Religions of Doubt: Religion, Critique, and Modernity in Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Walter Benjamin

Ajay Singh Chaudhary

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ABSTRACT
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Religions of Doubt: Religion, Critique, and Modernity in Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Walter Benjamin is a work of comparative philosophy addressing selected works of the Iranian novelist and political thinker Jalal Al-e Ahmad and the German-Jewish critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin. I demonstrate that the perceived failure of utopian modern projects, particularly Marxism, led each of these twentieth century thinkers to re-engage with religious questions and concerns in a simultaneous critique of the corrosive, reductive, and catastrophic nature of the modern condition and the idea of traditional religion – static, irrational, regressive – that modernist thought had conjured. Furthermore, both Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin were compelled to move beyond the worlds of traditional philosophical inquiry or political action, into questions and practices of art, literature, science, technology, and ritual. I argue that reading these thinkers together allows a glimpse at ideas and modes in philosophical thought that were largely derailed by varying discourses of secularism, poststructuralism, naturalism, and fundamentalism. This reading suggests new synthetic possibilities for philosophy in the twenty-first century.

Note on Transliteration: This dissertation primarily addresses bodies of literature originally written in Persian and German but it also draws on words and phrases in Hebrew, Arabic, French, Aramaic, Greek, and Latin. To address this vast array of languages, I have employed a transliteration method designed to be easily understandable to an English reader. I have transliterated words and phrases from Persian, Hebrew, Arabic, and Greek into a basic phonetic English approximation, free of diacritical marks. For words and phrases in German, French, and Latin, I have preserved accents and diacritical marks that are commonly employed in English.
writing. I have occasionally included words and phrases in their original Perso-Arabic, Hebrew, or Greek scripts where they might prove additionally beneficial to readers of those scripts but always alongside a clear English translation and explanation.
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Dedicated to Millie Poris (שלום עליה שלום)
Prologue: An Excursus on Ending before Beginning

The fact that history has rolled over certain positions will be respected as a verdict on their truth content only by those who agree with Schiller that ‘world history is the world tribunal.’ What has been cast aside but not absorbed theoretically will often yield its truth content only later. It festers as a sore on the prevailing health; this will lead back to it in changed situations.

- Theodor Adorno (Negative Dialectics, 1966)

And I say to you: someone will remember us. In time to come...

- Sappho (“Fragments, on the Muses” Verse III, circa 6th century BCE)

Iran 1968

On May 9, 1968, Ali Shariati delivered the last of a series of lectures at Tehran’s Husseiniyah Irshad, a center for Islamic learning that Shariati and several others were transforming into what they conceived as both a truly open and popular “Islamic University.”¹ Shariati and many of his colleagues actively hoped that the Husseiniyah Irshad would become both a center for the development and dissemination of the new “Islamic Ideology”² that Shariati and his peers were developing as well as a model of the kind of new Islamic ideological and pedagogical apparatus that Shariati would describe in more detail in the introduction to the massive series of lectures that were later collected as Islamshenasi or “Islamology.” These lectures were a synthesis of his research on sociology, philosophy, and Islam. In Shariati’s newest formulations at the time, a brand of urgency and immediacy had overtaken both his ascetic-mystical interests (the kaviriyyat of his writings and thought) and his sociological reflections on Islam (the Islamiyyat) and he was focused more purposefully on social critique,

¹ Ali Rahnema, An Islamic Utopian, 238.
² Hamid Dabashi, Theology of Discontent, 7.
ideological dissemination (his *ijtimayyat*) and, put simply, mobilization and agitation.\(^3\) This is not to say that this latter set of speeches and writings did not contain major elements of the *Islamiyyat* and – in both the choice of philosophical references and Shariati’s often mystical orientation toward the world – a large amount of the *kaviriyyat* as well. Rather, it is to note that by the time of his lectures in the late sixties and early seventies, Shariati had moved into a phase in which the question was no longer one of analysis but of action. The question was, as succinctly put in the title to one of Shariati’s 1971 lectures, echoing Lenin and the need for the creation of a vanguard party for this new ideology, “What is to be Done?”\(^4\) Although exhortation and ideological dissemination had long been a central component of Shariati’s oratory in particular, this complete shift into an activist mode marked a distinct departure for him. Well past Khomeini’s first clerical insurrection in 1963 and during the increasing agitation of the Marxist *fedayyin* and left-Islamist *mujahidin*,\(^5\) Shariati had urged patience as the new Islamic

\(^3\) Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent*, 104. It is tempting to merely call this “school of action and thought” (in Shariati’s words) “praxis” and that would not be entirely incorrect; it would just underemphasize the sense in which the practice and in fact pure valorization of action itself had overtaken any kind of dialectical relationship between theory and practice. As Dabashi puts it here, Shariati in this period of his life, “wished to change, not interpret; lead, not argue; move, not convince; achieve, not rationalize.” It may sound like Shariati is merely in line with Marx’s 11\(^{th}\) thesis on Feuerbach. But after all, Marx never said to stop interpreting. Even granting the ways in which time was perceived in the early Soviet Union as a radical discord between what political conditions were and what economic conditions ought to be (please see Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, 36-37), and that a notion of an urgent need to “catch-up” was especially present in Stalin’s day, it is nearly impossible to emphasize sufficiently just how much a sense of having to catch-up to events themselves, to the wave of radically diverging but also increasingly *mass* mobilization that was occurring in Iran (even as early as 1971) drove theoretical considerations completely off the table in favor of bringing political factions together, increasing agitation, and, above all, fomenting universal resistance to the Shah’s regime. These theoretical considerations include many that might traditionally even be considered praxiological. For example: Shariati, for all his social science training at the Sorbonne, never articulated anything approaching a detailed economic analysis. The left-leaning aspects of the “Islamic Ideology” movement had not even tried to craft an economic program of *any kind* to speak of until Ayatollah Taleghani’s *Islam va Malikiyat* was published in 1965.


\(^5\) It is crucial to understand that although the contemporary *Mujahidin-e-Khalq* claim Shariati as an intellectual forbear and inspiration, Shariati was never part of the organization. Additionally, the organization itself had a *radically* different quality in the pre-Revolutionary period. Please see Ervand Abrhamian’s study *Radical Islam* (Abrhamian, 1989) for more on this point.
program could be fully articulated. However, by this period, events were overtaking thought, and Shariati – who viewed the contemporary, socially-committed intellectual as a kind of modern day prophet – would not be left behind.  

The lecture he delivered that May 9th was entitled *Motemadden va Motejaded* [Civilized and Modern] and it is a scathing polemic against modernization, existential anomie, capitalist production, and the conditions which give rise to alienation understood in an orthodox Marxist sense, but also in the later sociological accounts of Max Weber and Marcel Mauss (both of whom are directly reference in the speech). But it is also an adaptation and transformation of the ideas proposed by Jalal Al-e Ahmad in *Gharbzadegi* ([West-strucken-ness], 1961). Al-e Ahmad shared many of the above concerns. In *Gharbzadegi*, he was particularly attuned to the ways in which modern industrial production produced a particular ‘modern-but-not-modernized’ condition in the periphery which was necessary to capital (and European powers) as both a source for raw materials and as a market to flood with cheap goods. Al-e Ahmad had also been in many ways the first to suggest – although in far more oblique ways – the revolutionary and resistive capacities in Shiism to this economic, political, and social crisis. But in *Motemadden va Motejaded*, Shariati was adapting many of Al-e Ahmad’s ideas: the colonial need for ideological

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6 For more information on Shariati’s history, please see Ali Rahnema’s excellent “political biography,” *An Islamic Utopian: a Political Biography of Ali Shariati*. The chapters on the *Irshad* as well as on “Insurrectionary Discourse,” provide a helpful narrative for the transformation of Shariati’s discourse from primarily analytic (albeit with an eye to laying the groundwork for activism) to primarily activist and exhortative.

7 Translated by Hamid Algar as “Civilization and Modernization” in the volume *Reflections of Humanity* (Shariati, 1980).

8 Please see Ali Rahnema’s section “A Diversion: Shariati and Jalal Al-e Ahmad” in *An Islamic Utopian* (Rahnema, 2000, 190-194) for a full discussion of the relationship between the two thinkers. It must be mentioned that Shariati’s engagement with Al-e Ahmad was also colored and influenced by his work translating and commenting on Frantz Fanon.

9 In regard to the history discussed in footnote 3, Al-e Ahmad had a surprisingly lucid economic analysis despite sometimes playing fast and loose with historical details.
production of ‘civilization’ to sell goods; the uneven ‘machine economy’; the ‘loss of self’, and
the modernization of economic conditions paired with stultification of the modernization of the
individual and society. Shariati says:

There is another kind of “control by jinns” which possesses humanity and alienates a person or an
entire class from itself. This type of alienation is more real, more frightening, and more damaging,
and it is this omnipresent form of alienation which affects us, the Iranians, Muslims, the Asians,
and Africans. It is not an alienation caused by technology – we have not been alienated by
machines... Rather what we are at grips with is something extremely unpleasant and dangerous –
“cultural alienation.”

This is, in some ways, textbook Al-e Ahmad. Until this point in his speech, Shariati had been
rehearsing theories of social alienation (Marx) and individual alienation (Weber, Mauss) that
would be familiar to any first-year sociology student. Something different enters the
conversation here, although it may initially be hard to discern given that Shariati’s answer to
“cultural alienation” is in fact so close to the “return to self” which many contemporary scholars
attribute to Al-e Ahmad himself. But what is different here is the possibility that subjectivities
in the colonized world have something to say about the general condition of alienation,
something “more real, more frightening, and more damaging.” For Al-e Ahmad, this was a
deeply fraught question: the “true-self” was a gharbzadeh [west-struck] invention, and yet the
universal subject of the Enlightenment was clearly an abstract ideal which not only promised in
theory what it did not deliver in practice (particularly in Iran), but had already delivered its
logical conclusions in the catastrophes of the Holocaust, the Stalinist purges, Hiroshima and
Nagasaki, and, of course, in the colonial project itself. Al-e Ahmad, over the course of his
writings, viewed with increasing degrees of intensity, the power of Shiism in resisting the

10 Ali Shariati, Reflections of Humanity, 23.

11 This is the primary topic of my second chapter, “How to read Gharbzadegi?”

12 See quotation from Shariati above.
colonial project – from the Tobacco revolt of 1890, to the differing roles of the clergy in the Constitutional Revolution of 1905, to the failure of a unified religious-secular front in the Mossadeq crisis in 1953. And yet, at the same time, he could celebrate the end of tradition itself in his own infertility and its allegorical possibilities, as he did in *Sangi bar Guri* (A Stone on a Grave, 1981). In what I hope will become a familiar argument in this work, I would claim that Al-e Ahmad held an unresolved, negative dialectic between the two logical contradictions.

Shariati, in contrast, had already decided as early as his first lectures on *Islamshenasi*, to dissolve this dialectic: the new history, from the new starting point, was to proceed in a Hegelian manner but – in a strange inversion – toward an ahistorical fixed point of perfect revelation *in the past*, the time of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions, when true “Being” was in the world. At that point, when the new history had achieved in material reality what the old history had achieved through revelation, the end of history would be reached. What had been a mass of necessary and simultaneous contradictions in Al-e Ahmad became a singular, driving theory of identity, history, and action by this point in Shariati.

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13 Originally composed in 1961, *Sangi bar Guri* was never meant for publication and only appeared posthumously. However, Al-e Ahmad’s actual ambivalence regarding tradition can be seen as early as *Ghabzadegi* and, as I will show, most fruitfully in *Khassi dar Miqat*.

14 Shariati was no ‘back-to-the-earther’ – he did not think that modernity could be undone – but the notion of an, at least, proper structural order at the time of the Prophet and proper self-knowledge at the time of the Prophet in Shariati’s writings are clear. It is fascinating to note that when he is talking in these idealized terms, Shariati speaks in much more, for lack of a better adjective, Sunni language – focusing on the times of the Prophet and his companions. When discussing protest and resistance, Shariati would attend much more specifically to the narratives of Shiism, of Karbala and Hussein. One gets the sense that Shariati had resolved the Sunni-Shii dynamic as mapping neatly onto one of theory/ideal (Sunni Islam) and practice/action (Shii Islam) – in place of the difficult work of thinking with contradictions upon which Al-e Ahmad had embarked. I have no wish in this study to rehash the extremely recent and deeply ahistorical notion that somehow Sunni Islam and Shii Islam have always been in martial conflict. Nor do I want to add fuel to the fire of Sunni polemicists who decry Shiism as a Judaized Islam. However, in moving past the intellectual strictures of mere liberal tolerance, I do want to attend to the actual differences between traditions that have been erased by the category of “religion”. There are specific and unique characteristics within the wide variety of practices and discourses we call “Judaism” and “Shiism” that I believe deserve consideration in the never-complete iteration of a universalistic philosophy. I discuss all these issues in more depth in Chapter 1, “Theory, Methods, and Justification.”
But alongside these obvious influences from Al-e Ahmad, Shariati is drawing on the writings of Marx, Weber, Sartre, Fanon, and – most curiously for this study – Herbert Marcuse. In my readings of several figures who are later identified as key for the iteration and consolidation of an “Islamic Ideology” in Iran (Al-e Ahmad, Motahhari, Shariati, Khomeini, Talaqani)\textsuperscript{15} this is the only direct reference to a “Frankfurt School” author that I have found. Specifically, Shariati is drawing upon one of Marcuse’s later and most famous works, *One-Dimensional Man* (Marcuse, 1964). *One-Dimensional Man* marked, in some ways, a departure from the avowed ‘independence’ of critical theory into an activist mode which would be picked up and championed by the “New Left.” Although the conditions of society – economic, social, and cultural – are in play, and although Marcuse couches the arguments as in line with the mode of dialectical thought that he and his former colleagues at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt has been developing, the overall argument is singularly one of activism against bourgeois conformity in all forms. It is the transformation of a non-synthetic critical dialectic into a renewed recognizably positive Hegelian dialectic of progress: in this case, mass-individualized liberation against the forces of domination, Marcuse’s “Great Refusal.”\textsuperscript{16} Shariati perceived an exciting possibility in Marcuse’s critique of society. The engine of class antagonism, the difficulty of class consciousness, the irresolvable dialectic of individual autonomy and mass collective consciousness – all of these could be resolved in individualized resistance to the mechanized, “one-dimensional society”:

\textsuperscript{15} For more on the interplay of the thought of these figures in the creation of “Islamic Ideology” please see Dabashi’s *Theology of Discontent* (1993).

\textsuperscript{16} It is extraordinary that Marcuse closes his text with a quote from Walter Benjamin on “hope.” Marcuse reads Benjamin’s “hope” as entirely utopian, as the urging of struggle toward fruition. However, this is a mistaken view. Benjamin’s “hope,” as I demonstrate, is articulated in his writings on Kafka and Jewish messianism – and is precisely predicated not on overt, direct, planned, social struggle but on the fleeting possibility that in a contemplation, creation, politics, and sciences of *Jetztzeit*, of “now-time” or “the now,” hope remains that something else may emerge. I explore my understanding of Benjamin and messianism in my third chapter, “*Pereat Mundus*?”
Shariati’s lectures were attended by thousands, to the surprise of both Motahhari and other Irshad organizers, as well the Iranian government, which viewed Shariati’s theories with increasing alarm. As noted by Ali Rahnema, Ervand Abrahamian, Hamid Dabashi, and many others, these lectures galvanized Iran’s newly emerging professional intelligentsia as well as its ever more disaffected students, providing an “organic” path (to use Gramsci’s notion momentarily), drawing on Shiism, Marxism, and existentialism, to revolutionary upheaval and transformation. Although Shariati would die before 1979, his place in the popular imagination and in the mythology of the coming Islamic Revolution was secure, even if his adaptation of Al-e Ahmad’s more nuanced critique and eventually even his own Islamo-Leninism would be swept away by Khomeini’s Islamic Republic.

**Germany 1969**

Just under a year later, on April 22, 1969, Theodor Adorno began to give a lecture, also attended by nearly a thousand students, at the University of Frankfurt in Germany. However, unlike Shariati – whose lectures were well-received by an eager and enthusiastic audience, particularly among students and the new professional classes in Iran – Adorno was unable to finish his lecture on the methods of dialectical thought because of student protest. Adorno was castigated by students in his class to engage in “self-criticism,” Maoist-style; others stood up and wrote on the board, “He who only allows dear Adorno to rule will uphold capitalism his entire

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Finally, while Adorno allowed the students a five minute interval to determine whether they wished him to continue his lecture, he was confronted by a group of female students who attempted to kiss him, while exposing themselves, and pelting him with flower petals. Adorno fled the lecture hall. That summer, he was dead, although his thought had already been declared “dead” via SDS flyers from that same year.

In the interval between these incidents and his death, Adorno kept up an impassioned correspondence with Marcuse. One-Dimensional Man, as already noted, was popular and widely dispersed enough that Shariati was drawing on it in his Irshad lectures in 1968, and in such a way that one can only assume much of his Iranian audience was also familiar with the text. Noah Isenberg writes, in his article “Critical Theory at the Barricades”, that above all other texts, including mimeographed copies of varied works of Walter Benjamin as well as Adorno and Horkheimer’s Dialectic of Enlightenment, Marcuse’s One-Dimensional Man had become an intellectual rallying cry for students of the German New Left (and the American New Left as well). Although formulated before his open affiliation with the student movements and any

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18 Leslie Esther, “Introduction to Adorno/Marcuse Correspondence on the German Student Movement,” New Left Review I/233, January-February 1999. The original message in German was: “Wer nur den lieben Adorno läßt walten, der wird den Kapitalismus sein Leben lang bewalten.”

19 Noah Isenberg, “Critical Theory at the Barricades,” Lingua Franca 1998. For many interested in an account of these events which is more of an apologia for the student movement in 1969, particularly in Europe, this event – which amounts to little more than an irrational outburst of anti-intellectualism and the attempted sexual assault of an old and, apparently, quite sick man – is often framed as something of a triumph. As Isenberg notes in his article, the motto of the German SDS at the time was “Enlightenment through Action.” It is not surprising that this could read – especially to a theorist like Adorno, who was sharply attuned to the irrational in culture, particularly as it plays out in the context of a mass movement – as a page right out one of the early manifestos of Italian Futurism.

20 Esther gives a nearly identical description of events in her article, although she adds one crucial point that, I hope, will prevent this historical excursus from descending into a pitched battle between the “New” and “Old” lefts. The German SDS was itself split on what to do at the Adorno lectures. Many thought that the lectures provided a good opportunity for political dialogue with the aging theorist, whose writings from the 40s and 50s were still seen as inspirational to the movement as a whole. As Esther writes, “The leather-jacket fraction of the SDS was indulging in action for action’s sake.”

21 Isenberg, “Critical Theory at the Barricades.”
kind of formal break with Adorno and Horkheimer, Marcuse’s text already contained within it significant departures from what had constituted much of the shared ground of many Frankfurt School theorists. Marcuse’s book was in equal parts analysis and exhortation to action with its calls for the “Great Refusal” and definitive – not critically reflective – “breaks” and other forms of resistance to what Marcuse called a totalized culture of late capitalism. His description of “one-dimensional society” shares much with what Adorno and Horkheimer had once described in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* but it had become entirely monolithic, i.e. in many ways a non-dialectical presentation. While he would himself deny it, in many ways Marcuse was returning to his pre-Frankfurt School conception of Heideggerian Marxism. In the clearest case, Marcuse abandoned the traditional Marxist notion that technology was neither good nor evil in itself. While Adorno had never quite shared precisely this sense of technology or even the same sense of technological optimism that characterize many moments in Benjamin’s texts (most famously in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” but also in several of Benjamin’s

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22 At the very least, Marcuse was no longer embracing the “negative” dialectics associated with Adorno and Horkheimer and with the Frankfurt School more broadly. For example, in place of the Dialectic of Enlightenment, Marcuse writes: “The advancing one-dimensional society alters the reality between the rational and the irrational. Contrasted with the fantastic and insane aspects of irrationality, the realm of the irrational becomes home of the really rational – of the ideas which may ‘promote the art of life.’” (Marcuse, 1965, 247) It would be easy to mistake this reasoning for similar arguments in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1947) but even there, Adorno and Horkheimer always turn back (thus maintaining the negative, non-synthetic, dialectic) to critique in turn, for example, the irrational itself. It is on grounds of irrationality that Reason is critiqued.

23 As Andrew Feenberg remarks, “It is commonplace to find traces of Heidegger’s critique of the Gestell in Marcuse’s concept of technological domination.” In fact, this is precisely what I proceed to do here. However, Feenberg goes on to note, “But the connection goes much deeper. The most important vestige of Heidegger’s influence is Marcuse’s theory of the two dimensions of society. Although his presentation of this theory in *One-Dimensional Man* does not reference Heidegger, on examination it reveals a remarkable resemblance to the argument of *Die Frage nach der Technik*. In fact Marcuse sketches a sort of ‘history of being’ that parallels Heidegger’s account in his famous essay.” (Feenberg, *Heidegger and Marcuse: The Catastrophe and Redemption of History*, 85-86). Feenberg goes on to note that Marcuse does not cite Heidegger by name in the *One-Dimensional Man* chapter, “Negative Thinking: The Defeated Logic of Protest.” He cites him – strangely – by absence. After reestablishing ontology as first philosophy, “Being” as having a structure in itself, and the search for “essence” (elsewhere the “authentic”) as necessary (Marcuse, 1965, 135-136), Marcuse states in a footnote: “To avoid a misunderstanding: I do not believe that the Frage nach dem Sein and similar questions are or ought to be an existential concern.”(Marcuse, 1965, 136). Feenberg accepts this disavowal but I think that Marcuse protests a bit too much, especially since he happily cites Heidegger on technology and Husserl on Cartesian dualism a mere twenty pages later.
other texts on film, radio, and toys), he still viewed technology dialectically, lacking either the Hegelian forward momentum contained within Marxist understandings of transformations in society as emergent from transformations in the means of production, or any kind of essentialist or late capitalist romantic revulsion at technology qua technology. For Adorno and Horkheimer, it is instrumental reason that is most crucial, not technologization per se. In One-Dimensional Man, Marcuse, returning to his Heideggerian roots, points at technology itself, to make a distinction between “the natural” and “the technological” which would have no place in Adorno’s dialectic but which does provide a foundation for a generalizable, individualizable resistance that transcends class and other boundaries (thereby reinscribing and reproducing sociological conditions therein ignored).

But it was not explicitly on grounds of this intellectual divergence that Marcuse broke with Adorno in 1969; in fact, in their correspondence, Adorno seems eager to keep their conversation alive. Although recognizing that their work had already diverged a great deal by this point, Adorno still thought of Marcuse as something of a colleague and compatriot, and invited Marcuse to Frankfurt to speak at the Institute for Social Research. It was on grounds of political solidarity that Marcuse explicitly laid out his case against Adorno: “To put it brutally: if the alternative is the police or left-wing students, then I am with the students.” Throughout the subsequent conversation, although Adorno for all intents and purposes begged Marcuse to visit him to work through their intellectual and political differences, and although Marcuse agreed

24 In Adorno’s famous critique of Benjamin’s “Work of Art” essay, it is not primarily against technological and technologically reproducible art that Adorno criticizes Benjamin but rather Benjamin’s, in Adorno’s word, “undialectical” approach to autonomous art.

25 Herbert Marcuse, letter to Adorno, April 5, 1969, in Esther Leslie, “Reading Between the Lines: Correspondence on the German Student Movement,” New Left Review 1/233 (1999). The “police” refers to an earlier incident in which – during a student occupation – Adorno called the police out of fear that the students would vandalize the Institute grounds or commit other more serious violent acts. This fear may or may not have been justified.
that the student rebellions of 1968/1969 did not reflect a truly revolutionary moment and also contained within them a disquieting tendency towards irrationalism and anti-intellectualism, this remained the sticking point. While Marcuse insisted that the student groups represented “the strongest, perhaps the only, catalyst for the internal collapse of the system of domination today,” Adorno countered, “I would also concede to you that there are moments in which theory is pushed on further by practice. But such a situation neither exists objectively today, nor does the barren and brutal practicism that confronts us here have the slightest thing to do with theory anyhow.” This was the key issue around which the increasingly acrimonious correspondence continued, intermingled with pleas from Adorno for some kind of face-to-face meeting with Marcuse.

There is no need to rehash the entire conversation; it was over before it began. I do not begin with these narratives to cast antagonists and protagonists for this study. In some ways, all parties involved, in simple terms, got some things right and some things wrong. Marcuse was right that “a protest against capitalism, which cuts to the roots of its existence, against its henchmen in the Third World, its culture, its morality,” was necessary. Adorno was right that the movement lacked a material basis in society and that it was shot through with genuinely anti-intellectual and irrational impulses. Shariati was correct in viewing that events were overtaking

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26 Herbert Marcuse, letter to Adorno, July 21, 1969. Marcuse writes: “Of course, I never voiced the nonsensical opinion that the student movement is itself revolutionary. But it is the strongest, perhaps the only, catalyst for the internal collapse of the system of domination today.”


29 Adorno was also shockingly prescient about the ways in which formal qualities in the student movement would eventually be absorbed into the further technocracy of the university the students were precisely against. Something similar can be said concerning the American student movement and the dissolution of the draft; as we enter the second decade of the American war in Afghanistan, it is clear that ending the draft did little to quell American imperial tendencies. Rather, it allowed for the “professionalization” of the armed forces, i.e. the entry of the military
theory in Iran in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and in seeing in Marcuse a sympathetic thinker. It would also be incorrect and unfair to say that Shariati stopped his theoretical investigations altogether. Perhaps his most powerful critique of both religion and modernity came in a speech he delivered in August of 1970, “Religion vs. Religion” in which he responded to the takfiris of his time with the insight that, from a sociological perspective, he simply could not find the “unbelievers” they were all worked up about, just many different forms of religion.\footnote{Ali Shariati, *Religion vs. Religion*, 19-20. This lecture anticipated many of the critiques of secularism that would occur more than two decades later.} He was almost certainly incorrect to think that the burgeoning, legitimately revolutionary events in Iran required a theory completely subsumed to totalizing philosophy which viewed a monolithic “society and philosophy of history (the principal pillars) forming one’s ideology, developing the ideal society and the ideal human being.”\footnote{Ali Shariati, *School of Action and Thought [Islamshenasi, lecture 1]*, 42.}

Nor do I invoke this one historical fact – that Shariati once quoted Marcuse – as some kind of tenuous foundation for my comparative philosophical project concerning Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Walter Benjamin, two thinkers who most assuredly had no knowledge of each other. If that were the case, perhaps I would also include the even more tenuously related fact that the series of protests that eventually placed Adorno and the SDS at odds began partially in response to protests of the Shah’s visit to Germany in 1967. However, if I were to proceed along those lines, my comparison would devolve quickly into Jung-like mythological thinking about synchronicity and archetypes, instead of gesturing at the less direct but more pertinent truth that these historical facts help us understand a modernity already historically and materially
intertwined by the middle of the twentieth century. In these tiny historical facts, we can shatter a centered view of modernity and embrace one that is perhaps more truly universal. In them we can imagine a different conversation that could have occurred, one that lets an Iranian-Shii novelist and essayist and a German-Jewish critic and philosopher speak in and at the very center of the project of modernity. My point, then, is not to readjudicate Iran in 1968 or Germany in 1969, the Islamic Revolution, the New Left. Rather, it is to see in them the eclipse of the possibilities of a moment in time, ironically, on the very grounds of seizing the possibilities in that moment. This dissertation, which considers Jalal Al-e Ahmad, Walter Benjamin, and undertakes a comparative philosophical investigation of these two figures, examines what was eclipsed and what could still be.

