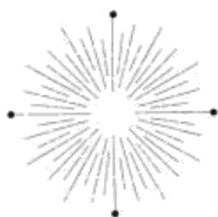


TIME
of the
MAGICIANS



**Wittgenstein, Benjamin, Cassirer, Heidegger,
AND THE Decade That Reinvented Philosophy**

**WOLFRAM
EILENBERGER**

Translated by Shaun Whiteside

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I.



PROLOGUE

THE MAGICIANS

THE ARRIVAL OF GOD

DON'T WORRY, I know you'll never understand it." This sentence concluded what was probably the most peculiar oral exam in the history of philosophy. Appearing for his doctoral examination at Cambridge on June 18, 1929, before a panel consisting of Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore, was a forty-year-old former multimillionaire from Austria who had for the previous ten years been working chiefly as a primary school teacher.¹ His name was Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein wasn't some obscure returning Cambridge student. On the contrary, from 1911 until just before the outbreak of the First World War, he had studied there with Russell and had quickly become a cult figure, known for both his obvious brilliance and his waywardness. "Well, God has arrived, I met him on the 5:15 train," John Maynard Keynes wrote in a letter dated January 18, 1929. Keynes, at the time probably the most important economist in the world, met Wittgenstein by chance the day after his return to England. It says a great deal about the intimate, rumor-filled atmosphere of university life at the time that Wittgenstein's old friend G. E. Moore was on the same train from London to Cambridge.

But it would be a mistake to think that the atmosphere in the compartment was entirely convivial. Wittgenstein at least was not given to small talk or other social niceties. The genius from Vienna was prone to sudden outbursts of fury, and could be extremely unforgiving. A single word out of place or jocular observation could lead to years of rancor, indeed to a breakdown in relations—as had happened several times with Keynes and Moore. However: God was back! And accordingly, joy was unconfined.

The next day, a meeting of the “Apostles”—a highly elitist, unofficial students’ club notorious at the university for the sexual proclivities of its members—was called in Keynes’s house to welcome the prodigal son.² At a ceremonial dinner Wittgenstein was promoted to the rank of “Angel,” an honorary senior member of the society. Most of the group’s members hadn’t met for more 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, he was similarly familiar from earliest childhood with the etiquette of Swiss luxury hotels. He spent the summer months, as members of his circle tended to do, in the Swiss Alps taking a spa cure with his wife, Toni. Above all, 1929 marked the height of Cassirer’s fame, the zenith of his career. Over the previous ten years he had committed his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* to paper. The encyclopedic breadth and systematic originality of the work—the third and final volume of which had appeared only a few weeks before the meeting in Davos—established Cassirer as the undisputed head of neo-Kantian philosophy, then predominant in the German academy.

Unlike Heidegger’s, Cassirer’s rise to preeminence had not been meteoric. Instead his reputation had grown steadily over the decades he dedicated to editorial labor and the production of histories of modern philosophy. He was known not for any charismatic or linguistic boldness, but for his extraordinary erudition and almost superhuman memory: when called upon, he could quote by heart whole pages from the great classics of philosophy and literature. Cassirer was almost notorious for his balance and his commitment to mediation and moderation. In Davos he represented—and was aware of playing this role—precisely the form of philosophizing, and the academic establishment that practiced and endorsed it, that Heidegger was determined to shake up. The photograph of the opening

celebration shows Cassirer—second row, on the left—sitting beside his wife, Toni. His full head of hair is dignified and white, his gaze concentrated on the speaker’s lectern. The chair in front of him is empty. A piece of paper stuck to the back of the chair identifies it as “réservé”: Heidegger’s seat.

THE DAVOS MYTH

HEIDEGGER’S INFRINGEMENTS OF DAVOS ETIQUETTE were not entirely without effect. Toni Cassirer was so disturbed by the meeting that in her memoirs, written in 1948 when she was in exile in New York, she misdates it by a full two years.⁷ In her memoirs she describes a “short man, entirely unremarkable, black hair and piercing dark eyes,” who immediately reminded her—a businessman’s daughter from the upper tiers of Viennese society—“of a craftsman, perhaps from southern Austria or Bavaria,” an impression that was “further supported by his accent” at the subsequent gala dinner. Even then she saw clearly the force that her husband would soon be dealing with: “Heidegger’s tendency toward anti-Semitism,” she concluded, “was not unfamiliar to us.”

