is the declaration of a belief in the equal humanity of all sign-using beings as against the elitist courage of authenticity; the hope that our deepest anxieties can be tamed by the civilizing process as against the demand for as radical as possible a struggle to defeat those anxieties; a belief in the pluralism of cultural forms and diversity as against the sense of the necessary loss of self in a sphere of superabundance; the idea of a moderating continuity as against a total break with the past and a new beginning.

When Cassirer and Heidegger met at ten o'clock in the morning on March 26, 1929, each of them was able to claim that, with their respective philosophies, they embodied whole world-images. What was at stake in Davos, then, was the contest between two fundamentally opposed visions of the development of modern human beings, visions whose force and appeal continue to shape and determine our culture from within even today.

The students and researchers present at Davos had for the most part delivered their judgment even before the debate took place ten days into the conference. Predictably, the conflict had a generational dimension and the junior philosophers strongly favored the young Heidegger. It couldn't have helped that Cassirer, as if acting out the obsolescence of his bourgeois conception of culture, spent most of the conference convalescing in his hotel room, while Heidegger spent every spare minute on his skis, dashing down the *pistes noires* of the Grison Alps with the Young Turks of the student body.

WHERE IS BENJAMIN?

IN THE SPRING of the miraculous year when Cassirer and Heidegger met to set out the future of humanity on the peak of Davos, in the metropolis of Berlin the independent journalist and author Walter Benjamin was troubled by concerns of a quite different order.

university grew: an academic office would supply him with the necessities of life and enable him to support his young, much-traveled family—the two things this profoundly conflicted thinker both longed for and feared.

FAIL BETTER

IN 1925, BENJAMIN'S ACADEMIC AMBITIONS reached their nadir with his postdoctoral dissertation (*Habilitation* in German) at Frankfurt University. At the suggestion of Benjamin's only advocate at the institution, the sociologist Gottfried Salomon (one of the future main organizers of the Davos conferences), Benjamin handed in a work titled *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. At first glance it was an attempt to incorporate the tradition of the Baroque tragedy into the canon of German literature. For its "Epistemo-Critical Prologue," the work is recognized today as a milestone of twentieth-century philosophy and literary theory. At the time, however, the expert assessors appointed by the university were completely overwhelmed by its weight and impenetrability. After an initial review, they urgently requested that its author voluntarily withdraw; the alternative was formal failure at the hands of the examination committee.

Even this humiliating ultimatum did not lead Benjamin to abandon the idea of university completely. In the winter of 1927–1928, with the assistance of his friend and patron the author Hugo von Hofmannsthal, he sought to join the so-called Warburg School around Erwin Panofsky and Ernst Cassirer, with disastrous results. Panofsky's response to Hofmannsthal's overture was so crushingly negative that Benjamin had to apologize to his advocate for having involved him in the first place. Particularly galling for Benjamin would have been the knowledge that Cassirer must have been aware of the fiasco; as a student in Berlin in 1912–1913, he had eagerly attended the lectures of the then Privatdozent. These circles were tight and advocates were everything, but Benjamin was generally seen as a hopeless case: his approach was too independent, his style too unconventional, his day job too journalistic, and his theories so original as to be indecipherable.

In fact, the ballroom in Davos—and this would certainly not have escaped Benjamin as a correspondent—formed a sort of gallery of all his academic humiliations, crowned by the presence of Martin Heidegger, whom Benjamin profoundly hated. In 1913 and 1914 they had both attended the Freiburg seminars of the neo-Kantian Heinrich Rickert (later Heidegger's thesis supervisor). Since then Benjamin had attentively followed Heidegger's rise with no small amount of envy. In 1929 he planned, not for the first time, to set up a magazine (working title: *Krise und Kritik*, or "Crisis and Criticism"), whose mission, as he confided to Bertolt Brecht, his friend and prospective cofounder of the journal, was the "demolition of Heidegger." But in the end nothing came of that, either. Another experiment, another plan nipped in the bud.

By the age of thirty-seven, Benjamin could look back on dozens of large-scale failures. Over the previous decade spent juggling different roles—freelance philosopher, journalist, and critic—he had above all been an inexhaustible source of abortive projects. Whether attempts to found journals for publishing companies, academic papers or monumental translation commissions (the complete works of Proust and Baudelaire), series of thrillers or ambitious stage plays, they went no further than initial announcements and first outlines. In very few instances did pen meet paper. That is not to say that Benjamin was struck dumb by the *Habilitation* fiasco—he earned his living primarily through the daily tasks of writing commentaries, columns, and reviews. By the spring of 1929 he had published over a hundred of these in national newspapers. His subjects ranged from Jewish numerology to "Lenin as letter-writer" to children's toys; brisk reports on food fairs or haberdashery joined long essays about Surrealism or the châteaux of the Loire Valley.

And why not? Those who can write can write about anything. Especially when the author's approach lies in interpreting the object of his attention as a kind of monad, something whose very existence reveals nothing less than the entire state of the world—present, past, and future. Therein lies Benjamin's method and magic. His worldview is profoundly symbolic: for him each person, each artwork, each object is a sign to be deciphered. And each sign exists in dynamic interrelation with every other sign. And the truth-oriented interpretation of such a sign is directed precisely at

demonstrating and intellectually elaborating its integration within the great, constantly changing ensemble of signs: philosophy.

DOES MY LIFE NEED A GOAL?