Introduction

153. Finale - The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its riffs and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light. To gain such perspectives without velleity or violence, entirely from felt contact with its objects – this alone is the task of thought. It is the simplest of all things, because the situation calls imperatively for such knowledge, indeed because consummate negativity, once squarely faced, delineates the mirror-image of its opposite. But it is also the utterly impossible thing, because it presupposes a standpoint removed, even though by a hair’s breadth, from the scope of existence, whereas we well know that any possible knowledge must not only be first wrested from what is, if it shall hold good, but is also marked, for this very reason, by the same distortion and indigence which it seeks to escape. The most passionately thought denies its conditionality for the sake of the unconditional, the more unconsciously, and so calamitously, it is delivered up to the world. Even its own impossibility it must at last comprehend for the sake of the possible. But beside the demand thus placed on thought, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters. – Theodor Adorno (Minima Moralia, 1951)

And they're all awaiting the Imam of the Age. Well, we're all awaiting him, each in our own way. – Jalal Al-e Ahmad (Gharbzadegi, 1961)

32 I address this issue in my first chapter, “Theory, Methods, and Justification.”

33 This passage - published just over a decade after Benjamin’s death and exactly a decade after Adorno first received a copy of Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” - is unmistakably, in the words of Susan Buck-Morss “in full accord with Benjamin’s theses,”(Buck-Morss, 1977, 170). I have, in some ways unfairly, been using Adorno partially to ‘stand-in’ for Benjamin in my narrative prologue. I explore Benjamin and Adorno’s exchanges and disputes more explicitly in my third chapter, “Pereat Mundus? Anaesthetics and Epistemology.”
How can we know a philosophy contemplated “from the standpoint of redemption”? What are the practices of waiting for redemption while preserving or even building the conditions for the possibility of that waiting, the possibility of that contemplation? How can we understand a philosophy from the standpoint of redemption without “betraying the world,” i.e. the empirical, existing, world of the now? What is left for universal philosophy in a world of multiple, distinct but overlapping subjectivities, without ‘the subject’? Exactly what kind of project is materialist redemption? 

Religions of Doubt: Religion, Critique, and Modernity in Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Walter Benjamin is an interdisciplinary work of comparative philosophy that seeks to answer these questions, examining two seemingly disparate critiques of modernity before they were appropriated, written over, or discarded by theories and movements of poststructuralism, religious fundamentalism, and philosophical naturalism.

In Religions of Doubt, I compare the texts, histories, and conditions of several works of the twentieth-century Iranian-Shiite author Jalal Al-e Ahmad in conversation with a selection of those of the twentieth-century German-Jewish author Walter Benjamin. I focus in particular on Al-e Ahmad’s non-fiction work in Gharbzadegi (Occidentosis, 1962), Dar Khedmat va Khianate Roshanfekran (On the Services and Treasons of the Intellectuals, 1968), and Khassi dar Miqat (Lost in the Crowd, 1964) and a broad swath of Benjamin’s work from the period beginning with Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels (The Origin of German Tragic Drama, 1925) through the Passagenwerk (The Arcades Project, 1927-1940). I demonstrate that Al-e Ahmad and

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34 “Lost in the Crowd” is Green’s very loose translation, although apt for the contents of the book. A more literal translation of Khassi dar Miqat would be something like a “speck” or a “mote” or a “straw” in the “holy precincts”.

35 As the Passagenwerk or Arcades Project was never completed and was composed over the course of a long period of Benjamin’s adult life, it is difficult to give a definitive date of its ‘composition.’ This is especially problematic since it was not published in book form until the 1990s and only in English in 1999. Before this period, its
Benjamin are participating in local iterations of a complementary critique which – viewed in light of each other – constitute a productive intervention in current philosophical debates. This critique addresses different facets of what was in their time an already global and shared conception of modernity – even if, conditionally, an uneven, imbalanced, and geometrically unstable one. I argue that reading these authors in comparative conversation brings forth an image of what can contentiously be called a “radical materialist religious philosophy.” This, in turn, challenges prevailing modern norms not only in terms of the assailing the categories of the religious and the secular but also basic philosophical stances regarding ethics, epistemology, and aesthetics.

Although Al-e Ahmad has been addressed by some intellectual historians, regional specialists, and journalistic commentators, his work has yet to receive a sustained comparative or philosophical reading. Conversely, Benjamin has had a seemingly geometric expansion of secondary literature devoted to him in the past several decades, in some cases, collecting literally every jot of ink he left on a page as transcendent art objects in themselves (see, for example, *Walter Benjamin’s Archive*, 2007, eds. Marx, Schwarz, and Wizilia). However, in both cases, I argue that there is a current, prevailing, and ahistorical revisionism in the approach to these thinkers, pulling them out of their respective Marxian and Iranian-Shiī/German-Jewish milieus that I focus on in this work and appropriating them without regard for textual or factual evidence.

“Convolutes” were organized as connected sheathes of papers. This difficulty is further compounded by the fact that many of Benjamin’s positions in the project seem to shift, as can be observed within Benjamin’s infrequent commentaries in the text itself as well as through his correspondence with Adorno and Gershom Scholem about the work.

36 Ali Mirsepassi in his second major work that touches on Al-e Ahmad, *Political Islam, Iran, and the Enlightenment* (2011) has, in some ways, attempted a philosophical reading of Al-e Ahmad. However, as I demonstrate in my chapter “How to read Gharbzadegi?”, I believe his analysis to be reading past or over Al-e Ahmad. I think the comparative philosophical perspective I bring to the analysis actually helps draw out not only a more productive reading of Al-e Ahmad but also a more historically accurate one.
into frames of reference of later, recognizable philosophical and political schools and movements. While I do not claim that my reading of either Al-e Ahmad or Benjamin is the definitive reading, I do think several of the current schools of interpretation are, in demonstrable ways, flawed or, at the very least, debatable. In Al-e Ahmad’s case, this takes the form of placing him within an anti-modern, Heideggerian framework and as clearly and obviously paving the way for Khomeini and the Islamic Republic. In Benjamin’s case – in which there are so many different intellectual movements that claim him – I focus in particular on a sizable group of authors I call the “Critique of Violence School” (Derrida, Agamben, Taubes, etc.) which reads all of Benjamin through the lens of this one, small, unrepresentative, and perhaps most importantly, misread text. This reading also often involves a near fever-pitch obsession with the miniscule correspondence between Benjamin and Carl Schmitt. The intervention I perform here seeks to be more attentive to the larger body of work of both these authors and to their own histories and programs. It is intended to function both as an intellectual historical corrective and as the groundwork for the emergent philosophical discourse I argue is possible. This discourse does not negate other possibilities for reading Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin. Rather, by placing Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin in conversation, Al-e Ahmad’s Shiism helps illuminate the Judaic elements in Benjamin’s philosophy, while Benjamin’s “historical materialism” helps keep Al-e Ahmad’s own Marxian commitments in focus.

In Religions of Doubt, I contend that the perceived failure of utopian modern projects, particularly Marxism, led each of these thinkers to re-engage with religious questions and concerns in a simultaneous critique of the corrosive, reductive and catastrophic nature of

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37 The reading mentioned here also involves a confusion of Benjamin’s methodological theology with Schmitt’s political theology. I discuss this in my section on critiques of religion in Chapter 1.
modernity and the idea of traditional religion – static, irrational, regressive – that modernist
thought had conjured. In turning to specific, local religious practices (of interpretation as well as
ritual but not of faith or transfiguration) as part of a Marxian project, both authors proposed to
turn the most classic case of “false consciousness” on its head. Reading these thinkers together
allows a glimpse at ideas and modes in philosophical and religious literature that were besieged
and largely derailed by various discourses of secularism, naturalism, and fundamentalism.
Moving away from (although perhaps not beyond) the philosophical cul-de-sacs of radical
poststucturalism, textual reductionism, strict philosophical naturalism, and, perhaps most
pernicious of all, a kind of naturalistic Hegelianism that pervade several contemporary
philosophical discourses, I argue for a new perspective that builds on Al-e Ahmad’s performative
doubt, Benjamin’s “dialectical images,” and the very “religious” contention of both that meaning
itself inheres in the world.

Chapter Outline

My first chapter, “Theory, Method, and Justification,” is largely devoted to establishing a
theory and methodology for the kind of “comparative philosophy” I am performing. I also set the
stage for this comparison as I briefly examine material and historical conditions in Iran and
Germany at the time periods in question and aspects of Shiism and Judaism that I argue are
directly pertinent to understanding Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin. Finally, I explicate my polemic
use of the term “religious” in relation to current critiques of religion and secularism, as well as
analytic discourses of philosophical naturalism. As I say here, I end my first chapter with an explanation of what I mean by saying “my polemic use of the term ‘religious.’” As I explain in the introduction to chapter 1, I believe a great deal of preparatory critical work must be done before a clear understanding of my use can be presented. However, in brief, I propose “religious as polemic” to work on at least two levels. First, as part of my critique of the post-structuralist turn in post-colonial theory, I argue that merely “provincializing” or “unveiling” the identities that function as normative in modernity can only be half
political theory as a broad methodological precursor for my comparative philosophy and then on Quentin Skinner (“Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” 1969), Susan Buck-Morss (Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History, 2009), Jurgen Habermas (The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, 1995), Dipesh Chakrabarty ( Provincializing Europe, 2008), Partha Chatterjee (Our Modernity, 1997) Marshall Berman (All That Is Solid Melts into Air, 1982), Edward Said (Orientalism, 1978, Culture and Imperialism, 1993, and Representations of the Intellectual, 1994), and others in establishing the tools and aims of this particular comparative methodology and to establish a justification for the comparison of such prima facie disparate figures (although I demonstrate throughout the work that they share important temporal, intellectual, and historical backgrounds as well as relevant socio-cultural positions). I argue here, as well, that, particularly for this analysis, a concept of “incomplete modernity” (Habermas) or a “shifting, geometric modernity” (my own extension of Habermas via a post-colonial lens) is far more productive than a framework of “multiple modernities” (Mirsadini, Intellectual Discourse of Modernity, 2000) or post-modernity or post-structuralism. Furthermore, I cite previous work

the necessary work. Without an accompanying attempt to challenge the formal and substantive universality itself, the original veiled and centered modern subject lives on in an even more ideologically reified ‘spectral presence.’ In terms of the use of the term “religious” then, in addition to the critique of Christianity, we must allow substantive and formal challenges to the Christian-religious/Secular-religious understanding to be considered as part the grounds of an ever-shifting critical engagement with “religion.” The imperative expressed here is one of emancipation for both the concepts expressed and the subjects expressing them. The second level of meaning in “religious as polemic” would be one of reclamation vis-à-vis certain discourses of philosophical naturalism that would cast any notion of orders of meaning beyond those expressed through the natural sciences as religious thinking. Thus even though I demonstrate that neither Al-e Ahmad nor Benjamin are ‘supernaturalists’ and that they fundamentally accept, even if through critical engagement, scientific ontology, their thought would be ‘religious’ for reductive philosophical naturalism. If both truth and philosophy are to become so narrow, then perhaps “religious” thought – radically rethought – is precisely what is needed.

Please see Roxanne Euben, Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism, introduction.

Dabashi suggests the concept of “Persian Literary Humanism” as an “alternative theory to modernity” in The World of Persian Literary Humanism (Dabashi, 2012, 310). I explore this conception, and also explain, in this section, why a different theory of modernity is most appropriate in my view, at least for comparatively discussing the authors and texts in question.
– Hamid Dabashi (Theology of Discontent, 1993 and The World of Persian Literary Humanism, 2012) Susan Buck-Morss (Thinking Past Terror: Islamism and Critical Theory on the Left, 2003), and to a lesser extent, Farzin Vadhat (God and Juggernaut, 2002) – which suggest broadly that a comparison of the intellectual moment of mid-twentieth century Iran and organic forms of social critique emerging there to mid-twentieth century Germany and Frankfurt School critical theory might prove fruitful. I follow this with a brief section discussing the ways in which Judaism (through Talmudic commentary, hermeneutic practices, and Moses Mendelssohn’s ‘religion of gestures’) and Shiism (particularly through the ritual narration of the martyrdom of Hussein – spoken, performed, painted, and otherwise – alongside a this-worldly religious law) provide particularly fruitful touchstones for a dialectical entrance in to the question of religious discourse and practice not centered around faith.41

In my second chapter, “How to Read Gharbzadegi?”, I demonstrate – both through historical evidence and textual argument – that the currently popular scholarly idea that Al-e Ahmad’s discourse is best understood as a local Iranian inflection of Heideggerian thought is flawed at best. Furthermore, even the slightly less dubious connection to Ernst Jünger pales in comparison to Al-e Ahmad’s obvious intellectual milieu, which is largely Marxian, “third worldist,” French existentialist, and in deep conversation with his Shii upbringing, his reading of Shiism, and the “landscape” of Iran. Far from being an anti-modern “nativist,” I argue that Al-e Ahmad was addressing what he saw as key gaps and fundamental problems in Marxist and other modernization discourses, writing towards the Iranian case in particular, but gesturing from that

41 The critique of the Christian notion of faith is one of the key nodes of intersection for Benjamin and Al-e Ahmad. I discuss the Benjamin’s version of this vis-à-vis his arguments around loyalty/treachery/faith in The Origins of German Tragic Drama and in the fragment “Capitalism as Religion” in my second chapter, expanding on several ideas first proposed by Susan Buck-Morss in The Dialectics of Seeing (Buck-Morss, 1991). I discuss Al-e Ahmad’s version of this in my third chapter, via his critique of the role of faith in Shiism in Dar Khedmat va Khianat Roshenfekran and his propositions about what I call “performative doubt” in Khassi dar Miqat.
“center” towards new ideas in the universal. Al-e Ahmad is far more concerned with the question of “false consciousness” and the non-correlation of cultural-political ideas with the position of a subject than he is with any notion of a “true” or “authentic” Iranian subject. I show how Al-e Ahmad himself in Gharbzadegi pillories the notion of the “true” Shii and Iranian subject as itself a gharbzadeh concept, fit only for European encyclopedias and nationalist museums. How he proposes to address these problems is only briefly addressed in Gharbzadegi, which is largely concerned with “diagnosing” the problems in society, which accounts for its often misleading biological metaphors. Understanding how to read Gharbzadegi (the book) and gharbzadegi (the concept) are key in both establishing the modes in which we can best understand the kinds of arguments Al-e Ahmad makes elsewhere and in seeing where his interests overlap with those of critical theorists of the Frankfurt School, particularly Benjamin. In chapter 4, I argue that it is in Khassi dar Miqat, particularly its ending, that we find Al-e Ahmad’s most compelling and original propositions.

In my third chapter, “Pereat Mundus? Anaesthetics and Epistemology,” I explore a reading of Benjamin’s methodology as one that explicitly reconnects aesthetic thought with epistemology and embodied, sensory experience. This is a key point of my comparison. Benjamin addresses through aesthetic inquiry what Al-e Ahmad does through social critique: the diminution of individual sensory experience, and thereby the limitation of cognition, particularly creative and political in late capitalism as experienced differently in Germany of the 1930s-40s and Iran in the 1960s. For both authors, this diminution co-determines a reification of existing social order. Additionally, both authors see not purely a philosophy of despair in their respective critiques of modernity but additionally a possibility for radical transformation outside the existing bounds of what modernity was understood to be. While for Al-e Ahmad this transformation involved
drawing on narratives and ritual performance drawn from Shiism as methods of resistance (as I explore in chapter 4), in Benjamin it involved drawing from Judaism modes of hermeneutic practice and principles about how to regard objects in the world. Both authors saw these turns to “religion” as part of an ultimately materialist philosophy. I examine Benjamin’s position both by building on Buck-Morss’ work on Benjamin and “anaesthetics” and through my own readings of several of Benjamin’s texts. Benjamin’s methodology, I argue, presents us with a notion that might even be appropriately called an exploration of “Divine Immanence,”42 if that phrase could be stripped of any ‘supernatural’ connotations. Meaning adheres in the material world and the task of the philosopher/critic is to deduce it (in a “dream-image” which must be shattered - i.e. an analysis of the social, material, and natural forces that mark its facts and in a “wish-image” - the

42 It is in this pseudo-pantheism that Benjamin is closest to both some kabbalistic thinkers. As Allan Nadler argues in his work, The Faith of the Mithnagdim: Rabbinic Responses to Hasidic Rapture (Nadler, 1997), the concept of “divine immanence” which is most key in the “kabbalistic” aspects of Benjamin is not one of the theological principles (or an objection at all) in the early nineteenth century debate between the Hassidim and the Mithnagdim. As the debate between the Hassidim and mainstream orthodoxy largely faded in the twentieth century, it becomes easy to mistake what was once discursively considered merely another option in Jewish cosmology as part of the kabbalah being ‘newly rediscovered’ by figures like Scholem in the twentieth century just as the Hassidim portrayed their reactivation of a neoplatonic kabbalah in the eighteenth century as a ‘renewal’ of a staid and intellectual Jewish life in Eastern Europe. Late in chapter 3, I discuss the neoplatonic character of kabbalah via one of the key texts of the Hassidim, the Tanya of Schneer Zalman. The method of reading God as part of all objects in the world – which becomes, in Benjamin, reading meaning as both inhering and dialogically emergent between objects in the world – would not be kabbalistic per se, although both the Hassidim and the Mithnagdim respected kabbalistic thought (of the earlier, Lurianic varieties) as normative. Ironically, the neoplatonic and Gnostic qualities of many of the kabbalistic schools come into direct conflict with Benjamin’s materialism and desire not to ‘transfigure’ human suffering through any sort of theodicy; this is the crux of the argument against Hegel that Benjamin shared with Adorno and Horkheimer. The point would certainly not be to see the “sparks” of “divine light” that are “trapped” in the “shells” of objects in the world (using classic formulations of neoplatonic kabbalah) since that would be precisely a theodicy that explains away, reifies, and reproduces the catastrophe. In a 1931 letter to Max Rychner, Benjamin gives a rather clarifying overview of the Marxian and Judaic sides of his project, “Of those, the one most familiar to me would be to see in me not a representative of dialectical materialism as a dogma, but a scholar to whom the stance of the materialist seems scientifically and humanely more productive in everything that moves us than does that of the idealist. If I may express myself in brief: I have never been able to do research and think in any sense other than, if you will, a theological one, namely, in accord with the Talmudic teaching about the forty-nine levels of meaning in every passage of the Torah.” (Benjamin, Complete Correspondence, 372). Benjamin goes onto say that “the most trite Communist platitude possesses more hierarchies of meaning than does contemporary bourgeois profundity, which has only one meaning, that of an apologetic.” Benjamin may have viewed himself – especially in the context of his exchanges with Scholem – as engaging in kabbalistic practice. But this self-description, akin to the more enigmatic version in N7a.7 of the Passagenwerk, fuses a materialized “divine immanence” that can be theologically interpreted in line with “dialectical materialism” which opens the possibility for a multitude of meanings that are not “apologetic,” i.e. that remain in the world, to deal with the world as is. This is both “humane” and “scientific” and it is about intentional “stance,” not cosmology.
messianic possibilities inherent in all objects – material and intellectual – that would only be fully revealed in the light of redemption) and then help arrange it such a manner that indirectly brings about the possibilities of a “redemptive” outcome, or messianic rupture. This is an argument that can be traced in fragmentary forms from *The Origins of German Tragic Drama* all the way through the *Arcades Project* (and in this chapter I focus on both as well as “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” and the “Theses on the Philosophy of History”). I argue that while it must be in some ways understood as a “religious” mode of reading and material analysis, it is combined throughout Benjamin’s corpus with a withering critique of the concept of “faith”. This is evident not only in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* but also, in particular, in “Religion as Capitalism” and the “Theologico-Political Fragment.” While this “religious mode of reading and material analysis” (“religious” being deployed *polemically* as discussed earlier) has often been associated with Benjamin’s discussions of the Jewish kabbalah with Gershom Scholem, I continue this chapter by showing how Benjamin’s knowledge of the kabbalah seems idiosyncratic at best. When read in concert with Benjamin’s writings on Kafka – a theme I will expand on in the second half of chapter 4 – we see a picture of Benjamin’s conversation with Jewish materials that is far closer to the Talmudic concepts of *halachah* and *aggadah* (i.e. religious law and illustrative storytelling) than to any recognizable kabbalistic doctrines, particularly those of a neoplatonic character (which Benjamin explicitly rejects in *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*) or of the *merkabah* mysticism. Benjamin’s method of interpretation (which he called “theological,” but I think in contemporary terms should be understood rather as “religious”) was *part of* a larger system of narrative and law which he did not or could not finish. I argue that this was all part of what Benjamin saw as a necessary iteration on the existent “historical materialism” of Marxian thought. To understand why
Benjamin’s engagement with Talmudic thought, and the concepts of halachah and aggadah more specifically, have been downplayed or simply ignored in much of the existing secondary literature, I address what I dub the “Critique of Violence School” of Benjamin interpretation. This “school” of thought views – strangely, I argue – Benjamin’s engagement with politics as being primarily about state law, violence, and sovereignty as articulated in the early and unrepresentative text, “Critique of Violence”. It is rather in his aesthetic philosophy and epistemology that we find Benjamin’s politics and in his analyses of Kafka and halachah his most pertinent discussions of “law.”

In chapter 4, “Religions of Doubt,” I present my reading of Al-e Ahmad’s Khassi dar Miqat. I focus specifically upon its ending. It is in this text – and at the moment of Al-e Ahmad’s final reflections of what it means to go on the Hajj as a “non-believer,” i.e. to live as a faithless practitioner – that we can begin to glimpse the concept of what I call throughout the work a “religion of doubt.” Without rehearsing the entire argument here, Al-e Ahmad proposes that the performance of a ritual activity – in this case the Hajj pilgrimage – can both arise out of a state of non-belief (at least in the sense of faith) and end in a different state of non-belief, inculcating critical reflection. This is a radically different interpretation of ritual action than is found in Christian theology (faith precedes action) or even in some Orthodox forms of Judaism (action precedes belief), and it certainly is not the understanding of ritual action found in juridical understandings of Shiism. Rather, the performance of ritual action is a kind of gestured iteration of organic intellectual life, forcing engagement with social conditions and with meaning in the material world through a mass form that in turn creates a social text to be read, redeployed and so on. I find a particular – although ultimately and importantly not coterminous – congruity between Al-e Ahmad’s and Benjamin’s thought here.
In Benjamin’s discussion of “law” (i.e. the *halachah*) vis-à-vis Kafka and his conclusion that a new law of his kind is inarticulable, Benjamin denies certain possibilities about ritual action in his thought. I argue that this is partially due to Benjamin’s uneasy self-conception as a German-Jew and an ahistorical conception of religion itself that he developed and shared with Adorno. Although Benjamin’s engagement with materialist aesthetics and epistemology was far more nuanced, sophisticated, and expansive than Al-e Ahmad’s social critique, Al-e Ahmad had far greater insight into the unevenness of modernity, the false solidity of concepts like “religion” and “tradition,” and of a bodily engagement in ritual practices as a possibly necessary enactment of critical uncertainty and resistance. Al-e Ahmad’s hermeneutics and epistemology are, at best, implicit or underexplored in comparison with Benjamin’s theories of interpretation, historiography, and aesthetic practice. Not being steeped in German Idealism and Romanticism as Benjamin had been, Al-e Ahmad lacked the philosophical armature or even inclination, to produce the kinds of critiques that Benjamin did. Both thinkers engaged with aesthetic practice (Benjamin via criticism and theory and Al-e Ahmad via his fiction) as part of a possibly better mode of politics and both thinkers saw a similar potential in ritual action and enactment. But where Benjamin ultimately denied the possibility of that particular potential, it was Al-e Ahmad’s insight into the identity and genealogy of modern concepts that allowed him to embrace the possibilities of open, embodied religious practice as a central component of historical materialism, while for Benjamin even the “religious” aspects of hermeneutics which he employed must remain “out of sight,” as he says in the “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” Al-e Ahmad understood and engaged with the complex relationship in Shiism between legitimate and illegitimate authority. He recognizes an insoluble dialectic tension between the necessity of
political authority and its simultaneously necessary illegitimacy; this tension necessitates an unending need for critical practice and consciousness.

For Al-e Ahmad, this tension also provides the groundwork, in his organic Marxian social critique, for why the utopianism in orthodox Marxism is fundamentally flawed; it is not the historical truth of Karbala per se or the cosmological truth of the return of the Mahdi that prove this but the narrative lesson furnished therein. Similarly, Benjamin’s recognition of a messianic longing as a hidden necessity in Marxism itself carries over the logical conclusion of anti-utopianism, as the work of the messiah is necessarily outside of history and beyond human action. To positively describe or attempt to build the messianic kingdom – the worldly utopia – is precisely to engage in Idealistic theodicy; i.e. the present may be sacrificed for the utopian future. Thus, Benjamin calls for the “annihilation” of “the idea of progress” in the *Passagenwerk.*43 If Hegel secularized the Christian Kingdom of Heaven as the telos of history, Benjamin demolished it by secularizing Judaic iconoclasm and negative theology. Al-e Ahmad looked to the competing ends of history presented by the United States and the Soviet Union and saw, quite simply, more self-delusion and more horror: once again illegitimate authority that must be critiqued and assailed from the always deferred possibility of just government. These were not departures from materialist thought. They were necessary correctives to it.

These complimentary aspects of their critiques pushed both thinkers to engage critically and creatively with the present and the past, in ways that had been cut off both to modernist thought and within prevailing modes of their respective traditions. Marx had said that the logical contradictions of capital eventually produce “above all, its own grave-diggers.”44 But for Al-e

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Ahmad, writing in Iran, all he saw was the production of *gharbzadeh* subjects who were anything but the grave-diggers of capital. For Benjamin, writing in Germany and France, he saw that far from this mechanistic determinism, those contradictions could just as easily produce Fascist subjects and/or reproduce the “catastrophe” of present conditions forever. Neither Benjamin nor Al-e Ahmad abandoned Marxian historical materialism per se, but it was utterly transformed in their respective philosophies. In rejecting utopianism and the mechanical production of the revolutionary subject, both thinkers instead could turn to grappling with how and why a redemptive consciousness did not come into being, and with how and why different ones might. Both thinkers saw some measure of hope – however small – in this emancipation from the very duty of utopia itself. Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin drew on concepts, narratives, and practices from Shiism and Judaism respectively as necessary parts of a continuing development of materialist thought. However, they did *not* in the end fully meet; I argue that this is both because of inherent differences in their positions and intentions but also because of the unfinished nature of the projects of both thinkers.

In my conclusion, while I do not argue that they would have gone on to converge on a single vanishing point, I contend that Al-e Ahmad’s *gharbzadegi* as examined in chapter 2, Benjaminian aesthetics and hermeneutics as discussed in chapter 3, and the notions of ritual action and messianism discussed in chapter 4, can be connected in a new philosophical framework. It is a necessarily incomplete Weltanschauung that warily allows for a scientific centering of ontological thought (contra Heidegger) while stipulating that a broad swath of both meaning and value exists beyond the scope of scientific inquiry and must be gestured at through historical commentary and creative presentation (Benjamin’s “dialectical images”) and critical performance of ritual action, if and only if, grounded in ethico-political thought. Of course, in the
face of either a fully committed philosophical naturalism or the diffusion of the subject into the
post-human and the world into the purely textual, any such gesture would, by negative definition,
be “religious.” As a very small number of commentators have noted, (Margarette Kohlenbach
and Susan Handelman, for example)\textsuperscript{45} Frankfurt School critical theory and Benjamin in
particular can really only be understood as a religious philosophy, despite its quite sincere and
consistent critique of religion (although, beyond their own scope, understood as a Christian
category) and its quite sincere materialism and resistance to irrationalism and spurious notions of
the supernatural. The aesthetic-moral-political grounding that is first philosophy in this
comparative reading would have to be the liberation of actually existing, multiple contemporary
subjects and the creation and maintenance of the possible conditions for the redemption of the
past, understood materially: what Benjamin calls “weak messianic power” and Al-e Ahmad calls
everyone’s right to “wait for the Mahdi.” This, then, is a radically self-critical, materialist
religious philosophy, de-centered not in order to dissolve the subject but to allow new
subjectivities the possibility of articulating parts of a universalistic discourse that will, by
necessity, shift across the contours of global modernity. That by the contours of both modern and
contemporary thought (late modern, late capitalist, etc.) this must necessarily be called a
“religious philosophy” is both critique of the growing absurdity of the current debates on religion
and a redemptive move on behalf of religious knowledges that may have nothing to do at all
with the theological (as in theism or a theological cosmology, whether “believed” or
“secularized”) or the supernatural. Thus, I focus in particular on the question of philosophical
naturalism as a functional theodicy for late capitalism. It is in the context of examining this

\textsuperscript{45} This notion comes up Martin Jay’s \textit{The Dialectical Imagination} (Jay, 1996) as well but only in passing. It marks
the crux of Kohlenbach and Handelman’s analyses. “Religious” here is used in reference to my discussion of the
critique of religion in chapter 1.
philosophical and historical question that I am able to address the full dimensions of the notion of religion as *polemic*.