Today the debate between Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger at Davos is understood as a crucial event in the history of thought, even a “parting of the ways for twentieth-century philosophy,” in the words of the American philosopher Michael Friedman.⁸ Seemingly all present were aware of witnessing a profound shift in philosophy, the close of one era and the ushering in of another. Otto F. Bollnow, Heidegger’s student and later an avowed Nazi, for example, described in his diary the “elevating feeling . . . of having witnessed a historical moment, just as Goethe said in his *Campaign in France*: ‘A new

era in world history begins here today’—in this case philosophical history—and you can say you were there.”⁹

This rings true. If Davos had not happened, future historians of ideas would have had to invent it. Even in its smallest details, this historic summit captures the trajectory and most formative events of a whole decade. The son of a Jewish industrialist, originally from Breslau, now from Berlin, faced the Catholic sexton’s son from the provinces of Baden. Hanseatic composure and restraint encountered forthright peasant manners and directness. Cassirer was the hotel; Heidegger the hut. When they met under the bright midday sun, the worlds for which they each stood were superimposed in a way that seemed unreal.

It was the insular, dreamlike atmosphere of a sanatorium at Davos that had inspired Thomas Mann to write *The Magic Mountain*, which was deemed to express the spirit of an era when it was published in 1924. The Davos debate four years later might therefore even have seemed to the participants like a realization of a fiction, and indeed Cassirer and Heidegger mirror with an almost uncanny precision the ideological struggle between Lodovico Settembrini and Leo Naphta.

HUMAN QUESTIONS

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. But 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. Benjamin's lover, the Latvian theater director Asja Lacis, had just evicted him from the love nest they had rented on Düsseldorf Strasse, and he was—once again—forced to return to his parental home on Delbrückstrasse, where his mother lay on her deathbed, and his wife, Dora, and their eleven-year-old son, Stefan, were waiting for him. The sordid sequence—of rapturous love followed by financial imprudence and, all too swiftly, the end of the liaison—was by now familiar to all involved. This time, however, Benjamin exacerbated matters by informing Dora of his irrevocable decision to request a divorce, with a view to marrying the Latvian lover who had just left him.

One might be tempted to pluck Benjamin from this predicament and place him instead at the Davos conference. It's not implausible: he might have attended as a correspondent for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* or the *Literarische Welt*, for which he regularly reviewed. We might now imagine him, a chronic wallflower, clutching his black notepad in the hindmost corner of the ballroom (*"Keep your notebook as strictly as the authorities keep their register of aliens"*), straightening his metal-rimmed glasses with their jam-jar-thick lenses and recording in tiny spidery handwriting his observations. His pen could have glossed the pattern of the carpets or the sofa covers, say, and then, with a swift stab at the cut of Heidegger's suit, lamented the fundamental poverty of the spirit of the age—a time in which philosophers celebrated the *"simple life"* and, Heidegger chief among them, cultivated a *"rustic style of language"* characterized by a *"delight in the most violent archaisms"* and thus seemed to *"appropriate for himself the sources of linguistic life."* Perhaps he would then have turned his attention to the armchair in the drawing room, in which the *"comfortable man"* Cassirer would later make himself cozy, and allow it to represent the dusty staleness of an entire intellectual

enterprise, the respectable bourgeois philosophy that still believed in forcing the diversity of the modern world into the corset of a unified system. Outwardly, Benjamin resembled a perfect hybrid of Heidegger and Cassirer. He was, like Cassirer, inclined to sudden fevers, and almost ludicrously unathletic. Though he was short in stature, Benjamin's presence was unmistakable, and he had a worldly air that people immediately found attractive.