BENJAMIN'S SEEMINGLY IDIOTIC ARRAY of themes and interests in fact pursued a cognitive method of its own. This approach was given focus by a growing conviction that the most deviant statements, objects, and individuals, which were for that reason often ignored, contained the whole of society in microcosm. Benjamin's *Denkbilder* (thought-pictures) in *One-Way Street* (1928) or *Berlin Childhood around Nineteen Hundred* are just as clearly inspired by the poems of the flâneur Baudelaire as they are by a love of outsiders in the novels of Dostoyevsky or by Proust's struggle for memory. They have a Romantic penchant for the ephemeral and labyrinthine as much as for the esoteric interpretative techniques of the Jewish Kabbalah, all underpinned, as applicable, by Marxist materialism or the idealism of Fichte's and Schelling's natural philosophies. Benjamin's writing tests out the birth of a new mode of thinking with an ideological disorientation typical of its time. The first lines of his autobiographical *Berlin Childhood around Nineteen Hundred* (published posthumously) sound like a playful introduction to his method.

> Being unable to find one's way in a city doesn't mean much. But getting lost in a city as one gets lost in a forest takes training. Street names must speak to the wanderer like the cracking of dry twigs, and small streets in the inner city must reflect the times of day as clearly as a mountain valley. I learned this art late; it fulfilled the dream, of which the first traces were labyrinths on the blotting paper in my notebooks.[11]

The chronic irresolution, extreme variety, and reality-saturated contradiction of Benjamin's writing was, he recognized, the only way to achieve knowledge of the world and therefore of himself. In the convoluted words of the preface to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*: Anyone who philosophizes must be concerned with allowing "the configurations of the idea to emerge—the sum total

of all juxtapositions of such opposites—from the remotest extremes, the apparent excesses of the process of development." But for Benjamin the representation of an idea "cannot under any circumstances be considered successful unless the full range of extremes that it contains has been virtually explored."[12]

It is obviously much more than just a wayward epistemological theory. It is an outline of existence that transforms the Kantian question "What is a human being?" into another—namely, "How am I to live?"—because for Benjamin what applies to the representation of an idea in the art of philosophy applies no less to the art of living. Free human beings who thirst for knowledge must with every fiber of their being *"open themselves up to remote extremes"* and cannot *"consider themselves successful"* in their lives until they have examined, walked, or at least tried out all extremes of possibility.

Benjamin's journey toward knowledge, like his design for life, exhibits in dramatic form the tension, typical of the age, that also impelled and inspired Wittgenstein, Cassirer, and Heidegger in the 1920s. His way of thinking, however, is based not on the ideal of a construction of the world that could be explained with logic but on the exploration of contradictory simultaneity. Where Cassirer strives for the unity of a polyphonic system that has as its basis a scientific understanding of the concept of the symbol, Benjamin is drawn to contrasting, eternally dynamic arrangements of knowledge. And he replaces Heidegger's fear of death with the ideal of a euphoria and excess that celebrate the lived moment as the medium of genuine sensation. Underlying all of this is a religiously charged philosophy of history that holds out the possibility of salvation, though the individual cannot bring it about or even predict when it will occur in the vulgar Marxist sense.

THE ONE-MAN REPUBLIC

DURING THE 1920S, attempting to find harmony between action and thought, Benjamin commuted both intellectually and physically back and forth among Paris, Berlin, and Moscow, invariably convinced of his imminent and complete breakdown. On occasion his consistent tendency toward self-destruction—the prostitutes,

casinos, and drugs—was accompanied by fleeting phases of immense productivity and explosions of brilliance. Like the Weimar Republic itself, Benjamin never sought balance; for him the truth that was worth seeking—not least his own—always lay on the exciting margins of life and thought.

In this sense, the events of spring 1929 represent the heightening of an arrangement that had already defined Benjamin's life for the previous ten years.[13] He was torn between at least two women (Dora and Asja), two cities (Berlin and Moscow), two professions (journalist and philosopher), two intimate friends (the Judaic scholar Gershom Scholem and Bertolt Brecht), two major endeavors (the founding of the magazine and the start of a new major work of his own, which would later become *The Arcades Project*), as well as working off debts of all kinds. There can be few intellectuals whose biographies exemplify and encapsulate the tensions of the countries of their birth more than Walter Benjamin in the spring of 1929. He was a one-man Weimar, by his own account incapable of "making a cup of tea" (for which he naturally blamed his mother).

Benjamin's decision to traduce and abandon the only person he had truly been able to count on signals a turning point in his life, as the woman in question, incidentally, saw much more clearly than the philosopher himself. In May 1929 a concerned Dora Benjamin wrote to Gershom (Gerhard) Scholem:

> Walter is in a very bad way, dear Gerhard, I can't tell you more than that because it is crushing my heart. He is entirely under Asja's influence and doing things that the pen resists writing, and which prevent me from exchanging even a word with him. He now exists only as a head and genitals, and as you know, or can imagine, in such cases the head is quickly overcome. It was always a great danger, and who can say what will happen .... Walter has sued me for my debt, as the first divorce proceedings failed to resolve this question—he wants neither to return the money borrowed from his inheritance (120,000 marks; my mother is seriously ill) nor to pay anything for Stefan .... I gave him all the books, and the next day he also demanded the

WHAT TO DO?

"If on the one hand the character of a person, the way he reacts, were known in all its details, and if, on the other, all the events in the areas entered by that character were known, both what would happen to him and what he would accomplish could be exactly predicted. That is, his fate would be known."[1] Is that so? Is a life's journey really conditioned, determined, predictable in this way? Even one's own biography? How much leeway do we have to shape our own destinies? Walter Benjamin addressed these questions in September 1919 at the age of twenty-seven, in an essay titled "Fate and Character." Today it stands for a whole generation of young European intellectuals who, after the Great War, faced the challenge of reexamining their own culture and their lives, but as its first sentence suggests, what follows is really an attempt by Benjamin to read his own fortunes. This is writing as a means of self-illumination.