I also describe how I think the structure of the category I have constructed – “religions of doubt” – might be dismantled and creatively reconstructed in other contexts, with other elements. And, finally, I suggest that this comparative synthesis of Benjamin’s and Al-e Ahmad’s positions creates a remarkably novel path away from what I called earlier the “cul-de-sacs” of certain strands of contemporary philosophical discourse.
Chapter 1: Theory, Methods, and Justification

Introduction

I have adapted the phrase “religions of doubt” from my reading of the conclusion to Jalal Al-e Ahmad’s Khassi dar Miqat (Lost in the Crowd), his seminal memoir and commentary on his hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. This work combines Al-e Ahmad’s varying anthropological, polemic, philosophical, and literary tendencies, but ultimately produces a contentious and universalistic philosophical conclusion in which Al-e Ahmad gestures at an idea of religion reintegrated into daily life – and particularly into political, scholarly, and creative life – but stripped of its grounding in any faith, belief, or cosmological structures. It is a thoroughly immanent religion as a language of gestures, intentional stances, and normative facts in the world. Although there were many other moments in Al-e Ahmad’s writing that touched on this idea (particularly in certain sections of Gharbzadegi and, in some sense, foreshadowed by the discussion of the role of religion and the clergy in Dar Khedmat va Khianat Roshenfekran), this is a project which remained, in the end, unfinished for Al-e Ahmad. According to many accounts, it was also a project that he quite literally handed over to Dr. Ali Shariati, who was to transform the skeleton of Al-e Ahmad’s skeptical, gestural Shiism into a powerful, militant, faith-based ideology.

46 Ali Rahnema writes about this transition from Al-e Ahmad to Ali Shariati in his biography of Shariati, An Islamic Utopian: “Simin Daneshvar [the celebrated Iranian novelist and Al-e Ahmad’s wife] refers to the significant impression that he [Shariati] made on Jalal… On his return to Tehran, he added a lengthy footnote to Dar Khedmat va Khianat-e Rowshanfekran referring his readers to Shariati’s recently published Eslemshenasi, from which he quoted. He also mentioned the fact that he had the honor of meeting and discussing at length with Shariati in Mashad and had been delighted that they were in agreement on the issue of Iranian intellectuals’ misconceptions about religion.” Rahnema continues a little later, “Al-e Ahmad’s caustic critique of Westoxication or blind conformity to all that came from the West, in addition to his return to Islam as source of inspiration for struggle against dictatorship and injustice had brought he and Shariati close to one another. Simin Daneshvar witnessed their lengthy debates and discussions during which Shariati piled a carton of half smoked cigarettes and a box of used matches in the ashtray before him. She remembered that they spoke on how to bring about socio-political change,
I also conceive “religions of doubt” as a philosophical concept that I believe is elucidated by the work of Walter Benjamin. Brought together, I propose that these two twentieth-century thinkers, Benjamin and Al-e Ahmad, point to unexplored syntheses and horizons for philosophical and social theoretical thought. This comparative philosophical approach brings out more clearly Benjamin’s own religious (as opposed to strictly theological)\textsuperscript{47} tendencies vis-à-vis his hermeneutic assumptions, his work on Kafka, and even his notions of Romantic science inspired by figures like Goethe. This category also helps highlight Benjamin’s commitment to objects-in-the-world qua material objects and not merely as textual events, as some later commentators would suggest.\textsuperscript{48} Benjamin was interested in the interplay of texts and images in order to obtain some sense of what he termed the “wish-image,” or the redemptive possibilities at work in the world of things – a distorted image of how they might appear or emerge in messianic
tactics for raising the consciousness of the people, predestination and voluntarism, the reason for Man’s search for God, jihad and martyrdom.” Rahnema, \textit{An Islamic Utopian}, 192.

\textsuperscript{47} I discuss my idiosyncratic and polemic use of the term “religious” at the end of this chapter. Additionally, at the end of my third chapter, I discuss the ways in which this comparison helps bring out the normative aspects of Benjamin’s Judaism – not against, but in addition to his “heretical” and kabbalistic impulses.

\textsuperscript{48} This is, for example, an apt description of Paul de Man’s reading of Benjamin. It can be difficult to trace all the threads that connect the often disparate ends of Frankfurt School critical theory, particularly if one includes thinkers like Benjamin who were on the Institut payroll and deeply influential on the work (a strong argument can be made, for instance, that a great deal of Adorno’s initial dialectical methodology comes from Benjamin, which makes Adorno’s later accusations towards Benjamin of being insufficiently dialectical all the more fascinating). However, one obvious strand is the critique of idealism’s production and reification of abstract, or ahistorical, non-contingent concepts, that override things-in-themselves, of course most problematically, the subject itself over actually existing empirical human beings. This strand is certainly apparent throughout the work of Benjamin, Adorno, and Horkheimer, and its abandonment for a large part in \textit{One-Dimensional Man} marks Marcuse’s final break from that tradition. But to move from the critique of idealism into pure textuality (à la de Man or Jacques Derrida) in place of overcoming or overriding the objects themselves, dissolves them. In a full pendulum swing away from idealism, the same outcome occurs, in effect. Thus the need for the unresolved dialectic, the dialectic tension, to be maintained. As Susan Buck-Morss puts it succinctly in disputing de Man’s reading of Benjamin, “For Benjamin was concerned with the rescue of historical objects, not their disappearance.” Buck-Morss, \textit{Dialectics of Seeing}, 225. Miriam Hansen observes a similar discord between Benjamin’s approach and post-structuralism in her particular observations about the post-structural critique (in film theory) of an “equipment free aspect of reality,” writing that, “Benjamin by contrast, rather than dismissing the fiction of a seamless diegesis for perpetuating reality as an illusion sees the cinematic crossing of supreme artificiality with physiological immediacy as a chance – a chance to rehearse technological innervations in the medium of the optical unconscious.” Hansen, \textit{Cinema and Experience}, 174. I will explore these issues in more depth in my third chapter.
time - while simultaneously never losing sight of the “dream-image,” or that which must be empirically critiqued in Marxian framework.\(^{49}\) Put another way, as Adorno lambasted Benjamin, his is an attempt to combine “magic” and “positivism.”\(^{50}\) Adorno almost certainly intended this charge to be derisive. But I believe it to be closer to the mark, and far more productive, than it might first appear. What emerges from my analysis is an understanding of Benjamin as a moral and political philosopher, most interested in the aesthetic world in both the neo-Kantian sense but also in contemporary sociological and psychological discoveries concerning the human body and sensorium. The questions which animate much of his work revolve around a Marxian and Judaic matrix. Some of these questions dovetail strongly with those of other Frankfurt School thinkers in investigating the cultural and psychological formations that prevented, so to speak, the fruition of history, particularly the question of false consciousness and the relationship between base and superstructure. But for Benjamin these were always simultaneously investigated alongside questions concerning “messianic time” and interpretation of the world – all shot through, I argue, with what can be called “Jewish” understandings of these categories, arising from Benjamin’s lifelong discussions with Scholem but also the deep influence of figures like Franz Kafka, and indeed, his own fraught position as an assimilated German Jew.

Although I do not generally follow Agamben’s reading of Benjamin in most areas (as I discuss more specifically in chapter 3), his very brief definition of the “gesture” in Benjamin as “the presentation of something indirect, the means becoming visible as means” is helpful here.\(^{51}\)

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\(^{49}\) I give a more thorough explanation of Benjamin’s creative synthesis of Marxian and Freudian methods in terms of the “dialectical image” later in this chapter.

\(^{50}\) This is an attempt to build upon the observations concerning this same passage that Buck-Morss outlines in *The Dialectics of Seeing*, (Buch-Morss, 1991, 228) although I am aware I am using the passage differently.

The indirectness follows both Benjamin’s specific notions of the impossibility of direct knowledge of the hoped for messianic condition and also the “wish-image” aspect of Benjamin’s “dialectical image” as presented in *The Arcades Project*. It also fulfills both aspects of the dialectic image: the dissolution of the “dream-image” into a Marxian demonstration of the modes of production while preserving the possibility – seen at a glance – of the “wish-image,” the messianic possibilities present even in the necessary inhabitation and therefore expression of false consciousness. The gesture can be read both textually – as in the possible field of meaning generated, as in Benjamin’s essay on Surrealism – or physically, as in Benjamin’s writing on Brecht and theater. Especially given the extraordinary overemphasis on Benjamin’s textuality (which is often presented as in line with or akin to later French theory), I am deeply interested, in this study, in understanding the latter. As both Michael Mack (*German Idealism and the Jew*, 2003) and Susan Handelman (*Fragments of Redemption*, 1991) note, this version of the gesture in Benjamin is tied also to Benjamin’s (limited) understanding of *halachah*. Mack in particular draws attention not only to the connection with *halachah* but connects this to his notion of an ‘other enlightenment’ which runs parallel to “the” Enlightenment, and which he traces from Moses Mendelssohn’s conviction that the ceremonial law in Judaism constitutes a religious system superior to those which rely exclusively on texts and doxologies (i.e. Christianity). For Mendelssohn, *halachah* constitutes an evolving, communal, communicative, and pedagogically centered ‘text’ themselves.\(^{52}\)

What I am proposing here is that Benjamin’s work – famously incomplete – also gestures at a “religion of doubt.” Both of these thinkers wrestled in what we might call a post-Marxist framework with the necessity of religious concepts and gestures as an integral part of a critique

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\(^{52}\) I discuss the fraught nature of the concept of religion in the “Theory of Religion” section, later in this chapter.
and fulfillment of the potentials of historical materialism. This can, in part, be understood under the rubric of what Jurgen Habermas calls the “incomplete project” of modernity. This understanding helps move Al-e Ahmad’s work out of the framework of “multiple modernities” or “alternative modernities” into the far more challenging direction of allowing his work to speak at and to the heart of the modern project. A similar understanding of Benjamin pushes back against the current tendency to read Benjamin as some kind of progenitor of post-structuralism or deconstruction. It frames him instead – in a much more internally coherent and historically justifiable manner – as a thinker who wanted to bring his own idiosyncratic understandings of materialism (based on meticulous, far-ranging, and interdisciplinary research) and Judaic thought and practice into play as central critiques and building blocks of modernity. Far from a historiography which views Marxism as a mode of the critique of capitalist, liberal modernity, Judaism as a “marginal” or “minority” religion or helping to constitute a “minority literature,” and Shiism as itself a minority religion, “peripheral” even to the already-peripheral Islamic world, this framework brings arguments constituted within these contexts and of these contexts into contention as philosophical concepts to be reckoned with within a destabilized, de-centered, and yet still universal – at least in a contingent mode – modern.

The theoretical framework I propose incorporates the post-colonial shift that Partha Chatterjee suggests in the introduction to The Nation and Its Fragments but moves into the kind of universality that is predicated on a notion that, as Susan Buck-Morss suggests at the end of Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History: “Truth is singular, but it is a continuous process of inquiry because it builds on a present that is moving ground.”53 As an expansion of the “incomplete project” of modernity, I believe this comparative study demonstrates paths for philosophy and

53 Susan Buck-Morss, Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History, 150.
understandings of religion(s) that move well beyond current debates and provide a necessary intervention from these momentarily de-marginalized literatures into that “continuous process of inquiry” towards an ultimately porous and slippery pursuit of truth.

I do not claim a philosopher’s disinterested and distanced stance towards these subjects, nor the critic’s “bird’s eye view” of the texts in question. Rather, it is precisely the “moving ground” of history that demands the comparison and then only from my own historically situated and materially bounded condition. My view on the authors is obviously, necessarily, and transparently positioned, both by positing a relation between the two and by actively intervening to make this project not merely comparative but in some sense synthetic: not by “overcoming” elements in the work, but rather by triangulating third positions that draw upon without effacing the original work, which itself has multiple valences. For example, were my study to be focused particularly on the development of Iranian nationalism or on a parallel discussion of nationalisms, I would certainly emphasize Al-e Ahmad’s deep and sometimes racist (particularly against Arabs) nationalist tendencies. However, since the comparative lens that I am using focuses on the propositions Al-e Ahmad makes about knowledge, religion, and politics beyond the national sphere, his nationalism is less relevant. I do, however, argue against the current prevailing view that Al-e Ahmad was a simplistic “nativist” thinker with little original thought and largely dominated by the influence of Heidegger (a view which, despite its popularity, is theoretically flawed, and has no basis in textual or historical evidence). Similarly a great deal of recent Benjamin scholarship has focused particularly on Benjamin’s views on violence and state-law. While I find this approach to Benjamin limited and sometimes distorted as a way of representing his thought in a broad, systematic way, the comparative study I am engaged in here does not seek to negate important work in critical legal studies that draws on Benjamin, but
rather to emphasize the epistemological, political, and moral dimensions evoked by a comparison with Al-e Ahmad.

However, before my analysis can proceed, I have several necessary and preliminary comments to make on methodology, historical and textual comparison, possible conceptions of modernity, and the theory and critique of religion. In order to clarify the framework and ideas just briefly sketched here and to demonstrate the concepts as the logical result of an unfolding critique, I will proceed dialectically from the starting point of the idea of “comparative political philosophy.”

In this dissertation, I often employ the concept of dialectics as part of my description of what Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin are arguing. That use of dialectics frequently employs an unresolved or an irresolvable dialectic tension between concepts which must be held to be simultaneously true even as they conflict with one another. I also sometimes employ Adorno’s related methodology of “negative dialectics,” but where I do so I always mark it as such. What I mean by dialectics here – in discussing my own method of writing and argumentation – is the presentation of the discursive negation by which the description and definition of concepts are explained and justified. I recognize that this may be a frustrating experience for the reader and, additionally, an unconventional method in contemporary scholarship, even in philosophy. As a result, I will not be able to fully articulate each concept and idea until I have proceeded through the arguments that give rise to it. Furthermore each conceptual proposition to be thereby explored is dependent on the previous discursive unfolding. Thus, for example, I cannot explain the full meaning of my insistence on “religious” as a polemic without first engaging with my argument concerning modernity as an already global, shifting but uneven, geometry. And this, in turn, I cannot fully explain without proceeding through the argument about the incomplete scope
of post-colonial critique, and so on. I do hope, however, that in this way, the reader may understand the full production, justification, and consideration that results in each concept, all of which are integral to the concept itself and to the arguments which proceed from it. I also provide several illustrative excurses alongside this dialectical argument. This is my method of presentation throughout the dissertation.  

**Comparative Philosophy and History**

*Religions of Doubt* is a work of comparative political philosophy. The closest methodological antecedent is Roxanne Euben’s study *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism*, in which she explores “the tension between, on the one hand, political theorists’ aspirations to engage questions about the nature and value of politics that if not universal are at least pressing to a broad range of peoples and cultures and, on the other, a political theory canon almost exclusively devoted to Western texts.”  

Euben writes:

> Generally speaking, the project of comparative political theory introduces non-Western perspectives into familiar debates about the problems of living together, thus ensuring that “political theory” is about human and not merely Western dilemmas.

Euben employs this methodology to better understand both the Egyptian political thinker Sayyid Qutb and a broad set of ‘internal’ Western critics of modernity, from Hannah Arendt to Alasdair MacIntyre to Richard Neuhaus. Euben’s overarching argument is not genealogical (in terms of intellectual history) or modal (à la Benedict Anderson’s theories about nationalism) but rather

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54 I have, of course, endeavored to provide a sketch of the arguments themselves and the overall scope of my dissertation in my introduction. I hope this will be a helpful guide as well.

55 Roxanne Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror*, xi. I will return to the question which Euben succinctly poses here of the boundary between “the universal” and “a broad range of peoples.”

56 Ibid., 9.
about co-illumination and explication of similar intellectual phenomena. The comparative approach, she argues, can help to highlight the parochial in the supposedly universalist Western philosophers and the universal in the supposedly “regional”, “identitarian” and “non-Western” Qutb. It also can help the theorist to develop further models that take seriously what Euben dubs legitimate “foundationalist” challenges to prevailing modes of modernity.

My approach is related to Euben’s, but differs in several key aspects. The first is categorical. Euben’s field is narrower than mine, while her method is focused more exclusively on resemblance. She focuses entirely on exclusively political thinkers, such that the entire project can fall under the rubric of “political theory.” This is a completely justifiable move given the nature of the discourse she is seeking to understand and the figures on which she focuses. This dissertation touches, however, on several broad areas in philosophy: epistemology, moral philosophy, philosophy of religion, aesthetics and, of course, political philosophy. At the same time, it also draws on genealogical methods more familiar to the intellectual historian. How the authors and their texts are historically and socially embedded, how and who they were influenced by, and what sources they share in common – all of these are deeply relevant questions in this comparative reading of Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin. That is not to say that philological arguments and archival evidence supplant textual analysis; far from it. Nor is it an attempt to ride rough-shod over Roland Barthes’ famous death of the Author. Rather, since this

57 Although I am focusing here on Euben’s work in terms of my own methodology, it is worth noting that part of my methodological departure (and in particular the arguments I make below concerning different conceptions of modernity, post-modernity, etc.) are also informed by the content of Euben’s argument. Although demonstrating formal similarities and even occasionally historical links, she maintains what Hamid Dabashi has called, in his reading of the post-Revolutionary Iranian political philosopher Abdolkarim Soroush, the “phantom pain” of “Islam and the West.” As he remarks, “conversation with modernity is what Muslim intellectuals have been conducting over the past 200 years…” (Dabashi, Islamic Liberation Theology, 128). I would add that conversation in modernity in addition to “with modernity” is particularly the case for 20th century Iranian-Shii intellectuals. Al-e Ahmad himself tries to reframe what “east” and “west” mean (in largely developmental terms) in Gharbzadehi. I discuss this in more detail in chapter 2, “How to Read Gharbzadegi?”
is an attempt at a systematic and synthetic philosophical reading that helps elucidate what systematic philosophy can be found in the respective authors and how these philosophies in turn can be seen as potentially complimentary and critically productive towards a third position, it seems crucial – especially where the secondary literatures have made significant errors – to take into account social-historical circumstances. For example: those of Jewish intellectuals in 1930/40s Germany or of Shia intellectuals in 1950/60s Iran; the fruitful comparison of the indirect colonial condition in Iran following the second world war; or the condition of “self-colonization” in Germany directly preceding the second world war. Both to illustrate this aspect of my methodology and to lay a crucial foundation for my comparison, I will briefly examine this example now.

Illustrative Excursus: Colonization and Self-Colonization

“Self-colonization” is a term originally coined by Stalin in a rather apt description of the forced collectivization of the “backward” rural, agrarian population of the Soviet Union into agricultural collectives. It can also be usefully applied as a descriptive category to what the National Socialist regime conducted within Germany from 1933 until the Anschluss in 1938, and from then on within Germany and German occupied territories until the end of World War II. Although Germany did achieve a few colonial possessions in the traditional sense of the term, it was, in the dry language of Sebastian Conrad, “a colonial late-comer,” its colonial experience and possessions largely “deemed marginal and insignificant.”58 As Conrad reminds us later in his book, both Hannah Arendt and Frantz Fanon make the case for the connection between Nazi

58 Sebastian Conrad, German Colonialism: a Short History, 1.
policies – and in particular the Nuremberg Laws and the Holocaust – and European colonialism and imperialism. Arendt writes:

*The chief importance of continental, as distinguished from overseas, imperialism lies in the fact that its concept of cohesive expansion does not allow for any geographic distance between the methods and institutions of colony and of nation, so that it did not require boomerang effects in order to make itself and all its consequences felt in Europe. Continental imperialism truly begins at home.*

Meanwhile, Fanon writes:

*The truth is that we ought not to accept these conditions. We should flatly refuse the situation to which the Western countries wish to condemn us. Colonialism and imperialism have not paid their score when they withdraw their flags and their police from our territories. For centuries the capitalists have behaved in the underdeveloped world like nothing more than war criminals. Deportations, massacres, forced labor, and slavery have been the main methods used by capitalism to increase its wealth, its gold or diamond reserves, and to establish its power. Not long ago Nazism transformed the whole of Europe into a genuine colony.*

Although Arendt is writing in the descriptive (with a veiled, implicit normativity) and about the genealogy of totalitarianism while Fanon is writing explicitly in the normative (dependent, of course, upon description) about reparations from one capitalist power to another, their analyses are remarkably similar. Both view Nazism as deploying the techniques – “deportations, massacres, forced labor…” – of colonialism and imperialism in the “continental” context. Both view the structure of the power relationship in Nazism as colonial in nature; in fact both go out of their way to emphasize it (“Continental imperialism truly begins at home,” a “genuine colony”) as if expecting their readers to disbelieve them. Fanon goes on to discuss both the creation of the State of Israel and the continued payment of reparations from Germany to Israel as, in some ways, an exemplar for post-colonial states; states should reorganize away from

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60 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 57-58.
the structures of colonial rule. Additionally, sovereignty, economic freedom, and compensation must be demanded.\textsuperscript{61}

Fanon was not the only anti-colonial thinker who ventured in this direction in the era. Al-e Ahmad himself wrote in his 1964 essay \textit{Valayat-e Israel}:

\begin{quote}
If you look with the eyes of an Easterner like me—empty of fanaticism and excess and vengeance—worrying for the future of an East of which one end is Tokyo and the other Tel Aviv—and knowing that this same East is the grounds of the coming renovation and the hope of a world tired of the West and Westoxification, in the eyes of this Easterner, Israel with all its faults and all the contradictions which it contains, is a foundation of power, a giant step, the herald of a future no longer far off.\textsuperscript{62}
\end{quote}

Al-e Ahmad does continue into a fairly astute critique of Israel – despite its promise with its ongoing engagement with Jewish practice and socialism – as both a “bulwark of capitalism” and a “curtain Christianity drew between itself and the world of Islam in order to prevent US from seeing them.”\textsuperscript{63} He even implicitly invokes the notion of colonial mimicry, which is one of most illuminating concepts in understanding the relation between political Zionism and Nazism.

It might be tempting to cease the comparison here and to note simply the parallels between Al-e Ahmad’s position as an Iranian-Shii vis-à-vis the European metropolitan center and Benjamin’s vis-à-vis his position as a Jew within Germany. However, as compelling as those parallels may be, it is important to note the differences in both the “colonial” apparatus and in the position of German-Jews. This is not merely for the sake of historical accuracy but also to grasp key historical conditions for understanding some of the convergences and divergences in the comparison of Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin. These historical and social connections help ground

\textsuperscript{61} It is certainly beyond the scope of this study to address with any precise degree the ways in which Zionist politics can as such be viewed as a variety of pernicious colonial mimicry.


\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.
the comparison but the fact that their conditions, while similar, were still part of an extraordinarily uneven modern landscape is just as important in understanding how each thinker formulated her particular critique of modernity.

As both Arendt and Fanon note in their descriptions, the case of Nazism is not only self-colonization, as – in addition to identifying a ‘native’ within the borders of the state – it also still has expansionist geographic aspirations, just “adjacent” ones. Furthermore, the attitude towards the ‘native’ in this case would appear far more settler-colonial than the imperial-colonial models that post-colonial theorists more often focus on: British, French, Dutch, etc. Finally, there is the place of German-Jews themselves. Referring to the late scholar Suzanne Zantop, Leo Riegert writes:

In her 1997 book, Colonial Fantasies: Conquest, Family, and Nation in Pre colonial Germany, 1770-1870, Susanne Zantop demonstrates that it was precisely the absence of colonial possessions beyond German territories that led to a variety of “colonial fantasies” within the German lands, and that these fantasies in turn served as kind of rehearsal for the way in which the newly-formed German nation approached its actual territorial acquisitions in the late nineteenth century. She makes clear that Germany’s developing sense of itself and its role in the colonial world took place vis-a-vis others both inside and outside Germany. In her portrayal, mechanisms that defined German Jews and other internal outsiders evolved conterminously with Germans’ understanding of their cultural and racial dis/connections to external outsiders’ nations and peoples beyond the German lands.  

What Zantop does in her book – although from a very different angle – is tie together many of the themes I have been arguing here: there is a link between stifled German colonial aspirations and the implementations of techniques and structures of power in Nazi Germany that closely mirror those in colonialism elsewhere. This is a point that has been explored more abstractly in Sven Lindquist’s A History of Bombing (Lindquist, 2000) and, in far more ideal-cultural form, in Alexander Kiossev’s “The Self-Colonizing Metaphor” (Kiossev, 2011) and Stathis Gourgouris’

64 Leo Riegert, “Subjects and Agents of Empire: German Jews in Post-Colonial Perspective,” 336. Riegert also cites the important work of Susannah Heschel in this area.
Dream Nation (Gourgouris, 1996). Gourgouris’ analysis of Philhellenism and Orientalism is particularly critical for this analysis.

As Gourgouris writes: “This is because Philhellenism – being, I would argue, an Orientalism in the most profound sense – engages in the activity of representing the other culture, which in effect means replacing the other culture with those self-generated, projected with those self-projected images of otherness that Western culture needs to see itself in: the mirrors of itself.” Only in the case that Gourgouris is exploring, “Neohellenic reality,” the “particular kind of colonial mimicry inherent in the colonization of the ideal,” can only be understood as an “autoscopic” gaze; it is self-colonization.

I do not intend all of this to mark an all too easy elision between the condition of German-Jews and Iranian-Shiis. As Riegert notes, Zantop overlooks the material specificity of the place of German-Jews as a people who could both inhabit a space of internal-colonization and play important roles in colonial and imperial administration; or, in a completely different direction, to “pass” à la critical race theory. Further, even if Nazism is viewed as a kind of self-colonization of the settler-colonial variety, with Jews (amongst others) as the “natives,” as well as partaking in the self-colonization of the “ideal” variety as described by Gourgouris, then Iran is positioned in at a rather odd angle to these notions of colonization: constantly on the knife’s edge of imperial powers threatening it nationally, while suffering an internal “self-colonization” crisis under the Pahlavis. What is important in these comparisons is not that they are equal; it is

65 Stathis Gourgouris, Dream Nation, 140.
66 Ibid.
that we can see the philosophies Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin produce as both part of a global, modern, anti-colonial discourse.

This discussion of “self-colonization” and conditions of Jews in Germany and a relationship to colonization and the complex condition of Iran in relation to the question of colonization and “self-colonization” serves both as part of the foundation for a comparison between the intellectuals in question and as part of my methodology for how to proceed with that comparison. The socio-historical frame must remain in focus in comparisons of the texts, as must the context of the authors’ respective bodies of work. Thus, for example, it seems significant in determining the possible meanings of, say, a piece of writing by Benjamin, that Benjamin numerous times in his letters derides Heidegger’s work and entire approach to philosophy and even addresses where he thinks his work does and does not intersect with the work of Heidegger.68 This does not negate Heideggerian readings of Benjamin per se; these may rise and fall on the interpretative communities that give life to them. But it should give us pause in attributing such readings to Benjamin himself and also give us hermeneutic space to elaborate other philosophical possibilities in the work. Interestingly, a similar argument (regarding the seeming irrelevance of Heidegger) can be made about Al-e Ahmad; I devote much of my next chapter, “How to Read Gharbzadegi?” to it. Yet this apparent point of convergence (Heidegger) is based on faulty grounds, historically speaking and thankfully, gives way to a much more compelling (textually and historically grounded) point of convergence: that of thinkers working

68 For example, Benjamin writes in a letter to Scholem on November 11, 1916: “An essay [originally held as a lecture when he received the venia legendi in Freiburg] on ‘Das Problem der historichen Zeit’ has appeared in the last or next to last issue of the Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik, and documents precisely how this subject should not be treated. An awful piece of work, which you might, however, want to glance at, if only to confirm my suspicion, i.e. that not only what the author says about historical time (and which I am able to judge) is nonsense, but that his statements on mechanical time are, as I suspect, also askew.” (Benjamin, Correspondence, 81). There are several other later letters in which Benjamin goes into more explicit detail on how he views himself as completely at odds with Heidegger’s thought; it is important to note that this letter (and several of the others I mention here) is written long before Heidegger’s opportunistic Nazi period.
in a Marxian tradition, coming to terms with the lasting theological contours of an already shared modernity and grappling with how religious practice can inform critical engagement with modernity.  

**Historical and Textual Comparison towards Philosophical Comparison**

Following the kinds of grounds I identify in the preceding excursus, I emphasize the secondary literature which tends to give equal weight to the textual and the socio-historical; for Al-e Ahmad, scholars like Hamid Dabashi, Ervand Abrahamian, to a certain extent Farzin Vadhat, or the far less well-know Robert Wells (author of the only monograph entirely devoted to the work of Al-e Ahmad in the English language) and, in the case of Benjamin, scholars like Susan Buck-Morss, Miriam Hansen, Michael Mack, Judith Butler, Margaret Cohen, and Susan Handelman (not to mention, of course, the interpretations of many of Benjamin’s friends and contemporaries like Scholem and Adorno).  