The primary subjects of discussion at Davos were in fact central to his work: the transformation of Kantian philosophy against the backdrop of a new technological age, the metaphysical nature of ordinary language, the crisis in academic philosophy, the internal conflict within modern consciousness and perception of time, the increasing commercialization of urban existence, the search for salvation in times of total social collapse . . . Who had written about these subjects over the previous years, if not Benjamin? Why had no one sent him to Davos? Or to be blunt: Why had he not been invited as a speaker?

The answer is simply that in 1929, from the point of view of any academic philosopher, Walter Benjamin was a nonentity. He had tried to find employment at many different universities (Bern, Heidelberg, Frankfurt, Cologne, Göttingen, Hamburg, and Jerusalem) over the years and had failed each and every time, sometimes because of adverse circumstances, sometimes because of anti-Semitic prejudices, but mostly because of his own chronic indecisiveness.

In 1919, when he graduated *summa cum laude* from Bern University with a dissertation on the "Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism," all doors seemed open to him. His doctoral supervisor, Richard Herberz, professor of German, told him a paid teaching post was within his grasp. But Benjamin hesitated, argued with his own father, and

squandered his chance; eventually he opted to live as an independent critic. Over the next ten years he repeatedly attempted to divert back to the path not taken and establish a career within the academy, not least because of the realization of how difficult it would be for someone who lived as he did to continue on his present course. In those years, being Benjamin was a costly business. Along with his insatiable appetite for restaurants, nightclubs, casinos, and houses of pleasure, he developed a passion for collecting curiosities, such as antique children's books, which he tracked down all over Europe and bought almost compulsively.

Without his family home, the life of a journalist, even one who was hardly underemployed—the newspaper market in Germany exploded in the 1920s, and with it the demand for reviews—was for Benjamin therefore characterized by permanent financial insecurity. Whenever things began to get tight, the allure of the 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 collection of children’s books. In the winter he lived with me for months without paying. . . . After we gave each other every freedom for eight years . . . he is suing me; now the German laws he despised are suddenly good enough for him.¹⁴

Dora was a sound judge of character. In autumn 1929, only five months later, almost as the markets on Wall Street tumbled, Benjamin had a breakdown. Unable to read or speak, let alone write, he booked himself into a sanatorium. With the

great Crash, humanity crossed a threshold, entering a new age, darker and more deadly than even he had imagined.

II.



LEAPS

1919

*Dr. Benjamin flees his father, Lieutenant Wittgenstein
commits financial suicide, Privatdozent Heidegger
loses his faith, and Monsieur Cassirer works on his
enlightenment in the streetcar.*

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

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, through which it is brought to consciousness and to knowledge of itself. . . . Insofar as criticism is knowledge of the work of art, it is as its self-knowledge; insofar as it judges the artwork, this occurs in the latter's self-judgment.⁸

Herein lies, for Benjamin, the philosophical core of art criticism in Romanticism, even if the Romantics were not able to appreciate it. That clarity would not be achieved for 150 years, and the application of much interpretative labor—criticism, in other words. Precisely the task he wished to devote the rest of his life to. Not least because by it he would accomplish something outside and within himself, the constantly evolving “work” that he had recognized himself to be. Each of us can, to some degree, accompany and shape our own evolution and thereby become the person who we really are. We can call this process criticism. Or also simply: philosophy.

FLIGHTS

IN SUCH TERMS, Benjamin could have explained to his father during those two weeks on Lake Brienz the idea behind his proposed career as an independent critic. Presumably he did so. But as we might expect, he was unable to convince his father. This failure was due in part to an inability to answer the most important question: Where would the money for this life come from?

How could he define himself, without complying at some level with the “fate” set out for him by his parents? What was to be done?

Benjamin did what he always did when no solution was in sight: he fled, flitting from one location to the next, and threw himself into several new large-scale projects at once.

His journey that autumn led him through the Swiss villages of Klosters and Lugano to Breitenstein in Austria, where the young family, having run out of energy and money, eventually settled in a rest home run by Dora’s Austrian aunt. “We are completely penniless here,” Benjamin wrote to Scholem on November 16. Still, there was good news from his thesis supervisor in Bern: “Herbertz welcomed me very warmly, and suggested the possibility of a postdoctoral thesis, even perhaps an extraordinary teaching position. My parents are of course very pleased and have no objection to a postdoctoral thesis, but cannot yet commit themselves financially.”⁹

So all was not lost. Only the question of money remained unanswered. During those same weeks and months, Wittgenstein was also preoccupied with his finances, albeit in a different way.