In the first summer after the war, Benjamin's future, for quite personal reasons, was profoundly uncertain. Many of the milestones of so-called adult life were behind him. He had married (1917), become a father (1918), and attained a doctorate (June 1919). He had managed to keep the apocalyptic horrors at arm's length. He first escaped the draft by staying up the night before the physical examination with his close friend Gerhard Scholem and drinking countless cups of coffee, so that when his pulse was tested it was irregular enough for him to be declared unfit. It was a popular trick at the time. His second maneuver was much more elaborate and imaginative. This time—highly successfully, in terms of outcome!—he had Dora convince him, through several weeks of hypnosis, that he suffered from severe sciatica. The military doctors found his symptoms pronounced and he was granted official permission to have his case examined more closely at a specialist clinic in Switzerland. Once there, he was safe from conscription. All he had to do was stay, which in the autumn of 1917 he and Dora decided to do.

A REFUGE

THEY FIRST TOOK UP lodgings in Zurich, which during the war had become a kind of collecting tank for young Germans, indeed for the whole of the European intelligentsia. It was there, for example, that Hugo Ball and Tristan Tzara proclaimed the beginning of Dadaism. Only a few meters away from the Cabaret Voltaire, a certain Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov had, under the pseudonym Lenin, planned the Russian Revolution. These circles passed the young newlyweds by, however, and their mutual friend Scholem soon moved to Bern in central Switzerland, where Walter enrolled at the university as a doctoral student in philosophy.

This trio of Berlin exiles largely set themselves apart from the cultural life of the city, known even today for its leisurely pace. Benjamin and Scholem found the teaching at the university so stultifying that they invented an alternative institution called "Muri," complete with absurd courses such as "The Easter Egg—Threats and Advantages" (theology), "Theory and Practice of Insults" (jurisprudence), and "Theory of Free Fall Followed by Exercises" (philosophy).[2] They preferred to read and study together, perusing the works of the neo-Kantian Hermann Cohen, for example, sentence by sentence in sessions that lasted through the night.[3]

The ambiguity of his position suited Benjamin perfectly. By the time of his son Stefan's birth in April 1918, he had become enormously productive, finishing his doctoral thesis in less than a year. The impending end of the war, however, meant that he would need to decide what to do next. His father—whose finances had been badly affected by the conflict—was urging him to stand on his own two feet at last.

CRITICAL DAYS

WHEN THE YOUNG FAMILY withdrew to a pension on Lake Brienz for a spa cure in the summer of 1919, they had several labor-intensive months behind them. "Dora and I are quite exhausted," Benjamin wrote to Scholem on July 8, not least because of the state of health of little Stefan, who for months had had "a constant fever," so that

they "never had peace."[4] Dora suffered from "the most serious exertions accumulated over months," which had led to anemia and "serious weight loss," while Benjamin was engaged in a painful struggle with his hypnotically induced sciatica. He mentioned that he had also "become sensitive to noise over the last six months," and he seems to have been close to what we would call burnout.

This summer vacation at the wonderfully named Mon Repos pension was exactly what the family needed. With a lake view, full board, and the support of the nanny they had brought with them (yes, their financial predicament might have been serious, but they were never truly penniless), they could eat well, sleep a lot, and read a little. Walter might even translate a poem by his beloved Baudelaire into German every now and again. It could have been so nice.

But as with virtually all of Benjamin's plans, nothing came of it. To avoid jeopardizing his father's financial contributions, he hadn't told his family back in Berlin about his successful doctoral examination. Meanwhile his father, who barely trusted him to cross the road unaccompanied, decided to pay a surprise visit to Switzerland, arriving at the resort with his wife on July 31, 1919.

No one familiar with the personalities involved, let alone the specific circumstances of their coming together, would have needed a crystal ball to predict how the meeting would go. On August 14, Benjamin described to Scholem the "*bad* days that now lie behind us," adding in passing: "It is now permitted to speak openly about my doctorate."

His father, finally up to speed, gave Benjamin an ultimatum: Find fixed and, most important, paid employment as soon as possible. This was easier said than done. In response to the urgent question of what he planned to do with his life, he could only give one truthful answer: A critic, Father. I want to be a critic.

What that self-description meant in practical terms had been the subject of Benjamin's three-hundred-page doctoral thesis, *The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism*,[5] though the task of explaining it to a largely uncultured (and, like his son, chronically depressive) businessman must have been daunting, even before addressing how this might translate into gainful employment.

But it was worth a try. Particularly when behind the dry title of this academic dissertation lay an idea of singular originality: that

openness was fundamental both to his own development as an individual and to the development of all culture on a new theoretical basis. The central activity that this openness made possible and endlessly renewed was what Benjamin in his doctoral thesis called simply "criticism." He was convinced that a specific form of intellectual activity was present in thinkers like Fichte, Novalis, and Schelling, which followed on from Kant, whose actual relevance to his own life and his own culture had hitherto remained undiscovered.

ROMANTIC THESES

FOR BENJAMIN the crucial impulse of these early Romantic thinkers lay in the fact that the activity of criticism—if understood correctly—leaves neither the criticizing subject (the art critic) nor the criticized object (the work of art) unaffected. Both are transformed in the process—ideally toward truth. The thesis of the constant enrichment of the work of art through criticism was based, in Benjamin's view, on two fundamental concepts in German Romanticism.