In this manner, I hope to avoid the pitfalls of pure textual immanence, historical projection, and, what is quite as pernicious, historical determination, as discussed, for example, in Quentin Skinner’s article “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas.” Instead of a false “orthodoxy,” such as Skinner describes, of an exclusively deterministic context of

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69 To address “religious practice” in Benjamin requires remembering that “theology” can also mean a form of hermeneutic practice. I will differentiate this meaning of theology – which in its particularity and within the framework of this dissertation is best understood as a religious practice – from substantive theology in my final section in this chapter on theories and critiques of religion.

70 This list is far from complete, but should give the reader some idea of the literature I will draw on. In the sections on secondary literature and discourse about Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin later in this chapter, I will discuss in more detail the various schools of thought concerning the thinkers. This is not to say that all these scholars agree or form “schools,” per se; merely, I wish to indicate my interest in authors who take all of the above seriously and to show how I intend to build on the foundations of their work.

epistemic closure (what I call here philological) or one which emphasizes “the autonomy of the text itself as the sole necessary key to its own meaning,” I hope in my interpretive sections to rely on the historical contingency of those texts and their textual interplay to understand how they address philosophical, political, aesthetic, and religious concerns of the mid-twentieth century. This does not impute to Al-e Ahmad the ridiculous notion that he “prefigures” or “anticipates” Khomeini or, even more improbably, the neo-traditionalists of the Taliban. Nor does it assign to Benjamin the improbable role (for someone so deeply committed to the things-in-themselves of material reality) of progenitor or prophet of post-structuralism. Rather in both cases, scholars who have made these kinds of arguments have engaged in a somewhat circular discourse. It is unquestionable, for instance, that some readers of Al-e Ahmad (Khomeini himself being an obvious example) took his critique of modernity and religion to call for, or partake in the call for, the establishment of a clerical state in Iran and, in fact, to call for global revolution towards universal rule of God through his representatives on earth. But this fact does not of course negate another fact: that in *Dar Khedmat va Khianat-e Roshanfekran*, Al-e Ahmad

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72 “Philological” can be read at least two ways and unfortunately I have to use both definitions in this dissertation. The first, which I am employing in this particular passage, is best understood as the ‘classic’ definition of philology as practiced by Max Mueller or Ernst Renan. For a more nuanced defense of the continued practice of this kind of philology, please see Sheldon Pollack, “Future Philology” (2009). Additionally, later in this chapter I wish to use the Saidian definition of philology, best explained by the following phrase in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*: “My position is that texts are worldly, to some degree, they are events, and, even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human world, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted.” (Said, 1983, 4). That Said dubs this form of philology (merely asserting the ‘worldliness’ i.e. *literal* secularity as derived from the Latin *saeculum*) “secular criticism” is an issue I will take up in the final section of this chapter on what I have been calling my polemical use of the word “religious.”

73 This is a quality Skinner ascribes to the new critics of his own day but which has some (if not complete) overlap with certain schools of Benjamin commentators. I discuss this issue more in the Benjamin secondary literature section and with what I call the “Critique of Violence School.”

74 This is the case whether we understand the latter in the mode of actual “traditionalism,” as argued by Olivier Roy in *The Failure of Political Islam*, or as both fallout from global modernism and mirror to modern management culture as persuasively argued by Faisal Devji in *Landscapes of the Jihad*. 
directly argues against just such an arrangement, targeting the clerical class as especially ill-suited to hold political office.\textsuperscript{75}

However, I do not think it follows, as Skinner does, that:

\textit{The essential question which we therefore confront, in studying any given text, is what its author, in writing at the time he did write for the audience he intended to address, could in practice have been intending to communicate by the utterance of this given utterance.}\textsuperscript{76}

Skinner rightly lampoons the ahistorical approach (which he associates in the essay most closely with the work of Leo Strauss) that searches through texts for traces of elements of conceptual objects which only take form in the contemporary world of the critic or seek to answer “timeless questions” or search for “timeless truths” which are assumed to be present in the works of great authors of the past. However, Skinner himself succumbs to a kind of epistemic radicalism here, reminiscent of Arthur Danto’s puzzle-like philosophy of aesthetics (particularly when it comes to film): the role of the reader/viewer/listener is to ‘figure out’ what the author intended.\textsuperscript{77} It is in the realm of aesthetics, in fact, that this position reveals its most radical dimensions: to remark about natural beauty would be a \textit{necessarily} theistic statement in such a worldview, in the most Christian-creationist sense of the word theism.\textsuperscript{78} This is much as Barthes himself argues in “Death of the Author,” writing:

\textit{We know that a text does not consist of a line of words, releasing a single “theological” meaning (the “message” of the Author-God), but is a space of many dimensions, in which are wedded and

\textsuperscript{75}Vadhat, \textit{God and Juggernaut}, 120.

\textsuperscript{76} Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” 48-49.

\textsuperscript{77} Arthur Danto, “Moving Pictures,” 100-112.

\textsuperscript{78} In fact, especially if we are to address Benjamin in somewhat Benjaminian terms, we would think of theological interpretation as open-ended and redemptive to the contemporary place, time, and needs: a \textit{religious} activity that posits the non-rational belief that meaning inheres in the world and in objects-in-the-world and yet is completely alien from any notion of a supernatural theism, or even the epistemological position of positing a “God’s eye view” or a “God of the margins.”
However, I would say with Barthes that while this refutation of the single ‘authoritative’ textual voice is necessary, it does not put an end to the authorial voice in all cases, even if we are to imagine, again with Barthes, the “birth of the reader.” To borrow an image that Barthes suggests earlier in the essay, “the Author” diminishes “like a tiny figure at the far end of the literary stage.” Diminishes, perhaps; especially from the sense of singular meaning as Barthes describes above. But there is no need to push the author off the stage altogether, particularly in the context of an attempt not to “decipher” the text in the manner suggested by Skinner in the above passage or by Danto’s writing on film but rather to understand a philosophical text as part of the corpus that will move under the sign of the author. This is not the only way to read a philosophical text. Although Benjamin tends to quote rarely from philosophical sources directly, it would be bizarre in a study that at least partially examines Benjamin not to note that Benjamin himself employs a rather ‘disembodied’ attitude towards textual quotation both in *The Origins of German Tragic Drama* and in the *Arcades Project*. However, given that this project involves *historical* as well as textual comparison, it is helpful to bring to bear both Benjamin’s or Al-e Ahmad’s social and historical circumstances as well as their other writings in interpreting any of their texts. This can also serve as a helpful corrective to more radical readings of the text that may subvert some of its, if not *intended* meanings, then its stronger valences. This places my

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80 Roland Barthes, “Death of the Author,” 6. I do not follow the line of homonymic-poetic or etymological-deterministic reasoning that posits that all notions of “authorship” imply “authoritative” or even more dubiously, “authoritarian.”

81 Roland Barthes, “Death of the Author” 3.

82 “Method of this project: literary montage. I needn’t say anything. Merely show… these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them.” Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, [N1a,8], 460.
methodological approach in these sections of this study closer to Edward Said’s position in *Orientalism*, when he states:

> Foucault believes that in general the individual text or author counts for very little; empirically, in the case of Orientalism (and perhaps nowhere else) I find this not to be so. Accordingly my analyses employ close textual readings whose goal is to reveal the dialectic between individual text or writer and the complex collective formation to which his is a contribution.\(^{83}\)

I would propose that Said’s observation is not limited to the study of Orientalism – against his own suggestion that it applies “perhaps nowhere else.” Foucault’s method (which also of course involves the death of the author, as Said discusses here) is of great value in revealing epistemic horizons, discursive boundaries and lacunae. However, when addressing certain genres of texts, understanding this discursive context as well as the interplay of the author and socio-historical context is necessary. It is impossible to discuss systematic philosophy without doing so. I consider this methodological point to be helpful beyond understanding and comparing the two main thinkers of this work. It also provides a foothold for further philosophical speculation that builds upon my readings of these thinkers.

Returning to the initial discussion of Skinner, the authorial-intent model that he outlines actually conflicts with Skinner’s own intended direction:

> The most exciting possibility here, which I cannot now explore, but which I have touched on in discussing both the causes of action and the conditions for understanding statements, is the possibility of a dialogue between philosophical discussion and historical evidence.\(^{84}\)

This kind of dialogue “between philosophical discussion and historical evidence” is precisely what I pursue here. The questions that I am asking are prompted both by historical investigation

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\(^{84}\) Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” 49.
and current philosophical debates: is there a “family resemblance,”85 in the Wittgensteinian sense, between Al-e Ahmad’s and Benjamin’s critique? Do Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin participate in such a “family”? Do they rely on certain shared sources and related socio-historical circumstances? What do these critiques say about historical conditions in their time and in relation to the present day? What, if any, philosophical conclusions can we draw from these historical and textual comparisons? These are all questions I am posing today that are prompted by current philosophical debates and simultaneously require historical investigation and are impossible to answer without considering that investigation.

It would be bizarre to suggest that either author in his own historical circumstance would have pointed to the other — or to many of the concepts I employ in this study — to describe themselves. There is absolutely no historical evidence that Benjamin knew anything about

85 “Family resemblance,” Familienähnlichkeit. Following Wittgenstein in Philosophical Investigations: “66. Consider for example the proceedings that we call ‘games.’ I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all?—Don't say: ‘There must be something common, or they would not be called “games” ’—but look and see whether there is anything common to all.—For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't think, but look!—Look for example at board-games, with their multifarious relationships. Now pass to card-games; here you find many correspondences with the first group, but many common features drop out, and others appear. When we pass next to ballgames, much that is common is retained, but much is lost.—Are they all ‘amusing’? Compare chess with noughts and crosses. Or is there always winning and losing, or competition between players? Think of patience. In ball games there is winning and losing; but when a child throws his ball at the wall and catches it again, this feature has disappeared. Look at the parts played by skill and luck; and at the difference between skill in chess and skill in tennis. Think now of games like ring-a-ring-a-roses; here is the element of amusement, but how many other characteristic features have disappeared! And we can go through the many, many other groups of games in the same way; can see how similarities crop up and disappear. And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail. 67. I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than "family resemblances"; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way.— And I shall say: 'games' form a family.” So the question asked broadly of Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin, then, is do they participate in such a “family”? What would we call it? I will later propose the possibility of “religions materialist philosophy.” Of course, Wittgenstein is working through the question of “family resemblance” in terms of formal similarity, whereas I am concerned both with formal similarity as well as that informed by both text and history. Still, Wittgenstein’s admonition “look!” is a remarkably Benjaminian gesture, pointing at objects beyond their textual limits; it is, if I might venture further, not dissimilar from what Al-e Ahmad attempted in his ethnographic projects.
intellectual currents in the Islamic, let alone the Iranian Shia world – the proposition alone seems preposterous. And while there is a passing chance that Al-e Ahmad may have been familiar with the work of Benjamin or, much more likely, Adorno, there is no historical evidence for that either, although we do find ample textual evidence of other Western Marxist figures, most especially Gramsci, in Al-e Ahmad’s work.86

**Outside Modernity?**

The philosophical questions I pursue are additionally prompted by the keen observations of several scholars concerning the possible conceptual intersection of these two intellectual worlds, seemingly distant at first glance. One of the first to propose such intersection and resemblance was Susan Buck-Morss, in her work *Thinking Past Terror: Islamism and Critical Theory on the Left*, although she focuses there on Sunni Arab Islamism as exemplified by Sayyid Qutb and the entire landscape of Frankfurt School authors. She writes:

> Now, the Western modernity that Qutb and others attacked was in fact the impoverished tradition of instrumental reason, possessive individualism, and lack of social consciousness that the members of the Frankfurt School and other European Marxists were criticizing from within.87

This observation is in line with Euben’s as well; the concerns of Islamist critique are not necessarily identitarian per se. Buck-Morss’ proposition is further buttressed by Farzin Vadhat’s more specific reading of Al-e Ahmad himself and modernity in “Return to which Self? Jalal Al-e Ahmad and the Discourse of Modernity,” when he notes the closeness of Al-e Ahmad’s writings to both an early iteration of post-colonialism and to his relationship to Khalil Maleki and

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86 Additionally, as discussed in my Introduction, Marcuse is an explicitly acknowledged influence on Shariati.

Western Marxism. Vadhat returns to the theme with his discussion of Al-e Ahmad and Gramsci in *God and Juggernaut*, where he aptly notes that the other of the *gharbzadeh*, particularly the *gharbzadeh* intellectual, is the Gramscian “organic intellectual.” More broadly speaking, Dabashi, in his 2012 book, *The World of Persian Literary Humanism*, concludes, in part, with a comparison of “the contingent subject of literary humanism” and in particular “Persian literary humanism” with both Adorno’s commentary on the “insolubility of contingency” with reference to identity but also to Benjamin’s “theory of allegory.” Although Al-e Ahmad only briefly appears in the work, the reflection on necessary similarities between the world of “Persian literary humanism” and critical theory is compelling. Alongside my own readings of the authors, I view all these scholars as in many ways opening the field for inquiry.

One of the major interventions I hope this study can achieve is to correct the error that Al-e Ahmad is relevant only for an Iranian Shia audience, in terms of application, intention, or, of course, legibility. There is a key observation in the passage by Buck-Morss I cite above: long before contemporary discussions of the phenomena of economic and social globalizations, modernity was already a singular, shared, multi-faceted condition in the twentieth century that gave birth both to Islamist and Frankfurt School theory. Furthermore, not only is modernity a

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88 Farzin Vadhat. “Return to which Self? Jalal Al-e Ahmad and the Discourse of Modernity,” *Journal of Iranian Research and Analysis*, 16:2 (2000). In Vadhat’s endnotes he has a long aside about the influence of Lukács on the international left at the time of Khalil Maleki’s growing disillusionment with the *Tudeh*. He discusses how the “intellectual and political at the international level” were pertinent to some of the shifts happening in Iran. Thus, Maleki moved in a political direction that Vadhat argues shares some relation with Tito’s non-aligned Communism while, intellectual currents on the Iranian left were driven, in part, by the same engagement with Lukács that helped develop Frankfurt School critical theory.

89 Farzin Vadhat, *God and Juggernaut*, 121-122.

90 Dabashi, *The World of Persian Literary Humanism*, 306-308. I will also discuss Dabashi’s argument for “Persian literary humanism” as “an alternative theory to modernity” (Dabashi, 2012, 310) later in this chapter when I elaborate on my own geometric theory, which still finds some use, at least in this study, for a revised notion of modernity that is still radically displaced, augmented, and in a state of flux. Like Dabashi, I too find the notion of “alternative” or “multiple” modernities insufficient, as I will explain.
shared condition temporally, systemically, and, in some ways, characteristically (if not conditionally and spatially), what is more, the object of critique – the nature of modernity itself – is also shared.

Buck-Morss continues (still comparing the conditions and critiques of German-Jewish and Arab-Sunni intellectuals):

*It would have taken a radical cosmopolitanism far advance of what was possible at the time for both sides (German Jewish and Arab Muslim) to join forces in a critique of Western reason in its impoverished, (neo-)liberal, instrumentalized form. But the very thought of such an alliance, an attack launched from both within and without, suggests the power that a new Left in a global public sphere might have today.*

Indeed, in addition to a “radical cosmopolitanism,” it would have taken at the least a modicum of mutual knowledge, not to mention recognition. Benjamin seems to have known next to nothing of the Islamic world, nor thought terribly much about it. Even in his correspondence with Gershom Scholem concerning Scholem’s numerous attempts to encourage Benjamin’s immigration to Palestine, Arabs and the Islamic world figure into the discussion rarely and often only as romantic set-pieces or political talking points without subjectivity. Al-e Ahmad was far more of a “cosmopolitan” than Benjamin in almost every sense of the word. He travelled extensively (to Europe, for medical reasons, and to Mecca, the Soviet Union, Israel, and American for varying intellectual, political, and religious reasons) and wrote about the world, even famously lecturing at Harvard as a visiting scholar for a summer at the behest of Henry Kissinger. He was also a cosmopolitan in the theoretical sense, writing explicitly about cosmopolitanism in *Gharbzadegi* (in favor of it, which is often lost in contemporary writing on


92 I will discuss one fascinating instance of Benjamin’s use of an Islamic reference point in my chapter “Aesthetics, Epistemology, and Metaphysics” when discussing the role of kabbalah and the critique of neoplatonism in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*.

Al-e Ahmad) and drawing on texts from Iran, across the Islamic world, Europe, Asia, Africa, and North America. The fascinating aspect of this very superficial comparison is that to read Al-e Ahmad (and thinkers like him) both for reasons of Orientalism and the state of his contemporary reception, one must constantly underscore his historically obvious cosmopolitanism. Benjamin, deeply parochial in a stringently European (although importantly European-qua-Jewish) world, is afforded something of ‘a free pass.’ Buck-Morss rightly puts the “two sides” on equal ground in terms of non-recognition of the other, but the language of “within” and “without” betrays the status that will always attach itself to intellectuals of Europe, even if they are part of the ‘marginal’ Jewish community.

I will address later the question of the Iranian-Shii vs. Arab-Islamic dynamic that I have been eliding in my discussion of Buck-Morss here. But first I would like to address the language of “within” and “without” that she deploys in the quotation above. While recognizing the shared condition/object of modernity, Buck-Morss implies that the Frankfurt School writers are “within” modernity and critiquing it, while Islamist writers are “without” or, somehow, outside modernity and critiquing it. This logic actually runs against the radical notion of universalism that she reclaims in *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*. However, it also ignores what is a key theoretical point in my methodology here and what, I think, makes possible the type of “radical cosmopolitan” reading that Buck-Morss advocates: viewing both of these thinkers (and their respective intellectual contemporaries) as “within” the condition of modernity, and viewing their critiques both as from and of modernity, as informed by their different geographic, economic, and social dimensions.

This idea of everywhere “within” might be misunderstood easily as a variant of several common postmodern concepts – for example Jean Baudrillard’s notion of the collapsing of the
“map” and “territory” of the whole world in *Simulacra and Simulation* – but I would rather propose it here as an attempt to acknowledge a fact of modernity and also as a challenge to the privilege that a binary of “within” and “without” can conjure. For instance, as in the example above: Walter Benjamin codes as cosmopolitan despite never leaving Europe; Al-e Ahmad is a genuinely global author who is treated as a “nativist” and understood as relevant only to the internal and local history, literature, and politics of Iran. In order to understand the distinctions I am drawing, I will briefly explore several pertinent definitions and critiques of the concept of “modernity.”

**Expanding the “Incomplete Project” of Modernity**

In his discussion of the genealogy of the word “modern,” Jurgen Habermas helpfully reminds us that the concept first came into use in the fifth century CE to delineate between the time of “ancient pagan” order and the new age in which Christianity was everywhere and “official.”

94 This is helpful both for its location of Christianity – particularly Euro-Christianity – as the keystone for any notion of modernity and also for destabilizing more historicist accounts. Habermas is not making the claim that “the modern” begins in the fifth century, as do say, Adam Smith or Karl Marx with the eighteenth century and the advent of the division of labor, or Max Weber with double-entry book-keeping and quantitative rationalization. Nor is he laying out a recapitulation of Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of Hegel’s “cunning of reason” which pushes the zygote of “the modern” into the ancient world itself. Habermas is underlining the way in which the “modern” is a constantly shifting plane, but predicated always on the idea of the “new.” In a manner that is explicitly in line with Benjamin’s understanding (and critique) of

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Nietzsche’s “eternal return of the same,” Habermas argues that in the contemporary “modern age” – best understood by the aesthetic of the modern – “the distinguishing mark of works which count as modern is ‘the new’ which will be overcome and made obsolete through the novelty of the next style.” However, there can be no mistaking this claim for a re-inscription of Hegel’s dialectic or of Nietzsche’s creative rebirth of mythology, “because the emphatically modern document no longer borrows this power of being a classic from an authority of the past epoch… the relation between ‘modern’ and ‘classical’ has definitely lost a fixed historical reference.” In addition to losing a fixed historical reference, something akin to the ancient concept of cyclical time is recreated in Habermas’ discussion of the detachment of the “new” from any substantive content. We are not speaking, then, with Hegel. Habermas – in what amounts to something of an about-face on Benjamin – has adopted several of Benjamin’s positions concerning the notion of historical progression in addition to Benjamin’s critique of the eternal return of the same.

Perhaps surprisingly, Habermas’ introductory notes on the Christian origin of the concept of the “modern” are not far away from Carl Schmitt’s proposition in the third chapter of Political Theology, “All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts….” However, while many (Hans Blumenberg being the most prominent example) have taken Schmitt to task for mistaking a historical transformation for a characterization, what Habermas does at the beginning of his essay with his genealogy of the term “modern” is, while

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95 Ibid., 4.
96 Ibid.
97 I say about-face because “Modernity – An Incomplete Project” and The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity mark a remarkable shift in Habermas’ writing on Benjamin. For an example of his earlier interpretations and opinions, please see Jurgen Habermas, “Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism: The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin” New German Critique, 17 (1979): 30-59.
98 Carl Schmitt, Political Theology, 36.
less directed, in many ways more bold. He diffuses the Christian world beyond law and state to encompass the character of an “age” and he elucidates several examples of the characteristics that form that “age”: aesthetic, social, cultural, and economic. It is partly a critical gesture; from its inception, Habermas suggests, the autonomy of these spheres – so central both to conservative thinkers like Schmitt and Enlightenment philosophers alike – has been a myth. They overlap with one another, share in the age’s characteristics, and inform the conceptual and categorical understandings of one another. Thus the “significance” – to paraphrase Schmitt – of particular “concepts” are downplayed in favor of a diffuse set of influences and characteristics. In recognition and response to this, I argue that Habermas’ notion of the “incomplete project” of modernity must be expanded both in terms of what is conceptually possible to consider as modern and to recognize that colonial and marginal conditions are an integral part of the landscape of modernity. The first expansion requires addressing post-colonial theory and an important critical turn I argue must be made to re-imagine modern concepts. The second expansion, building on the first, requires a reevaluation and redefinition of the muddled sociological, historical, and philosophical conceptions of modernity as a social condition.

**Expansion I: ‘Provincializing Europe’ and Beyond**

Perhaps unintentionally, Habermas, in tracing European modernity to a specifically Christian moment and intellectual dispersion – which looks, for lack of a better phrase, distinctly un-modern – opens up his critical theory to a synergistic post-colonial argument. Put another way, it helps in the task of, to borrow a phrase from Dipesh Chakrabarty, “provincializing Europe.” Particularly important for this study, especially in light of the discussion of “self-colonization,” the Euro-Christian character of key categories of modernity can be seen in all their messy, localized reality with the veil of the universal subject, the universal notion of the nation,
the category of religion, etc., beginning to lift. As Chakrabarty writes concerning his own work on the subcontinent:

*The Europe I seek to provincialize or decenter is an imaginary figure that remains deeply embedded in clichéd and shorthand forms in some everyday habits of thought that invariably subtend attempts in the social science to address questions of political modernity in South Asia. The phenomenon of “political modernity” – namely, the rule by modern institutions of the state, bureaucracy, and capitalist enterprise – is impossible to think of anywhere in the world without invoking certain categories and concepts, the genealogies of which go deep in the intellectual and even theological traditions of Europe… One simply cannot think of a political modernity without these and other related concepts that found a climactic form in the course of the European Enlightenment and the nineteenth century.*99

The object of this critique, as Chakrabarty says, is not Europe itself; he stipulates earlier in his introduction that the historical project of ‘fragmenting’ Europe – showing its particularities, fissures, overlapping areas of irreconcilable difference – had already in many ways been accomplished. What he is addressing is an intellectual firmament, a lexicon of the metropole which had been dispersed throughout the world by the economic, social, and political forces of colonialism. The “concepts” that Chakrabarty discusses span a radically wide range:

“citizenship, the state, civil society, public sphere, human rights, equality before the law, the individual, distinctions between public and private, the idea of the subject, democracy, popular sovereignty, social justice, scientific rationality, and so on…”100 There are some reaches of this range that must be challenged – Chakrabarty’s critique of science is particularly weak.101 But it is

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100 Ibid.

101 Chakrabarty’s assault on “scientific reason” would be better targeted at scientistic epistemology. The rather modest epistemic claims of actual scientific practice are some of the most stable parts of any conceivable, rational system of ontology. The super-scientific claim made by philosophical naturalists that all knowledge that can be actually known can only be known through the natural sciences is risible as ahistorical, amoral, and, ironically, non-scientific. Part of the overall purpose of this dissertation is to demonstrate how these authors – unlike many of their post-colonial and critical theoretical offspring – did not see the need to jettison science and scientific reason in order to account for a broader array of meaning in the world and of practices beyond the rational. Lacking the Heideggerian baggage, they are able to engage fully with the necessary Marxian principle that any system of possible human emancipation is going to develop partially through science and technology. A far better critique of the ahistorical and uncritical foundations of specific scientific inquiries can be found in Max Horkheimer’s 1932 essay “Notes on Science and the Crisis.”
undeniable that each of these seemingly inescapable modern concepts does, precisely as he argues, emerge from a recognizable and yet conceptually veiled position in Euro-Christian particularity.

And yet it is not enough to “provincialize Europe” in this manner. Chakrabarty tries to argue for better conceptions of pre-modern history (the transformation of “minority histories” into “subaltern pasts,” for example, which intends to transform the conceptions into fragmented, local iterations, self-referential both in content and in concept) and against the continued prevalence of even critical modes of modern thought (liberalism and Marxism are singled out in particular). Even so, the thought of what is already global – conceptually – haunts the work.

Chakrabarty’s provincialization only takes us as far as allowing the particular to speak in its own terms; it does not overturn – as Chakrabarty would seem to hope – the conceptual sovereignty of that “imaginary Europe.” In Chakrabarty’s own words, the “heritage” of liberalism and Marxism “is now global.” He may claim not to adhere to Heideggerian ontology but in his critique Heideggerian concepts (“present-at-hand,” “ready-to-hand” and so on) are allowed their day in the global sun, so to speak; whither the truth content of the global-particular approaches Chakrabarty seeks to let speak? There is a factual, historical case at work here as well, in which Chakrabarty is entirely correct: these Euro-Christian concepts and even their most nuanced critiques are, in a very liberating way, part of a “global heritage,” available for all – with access, ability, time, and resources – to draw upon when wanted or needed. But if there is an ontology peculiar to Bengalis (to continue in Chakrabarty’s case), how and when does it get to speak globally? Shall the notion of not only “the universal” but in fact of universal discourse, or more simply global discourse (and philosophy, like science, by definition must attempt the universal

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102 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 239.
even if attaining it is impossible) be ceded forever as another bad idea to come out of Europe, like nationalism or colonialism? If the wide range of concepts listed above are not “universal,” then surely the newly reiterated and reconstituted particularities may not only de-center these but supplant some, augment others, cast light on which should remain, turn an authoritarian conceptual universe into a web of interconnected people and ideas.