THE TRANSFORMATION

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.

EXPOSED FLANKS

A WORLD WITHOUT A VIEW

COMPARED WITH MAJOR CITIES such as Munich and Berlin, Freiburg had avoided the worst consequences of the war and its cessation. Its agricultural setting meant that food shortages were not quite as severe as they were elsewhere, and the city was spared civil revolts and fighting in the streets. And yet Heidegger's view from the lectern at his first lecture in 1919 must have been less than inspiring. Before him sat a scattered crowd of mostly defeated men, many already beyond student age, who now had to pretend that they saw themselves as having a future. How to reach them? Talk to them? Wake them up? By fleeing to the ivory tower of the most abstract and remote questions? Or rather by interpreting the 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:

§13 THE EXPERIENCE-OF-THE-QUESTION: IS THERE SOMETHING (GIVEN)?

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.

home, his marriage, and, if we look closely, Husserl's phenomenology.

GERMAN VIRTUES

THE FIRST POSTWAR SEMESTER at Friedrich-Wilhelm University (today Humboldt University) also saw Ernst Cassirer—in the fourteenth year of teaching as a Privatdozent—face some substantial challenges. In the first weeks of January 1919, as his wife recalled, “there was a lot of shooting in the streets of Berlin, and Ernst often drove through machine-gun fire to the university to deliver his lectures. Once, during one such street battle, the cables that supplied the university building with electricity were shot through while Ernst was lecturing. He liked to relate afterward how he asked his students whether he should stop or go on speaking, and how they unanimously voted for ‘go on speaking.’ . . . So Ernst finished that lecture in a pitch-dark auditorium, while machine-gun fire continued uninterruptedly outside.”²⁶

Surely someone in a situation of such extremity embodies precisely what Heidegger and Wittgenstein held to be the ideal result of their thought—a deeply internalized belief in the value of one's own actions and the value of self-determination, coupled with an attitude of incontestability. In short, a genuine and authentic character capable of responding to personal destiny. Cassirer, however, would never have described his behavior in those terms. Partly for political reasons, he wanted to have as little as possible to do with the concept of “character,” which was of prime importance to the conservative circles around popular philosophers such as Oswald Spengler, Otto Weininger, and Ludwig Klages. In Cassirer's view the philosophical potency of the concept of character—particularly

in the form of national character—played into a rhetoric of national chauvinism as well as a cult of “authenticity” and the “true essential core” that was opposed to freedom. And it thus encouraged precisely those intellectual and political forces in Europe that had made the First World War seem like an inevitable, fateful struggle for survival between the different European civilizations. For Cassirer, those who saw the “true character of a person” or the “true core of a people” as an indelible, innate determinant of all of their actions—or, on the other hand, a redemptive resource for times of hardship—were above all supremely unenlightened. And in Cassirer’s world that meant: eminently un-German.

In 1916, as the war reached its bloody peak, he had dealt with character by writing a book titled *Freedom and Form: Studies in German Intellectual History*. Here it says in a central passage:

Because of course we should be clear that as soon as one asks the question of the uniqueness of the spiritual “essence” of a people, one touches upon the deepest and most dangerous problems of metaphysics and general critical epistemology (*Erkenntniskritik*). . . . “Because in fact,” as Goethe writes in the preface to his *Theory of Color*, “we seek in vain to express the essence of a thing.” We become aware of effects, and a complete history of those effects would probably incorporate the essence of the thing. We struggle in vain to describe a person’s character; but if we assemble his actions, his deeds, we will encounter a picture of his character.²⁷

Subjective investigations into the “true character” and “interior” of human beings are based in the end on fateful metaphysical premises. But Cassirer’s thought—and here as always he follows his two philosophical lodestars, Kant and

Goethe—prefers to get by without the assumption of a given inner core or 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