1. Everything that exists is in a dynamic relationship not only with other things but also with itself (the thesis of the self-referentiality of all things).
2. The subject, by criticizing an object, activates and mobilizes this dynamic relationship between the two by mobilizing their references both to each other and to other things (the thesis of the activation of all references through criticism).

From these propositions Benjamin derived conclusions in his dissertation that would revolutionize not only his image of himself as a critic but also the way art criticism has understood itself since. First and foremost among these is the conclusion that the function of art criticism lies *"not in judgment, but on the one hand [in] completion, consummation, systematization."*[6] Second is the elevation of the art critic to the status of partial creator of the work of art. Third is the recognition that an artwork is fundamentally unstable, and changes and rejuvenates its nature and possible significance across history. Fourth, following from the thesis of the self-

reference of all things, is the understanding that any criticism of a work of art can also be seen as the artwork's criticism of itself.

Critics and artists, correctly understood, thus exist on the same creative plane. The essence of the work is not fixed, but constantly changing, and in fact works of art constantly criticize themselves. Imagine the bafflement and incomprehension that Benjamin's theses would have prompted in a person such as his father.

NEW SELF-AWARENESS

THE PLAUSIBILITY OF BENJAMIN'S SCHEME rests on our acceptance of the twin fundamental Romantic concepts—self-reference and hetero-reference—that underpin it. These may not be as far-fetched as they first seem. Benjamin could in their support have referred his father to one basic human experience, so self-evidently true and immediately verifiable that it is beyond dispute: self-consciousness. We all have this special ability. It consists of referring to one's own thoughts with one's own thoughts. We are all capable, each in our own way, of "thinking about our thinking." Each of us has experienced a process of cognition, in which both the object of criticism (the thought we think about) and the subject (the thinking about the thought) are altered, all the while experiencing themselves factually as single entities. For the Romantics this reflexive self-awareness is the textbook example of critical object-reference. More broadly, it is what happens when *"the being-known of one being by another coincides with the self-knowledge of that being which is being known."*[7]

In fact, Benjamin could have explained to his father, this miraculous fluctuating self-reference is always ongoing, but it becomes particularly visible and efficacious when we think about the foundations of our relationship to ourselves and to the world. Great works of art are in fact nothing but the manifestation or product of such a process of reflection. For that reason these works, in the references they hold out, are rich, diverse, stimulating, unique, and hence promoting of knowledge:

> Thus, criticism is, as it were, an experiment on the artwork, one through which the latter's own reflection is awakened,

fundamental change in his life. The scion of one of the biggest industrial families in Europe, from the lofty heights of Viennese society, the Cambridge student was even then recognized for his immense philosophical gifts. His patrons Bertrand Russell and Gottlob Frege urged him to take the "next big step" in thought. The war did in a sense entirely fulfill Wittgenstein's personal aspirations: he had shown courage at the front in Galicia, Russia, and Italy, looking death in the eye more than once. He had shot to kill, had—through his reading of Tolstoy—found his way to the Christian faith; and, during the long nights at the front, he had written his book, which he was convinced would be not only the next great step in philosophy, but its final and definitive one.

But what had he really achieved? Basically nothing. Nothing as he saw it. Nothing to stem the attacks of meaninglessness that still tormented him daily. As he wrote in the summer of 1918, while on leave from his last deployment at the front, in the foreword to his *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, its final flourish:

> I am therefore of the opinion that the problems have in essentials been finally solved. And if I am not mistaken in this, then the value of this work secondly consists in showing how little has been done when this problem has been solved.

In other words: Philosophy has nothing to say and no judgment to make about what conditions a human life, what gives it meaning, value, and daily hope. But why it is fundamentally unable to do so—why no logical conclusion, argument, or theory of meaning has even been able to touch the actual questions of life—that was what Wittgenstein believed he had shown with his work once and for all.

ETHICAL ACTS

IN FACT, as Wittgenstein explained to the publisher Ludwig von Ficker two months after his return from the war, the "meaning of the book is an ethical one," since his work consisted of two parts: "the present one, and everything that I have *not* written. And that

second part is the important one. The ethical is delimited by my book, so to speak."[11]

The realm of the sayable, which Wittgenstein's work delineates "from within" through logical linguistic analysis, applies only to the world of facts; this is therefore the only realm about which anything can be meaningfully said.

But to grasp this world of facts with all its qualities as precisely as possible is ultimately the task of the natural sciences. For Wittgenstein, it is "something that has nothing to do with philosophy" (T 6:53). Against this backdrop, then, the problem, or rather the actual philosophical solution, consists in the following conviction, or more precisely the following *feeling*:

> 6:52 We feel that even if all possible scientific questions be answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all. Of course there is then no question left, and just this is the answer.

The largely positivistic spirit of the age assumed that only things about which we could meaningfully speak could be significant for our own lives. These were things that could be proved to exist using the methodical foundation of this essentially scientific vision of the world—logical analysis. That is, so-called facts. But Wittgenstein was able to show that the truth was in fact precisely the reverse. Everything that gives *meaning* to life, and the world in which we live, already lies within the boundaries of what can be directly said. Wittgenstein's philosophical approach was a severely scientific one, but his morality was existential. A good life is based not on objective grounds but on radically subjective decisions. It cannot be meaningfully said what a good life consists of; it must *show* itself in real, everyday execution. That was what Wittgenstein had decided to do in 1919.