There is something to be said that for the idea that the entire project that Chakrabarty sets out on is to precisely not reconstitute such a universe, that reconstituting a universe or sphere even in a truly fragmented and decentered mode would be to recapitulate the mistakes of the Enlightenment and colonialism itself. And, yet, if it is not transformed or augmented, then the critical apparatus has reinscribed these locales as forever peripheral, while the remnants of Euro-Christian past lives on as the spectral global metropole. To move out of Chakrabarty’s areas of concern to my own: how does this mode of reading do justice to Al-e Ahmad’s Iranian and Shii inflected modernist critique of modernity? This is not only a question too of allowing non-Euro-Christian voices to speak globally. It is also the question of what is to remain of the Enlightenment project despite its origins; merely to unveil it as self-deceived does not constitute a negation. Chakrabarty writes in the end that he does not wish to “shun” “European thought,” and yet without hesitation he equates science with scientism. In critiquing the notion that “we see our ‘superstitious’ contemporaries as examples of an ‘earlier type,’”103 he goes on to endorse the superstition itself, out of uncritical deference to the (true) unknowable being and subjectivity of the Other. But taken to its logical conclusion, this is the end of knowledge. Chakrabarty has mistaken an epistemological problem for an ontological one. It is because of economic and conceptual hegemony that one would conclude that differences from the categories of the

103 Chakrabarty, 238.
metropolitan center, in and of themselves, are a sign of “backwardness” or “superstition”. The ontological exclusivity of the varieties of human experience apply to people’s beliefs vis-à-vis their own experience. The problem of self-knowledge aside, the experience of that belief, the habitation and/or practice of it, is exclusively in the realm of the self-reporting and the purely discursive. The epistemological verification of that belief – difficult as it may be to pronounce both in terms of the observers’ own problematic being and in terms of finding the right language, the formula which will be scrutinized – cannot be ruled impossible simply on the grounds that there is a subjectivity which experiences it otherwise. For all of his talk of de-centering European conceptual armature, Chakrabarty again draws on Heidegger – here the notion of the “‘worlding’ of the earth”\textsuperscript{104} – to obscure what is, in the end, an actual empirical question: in this case, whether or not a “magical,” “telepathy” has in fact occurred.\textsuperscript{105}

To ground these arguments in this study, I intend to argue that to deny this distinction is precisely to misunderstand the critique of faith that occurs in both Benjamin and Al-e Ahmad; it is to cast them both – the post-colonial and/or minority/marginal – permanently into the realm of the irrelevant because others have dubiously claimed the rational high ground first. Both the rational and the empirical become not questions of thought but of Being, and thus, ironically beyond interrogation in the particular, in history, in embodiment, precisely in all the ways that Chakrabarty wants to encourage. Chakrabarty’s argument is half a critique.\textsuperscript{106} Although I find

\textsuperscript{104} Chakrabarty, 241.

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 240. He is critiquing Marinowski’s skeptical response to the claims of “true magic” by his student, the Kenyan, Jomo Kenyatta. It is fascinating to note that Chakrabarty’s analysis turns on the question of “witnessing” and the inherent truth claim in such an act. Chakrabarty reproduces, note for note if you will, the Christian argument against the world and against the evidence of the senses. This, again, is a crucial node of confluence for the critiques advanced by Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin.

the notion of “provincializing Europe” incredibly useful for understanding the new critique that must take place, in the spirit of Benjamin, the theory it engenders on its own must be labeled as a Heideggerian nightmare in which the actually-existing-world fades further and further from the theoretical horizon. There is another critical turn which must be taken. As Asha Varadharajan asks in *Exotic Parodies*, her insightful study into post-coloniality, critical theory, and subjectivity:

> If the discourses of post-modernism and post-structuralism have been responsible for decentering the patriarchal and imperialist subject by demonstrating that the unity and self-sufficiency of this subject is possible only at the expense of the racial, ethnic, and feminine object, why has this perception not produced emancipation and self-acceptance of the object? The object, in other words, continues to function as a dark continent of sorts, a species of otherness whose point of reference remains the Eurocentric and masculine self.\(^{107}\)

Put simply – and openly as a challenge – if post-modernist and post-structuralist approaches to the post-colonial constitute the path to de-center/deconstruct/dethrone the Euro-Christian, masculine norms of global capitalist domination (which Varadharajan correctly identifies as the new, more virulent form of colonialism), then where is the liberation? What use is this discourse, if the condition of the colonial just continues on and the expressions, conceptions, arguments, but, above all, needs of the post-colonial world are simply relegated from the “dark continent” of barbarism and superstition to the “dark continent” of fragmentary parochialism? All while the Euro-Christian norms are simply sublimated (in the chemical sense of matter changing form without an intermediary stage, not “sublated” in the Hegelian sense of *aufgehoben*) via capital into the ‘true’ global forms.

Varadharajan – indirectly – demonstrates that Chakrabarty’s starting dilemma is reproduced by his concluding maneuvers. Varadharajan is aware that these are fighting words, stating in the conclusion that hers has been a “sustained effort” to “risk affiliation with the

'enemy’ in order to envisage the most effective mode of decolonization, at least within the realm of theory.” She is risking much. Against what she perceives as the prevailing post-structuralist headwinds of the questioning of all utility and the disinclination to view objects in the world and the world itself as anything other than textual events, she is positing a fundamentally crucial conditional: if the goal of this critical apparatus is “emancipation” then why have we pulled the rug out from the very people that are struggling in the face of new colonial? Varadharajan correctly calls it a question of “decolonization”; post-coloniality has meaning, but the world – both material and conceptual – still requires decolonization. Stripping away the very notion of fact and the possibility of a subject emancipates and empowers no one. Again, in Benjaminian terms – and this is helpfully illustrative of where certain readings of Benjamin fail – we would be left with neither the manifest factual critique of the “dream-image,” the sine qua non of human emancipation, nor the ephemeral “wish-image” of possibility. Perhaps surprisingly – although it is in fact the telos of her study – Varadharajan brings Adorno (despite his noted and amplified indifference to non-European subjectivities and, often, out-and-out racism) and Frankfurt School critical theory into conversation with post-colonial theory to address the question of decolonization. She does so precisely to bring the dialectical method to bear on the possible

108 Ibid., 137.

109 As discussed by Margaret Cohen (“Walter Benjamin’s Phantasmagoria”), Buck-Morss (Dialectics of Seeing) and numerous other commentators, Benjamin draws heavily on Freud’s “dream-work” (Traumarbeit) from The Interpretation of Dreams in synthesizing his notion of the “dialectical image,” a notoriously slippery concept in the Benjaminian philosophical lexicon. In combining Freud’s insight about the “manifest content” of dreams, the hidden “dream-thoughts” which are the material to be drawn out of the illusion of the “manifest content” and eventually yield up the “wish” which the dream is trying to express (Freud, 1989, 157) with Marx, Benjamin externalized Freud’s dream-work; the illusion to be demystified was the world itself, at least as it appeared to be as conjured by the phantasmagoria of “high capitalism.” The method for this demystification was, of course, rigorous Marxian critical social, economic, and political analysis. However, in addition to these yielding up the ‘true’ conditions, i.e. the equivalent of the dream-thoughts from Freud’s theory, Benjamin methodologically proposed that to get at the “wish” (in his case the “wish-image”), the critic had to move sideways as well from the original “dream-image” to catch a glimpse of the “wish-image” which does not yield up in straightforward manner as in Freudian psychoanalysis but must be considered a distorted, hardly seen image of what the object would like as reflected in the light of messianic redemption.
reconstitution and emancipation of post-colonial subjects and to return to the questions of the production and reproduction of material conditions and their ideologies. What is more, Varadharajan does this without running roughshod over the notion that resistances do take place. The question becomes not where to locate the resistance, nor how to simultaneously posit agency and resistance while dissolving the agential subject who resists (which a deconstructionist reading of post-coloniality does). There is a silent and deadly liberal tolerance that inhabits all such attempts; all resistances are equal, all beings are different. Varadharjan’s challenge is to choose sides, to actually stake out a claim, drawing on the facts of the lived conditions of marginalized and colonized peoples (and, for that matter, theorists): to demand, which resistance is better, in terms of efficacy and morality? It is a question that is fraught with tension and peril both for incorrect answers and for the potential of producing yet some new form of domination. It is also a question that I propose Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin are answering, in their most radical moments.

But while the theoretical lens turns on both a critical theoretical and a post-colonial lens on modernity and critics of modernity, I will demonstrate by dint of intellectual history and comparative philosophy, that Benjamin and Al-e Ahmad inhabit precarious, ambivalent positions articulating what Partha Chatterjee has called, referring to the history of the subcontinent, “our modernity.” Not an alternative modernity, nor post-modernity, but a face of the total condition, emergent, largely simultaneous, and interdependent. He does, at first, toy with the idea of modernities, but then he embraces an idea of the “our” of it: the particular part of the whole that is, unfairly, and lopsidedly, in the particular case, Indian. On his way to presenting the dilemma,

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110 Efficacy should not be read here as the reinscription of instrumental rationality, nor as a virtue in itself. Rather, it should be read as efficacy towards what Horkheimer deemed simply the alleviation of actual human suffering (material suffering writ large) or what Benjamin enigmatically called the “politics of happiness” in the “Theologico-Politico Fragment.”
Chatterjee alights upon the same territory as Chakrabarty – the elusive expression of colonial and then post-colonial subjectivity and the unsatisfactory limitations, in the case Chatterjee is discussing, of the “statistical facts of demography.” Yet, unlike Chakrabarty, he presents the rejection of those facts as “baseless” even while maintaining that the discursive expression of a challenge to those facts could be meaningful. This is not a contradiction. He presents the dilemma:

My argument is that because of the way in which the history of our modernity has been intertwined with the history of colonialism, we have never quite been able to believe that there exists a universal domain of free discourse, unfettered by differences of race or nationality. Somehow, from the very beginning, we had a shrewd guess that given the close complicity between modern knowledges and modern regimes of power, we would forever remain consumers of universal modernity; never would be taken seriously as its producers. It is for this reason that we have tried, for over a hundred years, to take our eyes away from this chimera of universal modernity and clear up a space where we might become the creators of our own modernity.  

The question is one of production and consumption. But even this “our” is too self-provincializing; it is, perhaps, an intermediate step towards what Chatterjee himself identifies indirectly as the differed desire: to “be taken seriously” as “producers” of modernity as at least part of a universal condition.

Expansion II: the Shifting, Uneven Geometry of Modernity

Consider again Habermas’ notion – as discussed more fully before – of the modern as the repeated historical instantiation of the radically new. Rather than one sharp break from the pre-modern to the modern, we are presented with a shifting plane of the modern which, itself,

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112 For a more thorough discussion of the relationship between definitions of “modernity” and modernization theories, please see Sudipta Kaviraj, “An Outline of a Revisionist Theory of Modernity.” Kaviraj writes, from this slightly different perspective: “Although the structural form of writing encourages a view that capitalism is a ‘universal form’, i.e., wherever it arises, it eventually produces an economy of the same structural design, the historical analyses seem to suggest a very different implication.” (Kaviraj, 2005, 10)

113 I would like to clarify that when I write “we” here and throughout this dissertation, I intend it conversationally as in, “We who are reading this text,” not we as a transcendental category of a universal collective subjectivity.
continues to shift. To remain within the realm of geometric metaphors, we can think not only with the image of a shifting plane but also, by extrapolation, of modernity as a multi-faceted polyhedron. If we think of the sum total of the “age” vs. the strict one-to-one secularization of concepts, the image of the polyhedron becomes more and more compelling. In this way, we can elaborate geospatially and temporally a quite conventional definition of modernity such as that provided by Anthony Giddens:

At its simplest, modernity is a shorthand term for modern society or industrial civilization. Portrayed in more detail, it is associated with (1) a certain set of attitudes towards the world, the idea of the world as open to transformation by human intervention; (2) a complex of economic institutions, especially industrial productions and a market economy; (3) a certain range of political institutions, including the nation-state and mass democracy... It is a society – more technically, a complex of institutions – which unlike any preceding culture lives in the future rather than in the past.

I do not wish to endorse Giddens’ definition of modernity. Nor do I wish to suggest that it summarizes Habermas’ definition. Rather, in elaborating on this definition geospatially and temporally in light of Habermas’ argument in The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity and put

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114 In his work, The World of Persian Literary Humanism, Dabashi makes a compelling case for doing away with the notion of modernity as any kind of useful category outside its immediate European context. He writes: “What I have offered in this book on Persian literary humanism (Adab) is not in opposition to the European project of modernity – which remains a perfectly valid and thriving issue in its immediate European context… In doing so, I have altogether discarded the “tradition versus modernity” binary – itself a manufactured opposition superimposed on Persian literary humanism to further universalize the European project of modernity. The far more accurate, grounded, and nuanced morphological succession of ethnos, logos, ethos, and chaos within successive imperial contexts includes but does not privilege, the encounter of this humanism with European empires. It does not deny the historic significance of European imperialism – but it does not privilege it with deciding the entire history of the human race. What I have offered here, as a result, is not a theory of alternative modernity – but an alternative theory to modernity…” (Dabashi, 2012, 310) I believe the teleological impulse in this approach and the one I discuss above of modernity as a multi-faceted, lopsided polyhedron, in flux, actually converge. However, I wish to hold on to “modernity” for at least one more discussion for three reasons. 1.) Both of the authors I am reading see themselves as inhabiting the modern condition; as critics of the modern condition; as offering modernist solutions to the problems of the modern condition. 2.) Alongside Chatterjee, Kaviraj, Varadharajan, Buck-Morss, and several of the other authors discussed here there are some qualities – if you will – that have come to be called modern that seem worthwhile to hold onto, regardless of their temporal, geographical origin, or mode of transport. 3.) One of my primary concerns is to allow either a universally regarded critical voice (Benjamin) or a forever-displaced “regional” or “native” voice, a chance to speak in the universal, not to dissolve the universal and only leave a spectral European modernity to inhabit it perpetually. I believe that this third position dovetails with the move Dabashi is suggesting but the paths to get there are different.

115 Anthony Giddens and Christopher Pierson, Conversations with Anthony Giddens, 94.
within the post-colonial frame I discussed in the previous section, we can see both how deeply parochial Giddens’ definition is and simultaneously where it does bring together key – if necessarily skewed – observations on modernity. Giddens’ first condition is, fundamentally, about subjectivity; it is integral to any conception of the modern, even the geometric redefinition which I am applying here. The subject as some kind of integral whole and the relationship of that subject to knowledge are a crucial link between the writings of Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin. They are a shared aspect of the modern experience and the critique of the modern experience. The final comment – about the modern society as one that “lives in the future” – has mistaken modernity for modernization theses. The limitations within these categories, such as the centrality of things like a “market economy” or a “nation-state,” become all the more obviously absurd as one elaborates on the variety of angles, facets, and faces one finds on whole in modernity. In addressing Giddens’ second and third conditions now, by briefly addressing specific Iranian and German conditions in the periods in which Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin were writing, I hope to make this point clearer.\textsuperscript{116}

To begin with, we must contrast, drawing in part on the Chakrabarty discussed above, the factual conditions of modernity (which I have been describing geometrically) with the abstract condition of modernity – the discursive object of modernization theses, Enlightenment aspirations, and European colonial discourse. I am not trying to make a distinction that promotes the notion of a ‘rarefied’ philosophical discourse of modernity against some ‘purer,’ more

\textsuperscript{116} For a different discussion of this topic see, again, Kaviraj, “An Outline of a Revisionist Theory of Modernity”: “Improvisation in this sense, i.e., not simply copying them from other successful democracies, but fitting them to a society’s peculiar circumstances, is of the essence of the unfolding of the modern. As a result of such historical improvisation, it is likely that institutions of democracy or capitalism or secularism would tend to develop unprecedented features and institutional idiosyncrasies in different historical settings. Unlike conventional political science, the proper way of judging them is not to take a map of European institutions and decide whether the new forms are ‘correct’ or not by judging if they fitted the European ‘norm’ but to test them more abstractly and philosophically against the relevant principles.” (Kaviraj, 2005, 25-26)
empirical, sociological understanding. Rather, I would like to connect the two; some sociological positions fall in to the “abstract” category, while some philosophical positions must be addressed as “factual.” Thus, unless we subscribe to a highly dubious thesis of evolutionary or divine determination and simultaneous emergence, we must engage with the concept of modernity as one that unfolds already constituted – centrally, not epiphenomenally – by conditions like resource extraction, colonization, “self-colonization,” the struggle for national identity, and so on. Thus, we must note that by the beginning of the twentieth century, both Germany and Iran were deeply integrated into what would now be called globalized systems of commerce and communication; both had experienced a truncated experience of the “advent” of modernity.

117 For example, the sociological – or more accurately, the social scientific – concept of “the rational actor,” while presented as a merely a “model,” operates as a transcendental abstraction. An example of the reverse can be found in Adorno’s Negative Dialectics: “The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth.” (Adorno, 1973, 17-18). This is a philosophical formulation that must be treated as factual.

118 Germany was both an emerging major center for global manufacturing and, as early as the long nineteenth century, the center for major European “modern” philosophy, even if, importantly, Britain retained the overall economic “centrality” and France (and in a different way, the United States) retained the political. Iran was thoroughly integrated into the commerce of global capital by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. In fact, late Safavid economic policy in the seventeenth century and earlier (Matthee, 1999, 175) seems to have mirrored the same mercantilist policies that Adam Smith critiqued with such success in the Wealth of Nations. However, Iran, already deeply integrated into the global economy via the silk trade, transitioned in the nineteenth century into modern global trade with the increased foreign demand for oil and constant pressure for access to resources and market monopolies from both Britain and Russia. Iran was integrated into the modern capitalist economy as a source for raw resources and a market for foreign goods, as opposed to being ‘inaugurated’ into the modern capitalist economy through the division of labor and either a labor-based (as both Smith and Marx agree) or a production-based (a more neo-classical vision) internal economy. Iran itself was part of modernity – at least as I have described here – and indeed was an integral part, as the heated exchanges between Britain and Russia testify. Indeed, Iran’s internal economic stultification was not a “natural” consequence of climate, culture, or language, as so many would come to argue in the early and mid-twentieth century but rather was, as Al-e Ahmad astutely observed in Gharbzadegi, part and parcel of full integration into what I have been calling the uneven geometry of modernity. That this condition did not pass by unnoticed in both elite and mass politics, as I will shortly explain, is further evidence of this already-modern condition. “Modernization” discourses – often taking national boundaries as, ironically, real – looking at Iran as a case, saw a ‘backwards nation’ where they should have seen that modernization had already occurred far too well. The government of Iran in this period – first the inept Qajars and then the imperially-imposed Pahlavis – continued the pre-modern mercantilist policies until they fully ensconced Iran as a rentier state, a condition Iran suffers from economically to this day and one the Islamic Republic has only partially addressed through education reforms.
vis-à-vis foreign military intervention;\textsuperscript{119} both had seen both mass-popular movements mobilized in addition to “modernism” in literature and the arts.

In the question, then, of the comparison of Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin a new constellation and perhaps the firmest foundation for the comparison unfolds \textit{within} this uneven geometry of modernity: that of a \textit{shared} status as oppositional intellectuals, in the model that Said outlines in \textit{Representations of the Intellectual} (Said, 1994) for which the seemingly odd pairing of Julien Benda\textsuperscript{120} and Theodor Adorno both prove paradigmatic cases.\textsuperscript{121} Unlike the Said of \textit{Orientalism}, who draws heavily on Foucauldian discourse analysis and Gramscian hegemony, here Said is

\textsuperscript{119} As I have already discussed, Iran was integrated into a global economy centuries prior to the “advent” of modernity, but in both the German and Iranian case some of the political aspects of modernity – even conventionally understood – arrived not in the form of revolution, the development of new productive economic capacities, etc., but in fact in the form of military threats. In this case, it is perhaps best to start with the way in which Germany – which did not even exist as a political or even nascent national entity at the time – came to view itself as finally joining modern (read: national in this case) Europe with the arrival of French troops. As is so often noted, Hegel was putting the finishing touches on \textit{The Phenomenology of Spirit} as the Napoleonic forces were reaching Jena in 1806. Marx even notes in \textit{The German Ideology} that while it was English revolutions in production and the French Revolution itself in politics that had ushered in the “world-history” that Hegel was attempting to describe, in the German case, it was the arrival of Napoleon and the local reaction through the “Wars of Liberation of 1813” that had ushered Germany into the new social conditions (Marx, \textit{The Marx-Engels Reader}, 172).

\textsuperscript{120} It must be noted here that Benda’s \textit{La Trahison des Clercs} (Benda, 1927) is an obvious reference point for \textit{Dar Khedmat va Khianat Roshenfekran}.

\textsuperscript{121} In \textit{Culture and Imperialism}, Said, speaking in a similar register about intellectuals, particularly émigré intellectuals (literally and/or metaphorically), actually cites Shariati (over and against Al-e Ahmad who gets short shrift earlier in the book): “Too privatized, we are likely to say about this respite from regimentation [of Adorno]. Yet we can rediscover it not only in the obdurately subjective, even negative, Adorno, but in the public accents of an Islamic intellectual like Ali Shariati, a prime force from the early days of the Iranian Revolution, when his attack on ‘the true, straight path, this smooth and sacred highway’ – organized orthodoxy – contrasted with the deviation of migration....” (Said, 1993, 334) Although I dispute the “obdurately subjective” characterization of Adorno, and the “migratory” aspects of Shariati that Said goes on to quote, it is far more interesting that Said cites Shariati here at all, giving us a clue, as the citation of Benda does, that Said both did have a true lacuna when it came to religion but also that sometimes his arguments would land him somewhere other than where his theory (think “Religious Criticism” vs. “Secular Criticism” from \textit{The World, the Text, and the Critic}) would suggest. I address this more thoroughly in the following section.
working largely from Gramsci’s notion of the “organic intellectual”\textsuperscript{122} and from Benda’s (extreme) example in representing an uncompromising oppositional stance to power.

If this perhaps seems too open up too much or to be potentially too broad, that is precisely the methodological point. A similar (but non-identical) argument – as the links I drew between conditions in Iran and Germany and the subsequent basis for a comparative analysis of intellectuals – could be made about any number of other arrangements on the landscape of the uneven, geometric modernity I have been discussing. However, these would always have to stand on factual foundations – historical and textual – and not only on “family resemblance.” Thus, we can move from the rather succinct and reductionist account we read in Giddens to Marshall Berman’s more radical account of modernity:

\textit{Modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology: in this sense, modernity can be said to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be part of the universe in which, as Marx said, “all that is solid melts into the air.”}\textsuperscript{123}

It is a rather stirring depiction and a literalist reading of it is found centrally in both Mehrzad Boroujerdi and Ali Mirsepassi. For them this is the ontology of “the modern.” But if we want to take seriously what a universalistic but non-totalizing philosophy might look like – if we, in

\textsuperscript{122} See Antonio Gramsci, \textit{Selections from the Prison Notebooks}, 9-10. Gramsci’s insights into intellectuals, but also into the notion from Marx of “town and country,” are particularly helpful in understanding Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin and yet – even putting aside Said’s concern of “opposition” – it would be wrong to draw a straight line from Gramsci to what Al-e Ahmad or Benjamin are doing. Al-e Ahmad draws heavily on Gramsci in \textit{Dar Khedmat va Khianat Roshenfekran}, but it is clear that for him Shiism is more than merely the “language” or the “sentiment” of the people that the intellectual must adapt; that is part of its use-value, but it also contains substantive content, not just the “passion” of the people (Gramsci, 1971, 418). Furthermore, when it comes to his own writings on Shiism, Al-e Ahmad is no populist; nor is Benjamin. Although Gramsci calls the two elements (the way the “popular element” feels and the way the “intellectual” element” knows) co-determining, or a “nexus” one never gets the sense that the actual content of “knowledge” i.e. “the particular historical situation,” connected, “dialectically to the laws of history and a superior conception of the world” is at stake (Gramsci, 1971, 418). Gramsci is best understood here as one figure (but only one of many) who is initiating a kind of conversation which unfolds globally and in which Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin can be seen to partake.

\textsuperscript{123} Marshall Berman, \textit{All that is Solid Melts into Air}, 15.
some sense, want a truly modern modernity – we need to read a bit closer and a bit more, just as we did with Giddens. “Modern experiences,” “cut across” some “boundaries of geography and ethnicity,” but in uneven ways with different corresponding social structures; they cut across some boundaries of “class and nationality,” but mostly to dissolve the bonds of the former and ironically reify notions of the latter. It is not a unity of disunity; it is rather, disunity under domination and the illusion of unity. Berman is writing in 1988 and part of the “maelstrom” is the ‘identity’ crisis that is postmodernism. Rather than name (and thereby destabilize) the “unity” which has economically and politically dominated the world for several centuries, postmodernists would rather dissolve everything the ‘veiled’ modern had simply sought to control, including modernity itself. Of course, unveiled, it is capitalist, Christian, Europe that stands invisible to all on the terrain of the modern except itself. It stands or perhaps stood at the center, alone. It does not have to be this way; this dissertation is an attempt at describing at least one alternative way amongst many. It is on the grounds of these arguments that I can finally address current debates in the critique of religion as a category and my own stated use of “religious” as a polemic.

**Religion and Religious: The Critique of Secularism and Religion as Polemic**

There has been, over the course of the last several decades, something of a seismic shift in scholarly understandings of “religion” as a conceptual category by a wide range of scholars, most prominently Talal Asad (*Genealogies of Religion*, 1993 and *Formations of the Secular*, 2003), Tomoko Masuzawa (*The Invention of World Religions*, 2005), and Gil Anidjar (“Secularism,” 2006). As I argue in this dissertation, Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin themselves can

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124 I have dealt with this critique in a preliminary manner in my MA thesis: *Vanishing in a Puff of Logic: The Political and Philosophical Uselessness of Secularism as a Discourse* (Chaudhary, 2007). However, I have expanded that critique in the context of this dissertation.
be seen as performing critiques of the concept of religion, particularly of the notion of faith within “religion.” Benjamin even goes so far in one of his fragments as to write, “Christianity in the time of the Reformation did not encourage the emergence of capitalism, but rather changed itself into capitalism.” As I discuss in my third chapter, his critique of faith – at least of the notion of faith as in belief against the objects of our senses, faith in transcendence – goes considerably further back historically than the Reformation. But before I proceed to Al-e Ahmad’s and Benjamin’s critiques and propositions concerning religion, I would like to spend some brief time with the genealogical critique that begins with Asad.

Asad proposes in his works *Formations of the Secular* and *Genealogies of Religion* that the “secular” and the “religious” – born in and of the same discursive moment – are incoherent in their deployment in modern and contemporary political and philosophical conversation. Against the general narrative of neutrality or universal principles, Asad presents a counterargument from the point of view of historical specificity and genealogy. As he writes of religion:

*For the entire phenomenon is to be seen in large measure in the context of Christian attempts to achieve a coherence in doctrines and practices, rules and regulations, even if that was a state never fully attained. My argument is that there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationship are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes.*

In other words, Asad rejects even some of the more complex anthropological, sociological, and historical accounts of religions as having treated “religion” as something like a peculiarly-shaped box into which different substantive contents can be placed, but which takes on a similar form, performs similar functions and makes similar demands in different societies, even if content, appearance, and all manner of other differences might obfuscate this. Furthermore, he asserts that

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the complementary relationship between the contours of Christianity and the shape of that box are not an accident of history but rather a deliberative historical process by which Christianity (or rather the Christians who constitute it) came to see itself as providing the universal model of religion. The conceptual category “religion” was projected back in both temporal and spatial terms; the Greeks suddenly have a “religion”; the Indians have many.

In pushing this observation even further, Gil Anidjar suggests that “secularism” is not just shaped or historically derived from Christianity, but really is just Western Christianity or, rather, the name with which Western Christianity re-christened itself (if you’ll pardon the pun) when it collectively decided that another category, namely “religion,” was the to be the grand historical “problem” of modernity itself: the myth of myths that the Enlightenment would overcome, to move the argument into more familiar critical theoretical terms. As Anidjar argues:

*Cristianity invented the distinction between religious and secular, and thus made religion. It made religion – rather than itself – the problem, the object of criticism that needed to be no less than transcended. The two terms, religious and secular, thus function together as strategic devices and as mechanisms of self-blindness, doing so, at any rate, in such a way that it remains difficult, if not impossible, to extricate them from each other as if by fiat... Most importantly, then, secularism is a name Christianity gave itself when it invented “religion,” named its other or others, “religions.”*127

This, by way of Asad and Anidjar, is not to say that there were not practical and intellectual objects like “Islam” around before Christendom decided to come up with a fully structured and bounded ideal of what “religion” is (although it does lend credence to those many scholars who have pointed out that there really may never have been such a thing as, for example, “Hinduism” before European-Christian ideas of “religion” were applied to a disparate, uncoordinated and sometimes even inimical set of subcontinental ideas and practices). It is to say, though, that the

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discursive notion of “religion” (and its mirror “secularism”) is entirely a Christian invention and dependent upon Christianity’s history and content in informing what that normative notion of religion is. Nor is it a politically innocent formulation: what Anidjar underlines is that at precisely the moment at which all others are reconfigured as religion and Christendom is reconfigured as “secular,” “religion” itself is then posited as that which much be controlled, dominated, and, if all else fails, cut-off, excluded, or annihilated. The issue at hand here is not just about marginalization and incoherent legitimacy; it is about concealing and legitimating a mode of potential violence by allowing secularism to act as a veil. Anidjar continues:

To uphold secularism today is to erase the fact that secularism continues to serve mostly — and certainly has historically served — one particular religion...and one economic game, one elite-serving apparatus, namely, the secular nation..., the discourse of power that legitimates itself and presents itself as secular, as if indifferent to religion yet producing religion as a (generic)
problem. Secularism’s key words — consensual keywords for one keyword among others — are human rights, international law, sovereignty, democracy, and so forth, all of which are avowedly “secular” projects. Is it possible to be for or against these? 128

The “secular,” then, Anidjar himself notes later in his paper, becomes like the “white” in racial discourse: always present and yet always disappearing. “Is it possible to be against these?” The implicit answer is no. So what then is always posited against these? More specifically, what is “the secular” defined against? Why, “religion,” of course. It must be noted in a study like this that Islam and Judaism are marked as the respective interior and exterior other to Western Christianity, that is to say, to secular modernity.

Despite recognizing the philosophical illegitimacy of the marginalization of religion, the constitution of secularism as its own particular tradition, the primary necessity of negotiability on principles, and so on, when secularism shifts from proposition to existence, in theory or on-the-

ground, it is a particular identity defined, as argued in my earlier analysis of Anidjar’s position, by and of Christians-transcending-Christianity. As he points out:

> Usually, however, or rather, hegemonically, the word “secular” has participated in another history and served another function. It has operated in a differential relation, indeed, in opposition to the word “religious,” doing so within a specific religious tradition (on which more anon), where it had earlier served to mark that which is separated from the sacred or theological.129

Before Christians viewed themselves as “secular” or occupying “secular” space, they had already constructed the divide between “religious” – a supernatural realm of spirit entirely removed from the physical world, eternal, benevolent and loving – and “secular” – the actually existing world, temporal, malevolent, and menacing. It is the fundamental separation of the two—and that the allegiance implied in sacrality is paradigmatically wrongly placed within the actually existing world — that is centrally and seamlessly reproduced from ontological-Christianity into ontological-secularism. It is merely the valorization that is changed. Talal Asad argues, in a similar vein:

> For the representation of the Christian God as being sited quite apart in “the supernatural” world signals the construction of a secular space that begins to emerge in early modernity. Such a space permits “nature” to be reconceived as manipulatable material, determinate, homogenous, and subject to mechanical laws. Anything beyond that space is therefore “supernatural”—a place that, for many, was a fanciful extension of the real world, peopled by irrational events and imagined beings.130

Although other systems of thought (that is to say, other religions or those aspects of what we call religions which pertain to systematic thought) may have characterized similar divisions, “formations of the secular,” if you will, and continue to work in rearranging similar elements, the particular valences and dimensions of the secular as it was, and continues to be, defined in history, by Christians, was, and is, a peculiarly Christian invention, the logic of which depends

129 Anidjar, 57, emphasis in original.
130 Asad, Formations of the Secular, 27-28.
entirely on the ultimate truth of a Christian cosmogony. The only change between the Christian and the Secular periods, then, is what is valorized and what is demonized. “Religion” in its proper place is supernatural under secularism and certainly not worldly. “Religion” which exceeds that proper place is always characterized as ‘invading’ or ‘returning’ or, of course, ‘politicizing.’

In following Asad’s and Anidjar’s logic, where they coincide, and bringing us a little closer to the rest of this chapter, the problem is complex: Christendom – the loosely linked collection of political entities in Europe dominated in one way or another by Christianity – vanishes and is replaced, through the process of the self-consciousness of the Enlightenment, by the secular universal that I have been discussing hitherto. The irony is, of course, that Europe remains, the Christians remain, the domination remains. Merely the name vanishes and is replaced by the very same spectral universal subject (abstract, secular, modern, transcendental, etc.) that I argued earlier would be left if the task of ‘provincializing Europe’ were not carried out to its furthest conclusions. For debates about secularism – and I would note that there are several\textsuperscript{131} – this identification of “secularism” as far from empty is the most operative component. But what of religion? Religion is at the same time raised as the name for that which is to be overcome and that which is other, but its normative form is determined by Christianity. So, to follow the logic for a moment, Christianity is both secularism and the ideal form for religion; let us for the sake of establishing just a measure of clarity call this ideal form religion\textsuperscript{1} (religion “prime”) for the moment. “Religion,” that which was overcome in the advent of “the modern,” is recast as a name for that which is not yet modern; it is religion ‘out of bounds,’ and

\textsuperscript{131} For debates about secularism within a liberal democratic political and legal discourse, for instance, please see \textit{Secularism and its Discontents} (Bhargava, ed., 1998), “Secularism and Relativism” (Bilgrami, 2004), \textit{The Morality of Freedom} (Raz, 1986), for just a small sampling.
yet, as we have already seen, the argument for the not-yet-modern in many of the exact cases where “religion” should apply is incongruous. Meanwhile Christianity gets a third afterlife in this model: Christianity – Secular Empire; Christianity – religion¹; and Christianity – the measure of “religion” with respect to which actually existing now-dubbed-religions, Islam the primary object, are always found wanting.

I quote Anidjar at length here, as he helps to explain the stakes of what can appear simply semantic:

_These same elites, occupying the same places and functions (and a not altogether different dress code), were and remain devoted, wittingly or not, to the training and exercise of the power of the few over the millions, indeed, billions of individuals conveniently located in the very same neighborhoods, the very same areas of the world colonized and administered, massively transformed by good and bad Christians since 1492... It participates in a set of devices that make religion (the religion of the others, that is, or their nationalism, primitivism, militarism, and terrorism) more of an ominous danger than, say, the dealings of the ruling and no-longer-welfare states, the practices of gigantic corporations and their national and international banking, to say nothing of homeland security and its consequences... Secularism continues to be fostered by the same institutions and structurally identical elites, who work out of the same centers of power that earlier spread their “civilization” and continue to expand their mission, be it economic, military, cultural, humanitarian even. It still has the bigger bombs—it is the history of bombing—and the bigger police, security, military, and financial forces. It builds the bigger walls. It leads the war on terror. Minimally, it maintains its hold on the institutions that preserve and reproduce a power structure and a ruling and intellectual elite that suffers or holds with true Gelassenheit (and a few international laws and trade agreements) those billions in abject poverty, judging unsatisfactory their inability to escape the dark theological ages out of the depth of which they allegedly seek artificial comfort and solace. Or the ground of their misguided resistance. There would be the problem, along with the demonstration of the poor man and woman’s inability to restrain their theological or quasi-theological failings. Thus to uphold secularism (or, for that matter, religion) as the keyword for critical endeavors and projects today is, I am afraid, not to be all that worldly._¹²

Anidjar is correct to identify these phenomena and the identity of the culpable party – some continuous iteration of Christendom. It cannot be viewed as historical accident that the regions and peoples of the world who were most directly addressed by colonial practices and discourses are suddenly refashioned as the most in need of secularization and that a new variety of attendant

practices and discourses of control, domination, and indeed demonization, continue apace. It also
cannot be viewed as historical accident that there is continuity in the people who are doing so;
Anidjar simply names them, “Christians.” And I quote him at length here also to underline that
these are precisely the stakes that Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin (and Shariati and Adorno for that
matter) saw in the balance. Not, of course, with the exact War on Terror valences that Anidjar
employs. But the question of identifying the structures of human misery that had been in place
since, yes, at least 1492 without explaining away, without the Hegelian “transfiguration,”
without Christian theodicy – this is a central aspect in both Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin.

Although Anidjar does not put it in such starkly Marxian terms, this is a process of
demystification, of critiquing conceptual categories which veil the all too real conditions that he
describes. And, although this is a narrative presentation, it is important not to lose sight of the
fact of this condition. And yet, something is missing in the analysis and something else is amiss
in the argument. What is missing is the other ascendant discourses that take part in the matrix of
“secularism,” which also assault not simply the concept of religion but, as Anidjar notes as well,
the actually existing human beings and their being-in-the-world that operate under that sign.
Anidjar’s primary concern in this passage, to paint with a broad brush for a moment, is the
confluence of Empire and Capital: to name the identity which is veiled by the universal subject,
by “the modern,” “the religious,” and “the secular” is a key step. But – and this may simply be
outside of Anidjar’s concern or purview here – within “Christendom” what was once the
dynamic of good religion\(^1\) and bad “religion” has given way to the notion that religion\(^1\), whether
that be Protestant Christianity or other sets of historical practices that have been refashioned to
match Protestant Christianity, is now seen as a gateway, so to speak, to “religion.” To borrow
from Anidjar’s psychoanalytic moments for a moment, narcissism – in shoring itself up – has
given way to self-hatred in the name of narcissism. This is the major thrust of strict philosophical naturalism\textsuperscript{133} which, in “fear of religion,” as Thomas Nagel aptly puts it, seeks to dissolve any aspect of reality – particularly of human reality – that does not emerge as a verifiable result of the natural sciences. To say nothing of the Nietzschean point that lying at the heart of this project is a continuation of a Platonic-Christian ideal of truth carried over uninterrogated, this project of strict philosophical naturalism – in the name of human emancipation – dissolves everything not-directly explicable by the natural sciences: “qualia,” norms, even, in the end, human subjectivity itself. Although its terms are new (Daniel Dennett’s Darwinian “universal acid,” for example), the project is recognizably old. Adorno and Horkheimer address it in different terms in the

*Dialectic of Enlightenment* when they write:

\begin{quote}
...anything which does not conform to the standard of calculability and utility must be viewed with suspicion. Once the movement is able to develop unhampered by external oppression, there is no holding it back. Its own ideas of human rights then fare no better than the older universals. Any intellectual resistance it encounters merely increases its strength... No matter which myths are invoked against it, by being used as arguments they are made to acknowledge the very principle of corrosive rationality of which enlightenment stands accused. Enlightenment is totalitarian.\textsuperscript{134}
\end{quote}

In light of what Adorno and Horkheimer write here, Anidjar’s argument, then, is to go further and say, “Enlightenment is secularism, Enlightenment is Christianity.” Critical theory initially addressed both rationalism (read today, theoretical and mathematical physics, alongside the enduring old Kantian projects) and empiricism (read today, evolutionary biology and psychology, scientism) under the catchall (if slightly confusing, since it was not exactly the common use at the time) term of “positivism.” But this was a rhetorically reductive move against reduction writ large. But if we are concerned with the confluence (indeed co-production) of Empire and Capital as part of a critique of Christianity where, again as Al-e Ahmad and

\textsuperscript{133} I hope the reader will pardon my abbreviated introduction to, and examination of, philosophical naturalism and other trends in analytic philosophy. I return at more length to some of these questions in my conclusion.

\textsuperscript{134} Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 4.
Benjamin both attest, it is the move to otherworldly faith that reifies and reproduces the conditions of human misery, surely then we should also be attentive to when the philosophy of empire seeks to eradicate every aspect of humanity that has the potential to point to current conditions as other than purely “natural,” that is, as static, eternal, given. This would finally be the totally administered world of late Capitalism triumphant: meaning, history, humans, non-rationality, all reduced to causal apparati and nothing more. Perhaps Benjamin, although predating this critique by some sixty years, was right all along: at the time of the Reformation, Christianity did not merely have “elective affinities” with Capitalism; it did not merely foster its growth, nor was it “secularized”. It “transformed” into Capitalism. And what must be eradicated for the reproduction of capital in late capitalism is the meaningfulness of objects, and, failing that, the objects themselves. And then, only then, will we have reached Fukayama’s “end of history,” a horrible transmutation of the Kantian “kingdom of ends” into a Kingdom of Means.

Here I return to the end of the long quotation from Anidjar above: “Thus to uphold secularism (or, for that matter, religion) as the keyword for critical endeavors and projects today is, I am afraid, not to be all that worldly.” While one reading of this sentence would be to finally allow the formerly bounded subjects which have come to be called “religions” to exist as din or makhtab or yiddishkeit, that would be rather unworldly, or perhaps, more accurately both unworldly and ahistorical. The notion that whatever it is that Jews do can have nothing to do with the transcendent, the supernatural, or the otherworldly is an idea at least as old as the Talmud itself.135 That one of the central acts of the Shia is to commemorate, recreate, remember, and mourn a historical catastrophe is indisputable.136 It was modernity (or to be more specific,

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135 See my discussion of the Talmudic story of the “Oven of Akhnai” Baba Metzia 59b in my conclusion.

136 Please see Dabashi’s preface to Shiism; this is also discussed at the beginning of my chapter 4.
moderns) that conjured the (Christian-shaped) specter of religion, the unworldly, the anti-material, the anti-rational, the ahistorical. It then castigated “religions,” which were too, for lack of a better word, secular, as being the enemy. Yet to merely name an entity which has been hiding behind the veil does not erase five hundred years of history. We are left with the same dilemma Chakrabarty makes in naming the formerly transcendent universal subject in order to dissolve it. If I may play a post-structuralist game for just a moment, what good does it do to re-religionize Christianity? For Anidjar, the answer is quite clear: it is to allow critique to become “anti-Christian” and in fact to finally perform the critique of Christianity that includes its veiled self. But I am examining two authors who performed critiques of Christianity, so to speak, and were without a doubt, “anti-Christian”; what of them? Just as I asked earlier if post-colonial subjects would forever be themselves haunted by the specter of the newly emptied out “universal subject,” it is necessary to ask: if we give up the discussion of whatever tenuous links remain to us between the discourses that came to be called “religion” in relationship to the historical development of Christianity, have we just reified the universality of Christianity as, at the very least, the measure of religion?137

These questions are also prompted by the challenge of philosophical naturalism, as briefly mentioned above. Philosophical naturalism working in the explicitly ahistorical terms of scientism describes religion as supernatural hogwash. It goes much further – this is what truly frightens Nagel about the “fear of religion” – and says to any aspect of what is assumed to be human reality that cannot be registered by the natural sciences: this is an illusion. This comes down to humans themselves; as Dennett says, “We are each of us mindless robots, nothing more,

137 There is an irony, of course, in speaking of spectrality and reification in the same breath; however, I find many of the most productive uses of spectrality generally, in fact, mirror a problem in the critique of idealism: namely, the production of more idealism.
no non-physical, non-robotic ingredients at all.”

Dennett says this as if the central phrase “no non-physical” implied all the surrounding clauses. This physicalism, this radical reductionism, is a mode of violence. And it is no historical accident that it performs the Christian theodicy to the letter. If this is the picture of humans, (and I am careful to say humans and not “the human” or “the post-human”) then their history is a meaningless mass that had to be this way. Dennett can truly say with Leibniz that we live in the best of all possible worlds.

Secularism says religion is “shutting off human investigation,” “deference to the authority of the more-than-human, the supernatural, the other-worldly.” Fundamentalism says in return a simple and horrifying, yes, and sets about effacing both its former self and the world around it. What true room is created when post-structuralism responds by dissolving the conceptual object altogether? Yes, it is true, this is a freeing gesture, but only in theory; I mean this quite literally, only in text. Anidjar’s critique is located in a political setting and articulated towards a political telos, but its politics are seemingly nowhere, or assumed. The only political move I can locate in the article is at the very end, with the suggestion of “anti-Christian” as a viable position. But this merely identifies the enemy, and whose politics is that?

I would like to suggest an alternative. Asad’s genealogy – without rehearsing the entire argument – is broadly correct. Additionally, his choice of Clifford Geertz as an interlocutor is

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138 Daniel Dennett, *Freedom Evolves*, 2; I am giving far too cursory a reading of trends in analytic philosophical naturalism than I would like, but to do a complete review of that literature is far beyond the scope of this dissertation. I will, however, return briefly to the question of philosophical naturalism again in this chapter and in my conclusion.


140 For a remarkable treatment about how the apolitical nature of post-structural thought can have entirely unexpected practical applications, please see Eyal Weisman’s “Lethal Theory” (Weisman, 2009). In it he discusses the use of Deleuze and Guattari in particular, but post-structuralist thought in general, by the Israeli Defense Forces in thinking more creatively about urban warfare. Of course, any theory (Marx’s certainly not least) can be deployed in horrific ways; the point is that the comfortable assumption on the part of post-structuralist authors of participating in some kind of “left” politics or even more generally a politics of emancipation is in need of serious reflection.
particularly effective as well. Geertz gives a nuanced, *thick*, contemporary definition of religion for ethnographers, and Asad shows how even the contours of that definition can be traced back to that moment “in the seventeenth century, following the fragmentation of the unity and authority of the Roman church and the consequent wars of religion, which tore European principalities apart, that the earliest systematic attempts at producing a universal definition of religion were made.”\(^{141}\) Tomoko Masuzawa’s genealogy not of “religion” but of “world religions” sees the “monumental transition” from a Christian view of other practices and ideas in the world as relational (Judaism as pre-Christian, Islam as heresy, paganism as unreligion) to a still Christian view that is constitutional (Judaism, Islam, paganism, and soon several others, as “world religions”).\(^{142}\) These critiques are different ways of describing a similar phenomenon. They also intervene with different historical foci as critically crucial. Subsequently, they end with subtly different conclusions. 1492 is the historical punctum of Anidjar’s critique: the mass expulsion, conversion, or massacre of Muslims and Jews from Spain, and the conquest of the New World, gives us Christianity the enemy, and well-deservedly so; it unveils the existing continuity in a supranational political entity that ought rather to be called Christendom. Events in the sixteenth century are the central foci for Asad: the Reformation, the Wars of Religion, the Christian crises that mark “religion” as a problem to be overcome, leads to a *formalized* notion of Christianity that we can then call religion. Masuzawa focuses instead on the seventeenth and eighteenth century: the consolidation of the colonial world, philology, the reinscription of history as the site of progress – from here we receive “world religions,” an ordering of systems around the world no longer in strictly *theological* terms but now described in terms of their varying

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\(^{141}\) Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 40.

\(^{142}\) Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, 58.
degrees of deficiency in relation to Christianity. We have many critiques of religion and many critiques of Christianity. What I propose is another critique (and probably not a final one).

It is not enough to name the enemy, to provincialize Europe in a different manner. In the mid-twentieth century Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Walter Benjamin both wrote theories of philosophy and religious practice, about reading and ritual, as fundamental to understanding the material world, both as it is and in how it could be. These theories did not conform to the Christian category of religion. Indeed, they were often against Christianity in its identified and veiled forms. Even more, theirs was not mere enmity of Christianity but also critique of precisely what it was (the Christian notion of faith itself) in Christianity that seemed to explain so many of the errors in modernity: the economic, social, and historical oppression associated with the modern rule of Christendom.

To return momentarily to Said’s list of the qualities of “theological criticism,” for Benjamin, theology (that is theology as a hermeneutic system, not as a theistic cosmology) was precisely the beginning of “human investigation,” not one that produced a single authoritative voice of God, but at least if not more than the “forty nine levels of meaning in every passage of the Torah.” For Al-e Ahmad, the performance of a ritual was not “deference to the authority of the more-than-human, the supernatural, the other-worldly.” Rather, it was the beginning of the resistance to, even the repudiation of deference to authority, the origin point of a philosophy and a politics that were profoundly and only worldly. Neither believed in the supernatural; both affirmed the material. The idea of divine immanence becomes here a proposition about meaning in the world and a concomitant “intentional stance” (to borrow Dennett’s useful phrase for a

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143 Benjamin, *Correspondence*, 372.
moment) towards objects in the world. It is not a “third person perspective,” but a perspective in and from which subjects and objects in their infinite variety are, to use Benjamin’s term from *The Origin of Tragic Drama*, “loyal” to each other.

This study then is an attempt at an intervention or reclamation. This is religion as *polemic*. This is not about re-establishing a new “normalizing concept” or a new abstract universal. It is about expanding and shifting the possibilities of that universal space. This is allowing Shiism, a “religion of protest,” or Judaism, the religion whose *secularity* so offended the German Idealists, to speak at the center of the uneven geometry of modernity, to speak instead of Christianity, at least insofar as we may reevaluate what religion can be, at least so we can see what can emerge. This would be to use religion against the inherited Christian paradigm that is so perfectly affirmed in the fundamentalists who name essay contests after Jalal Al-e Ahmad and then ban his books. This would be to consider religion which in its commitment to the world (the *of course* only existing world) speaks against the post-structuralist “textuality” that claims Benjamin and yet denies his commitment to objects *beyond* texts. This is religion if, for no better reason than that strict philosophical naturalism (that is to say, scientism) does not deem these kinds of claims as valid. In negating the legitimacy of such claims, it affirms the conditions of the world; worse than affirms, it *naturalizes* them, in the strongest sense of the

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144 Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 1.


146 See Michael Mack, *German Idealism and the Jew*, chapters 1 and 2.


148 In his *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, Hegel explains precisely this sort of philosophy: “For some time, it was customary to admire God’s wisdom at work in animals, in plants, and in the destinies of individuals. If we grant that providence reveals itself in such objects and materials, then why not also in world history? Here, the material seems too great. Yet the divine wisdom, i.e., Reason, is one and the same on the large scale and the small, and we must not consider God to be too weak to apply his wisdom on a large scale. In our knowledge, we aim for
word. It suppresses the idea that other conditions are possible. And not out of fear or dystopian horror – for these would require dialectic reflection not naturalistic reduction – but out of faith (Nietzsche’s irony alive and well) in a limited, static, and always knowable truth. What could be more frightening, then, than Al-e Ahmad’s steady walk, on his unbeliever’s Hajj, crumbling the “world of certainty” with every step.  

A “religion of doubt,” then, is a categorical challenge. In my reading, Al-e Ahmad (less obviously) and Benjamin (more obviously) are profoundly for science as a reliable ontology and as the sine-qua-non for material justice. But scientific inquiry should not pretend to be foundationally disinterested even if its practical methodology must be: “putting the jinn back in the bottle,” for Al-e Ahmad, as he says in Gharbzadegi, means remembering that science is both for knowledge and for human emancipation; as a fetish or a talisman, it produces neither. Indeed, in a fascinating reversal, Al-e Ahmad’s critique of science does not turn on suspicion of scientific knowledge or of the scientific method but is actually part of his critique of superstition.

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the insight that whatever was intended by the Eternal Wisdom has come to fulfillment – as in the realm of nature, so in the realm of spirit that is active and actual in the world. To that extent our approach is a theodicy, a justification of the ways of God.” (Hegel, 1988, 18). Of course, theodicy is not simply “a justification of the ways of God.” It is, more specifically a justification for why evil exists, why “the happiness of nations, the wisdom of states, and the virtues of individuals were sacrificed” on the “slaughter-bench” of history (Hegel, 1988, 24). A good example of the naturalization of Hegel’s theodicy can be found in Steven Pinker’s The Better Angels of Our Nature (Pinker, 2012). Pinker’s work attempts to demonstrate empirically what Hegel argues rationally, although he certainly does not believe that he is engaging in Hegelian philosophy. Nevertheless there is an astounding near one-to-one correlation between Pinker’s concepts and Hegel’s. In Pinker, there is a direct line from physical causation to human nature to social phenomena; there are no intervening systems or structures or dilemmas that must be explained, in his language, fully “endogenously.” A conception of evolution – rather unscientifically pumped full of teleological value – is employed to explain the logical emergence of reason. Hegel’s “cunning of reason” becomes Pinker’s “escalator of reason”; Hegel’s admiration of “God’s wisdom” in world history becomes Pinker’s “exogenous” basis for the “escalator of reason”: the determinate “nature of reality” itself. This is a limited treatment here, but it should be no surprise that just as Hegel eventually concluded that something much akin to nineteenth century Prussia is the logical unfolding of reason in history, Pinker ‘discovers’ the astonishing fact that it is modern, Western, capitalist, liberal, democracy that is an approximation of the ‘best of all possible worlds’ so far. But what is most important is the effect. Pinker’s book is a theodicy in the most crucial understanding of the word – it is an apologia for the status quo. Any further transformation is already contained within the step-by-step theory of largely predisposed natural development.

149 Al-e Ahmad, Lost in the Crowd, 123; this is the central focus of my fourth chapter.
For Benjamin, this engagement with science and scientific inquiry is even more clearly integral to his project. This is clear not only in some of Benjamin’s more traditional Marxian commitments and in his ambivalent enthusiasm for the technological possibilities in aesthetic production and reproduction, but even in some of the least expected places. For example, in his writings on Kafka, Benjamin affirms that reality is “realized” in “modern physics” and that simultaneously “in all of literature” he knows of “no passage which has the Kafka stamp to the same extent,” as a nearly page long description of known physical laws in relation to bodies in space quoted directly from a physics textbook.\(^{150}\) In Benjamin, these engagements often come at precisely at the moments he is also closest to his “theological” tendencies. As I demonstrate in this dissertation, neither Benjamin nor Al-e Ahmad saw a contradiction in cosmological materialism, historical materialism, and religious practice.

To end, I would like to explore a specific moment of this closeness in Benjamin: the concept of active “waiting.” The case of this concept is not as direct as Benjamin’s assertions concerning physics in his Kafka discussion but it is helpfully illustrative of how so many of these tendencies can be simultaneous in Benjamin. “Waiting” for Benjamin did not only connote waiting for a messianic possibility understood in Judeo-Marxian terms. “Waiting” was also the condition of engaging phenomena pregnant with that possibility:

\begin{quote}
The more narcotizing effect which cosmic forces have on a shallow and brittle personality is attested in the relation of such a person to one of the highest and most genial manifestations of these forces: the weather. Nothing is more characteristic than that precisely this most intimate and mysterious affair, the working of the weather on humans, should have become the theme of their emptiest chatter. Nothing bores the ordinary man more than the cosmos. Hence, for him, the deepest connection between weather and boredom. How fine the ironic overcoming of this attitude in the story of the splenetic Englishman who wakes up one morning and shoots himself because it is raining. Or Goethe: how he managed to illuminate the weather in his meteorological studies, so
\end{quote}

\(^{150}\) Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 142-143. I address this more fully in chapter 4.
that one is tempted to say he undertook this work solely in order to be able to integrate even the weather into his waking, creative life.\textsuperscript{151}

“Weather” – along with night – is precisely what the Paris Arcades banished in order to create their phantasmagoric perpetual rainless day. There is an obvious materialist critique to demystify that particular “dream-image”: the Arcade perpetuated commerce; it made twenty-four hour commerce possible. It was also the place that facilitated the existence of all the familiar Benjaminian characters and in which they dwelled: the flaneur, the prostitute, the gambler, the collector. Benjamin subjected each of these, sometimes explicitly, sometimes through “literary montage,” to the critical apparatus of the “dialectical image”; their “dream” must give way to waking, but \textit{in} the image the “wish,” however distorted, remains. But let us remain with “weather” or rather with the “contemplation of weather,” which is what really is in question in this passage (“weather” itself being, as we are told, a proper subject for “meteorological studies”). The initial observation applies both to the “ordinary man” as well as to anyone “whose shallow and brittle personality” cannot see in “weather” an “intimate and mysterious affair.” “Mysterious” here should not be mistaken for mystified, for, even beyond Benjamin’s own methodology, we are about to be told about “meteorological studies” in a salutary manner; surely this is demystification at the very least. The “narcotizing effect” is not produced by the “weather” itself but by, if you will, an “intentional stance” which cannot see an “intimate and mysterious affair.” “Or Goethe.” What is Goethe doing here? If I might put it into slightly different terms, Benjamin is not simply comparing an “ordinary man” and “Goethe”; he is comparing two attitudes towards phenomena. The reductive, what I would call scientistic, attitude cannot by definition partake of the “mysterious affair” or appreciate the qualities of weather that are “highest” and “most genial”; those are illusions which give way to nothing, to a

\textsuperscript{151} Benjamin, \textit{The Arcades Project}, [D1,3],102.
view of phenomena as static and meaningless. For the scientistic perspective – as for the “ordinary man” – the weather simply is; and in their attitude, the weather itself becomes “narcotizing,” that is, desensitizing and soporific. People with this perspective will return to sleep; they will also not recognize that the conditions around them are a kind of dream from which they must awake.\textsuperscript{152} I am pushing hard on the first half of the quotation, but the second half demands it. That the actual Goethe’s science was not precisely \textit{scientific} – certainly not in the way the physics Benjamin cites in relation to Kafka is – is not relevant. In the figure of “Goethe,” who “illuminates the weather in his meteorological studies,” we catch a glimpse of a certain “wish-image,” that of non-reductive science, science that is integrated as a part of “waking, creative life.” This all happens under the epigram Benjamin has placed from Victor Hugo near the top of the page, “Waiting is life.” To apply Benjamin here, the philosophical naturalist may think that – unlike the “ordinary man” – he is not bored by the cosmos. But he is not truly conscious unless he can adopt the attitude for which “Goethe” is emblematic, which by Benjamin’s logic would mean not only integrating the phenomena they study into “creative, waking life” but to embrace that the phenomena are simultaneously “intimate” and “mysterious” even as they are explained – after all. This is no extolling of pseudo-science and certainly not of mystification. He must examine the weather as \textit{meaningful}.