A return to the old world of Vienna would have been unthinkable for him even had that world still existed. Neither war nor philosophy had freed him from the riddle and the misfortune that he was to himself. He returned from the war transformed but by no means clarified. In order to combat the remaining chaos within him, he spent long months in the Italian POW camp at Campo Cassino drawing up the most radical plan imaginable. First

of all: signing over his entire fortune to his siblings. Second: never again philosophy. Third: a life of honest toil—and lasting poverty.

A SORROW BEYOND DREAMS

THE TENACITY WITH WHICH WITTGENSTEIN devoted himself to this plan on his return was a source of great concern to his siblings, particularly his eldest sister, Hermine. During those late August days she feared she would lose a fourth brother to suicide, after Johannes (d. 1902), Rudolf (d. 1904), and Kurt (d. 1918).

Johannes, the eldest brother, had fled their dominating father to America and "drowned" in a boating accident in Florida, never satisfactorily explained; the third son, Rudolf, born in 1888, took cyanide in a Berlin restaurant at the age of twenty-two. In his suicide note Rudolf attributed the act to grief over the death of a friend, though some believe he had been unmasked through an anonymous case study by the sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld about a "homosexual student" and feared exposure.[12] Heroically tragic, finally, was the suicide of Konrad (known as Kurt) who put a bullet into his brain while retreating from Italy during the last days of the war in October 1918—probably to escape being taken prisoner.

By this standard, the fourth of the five Wittgenstein brothers, Paul, was a remarkable success. Prodigiously musical, like all the family's offspring, he had established a career as a concert pianist before the onset of war. Young Paul was generally seen as exceptionally talented, and the musical soirees that his father organized at the family mansion were among the highlights of the Viennese social calendar around the turn of the century. In the first few months of the war, however, he was so badly wounded that his right arm had to be amputated. He ended up in a Russian camp, and wasn't released until 1916. He, too, seriously considered suicide after returning home, but then found new meaning in life by teaching himself, over countless hours of practice, to play the piano one-handed to an extremely high level using a special pedaling technique he developed. He was thus able to continue his career as a concert pianist and went on to become an international star.

The youngest of the brothers, "Luki" (as Ludwig was known in the family), likewise teetered on the edge upon his return. Given what he had been through, his family felt it sensible to grant him free rein. Perhaps all the more so because Ludwig's entire military career looked in retrospect like one long suicide attempt. As he rose swiftly through the ranks, Wittgenstein insisted to his superiors that he wanted to be sent to the front, not in spite of the danger but because of it.

In his war diaries Wittgenstein obsessively returned to the notion that it was only in a near-death situation, with his own life hanging in the balance, that he would truly see himself, above all his faith in God—and thus his capacity for happiness. In entries from the summer of 1916 on the Galician front, we can see the dovetailing of Wittgenstein's program of logical linguistic analysis with a Christian-existentialist ethic along the lines of Kierkegaard and Tolstoy:

> In order to live happily, I must be in agreement with the world. And that is what "being happy" means.
>
> I am then, so to speak in agreement with that alien will on which I appear dependent. That is to say: "I am doing the will of God."[13]

> The fear of death is the best sign of a false, i.e. a bad life.[14]

> Good and evil enter only through the *subject*. And the subject is not part of the world, but a limit of the world ....
>
> What is good and evil is essentially the I, not the world. The I, the I is what is deeply mysterious.[15]

By August 1919, Wittgenstein had certainly lost any fear of death. But often it came to the critical question of whether a good, meaningful, and indeed happy life lay within reach for someone like him; he was plagued by doubts. It was these that led him, on September 5, 1919, to take the second step in his survival program and, now penniless, begin a one-year course at a training institute in Vienna to become a primary school teacher. No more philosophy, then. Never again.

Martin Heidegger knew nothing of Wittgenstein's life plan at the time. It might have shaken his own foundations. Because Heidegger, too, had just returned from the war—and there was only one thing he wanted to do: philosophy.

AN INTERESTING CONDITION

"IT'S HARD TO LIVE the life of a philosopher," Martin Heidegger wrote on January 9, 1919, to his patron Engelbert Krebs. Because "inner truthfulness towards oneself and those for whom one is supposed to be a teacher demands sacrifices and struggles that the academic toiler can never know."[16] No doubt. This was someone being very serious. About himself, his thought, his journey. "I believe," Heidegger continued, "that I have an inner calling to philosophy."[17]

Held back for the first few years by a heart condition (self-diagnosis: "too much sport in my youth"), Heidegger had served as a meteorologist with the frontline weather service number 414 from August until November 1918. At Marne-Champagne, he provided forecasts to the German army from an observation post elevated a little above the battlefield to enable deployment of poison gas. Heidegger did not take part in any actual fighting, but through his binoculars he would have seen many thousands of German soldiers emerging from their trenches and running toward certain death. In his personal notebooks and letters, however, the horrors of the war go unmentioned. When Heidegger speaks of "sacrifice," "renunciation," and "struggles," he means first and foremost himself and his academic and personal situation.

For Heidegger, since the winter of 1917, the actual front had run not through the Ardennes but through his own four walls. This line was not national or geopolitical but denominational. In the end, it was actually difficult "to live—to forge a career within institutions"—as a Catholic philosopher sponsored by the Church, if, like Martin Heidegger, you secretly married a Protestant. All the more so if your wife, contrary to earlier statements of intent, did not convert to Catholicism, or have your child baptized as a Catholic.

here and now in a manner close to their experience? The young lecturer decided to do both at once. And by so doing he gave philosophy one of its finest hours.[20]

According to the prospectus, Heidegger was supposed to be delivering a talk on Kant, but at the last second he confidently opted for a change of subject. The new title was: "The Idea of Philosophy and the Worldview Problem."[21] In other words, it was about philosophy's understanding of itself as an autonomous discipline of knowledge; beyond the methods and declarations of the empirical natural sciences and, above all, beyond the genre of books based on an all-encompassing worldview, which were particularly dominant at the time—such as Oswald Spengler's sprawling interpretation of civilization, *The Decline of the West*. It seemed clear enough that the aims and methods of philosophy are not identical with those of the natural sciences. But how does it differ from the business of constructing a value-based worldview? Is there really a significant difference between the two?

If we follow Husserl's phenomenological approach, the answer is an unambiguous yes. Because what distinguishes phenomenology is a methodically rigorous method of discovering the world. But this differs from the natural sciences in that it does not strive to explain or predict the course of phenomena, but rather seeks to grasp those phenomena in their factual reality for human consciousness in as objective and value-free a way as possible. Under the battle cry "Back to the facts!" phenomenology attempted to establish itself as what Heidegger called a *"pre-theoretical primordial science"*: as a precise foundation of experience prior to any natural sciences and also, primarily, prior to all worldviews and ideologies distorted by prejudice.

THE PRIMAL SCIENTIST

THIS WAS PRECISELY the track that Heidegger, as Husserl's new assistant in Freiburg, took in his first lecture. In its simplest form, according to Heidegger's approach, the fundamental question of phenomenology was: *Gibt es etwas?* (Is there something? or Is there something given?) And if so, how does that *"es"* reveal our consciousness? How does it show itself? Let's listen for ourselves:

> In the very question *"Gibt es ...?"* something is given. Our *entire* set of problems has reached a crucial point which, however, appears so meager as to be insignificant. Everything depends on ... our understanding and following the meaning of this meagerness and persisting with it .... We stand at a methodical crossroads where the life and death of philosophy will be decided; we stand before an abyss: either an abyss of nothingness, i.e. of absolute objectivity, or a leap into *another world*, or more precisely: into the world itself for the first time .... Let us assume that *we* did not exist. Then that question [*gibt es*] would not arise.[22]

Just to examine once more, a few sentences later, this crucial questioning impulse in greater depth:

> What is the meaning of: *"es gibt"*?
>
> *Es gibt* numbers, *es gibt* triangles, *es gibt* paintings by Rembrandt, *es gibt* U-boats; I say *es gibt* rain today, *es gibt* roast veal tomorrow. A great variety of *es gibt*, and each time it has a different meaning and yet in each one it has an identical element of significance .... Again: the question asks whether *es gibt* something. The question is not whether *es gibt* chairs or tables, or houses or trees, or sonatas by Mozart or religious powers, but whether *es gibt* anything whatsoever. What does anything whatsoever mean? Something universal, indeed, one might say, the most universal, that applies to every possible object. To say of something that it is something is the smallest assertion I can make of it. I face it without presupposition.[23]

Here was a twenty-nine-year-old academic, in his very first lecture, challenging his audience, his voice quivering with resolution, to recognize the crucial question of philosophy itself in its most meager formulations. Who was he? A clown? A magician? A prophet?

It is worth lingering a little longer over this key passage of Heidegger's first postwar lecture, since it forms the nucleus of his whole philosophy of Dasein. If we follow Heidegger's exhortation to dwell on the formulation of *"es gibt"*—immersing ourselves meditatively, so to speak, in its possible meanings and applications—a profound riddle appears: What does this *es gibt* actually mean? Where does its true meaning lie? After all, in its most universal form it applies to everything and all things. To everything that *is*.

Precisely ten years later Heidegger would claim, in the same spot, that his entire philosophy revolved around nothing less than the meaning of the word *Sein* (be). And at that same lectern in Freiburg he would pronounce himself the first person in twenty-five hundred years to rediscover and revive the question of its meaning, and above all its significance for the life and thought of all human beings. This grand drama had already been previewed in 1919 when he discussed the question of *es gibt* as the "very crossroads" at which the "life and death of philosophy" will be decided.

If we plump for the path of "absolute objectivity" and thus leave the question of *es gibt* to the natural sciences, philosophy is threatened by the same fate also diagnosed by Wittgenstein: it becomes superfluous, at best the handmaid of the natural sciences. At worst it degenerates into precisely that kind of uninhibited generalization built upon false and prejudice-based foundations that Heidegger associates with worldview philosophy (*Weltanschauungsphilosophie*). Thus everything depends upon whether it is possible to make that "leap" into another world, another way of philosophizing and thus a different understanding of *Sein*. Into a third way.

NO ALIBI

BUT HEIDEGGER'S IDEA OF THE LEAP—a core concept in the religious philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard—already suggests that this redemptive alternative is not a purely logical, argumentative, or even only rationally motivated choice. Instead it is more a *decision*, and thus demands something more and something different. Something that is in fact based primarily not on reasons, but on

will and courage, and above all on concrete personal experience, comparable to that of religious transformation: a vocation.

Another concept absolutely crucial to Heidegger's later thought appears in this passage. It is concealed behind the speculation about "us"—as human beings—not even being *da* (there). And hence not in the world. What then?

Heidegger maintains that the question of "*Gibt es* something?" would not otherwise exist. In other words, human beings are the only ones who can ask the question of *"Gibt es"* and thus what the meaning of *Sein* is. It is only for us that everything that exists is therefore *da*—and in terms of that given, everything is in fact questionable. *"Es gibt"* a world only for us. Soon Heidegger would replace the concept of "humanity" with that of "Dasein."