Is this religion? Scientism says yes. But it has even better reason to. This is all under the sign of “waiting”: the active waiting for the messianic that is actually indirectly helping to prepare the grounds for its arrival. This is partially why one must learn “waking” from phenomena and not merely be narcotized by their mere being. It is to be aware that conditions

\textsuperscript{152} Finding more beauty and being more interested in dream than in waking-life is a major component of Benjamin’s critique of Jung in the \textit{Passagenwerk}. 
are transitory. It is not only Judaic and Marxian. There is an element, too, of the German-Romantic, of science as wonder. In Benjamin’s case, these must be linked. And it is tempting to push further and read the illumination of the weather here alongside the famous “profane illumination” Benjamin argues is achieved by the best of the Surrealists. I will return to these themes in my subsequent Benjamin discussions.

I have established in this chapter what a substantive, comparative philosophical method is, and an attendant theory of modernity that I believe is both historically accurate and complementary to this study. Furthermore, I have grounded my comparison both by looking at specific conditions in Iran and Germany in the mid-twentieth century and by looking at the positions that Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin held as intellectuals in relation to those conditions. Finally, I have established the grounds on which I call the conceptual formation produced by the comparison, “religious.” I have ended here with a discussion of Benjamin, narcotizing effects, and waking. I will now turn to Al-e Ahmad and Gharbzadegi, a book and a theory that – contrary to a great deal of current opinion – is also about phantasmagoria, narcotizing effects, and waking.
Chapter 2: How to Read *Gharbzadegi*?

Introduction

Jalal Al-e Ahmad writes in the Preface to *Gharbzadegi* of his indebtedness to Dr. Mahmud Human, who urged him...

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...to see one of the works of the German, Ernst Junger, a work on nihilism entitled *Uber die Linie*. As Dr. Human pointed out, Jünger and I were both exploring more or less the same subject, but from two viewpoints. We were addressing the same question, but in two languages.\]

For a large group of contemporary scholars of Iranian intellectual history, including Medhi Boroujerdi, Ali Mirsepassi, and Farzin Vahdat, this reference to Jünger, and from there to Heidegger, provides, to differing degrees, the hermeneutic framework for understanding Al-e Ahmad’s foundations and goals in writing *Gharbzadegi* and his other non-fiction works. This connection to Jünger, as well as the even more tenuous connection to Heidegger through the Iranian scholar Ahmad Fardid (the original coiner of the *gharbzadegi* neologism), helps these authors construct a narrative of the formation of Al-e Ahmad’s critique of twentieth-century Iranian society, connecting it to anti-modern philosophies of the European far right and subsequently, to politics of the European far right.

Yet it is far from clear what Al-e Ahmad means by “exploring more or less the same subject, but from two viewpoints.” In interpretations with only slight variations, this group of contemporary scholars asserts that the connection is the exploration of the same kind of European alienation in the face of modernity and especially technology that Jünger and Heidegger describe. In this presentation of Al-e Ahmad’s thought, Al-e Ahmad is merely translating and imposing the European crisis of authenticity described by Jünger and Heidegger into a local Iranian context: i.e. “same subject,” “different language.” He is using European anti-

modern philosophy, this argument continues, to craft an equally anti-modern “nativist” response. In this chapter, I propose an alternative reading. There is little historical or textual evidence that Al-e Ahmad was anti-modern, aligned or influenced intellectually or politically with the European far right or engaged in a simplistic “nativist” revival. In my reading, the “question” he is answering is this: what are the effects of the now global European modernity, especially capitalism, on local conditions? Al-e Ahmad seems to think that Jünger (alongside a series of existentialist thinkers and novelists) has correctly identified these effects in the fully industrialized and secularized European context, but he understands Jünger’s grasp of them in a ‘provincializing’ way; Jünger’s experience is not a universal experience of modernity. The experience expressed is what global capitalism and modernity have wrought there. It is a European experience of what is, at its core, a transformation in economic relationships and the modes of production. The Iranian experience, and its solution, is far removed from anything described by either Jünger or Heidegger.

More than either of those figures, the actual content of Al-e Ahmad’s essays identifies his intellectual touchstone as Marx. In this chapter, I will proceed dialectically through the existing arguments toward a definition and analysis of gharbzadegi that takes this into account. A great deal of misunderstanding surrounds this concept, often stemming from the choice of an translation that connotes infection and disease (“occidentosis”) or, in other versions, a translation that connotes intoxication (“westoxicition”). Both imply a metaphor of bodily infection by foreign agents. In contrast, the translation of “west-struck-ness” that some scholars have suggested, while an even more unwieldy neologism, is both a more literal translation and a more accurate representation. It does not conjure the image of a poisonous modern western culture sickening or intoxicating the hapless local population but rather evokes the image of a local
population dazzled by a false phantasmagoria of “Western Civilization.” In fact, Al-e Ahmad uses all three metaphors in Gharbzadegi. However, even when speaking of “disease” (bimari), the “occidentosis” translation more readily facilitates a slippage into the metaphor of infection by a foreign pathogen or agent (where the “West” is the pathogen) as opposed to what Al-e Ahmad is arguing: infection by a process, wherein the “West,” or experience of certain iterations of it, is the catalyst.

In pursuit of this analysis, I will first outline Boroujerdi [et al]’s claims, then mark just how far Al-e Ahmad’s analyses and prescriptions are from either Heidegger or Jünger. I will suggest an alternate intellectual genealogy that brings Al-e Ahmad’s Marxist influence more clearly into view. Finally, I will examine how Al-e Ahmad departs from Marx, on both strategic and philosophical grounds, only to converge with the (also Marxian) approach of Walter Benjamin.

The Jünger/Heidegger Approach

Ali Mirsepassi discusses several trends in the existing scholarship on twentieth-century Iranian-Islamic Intellectuals in his work Political Islam, Iran, and the Enlightenment. Mirsepassi begins by discussing an earlier scholarly tradition of treating “political Islam” as “representative of Islam or the Muslim world against the values and institutions of the democratic West or Judeo-Christian civilization… framing this conflict as a fundamental clash of two essential worldviews.”

This description applies not only to this earlier scholarly tradition but can also be extended to contemporary arguments in journalism and policy literature. In practice, this often

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involves the interpretation of Islamism within a hermetic ‘Islamic world,’ seeing in every Islamist idea and text a direct intellectual antecedent in medieval or Quranic literature.

Beyond this tradition, Mirsepassi writes of two other scholarly approaches:

These two mainstream tendencies are embodied in the writings of, for example, Esposito and Hadad, in arguments that “Islam” represents a tradition that does not separate religion from politics. There is also the “critical theory” social science approach that interprets Islamist movements as part of larger emerging discursive movements identified, in Michel Foucault’s terms, as the rise of “subjugated knowledges.”

These approaches, Mirsepassi argues, are ultimately “anchored in a notion of romantic authenticity.” Unlike the first tradition, these scholars recognize the dialogic development of Islamist thought but emphasize, in Mirsepassi’s thinking, Islam as a “tradition presenting an alternative to liberal modernity and challenging the totalizing nature of rational Enlightenment.” Mirsepassi extends this critique to post-colonial thinkers like Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood, arguing that writers using these approaches essentially engage in a reification and reproduction of historical differences into discourses of static authenticity.

Strangely, in his otherwise comprehensive description of the existing literature, Mirsepassi ignores the ‘social historians’ like Abrahamian and Dabashi who have focused less on an axiomatic treatment of the thought of writers like Al-e Ahmad and more on the social context of its production and reception and its role in twentieth-century Iranian political development. This is particularly odd given that Mirsepassi’s own argument is largely about connecting a revised version of the dialogic interpretation with political-historical consequences in post-revolutionary Iran.

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155 Ibid., 8.
Mirsepassi, along with a considerable number of contemporary scholars, represents a different school of interpretation which places Al-e Ahmad (and also Shariati) in an intellectual trajectory of European anti-modern right wing and/or counter-Enlightenment thought and within a recognizable political narrative of rejecting liberal institutions in favor of ‘authentic’ authoritarian alternatives, i.e. fascism. This is related to what Mirsepassi calls the “critical theory” approach. Like the authors in the “critical theory” approach, Mirsepassi accurately highlights the historical fact that these ideas did not develop in some kind of Iranian or Islamic bubble and were deeply conversant with early and contemporary European philosophy and politics. But where those authors see historically emergent difference, Mirsepassi sees familiar ideological rejection. Islamist writings bear for him the obvious stamp of European right wing thought, and he views Islamist politics as represented by the Islamic Republic as a) a clear political manifestation of Islamist thought and b) not a unique formation or an alternate mode of modernity but rather an easily recognizable manifestation of counter-Enlightenment reactionary politics, already well-known from European examples.\textsuperscript{156} As Mirsepassi puts it:

\textit{I argue that political Islam in Iran is in considerable part a nativist reaction to modernity that is in many ways very similar to early twentieth century populist reactions to modern democracy in Europe.}\textsuperscript{157}

This reaction is directly linked to particular European intellectuals and their ideological disciples in Iran:

\textit{Many Islamic thinkers have become fascinated by the Nietzschean and particularly Heideggerian critique of the West as the source of modern dehumanization and a general loss of cultural and existential meaning, or so-called roots.}\textsuperscript{158}

\textsuperscript{156} This position – that Islamist thought could be suggestive of an idea of “multiple modernities” – is, strangely, one that Mirsepassi himself advanced in his earlier work \textit{Intellectual Discourses and the Politics of Modernity} (Mirsepassi, 2000).

\textsuperscript{157} Mirsepassi, \textit{Political Islam}, 6.

\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., 6.
In Mirsepassi’s argument, this applies most particularly to what I would call the proto- or Ur-Islamists and the early Islamists:

This project presents a clear case study of the rise of Political Islam in Iran, and the strong Heideggerian influence on a number of leading Iranian intellectuals who helped enormously to articulate the Islamist ideology that paved the way to the 1979 revolution (Fardid, Al-e Ahmad, Shariati, Shayegan, Davari, etc.)\(^{159}\)

While I would want to note that this easy elision between all of these Iranian authors is in no way self-evident, this position owes a great deal to Mehrzad Borourjerdi and his *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism*. It has been recently advanced in varying forms by, in addition to Borourjerdi and Mirsepassi, Mohamad Tavakoli-Targi, Ali Gheissari and, with some important and nuanced differences to be discussed later, Farzin Vahdat.

This approach does provide a much needed counterweight to what I earlier called the ‘hermetic school.’ The influence of European sources on proto- and early Islamist writings in Iran are both numerous and obvious and the approach of looking for antecedents exclusively in Islamic religious and legal texts is flawed both historically and theoretically. Similarly, although Mirsepassi mischaracterizes what he calls the “critical theory” approach (particularly in the charge of a kind of ontological exclusivity in thinkers like Asad and Foucault), the effort to treat the texts and ideas as philosophical material in themselves is also a deeply important turn. Too often, anthropological and area studies approaches have subordinated the actual philosophical claims of twentieth century Iranian intellectuals (and frankly other non-Western thinkers) as either irrelevant to a ‘true’ understanding of their social role along given liberal, Marxist, traditional analytic terms or subordinate to, and therefore irrelevant by, internal cultural logic. There is much to be gained from taking seriously the challenging universalist language of a

\(^{159}\) Ibid., 7.
thinker like Al-e Ahmad, especially when that particular universalism is so destabilizing to the prevailing contours of secular liberal thought.

However, equally problematic in the approach of thinkers like Mirsepassi and Boroujerdi is the subsuming of any meaningful, local influence under an interchangeable category of a “nativism.” This particular use of the term, I will argue, amounts to little more than an accusation of window dressing in native clothes to mask a nihilistic or authoritarian politics—a charge that, ironically, Al-e Ahmad himself also formulates as part of the phenomenon of gharbzadegi. The exclusive focus on conservative anti-modern and/or counter-Enlightenment figures is still more problematic. While the influence of Heidegger is certainly apparent, especially in certain interests and idioms in Shariati, and a stated interest in and knowledge of Jünger is present in Al-e Ahmad, it seems a strange oversight to emphasize these philosophical influences over the overwhelming and obvious influence of Marx, Marxism and other leftist critiques of modernity. Together these interpretive decisions lead Mirsepassi, Boroujerdi et al to overlook how Islamic (specifically Shii) materials are deployed by these writers in particular ways that do not turn on theories of authenticity or identity. Rather, they emphasize challenges to the formally European and Christian shape of key concepts and ideas from a materialist presentation of Shii doctrine and experience. Furthermore, this exclusive emphasis on right wing European sources, leads Mirsepassi, Borourjerdi et al to mistakenly address discussions about mechanization and routinization within a purely Heideggerian idiom. For, in fact, these discussions are firmly embedded within a largely Marxist economic critique; as such, their primary concern is not alienation from an authentic self, but the stagnation of economic development. Similarly, what is read through the Heideggerian lens as “return-to-self” often has far less to do with authenticity than an attempt to recognize, account for, and evaluate unique, local, material and cultural
conditions. The mere act of addressing local conditions and critical potentials in local intellectual traditions is a far cry from a call for nativist authenticity.

**Nativism**

Mehrzad Borourjerdi writes in *Iranian Intellectuals and the West*:

In its broadest sense nativism can be defined as the doctrine that calls for the resurgence, reinstatement or continuance of native or indigenous cultural customs, beliefs and values. Nativism is grounded on such deeply held beliefs as resisting acculturation, privileging one’s own “authentic” ethnic identity and longing for a return to “an unsullied cultural tradition.” Nativism stands in the same relation to orientalism in reverse as Eurocentrism does to orientalism proper.\(^{160}\)

There are a series of theoretical claims that Boroujerdi extends here. He encourages us to see any doctrinal (or ideological) calls in favor of “native” values, beliefs or customs as intrinsically part of an empirically and theoretically suspect discourse called “nativism,” which, as Borjourdei suggests in the previous sentence, casts off a “seductive lure.” This “nativism” is really just an expression of what Boroujerdi calls “orientalism in reverse,” which is a “discourse bent on manufacturing difference, a self-validating and closed discourse that emphasizes other-ness.” Although it is fascinating to underline artifice (“manufacturing”) in an argument against the logic of authenticity, the connection is clear: promotion of “native” values is always the promotion of “‘authentic’ ethnic identity and longing for a return to ‘an unsullied cultural tradition.’” But what exactly is a “native” value? For Boroujerdi the answer is surprisingly simple: any value that challenges liberal universalism. Boroujerdi does not dispute Eurocentrism on the grounds that it veils largely particularistic Euro-Christian claims under a guise of “universalism,” but rather merely its claims to its own “uniqueness” in suitability to such values and to its “unequivocal manifest destiny.” (Bad) Eurocentric chauvinism and colonialism have

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gotten in the way of (good) Eurocentric universalism. “Nativism” becomes a catchall category for anything which, in Boroujerdi’s own words, “champions the cause of abandoning, subverting and reversing these same metanarratives and master codes” (of orientalism and colonialism).161 Above all this is about “authentic identity,”162 and therefore the content of any “nativist” claims can be dismissed as both romantic fantasy and epistemologically inaccessible.163

It is only in this light that the staggering list of implicated political leaders, thinkers and authors that Boroujerdi provides (“Yasir Arafat, Ahmed Ben Bella, Steven Biko, Houari Boumedienne, Amilcar Cabral, Fidel Castro, Aime Cesaire, Frantz Fanon, Paolo Freire, Ernesto Guevera, C.L.R. James, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Albert Memmi, Mohammad Mosaddeq, Gamal Abdel Nasser, Jawaharlal Nehru, Pablo Neruda, Kwame Nkrumah, Walter Rodney, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Sukarno and Mao Zedong”) begins to make sense. Despite running a wide gamut of political ideologies, from radical Marxists to true nationalists (not to mention creative writers far more difficult to classify so succinctly), these were, according to Boroujerdi, all “nationalist” figures who came to “dominate the terms of the discourse, narrative, imagery and rhetoric” of the mid-twentieth century with nativist calls for “political independence, cultural authenticity and knowledge indigenization.”164

There are several major theoretical issues with Boroujerdi’s definition and description of “nativism.” First, in painting with such a broad brush (as exemplified in the above list), he loses the strongest point that his argument could potentially yield—namely, that the historical

161 Ibid.
162 Ibid., 15, emphasis in original.
163 This latter point is in fact correct, but would only apply to identity politics of the crassest variety, a style of discourse that seems to exist most frequently in the imaginations of its theoretical critics.
164 Ibid., 15.
fabrication structurally inherent in nationalist thought and authenticity discourses shut down the possibility of political discourse. Clearly, for example, figures such as Pablo Neruda, Yassir Arafat and Chairman Mao aren’t saying more or less the same thing, nor are they saying what they are saying on largely similar grounds. By grouping all figures who have used any kind of East/West rhetoric and “political independence” as part of their discourse under the heading of the same ideological disposition, Boroujerdi leaves little space for any critical work. There is an inescapable circular logic involved. Although Boroujerdi admits, for example, that it was “right” to challenge “Western social sciences’ nominal universal notions, assumptions and language,” he simultaneously tells us that this is always done by “nativism” in the name of “authenticity and indigenization,” and that we can recognize “nativism” by looking for that very resistance. Yet such resistance is, of course, rendered at best suspect and more generally null by reference to the asserted authenticity discourse. To be clear, this argument is made on ontological and not epistemological grounds: it is not when it resorts to “authenticity” in an argument challenging supposedly universal norms that a discourse falls into Boroujerdi’s “nativist” category. Rather, following the logic of his theory, it is because the arguments arise as critiques of liberal universalism that they can be recognized as nativist. This argument precludes the possibility of anything but the most superficial critique of orientalist discourse and Euro-Christian/liberal universalism.

Understanding these theoretical limitations of Boroujerdi’s designation of “nativism” explains to a certain degree why he would apply the category to a thinker like Al-e Ahmad. In expanding the scope of inclusion (of thinkers) in his theory of nativism while simultaneously strapping that wide array into a marginalized theoretical straitjacket, Boroujerdi overlooks the fact that Al-e Ahmad, ironically, rails against many of the same “nativist” positions (“insular,
obscurest, nostalgic, jingoistic\textsuperscript{165} that Boroujerdi himself is trying to discredit. He misses the fact that in Al-e Ahmad there are “native values” that aim in fact not at parochial authenticity but at a challenging universalism that understands and integrates local material contexts. A modern, market-oriented liberal might point to a bazaar filled with fashions from around the world and think of the liberated individual consumer awash in a sea of free choice and possibility. Al-e Ahmad looks at the same scene and notes that none of the clothes now displacing local industry were manufactured in Iran and that they bear no historical connection to local tradition or context. In place of the liberation of the market, one can imagine a more pernicious gharbzađegi, being dumbstruck by these dazzling new goods of the market. These observations are not mutually exclusive or even contradictory, despite the fact that the latter observations are unmistakably expressing “native value.” They can be viewed alongside each other as competing normative evaluations of a given scenario. But this is precisely the kind of evaluation that Boroujerdi’s theoretically strangling notion of “nativism” prevents. He also misses new efforts at reform of universal values that Al-e Ahmad attempts through the use of Iranian and Islamic texts, traditions and experience. In Khassi dar Migat, for example, Al-e Ahmad asks, through the experience of the Hajj, if modern doubt could be the foundation of an understanding of religion, instead of faith or the negation of religion.\textsuperscript{166} This is a universalist challenge, using a local context to make a universal claim; it is clearly intended to have just as much relevance in London or Paris as in Tehran or Tabriz. The Christian experience of the modern condition might predicate faith as the sine qua non of religion, particularly faith in and against empiricism or rationality. But to even suggest that an Islamic experience might lead to different arguments

\textsuperscript{165} Ibid., 18.

\textsuperscript{166} This idea, which is central to my dissertation, is addressed in a far more thorough manner in chapter 4.
about those same topics – arguments presented as freestanding and not themselves dependent on a privileged class of being, i.e. identity – should not be dismissed simply because they express what Boroujerdi calls “native values.” The misconstruction and misapplication of this theory also leads Boroujerdi to lay the intellectual groundwork for what Mirsepassi picks up and expands: the connection between Iranian “nativism” and right wing, anti-modern German philosophy.

**Boroujerdi’s Al-e Ahmad and Gharbzadegi**

Boroujerdi presents Al-e Ahmad’s *Gharbzadegi* as staking out four key positions. First, it offers a “critical chronicle of a century of Iranian enlightenment”; second, “a nativistic alternative to the universalism of the Iranian Left”; third, “a Third-Worldist discourse very much skeptical of what the West had to offer”; and fourth, a call for “an awakening and resistance to the hegemony of an alien culture that increasingly dominated the intellectual, social, political and economic landscape of Iranian society.”167 While the first position is largely accurate, the latter three are readings thoroughly distorted by Boroujerdi’s flawed theoretical lens of “nativism.”

He begins by quoting one of Al-e Ahmad’s definitions of *gharbzadegi*:

> Al-e Ahmad began his defiant monograph with a definition of *gharbzadegi* as “the aggregate of events in the life, culture, civilization, and mode of thought of a people having no supporting tradition, no historical continuity, no gradient of transformation.” His clear intention was to sensitize the Iranian public to the problem of growing “rootlessness.”168

Boroujerdi uses this passage and argument to frame *Gharbzadegi* as a largely identity-based attack on “rootlessness” and an exhortation to “return to self.” This also helps Boroujerdi make

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168 Ibid., 68.
that argument that the “disease” in question itself, *gharbzadegi*, the “social malady,” was the infection of Iran with the contagion of Western Civilization. Boroujerdi continues:

> Influenced by Heidegger’s view on science and technology (which were somehow conveyed to him through Ahmad Fardid), Al-e Ahmad regarded those instruments of mastery as the essence of Western Civilization.\(^{169}\)

This is the other pillar of Boroujerdi’s reading of Al-e Ahmad. On the one hand, Al-e Ahmad is calling for a return to an authentic Islamic, Iranian Self and on the other he is participating in a Heideggerian critique of technology and borrowing from Heidegger’s critique of contemporary modernity. Although this reading conforms well to the contours of Boroujerdi’s theory of “nativism,” it does not accurately represent Al-e Ahmad’s views towards a ‘return to self’ or technology.

As can be inferred from Boroujerdi’s own phrasing – “somehow conveyed” – the connection to Heidegger is, in fact, tenuous at best. Heidegger appears nowhere in the pages of *Gharbzadegi* (nor in any of Al-e Ahmad’s other works). There is also scant evidence of the use of Heideggerian language. In fact, there is little in common even in those areas of shared interest, like technology. The best evidence that Boroujerdi puts forth for the Heidegger influence is the connection with Fardid, which is, for lack of a better phrase, circumstantial at best. While Al-e Ahmad did know and work with Fardid and Fardid did coin the word *gharbzadegi*, it is widely acknowledged\(^{170}\) that Al-e Ahmad’s *gharbzadegi* had little to do with Fardid’s. Fardid’s *gharbzadegi* was a direct adaptation of a Heideggerian critique of Western philosophy as emphasizing “an existential separation between man as the knowing subject and

\(^{169}\) Ibid., 68; *Gharbzadegi*, 31.

\(^{170}\) See Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent* and Vadhat, *God and Juggernaut*. 
the external world.”171 But this was not a concern of Al-e Ahmad’s. Al-e Ahmad was so far from Fardid’s philosophy that the two actually fell out over Al-e Ahmad’s use of the term, when Fardid accused Al-e Ahmad himself of being gharbzadeh, particularly since his analysis turned on such social scientific (read: Marxist) terms instead of the Heideggerian existential ones. Al-e Ahmad, in turn, did not claim to be using the term in its original sense.172 While Fardid pursued an Islamo-Heideggerianism which sought a rebirth of Islamic Zivilisation in place of Western Kultur.173 Al-e Ahmad decried both concepts as gharbzadeh and went off with Gholamhossein Saedi and “traveled extensively throughout Iran and wrote path-breaking sociological accounts of places they visited.”174 As Wells notes, “Fardid suggests that looking to culture to determine national characteristics is a sign of the new age, and the prevalent ‘self centredness’, whether of an individual or national nature, is an exclusive product of western thought.”175 Fardid, like the post-war Heidegger, preferred introspection to materialist analysis. Al-e Ahmad, following Gramsci in part, wanted a Marxism that was neither Stalinist nor philosophically restrictive. He did see what one might call a spiritual crisis in ‘the West.’ But for him, that crisis was expressed

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171 Vadhat, God and Juggernaut, 114.
172 Wells, Jalal Al-e Ahmad, 47.
173 Mirsepassi, Political Islam, 118.
174 Dabashi, Masters and Masterpieces of Iranian Cinema, 112. Al-e Ahmad was invited by the “Institute of Social Research” (I will not attribute any significance to this complete coincidence of names) at the University of Tehran to help then edit and produce a “series of anthropological monographs” (Occidentosis, 12). As Campbell reminds us in his introduction to his translation of Gharbzadegi, Al-e Ahmad himself gives the following definition of what he thinks a “renewed acquaintance with ourselves” is. Boroujerdi and Mirsepassi desperately want this to be either a retreat to some question of essentialist, internal Being à la Heidegger or a nostalgia for a bygone era of perfection in the time of the prophet à la Qutb. Alas, Al-e Ahmad is much more mundane in every sense of the word. He explains what he means, “a new evaluation of our native environment in accordance with criteria of our own.” It is all too present, all too, in the less controversial use of the term, secular. Hillman provides a much simpler – and telling – translation of the first clause as well; Al-e Ahmad wanted to promote “self-awareness.” (Hillman, 1982, 17)
175 Wells, Jalal Al-e Ahmad, 78.
in literature, in French writers like Andre Gide and Albert Camus. But, as I will demonstrate in chapter 4, Al-e Ahmad posited not a solution to this crisis, but an indeterminate negation of it, outwardly, through participation in Shii ritual. Al-e Ahmad, like so many of his friends and colleagues, including Nima Yushij, Sadeqh Hedayat, Saedi, and his wife Simin Daneshvar, was a committed modernist. His modernism was simply expansive and, despite being an ‘unbeliever,’ he saw no conflict between being ‘modern’ and being ‘Shii.’ Fardid, quite correctly, saw this stance as antithetical to his own project and to Heidegger and condemned Al-e Ahmad for it.

Even on the question of technology, where his interests and Heidegger’s do partially converge, Al-e Ahmad neither follows the Heideggerian line nor even addresses Heidegger’s questions. Primarily, for Al-e Ahmad, the question of technology is addressed not in terms of an epistemic arrangement with the world and the subsequent effects of that arrangement upon “Being.” It is addressed in terms of economic production and consumption. Questions of “Being” are largely relegated to routinization and alienation, in the vein of nineteenth century social thinkers such as Weber, Simmel or Marx rather than twentieth century ontological philosophy à la Heidegger. Immediately following the passage Boroujerdi cites, Al-e Ahmad writes:

176 I address Al-e Ahmad’s reflections on Camus at the end of this chapter. Gide is another potentially fascinating touchpoint in the context of a comparative study of Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin. Although not a towering figure like Marx, both Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin had considerable respect for Gide. Al-e Ahmad translated Gide’s *Retour de L’U.R.S.S* into Persian and includes a handful of references to Gide in *Gharbzadegi*, particularly his anti-colonial works. Benjamin wrote a a few articles on Gide, and the *Passagenwerk* contains several approving references to the French author. Benjamin’s interest in Gide is as “the great moral exception who is the highest pedagogical authority,” who poses an “undeviating and threatening challenge to both moral indifference and lax complacency.” (Benjamin, *Selected Writings* Vol 2.1, 96). Although these are certainly related interests to some extent, their full exploration is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

177 It’s not that Al-e Ahmad is entirely uninterested in questions of Being. However, it does not appear much if at all in *Gharbzadegi*, and when it does, it is more the question of alienation, à la nineteenth century social critique, rather than essence, à la twentieth century ontological philosophy. When Al-e Ahmad does address Being more directly in *Khassi dar Miqat* and *Sangi bar Guri*, it is about a crisis predicated on the nexus between belief and doubt and the possibility of existential affirmation through doubt as opposed to faith. I explicate this further in later chapters.
Occidentosis thus characterizes an era in which we have not yet acquired the machine, in which we are not versed in the mysteries of its structure. Occidentosis characterizes an era in which we have not yet grown familiar with the preliminaries to the machine, the new sciences and technologies. Occidentosis characterizes an era in which the logic of the marketplace and the movements of oil compel us to buy and consume the machine.\textsuperscript{178}

Al-e Ahmad proposes that the only way forward is mastery of technology, and not in the sense of the recognition of its true “essence” as an ontological extension of human Being. As such, his view is very much at odds with Heidegger’s.\textsuperscript{179} Heidegger spends the majority of his essay \textit{Die Frage nach der Technik} (“The Question Concerning Technology”) discussing the \textit{Gestell} (“Enframing”) that technology casts over the world. This is about a fundamental relationship between humans and the world around them as epistemically framed through a technological worldview. This \textit{Gestell} is essentially an obfuscation of the true or healthy human being-in-the-world and it is entirely predicated on the instrumental view that humans take concerning technology. Modern technology, based on and also reproducing the precision of modern physics, frames nature for humans in a mode of “challenging” \textit{[Herausfordern]} to produce for “unreasonable demand.”\textsuperscript{180} Technology produces an adversarial, instrumental and, ultimately false relationship. Towards the very end of the essay, in reflecting on a line where the poet Friedrich Hölderlin suggests, “But where danger is, grows/ The saving power also,” Heidegger

\textsuperscript{178} Al-e Ahmad, \textit{Occidentosis}, 34; \textit{Gharbzadegi}, 11.