THE NEW REALM

IN HIS VERY FIRST LECTURE, Heidegger announced to an auditorium traumatized by the horrors of war the possibility of "another world"—the world *and* life-form of *genuinely* philosophical inquiry. Not least because this is necessarily implied by his speaking of the *leap*. The conquest of this new realm must be undertaken by each of us individually. On the road to philosophy there can be no alibis. Whatever precedes the leap and makes it possible cannot ultimately be conveyed abstractly or simply proclaimed from behind a lectern; it must be experienced and grasped personally from within, and then manifested in day-to-day life.

The "pre-theoretical primordial science" for which Heidegger's "experience-of-the-question" sought to blaze a trail was thus no longer a science in the classic sense of the word. It was aimed at something more and something other than the mere description of the given, namely a fundamentally different way of understanding the manner of its givenness. Even in the spring of 1919, it was apparent how much of Heidegger's thought was shaped by a ceaseless interweaving of "*Sein* questions" (ontology) and "Dasein questions" (existential questions). In the closing words of his lecture:

> But *philosophy* only manages to advance by immersing itself thoroughly in life as such .... It has no illusions, it is the science of absolute honesty. There is no chattering, only *insightful steps*; no theories clash within it, only authentic insights with inauthentic ones. But the authentic insights can only be achieved through honest and wholehearted immersion in the authenticity of life as such, ultimately only through the authenticity of the *personal* life itself.[24]

FIDELITY TO THE EVENT

THE IMMEDIATE CHALLENGE that young philosophers faced in 1919 can be summed up as follows: Draw up a plan for one's own life and generation, which moves beyond the determining "structure" of "fate and character." First, in literal biographical terms this meant daring to break away from the old frameworks (family, religion, nation, capitalism). And second, it meant finding a model of existence that made it possible to process the intensity of the experience of war, transferring it to the realm of thought and everyday existence.

Benjamin wanted to undertake that renewal with a Romantic notion of a criticism that was a universally energizing criticism. Wittgenstein pursued the goal of giving everyday permanence to the overwhelming mystical tranquillity and sense of reconciliation with the world that he experienced at moments of mortal peril. Meanwhile Heidegger, who already saw himself as a "wild thinker," attempted to reconcile the intensity of the experience of war—which he saw as having fundamental similarities with the intensity of thought—with a desire for "everydayness." A life in the storm of thought on the one hand, a reconciliation with the everyday on the other; it was a task that required him to straddle both extremes. As he wrote to Elisabeth Blochmann (his wife's best friend since her youth) on May 1, 1919:

> We must be able to wait for high-tension intensities of meaningful life—and we must live continuously with those moments—not so much enjoy them as incorporate them

essence. As sensory, finite, rational creatures, he temperately suggests, we should cleave in our judgments to what is openly revealed: what a thing is, who a person is. This is apparent in the totality of their actions and the effects they have on other things and people. Essence, in other words, cannot be abstractly defined, definitively decreed, or magically invoked but will repeatedly show and prove itself in any given setting.

In Cassirer's view, therefore, the catastrophe of the Great War had been caused partly by bad metaphysics and a false, entirely "un-German" answer to the question of man's essence. So it is easy to imagine the appeal of that story of the postwar period in the auditorium. Cassirer valued the remarkable human ability to remain faithful to one's own philosophical ideals even in dire situations, and to embody them as visibly as possible for others. And for Cassirer that ideal was simply to be as autonomous as possible. To cultivate for ourselves and others forms and abilities that allow us to actively shape our own lives rather than be purely passive companions to them. Self-formation rather than definition by others. Objective grounds rather than internal actuality. That was, he was convinced, the actual contribution of German culture to the universal idea of man, radiantly embodied by the twin pillars of Cassirer's philosophy: Kant and Goethe.

UNLOVED

BUT IN THE WINTER OF 1919 it would be hard to claim that this German culture had been particularly kind to him. In his fourteenth year as Dozent at Berlin University, Cassirer was an internationally recognized scholar, though only with the misleading title of "extraordinary professor," which meant that he still lacked an official post, and indeed examination rights, and was still a part-time philosopher. His entry in the Berlin telephone directory identifies him, with factual correctness, as a "private scholar."[28] "I can't force them to love me, and they really don't like me," he would explain to his wife when he had been passed over once again for a new professorship that needed filling. He had brought out several well-regarded works, notably *The Concept of Substance and the Concept of Function* (1910),[29] and after the death of his

mentor Hermann Cohen in 1918 he was considered the undisputed head of the "Marburg School" of neo-Kantianism—one of the leading experts on Kant at the time, if not the leading one. In terms of his career prospects, this description had admittedly become more obstacle than advantage, since in conservative and nationalist circles the Marburg philosophers around Cohen and Cassirer were increasingly openly suspected of dislodging Kant's teachings from their "true" (i.e., "German") roots. During the war the narrowing of national discourse had encouraged anti-Semitism in Germany, as seen with the "Jewish census" of the German army in 1916. This was further reinforced when the United States entered the war, and continued after the conflict was over. In this climate the surname Cassirer was almost paradigmatic of a class of German Jews that was viewed with increasing suspicion and hostility. The Cassirers were a well-to-do and extensive German-Jewish family whose members occupied a central place in both the commercial and the cultural life of Berlin: as manufacturers, industrialists and engineers, publishers, doctors, art collectors, and, indeed, philosophers.[30] The Cassirers were as "assimilated" as it was possible to be, and on precisely those grounds, according to the internal logic of German nationalism, they were held to be particularly suspect.[31]

ELECTRIFIED

AND THE WAR? Cassirer suffered from psoriasis, which meant that wearing an army uniform gave him such a painful rash that in the first year of the war he was declared permanently unfit for service. In 1916, however, he was given a post in the French department of the Reich press office. The writing of flyers aside, his work there consisted of reading reports in French newspapers, collecting quotes and adjusting their sense where necessary to render them useful to German military propagandists. Not an overly demanding job, but far from ideal for a firm European like Ernst Cassirer.

This occupation gave him sufficient time in the afternoons to devote himself to his own projects and studies, and to counter his duties as a producer of disinformation by writing the aforementioned *Freedom and Form*, and the essay "On European

Reactions to German Culture." Come what may, Kant and Goethe should have been able to be proud of him. That was his maxim, and he had no intention of deviating from it. Not even on his grueling commute between his house in Berlin's Westend and the city center, an hour and a half each way. His wife recalled:

> I made that journey with him a few times, and was able to observe how he was capable of working even in such grotesque situations. He never tried to take a seat, because he was sure that he would soon have to give it up to women, elderly people, or injured veterans. He tried to push his way through to the back of the tram, and stood there occupying as little space as possible, with one hand reaching for a support so that he didn't fall over, and in the other holding the book that he was reading. Noise, jostling, poor light, bad air—none of it got in his way.[32]

That was what active self-formation on the streetcar looked like. We know because we have the outline for a three-volume *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, which Cassirer began in 1919 and completed over the next ten years, in the form of a sketch made on the streetcar. Its first version was dated June 13, 1917; written on eight small sheets of paper, it bears testimony to the brilliant ideas that the philosopher had on his journeys through Berlin—and the superhuman amount of reading that he did over the following two years, much of it on that same streetcar.[33]

In the winter of 1919, as he passed through the machine-gun fire of the Spartacist uprising, this time on his way to the university rather than the press office, he was already working on the manuscript of the first volume, concerning the phenomenon of human language as the actual basis of all symbolic forms. Cassirer was sure that he was working on something of consequence, the great idea of his life. And, as if summoned by fate, in May 1919—around the time that the corpse of Rosa Luxemburg, murdered in January, was fished out of the Landwehr Canal—he received a letter from the newly established Hamburg University. Cassirer replied as follows:

Dear colleague,

Please accept my thanks for your letter of 22 May, which was sent to me only a few days ago by the university, and to which I was unable to reply immediately since I was ill in bed with flu when it arrived. I am of course greatly obliged to you for your kind intentions, and you do not need to worry that I might be troubled by the expectation of undefined hope. Essentially—not least after recent experiences—I am quite beyond hope and hence also disappointment in this sphere. But I will not deny that in the uncertainties of the immediate future the prospect of a regular academic post would now be particularly desirable, and that I will be very grateful to you for any step in that direction.[34]

At last the long-awaited call to accept a chair. By the standards of the genre, the tone in which Cassirer replied to Hamburg was almost pushily unambiguous: Of course I'm coming! And yes, the money will come in handy, too! The war had made considerable inroads on his family fortune. The large cellulose factory once owned by the family, migrants from Breslau, now lay on the other side of the border, in Polish hands. But above all Cassirer was philosophically more than ready for new pastures; in a second letter he informed the developmental psychologist William Stern, director of the Hamburg appointment committee, that he had of late been increasingly devoting himself to the study of the philosophy of language. Formalities were swiftly concluded. As early as August 1919, a house was bought in the elegant district of Winterhude, and in October, Cassirer—with his wife and their three children—was on his way to a new life.

III.

LANGUAGES

1919–1920

Wittgenstein proves himself in the storm,
Heidegger learns the whole truth, Cassirer seeks his form,
and Benjamin translates God.

founding document of modern epistemological and subjective philosophy, René Descartes's *Meditations*, written in 1641, we can see an analogy that gives concrete form to Wittgenstein's simile of the person behind the "closed window." Descartes begins one of his experiments in doubt with an initially straightforward view from his fireside seat in his own room out into the street. He questions whether all the pedestrians he sees passing in the rain outside are really people—or perhaps only "machines" wearing coats and hats.[4] What, as a thinking subject closed in behind the brain's pane of glass, do any of us know about what is really going on inside anyone else? What storms rage within them? Or perhaps there is nothing at all happening in there—is there really complete and permanent calm?

VIENNESE BRIDGES

WITH HIS RETORT TO HERMINE, then, Wittgenstein called upon one of philosophy's most distinguished images of the inescapable problem of epistemology: the extent to which we, trapped as we are entirely within the internal space of our own experiential subjectivity, can have any reliable knowledge whatsoever of the outside world, or connect with the interiority of others. As we have seen, this question was for Wittgenstein much more than an exercise in armchair skepticism. Rather, this doubt constituted a constant and burning issue even in his most mundane actions and interactions, indeed his entire relationship with the world. Here we have a man returning from the war, who has over the previous seven years devoted all of his intellectual energy to the expression of his own thoughts, *including those about this problem*, as clearly and unambiguously as possible, in the form of a logical and philosophical treatise.

In the autumn of 1919, Wittgenstein had to admit failure. Even for his most knowledgeable contacts—Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, and the architect Paul Engelmann, to each of whom Wittgenstein had sent a copy of the manuscript—his work was largely incomprehensible.

As noted, however, the analogy in Hermine's memoirs reveals not only the set of fundamental existential problems with which