\textsuperscript{179} “Everything, then, depends upon this: that we ponder this rising and that, recollecting, we watch over it. How can this happen? Above all through our catching sight of the essential unfolding in technology, instead of merely gaping at the technological. So long as we represent technology as an instrument, we remain transfixed in the will to master it. We press on past the essence of technology.” Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” \textit{Basic Writings}, 337.

\textsuperscript{180} Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” 320. "Unreasonable demand" should not be misunderstood as Heidegger speaking in economic terms. He is quite precise: the unreasonableness of the “demand” is the transformation of the essence of nature such that it can “supply energy which can be extracted and stored as such.” This critique of modern technology is contrasted with the example of traditional technology – the windmill – which draws energy without ‘transforming’ the essence of the wind. Whether the latter claim is true is of course entirely beyond the scope of Heidegger’s philosophy or interest; the point is that first science and then technology as its expression produces a distortion of the “essences” of human Being and nature. As discussed in the end of my first chapter, neither Al-e Ahmad nor Benjamin subscribe to this romantic-conservative notion concerning modern science.
states that finally if there is any hope in the relationship between humans and technology, it lies in moving beyond the instrumental, beyond “the will to master it.”

In stark contrast, Al-e Ahmad consistently portrays the proper understanding of technology as being entirely instrumental: the subordination of technology from the exploitation of the “machine economy” (eqtisad-e mashin, the production of wealth for advanced overseas economies, i.e. capitalism) to the fulfillment of human needs. Early on, Al-e Ahmad marks out technology and technological advancement as the historical point of departure for Iranian/Islamic decline and “Western” advancement as well as crucial and necessary for a progressive, just society in which it is possible to “abolish poverty” and put “material and spiritual welfare within the reach of all.” This attitude should be instantly recognizable: it is ‘production for use,’ i.e. socialism. Al-e Ahmad clearly does see something particularly pernicious in both the central and peripheral geographies of the “machine economy,” and he uses the language (devoting a chapter to it entitled “Mashinzadegi”) of enthrallment to describe it. Yet it is the “economy” part of that equation—a social question—that is the key. A ‘production for use’ economy is a frequent argument in Gharbzadegi, and serves as the primary thesis of the only prescriptive chapter, chapter 6, Ra-ye Shekastan-e Talsim, “The Way to Break the Spell.” After rejecting both the options of being a permanent economic colony and of “retreat into the depths of our ancient ways, our national and religious traditions,” Al-e Ahmad alights upon a “third way”:

181 Ibid. 337.

182 This instrumentality should be differentiated from the instrumental rationality as a total system as critique by Horkheimer. The argument put forth by Al-e Ahmad in the section in question actually mirrors Horkheimer’s own point of view from his early essay, “Notes on Science and the Crisis” quite closely. It is a fundamental failure of modernity’s reason that leads to the fetishization of “machines” and useless commodities ahead of universal welfare, etc. It is a now-oriented instrumentality.

183 Al-e Ahmad, Occidentosis, 79; Gharbzadegi, 60.
The machine should naturally serve us as a trampoline, so that we may stand on it and jump all the farther by its rebound. One must have the machine; one must build it. But one must not remain in bondage to it; one must not fall into its snare. The machine is a means, not an end. The end is to abolish poverty and to put material and spiritual welfare within the reach of all.184

While development was not much of a concern (in fact, to my knowledge, not any concern) to Heidegger (or Jünger for that matter, but I will address that in a later section), it is of primary concern to Al-e Ahmad. For him, economic development is the sine qua non of all other questions, including, as he notes here, the question of “spiritual welfare.” And the “bondage” here is not a phantasmagoria of the machine, but rather the economic bondage that Al-e Ahmad presents on the very first page of Gharbzadegi and Boroujerdi completely overlooks. Al-e Ahmad writes:

Occidentosis has two poles or extremes—two ends of one continuum. One pole is the Occident, by which I mean all of Europe, Soviet Russia, and North America, the developed and industrialized nations that can use machines to turn raw materials into more complex forms that can be marketed as goods. These raw materials are not only iron ore and oil, or gut, cotton, and gum tragacanth; they are also myths, dogmas, music, and the higher worlds. The other pole is Asia and Africa, or the backward, developing or nonindustrial nations that have been made into consumers of Western goods. However, the raw materials for these goods come from the developing nations...

While the Heidegger connection rests upon the tenuous application of Boroujerdi’s “nativism” theory and an unstated, implicit and apparently invisible transmission via Fardid, despite Al-e Ahmad’s obvious and noted departure from Fardid, there is an equally obvious, albeit different German philosophical influence on these analyses: Marx.185 What Al-e Ahmad presents in these

184 Al-e Ahmad, Occidentosis, 79; Gharbzadegi, 60.

185 Until Boroujerdi suggested otherwise (and on, as I think I demonstrate here, scant to no evidence), almost every serious scholar who had examined Al-e Ahmad had understood him as an idiosyncratic Marxist, or a ‘Third-Way’ Marxist, or a post-Marxist, or, in any number of such similar formulations, holding as his primary economic and political source of analysis Marx, at least insofar as his analysis went. In addition to noting Al-e Ahmad’s active membership in the Tudeh and then in Maleki’s socialist parties, and the textual evidence I offer in this chapter, I feel I should advise the reader to see Modern Iran (Keddie, 2003), Mantle of the Prophet (Mottahedeh, 1985), The Making of Iran’s Islamic Revolution (Milani, 1988), Reformers and Revolutionaries in Modern Iran: New Perspectives on the Iranian Left (Cronin, 2004), and countless others beyond the sources (Dabashi, Abrahamian, Wells, etc.) I have already been quoting. Yet, the Boroujerdi point of view, without historical or textual evidence, has become the prevalent view on Al-e Ahmad such that even contemporary Iranian philosophers like Abdolkarim Sorosh cite the Boroujerdi position, instead of their own previous work. See especially Wells for a narrative of Al-e Ahmad’s political life which hewed always close to progressive and socialist groups. I will be focusing in the rest of
two passages and again and again throughout Gharbzadegi is both an application of Marxist analysis and a departure from Marxist metaphysics (the question of “spiritual welfare” which he expands elsewhere). But in all cases, his touchstone in terms of intellectual milieu and intellectual influence is, unmistakably, Marx. While there is little Heideggerian analyses or language, discussion of bases, superstructure, infrastructure, modes of production, economic development, surplus capital, etc. proliferate in Al-e Ahmad’s texts. As I will discuss at more length in the sections on Khassi dar Miqat and Sangi bar Guri, no small portion of this talk constitutes a departure from traditional Marxist theory. Indeed, Al-e Ahmad thinks cultural concerns are not merely epiphenomenal; that traditional institutions, language and local conditions have a great deal of legacy knowledge, value and importance; and that radical materialist reduction is ultimately part of the problem of material exploitation. But when it comes to both his analyses and his solutions, the starting point is Marx. This is so much the case that Al-e Ahmad even tries to ‘de-culture’ the ideas of “East” and “West,” stating that: “East and West are no longer geographical or political concepts to me… for me, they are economic concepts.” Shortly thereafter, he continues:

Western nations generally have high wages, low mortality, low fertility, well-organized social services, adequate foodstuffs (at least three thousand calories per day), per capita annual income of at least 3000 tumans, and nominal democracy (the heritage of the French Revolution.) The second group of nations [Eastern] has these characteristics: low wages, high mortality, even higher fertility, social services nil (or for hire), inadequate foodstuffs (at most 1000 calories per day) annual income less than 500 tumans, and no notion of democracy (the heritage of the first wave of imperialism.)

186 Al-e Ahmad, Occidentosis, 28; Gharbzadebi, 8. It should be noted that this description comes on the second page of the actual text.
For Al-e Ahmad, these are the crucial terms for understanding the character of “East” and “West”: economic terms and their social and political (welfare and democracy) consequences.

Al-e Ahmad does worry a great deal about the effects of this highly exploitative economic arrangement on the psychology, culture and “spiritual welfare” of individuals, but so does Marx himself (“species being”) and other Marxist thinkers. But the economic is primary. Boroujerdi, amazingly, claims that “in the entire Gharbzadegi essay, no mention is made of the positive results of technology.” But the development of a local “machine economy,” albeit with certain augmented features to ensure “spiritual welfare,” is presented throughout the book as the only path to prosperity and justice for Iran. In fact, in his early chapters, Al-e Ahmad continually returns to the theme that it was industrialization and technological advancement that laid the groundwork for the power that the West exerts. Furthermore he notes that the economic, political and even spiritual stagnation of the East were likewise predicated on the lack of technological development and subsequent overemphasis on interiority, “gnosis” and “self-absorption.” Consequently, he does not write of this in a Gandhian, ‘back-to-the-village,’ ‘trains-cause-famines’ approach. He does not dispute that the progress marked by industrialization, however problematic in terms of routinization, alienation and other qualities, is real progress, creating real wealth and opportunities for working peoples. Technology is not only

187 “Species being” [Gattungswesen] in Marx is derived from Feuerbach’s concept of the same name. Marx is himself helpful in delineating their different uses of the term in the sixth thesis on Feuerbach: “Feuerbach resolves religious essence into the human essence. But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of social relations.” (Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” Marx-Engels Reader, 145). Marx does not subscribe to the ahistorical category of “human nature,” but his objection to Feuerbach is primarily about not recognizing the “ensemble of social relations” and in “only,” viewing Gattungswesen as something that “merely naturally unites the many individuals.” As Marx makes more explicit in Capital, this does not mean the dismissal of ‘natural’ facts but rather their simultaneous reckoning with social conditions.

188 Boroujerdi, Intellectuals and the West, 71.

189 Al-e Ahmad, Occidentosis, 45; Gharbzadegi, 26.
the “trampoline” on which the people will leap to material and spiritual welfare. Al-e Ahmad outlines an economic program designed entirely around technological advancement, through “factories,” “schools,” “machines,” and “industrial goods,” albeit within the context of “village markets” and an “independent economy.”

Al-e Ahmad explicitly frames his idea of the “machine economy” as an extension of Marxist critique:

> What Marx said is true today, that we have two worlds in conflict. But these two worlds stretch far vaster than in his time, and the conflict has grown far more complex than the one of worker and employer. In our world, poor confront rich, and the vast earth is the arena. Our age is one of two worlds: one producing and exporting machines, the other importing, consuming and wearing them out. The stage for this conflict is the global market... Here is the basis for occidentosis of all non-Western nations.

This argument is far closer to Lenin or Gramsci than Heidegger. The Marx connection is stated and clear. Furthermore, ghārhzadegī is outlined as an emergent and contingent condition based on the forces of economic production.

It is in this context that one can more easily understand the quotation that Boroujerdi uses to open his discussion of Gharbzadehī. Boroujerdi omits that this phrase – “the aggregate of events in the life, culture, civilization, and mode of thought of a people having no supporting tradition, no historical continuity, no gradient of transformation” – is actually part of a conditional proposition. He writes:

> If we define occidentosis as the aggregate of events in the life, culture, civilization, and mode of thought of a people having no supporting tradition, no historical continuity, no gradient of

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190 Al-e Ahmad, Occidentosis, 79; Gharbzadehī, 60.

191 Al-e Ahmad, Occidentosis, 30; Gharbzadehī, 8. Lest the ellipsis prove disconcerting, it covers this text: “The weapons apart from tanks, guns, bombers, and missile launchers, themselves products of the west, are UNESCO, the FAO, the UN, ECAFE, and the other so-called international organizations. In fact, they are Western con artists come in new disguises to colonize this other world: to South America, to Asia, to Africa.”
transformation, but having only what the machine brings them, it is clear we are such a people.\textsuperscript{192}

Read together with the preceding comments, all from the first chapter of Gharbzadegi, it is clear that Al-e Ahmad’s central metaphor is not “infection” by a contagious disease of Western Civilization that turns Iranians into Europeans. It is being rendered prone for exploitation by international capital, by the “machine economy.” It is being reduced to consumers of commercial products and producers of raw materials. The machine does not act of itself as a “talisman” on the helpless gharbzadeh, as Boroujerdi interprets Al-e Ahmad.\textsuperscript{193} As I will elaborate in the next section, the gharbzadeh treats the machine as talismanic because s/he isn’t modernized enough!

Perhaps the greatest irony of Al-e Ahmad’s actual argument vs. Boroujerdi’s theory is that Al-e Ahmad declares quite blatantly that a “nativist” response – returning to an authentic self, desperately clinging to and reasserting national and religious traditions – is gharbzadeh. As he writes immediately preceding the conditional proposition:

\begin{quote}
We are all equally acceptable to Westerners, the makers of our machines, as contented museum pieces. We are to be objects of research in the museum or the laboratory, nothing more. Watch that don’t you alter this raw material! I am not speaking now of their wanting Khuzistan’s or Qatar’s oil, Katanga’s diamonds or Kirman’s chromite, unrefined. I am saying that I, as an Asian, or an African, am supposed to preserve my manners, culture, music, religion, and so forth untouched, like an unearthed relic, so that the gentlemen can find and excavate them, so they can display them in a museum and say “Yes, another example of primitive life.”\textsuperscript{194}
\end{quote}

“Nativist” responses in the vein that Boroujerdi describes are a double duty gharbzadeh response and certainly not the appropriate retort to the condition of gharbzadegi. On the one hand, they promote economic stagnation, ensuring the reproduction of the producer/consumer relationship between East and West. On the other, they provide yet another source for raw materials for

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\textsuperscript{192} Al-e Ahmad, Occidentosis, 34; Gharbzadegi, 11. The emphasis is mine to indicate the original text surrounding the quotation. Additionally, in the original Persian, the “machine” clause comes immediately after the interrogatory phrase.

\textsuperscript{193} Boroujerdi, Intellectuals and the West, 68.

\textsuperscript{194} Al-e Ahmad, Occidentosis, 34; Gharbzadegi, 11.
\end{flushright}
Western harvest and exploitation. In a later chapter, Al-e Ahmad had already acknowledges that
the static understanding of “culture,” particularly of Iranian or Islamic culture, is itself an
invention of orientalists, hilariously noting:

_I haven’t the foggiest notion when orientalism became a “science.” If we say that some westerner
is a linguist, dialectologist or musicologist specializing in Eastern questions, maybe this is
defensible... But what does it mean to be an orientalist without further definition? Does it mean to
know all the secrets of the Eastern world? Are we living in the age of Aristotle?_195

And in his comments about the preservation of native identity, he links this idea to an astute,
Bourdieuian observation that the manufactured, static ‘otherness’ of the “Eastern world” was a
goldmine of capitalist reproduction for Western interests, the performance or possession of
something totemistically Other being highly desirable and therefore profitable in advanced
Western economies. This is a critique of orientalism and a critique of the kind of idea of culture
implicit in the conception of authenticity-based nationalism or “nativism” which Boroujerdi
imputes to Al-e Ahmad. Al-e Ahmad argues that this kind of “tradition” is just another foreign
import, stapled together from the local raw materials of texts, customs, music, etc. What he
wants to propose instead is neither an idea nor a practice of nativist authenticity. Rather, he
proposes a materialist reckoning with local conditions. And it is also the possibility of
renegotiating the universal from new or additional standpoints.196 Orientalists produce
ideological clothes for these “museum piece” people just as factories in Manchester produce
clothes for the newly urbanized. Both are equally gharbzadeh. They are both ‘west-struck’ in the
sense that they have ironically overlooked just how unmodernized and unwesternized and,
simultaneously, how unlocal they have become. It is not that technology and “the machine” has
dazzled them on its own; they are enchanted by the “machine” because they are not modern

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195 Al-e Ahmad, Occidentosis, 99.
196 I explore some of these “renegotiations” in my fourth chapter.
enough to understand its bases, both economic and technical. They have not maintained a connection with local conditions or built upon local institutions because they are not sophisticated enough to recognize that essential “authenticity” is just another product which stands in the way of modernization.

This is the context, then, in which we need to read Boroujerdi’s criticism of Al-e Ahmad’s supposed rejection of technology and promulgation of Heideggerian philosophy:

What is most troubling about Al-e Ahmad’s criticism of machines is his parroting of Heidegger. Whereas Heidegger’s criticism of machines was pertinent to post-WWI Europe (with the unbelievable carnage and destruction left behind), one wonders how appropriate it was to criticize “machinism” in the Iran of the 1960s.197

What Boroujerdi completely misses here is that what Al-e Ahmad is doing in those sections of Gharbzadegi is reflexively extending the mode of cultural critique that he is applying to Iran in the book to the processes of cultural formations in Europe. Mashinzadegi is not the same condition as gharbzadegi. The –zadegi formulation is Al-e Ahamd’s designation for the pernicious false consciousnesses that threaten the “material and spiritual welfare” of people. And true to the methodology he outlines throughout Gharbzadegi, when Al-e Ahmad is analyzing existing mashinzadegi, he notes constantly how its contours are shaped by its specifically European local context. He even goes so far as to point out how the similar formations there prove a vital and disturbingly fertile ground for fascist ideas and movements which require “the constant need for vigilance against the seeds of fascism.”198 He is painfully aware throughout his text that the relationship between Europeans and mechanization is a different beast than the relationship between Iranians and mechanization. And in fact one of the vectors of Al-e Ahmad’s

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197 Boroujerdi, 71.

198 Al-e Ahmad, Gharbzadegi, 101; Occidentosis, 122.
work and the significant departures he makes from Marxist theory and, in particular, 
historiography, is his conviction that through building upon different philosophical formulations 
and different institutional arrangements and languages, Iranians need not necessarily bind 
themselves to a European fate that he sees—in light of rampant economic exploitation, two 
world wars and the threat of nuclear annihilation—as a truly frightening prospect. In sharp 
contrast to the image of his work created by those who describe it as economically disengaged or 
primarily an adaptation of Heidegger, Al-e Ahmad strongly emphasizes the point that in the 
colonial ideal, the Third World plays a very different role as a consumer and user of “machines” 
and as a source for their raw materials. This is the discourse he describes not in the colorful 
romantic language of right wing Europe, but in the recognizable terms of Marxist critique.

For in his conditional statement (quoted above) about gharbzadegi and his rejection of a 
nativistic identity politics, Al-e Ahmad is in many ways restating a Marxist, and, more 
specifically Gramscian199 critique of imperialism, culture and consumption. If a people have only 
the economic base of exporting raw materials and the cultural superstructure of cosmetic 
modernity or stultified traditionalism, just enough to reproduce the conditions of that 
consumption and exploitation of resources, then they are gharbzadeh. Although there is no doubt 
that Al-e Ahmad is concerned with the effects of an increasingly technological and rationalized 
civilization on human life, the ‘disease’ of gharbzadegi is a brand of false consciousness, not a 
nativist attack on straying from the authentic national or religious life of a people.

199 Vadhat, God and Juggernaut, 120. Vadhat astutely notes that Al-e Ahmad’s views were heavily influenced by 
Gramsci’s notion of the “organic intellectual.” Much of Al-e Ahmad’s concern and focus on traditional institutions, 
like the clergy, comes out of a materialist concern, à la Gramsci, with taking into account the economic and cultural 
forces already established in a given locality. In this way, the language of religion (and also the language of the 
village) would have to be the language of resistance and revolution. Beyond Gramsci, however, he added to this a 
genuine philosophical claim that any understanding of justice and morality must be made through some kind of 
thelogical foundation, albeit a highly idiosyncratic one based counter-intuitively on doubt and what I call epistemic 
modesty. I discuss this more thoroughly in chapter 4.
Mirsepassi’s Al-e Ahmad and Jünger

So what, then, of Jünger’s influence? I began this chapter discussing the reference to Jünger that Al-e Ahmad includes in the preface to *Gharbzadegi*, where he obliquely references Mahmud Human’s comparison of his work and Jünger’s as “addressing the same question.” Jünger plays a particularly prominent role in Mirsepassi’s account of twentieth-century Iranian intellectual history in *Political Islam, Iran and the Enlightenment*. Mirsepassi draws a straight line from Jünger and Heidegger through Fardid and Al-e Ahmad to Shariati to the establishment of the Islamic Republic. In his view, the expansive cultural and moral statism in contemporary Iran has its roots in Jünger and the vision that it is “the responsibility of the government to elevate the population on cultural and moral grounds.” This is more particularly emphasized in specific relation to Al-e Ahmad’s *Gharbzadegi*. Mirsepassi writes that Al-e Ahmad was “certainly aware of his debt” to Jünger, continuing:

*In the preface to Westoxication he indicates his intellectual debt to Ernst Jünger, whose work he translated into Persian, and whose ideas had also deeply influenced Heidegger. He wrote: “Jünger and I were both exploring more or less the same subject, but from two points of view. We were addressing the same question, but in two languages.” In this way the Gharbzadegi discourse was similar to the Germany “reactionary modernist” movement...*  

There are several separate questions here. The first is the question of influence. Multiple times in *Political Islam, Iran and the Enlightenment*, Mirsepassi draws these straight lines of influence, stitching together far-right German thought and the Iranians who localized it and transformed it into the Islamic Republicanism recognizable today. But the question of actual, direct influence here turns on something as straightforward as an inconvenient historical fact. If one notes the timeline of the writing and initial publication of *Gharbzadegi*, as Dabashi does in *Theology of

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201 Ibid., 121.
Discontent, it was not until after Al-e Ahmad wrote and circulated the manuscript of Gharbzadegi that Mahmud Human informed him of the existence of, and his similarity to, Jünger. It was only after this that Al-e Ahmad and Human together worked on a translation of Jünger’s Uber die Linie [Over the Line].\textsuperscript{202} This takes the question of Jünger’s influence out of the realm of a stated link, or an “intellectual debt,”\textsuperscript{203} as Mirsepassi argues, and puts it in the company of the same implicit Heideggerian milieu somehow tacitly transmitted by Ahmad Fardid, as discussed in the previous section, and with scant textual evidence, as critiqued in the previous section. This is particularly strange for thinking about the case of Uber die Linie. In both Mirsepassi and Boroujerdi, the analysis is primarily about Heidegger, not Jünger. It is true that Heidegger and Jünger held each other in great esteem. And yet this particular text of Jünger’s, which is referenced exactly once in the preface to later editions of Gharbzadegi, actually marks a point of friendly disagreement between Heidegger and Jünger. Jünger wrote the text as part of a collection, Anteile: Martin Heidegger zum 60 Geburtstag [Parts: To Martin Heidegger on his 60th Birthday]. Heidegger even wrote a response essay, Uber ‘Die Linie’ [Concerning “the Line”]\textsuperscript{204} which was a substantive critique of Jünger’s position.\textsuperscript{205} So this, too, proves to be yet another weak and strange link to Heidegger for Mirsepassi (and Boroujerdi).

\textsuperscript{202} Dabashi, Theology of Discontent, 76.

\textsuperscript{203} Mirsepassi, Political Islam, 121. What is this “debt”? As I note here, a simple glance at the timeline of events is all it takes to dismiss the idea that Al-e Ahmad is somehow adapting ideas from Jünger (the Jünger comment comes in the preface to the second edition and specifically is written as reflections after the fact). Not only does Mirsepassi want to deny Al-e Ahmad his actual intellectual debts to Marx and Gramsci (as well as to Khusrow or, say, Afghani, etc.) but portrays him as deeply in debt to a tradition which really seems to have been largely alien to him. It’s almost as if anything that might map as “progressive” or beyond a “semblance of continuity with local Shii tradition” must be expunged from Al-e Ahmad, as it would overly complicate the narrative of the steady march of un-freedom that Mirsepassi wishes to tell.

\textsuperscript{204} Heidegger was playing with the double meaning of the German über.

\textsuperscript{205} Eliot Neaman, A Dubious Past, 180.
But what of Al-e Ahmad’s own claim about Jünger, which I cited at the opening of this chapter? “As Dr. Human pointed out [after reading the draft of Gharbzadegi] Jünger and I were working on more or less the same subject, but from two viewpoints. We were addressing [in Human’s opinion] the same question, but in two languages.” Even leaving aside the question of Al-e Ahmad’s distancing of himself (Human is carefully and specifically cited as the source of the observed, potential similarity) how should we understand Ernst Jünger and Jalal Al-e Ahmad working on “more or less the same subject but from two viewpoints”? Eliot Neaman provides a helpful gloss of Jünger’s text in his study of Jünger, A Dubious Past:

Over the Line is Jünger’s diagnosis of nihilism; the “line” here is conceived as a meridional demarcation. Going “over” the line means entering the sphere of nihilism. At a less metaphysical level, Jünger’s analysis reads like a cultural criticism of the economic boom years. Everywhere he sees feverish production as a dominant activity, speaking of a “workshop landscape,” in which all of nature’s reserves are transformed by the work process. Work in modern society is a “zero-point” by economic and spiritual exploitation. The “highest values” are destroyed and in their place sects and cult religions take over. Jünger’s description of the shrinkage (Shwund) of life sounds like a description of the workaday world of the busy 1950s: “Today the contraction takes hold of the entire world, but it is not only contraction, it is at the same time acceleration, simplification, potentiation, and drive to unknown destinations.”

There is much in Uber die Linie that must have been alien to Al-e Ahmad, particularly the frame of the emptiness of the “boom years”; an anomie of plenty is certainly not the grounds that he lays out as his frame for gharbzadegi. Gharbzadegi is what helps reproduce the condition in which the majority of Iranians live on at most “1000 calories a day”; this is the irony of literal starvation while trying to keep up with the latest (Western) fashions. Instead, in Iran, Al-e Ahmad saw a feverish consumption propped up by (diluted) oil revenue and even that was largely ‘aspirational.’ Similarly, although Al-e Ahmad bemoans the cultural alienation he sees all around him throughout Iran, he does not have deep nostalgia about the “highest values.”

206 Al-e Ahmad, Occidentosis, 25.
207 Neaman, A Dubious Past, 178.
For Al-e Ahmad, there was a distanced but necessarily dialectical relationship between individual and community.208 There was also a highly critical understanding of the very notion of “highest values” as ahistorical, asocial constructs. “Highest values,” in precisely the way they are deployed by Jünger – eternal, true, the aspirations of the spirit, etc. – are a ghurbzadeh concept as understood by Al-e Ahmad: an idealist, mystifying phantasmagoria the West sells to itself as it marches to totalitarianism or self-destruction.209 Beyond this, as Al-e Ahmad writes in Sangi bar Guri [A Stone on a Grave],210 “If only you knew how happy I am to be the very last tombstone of my deceased ancestors. I am, as it were, in one place and by measure of one body the sole end point of tradition. I am the soul of the negation of the future that must remain enslaved to the past.”211 Shiism – the institution, the language, and the practice – were pregnant with possibility for Al-e Ahmad, but combined with an understanding that the individual’s freedom is part and parcel of the community’s liberation, the negation of the transcendence of faith, the literal grounds for the cultivation of practice. Yet, even with these major differences, one can begin to...

208 As Claus Pederson notes in his book Worldview in Pre-Revolutionary Iran, Al-e Ahmad views “man” as “a product of society and the historical development of society in which both man and world (society) are formed in a dialectical, mutual exchange….In most parts of Al-e Ahmad’s works…man is given a choice. Either he can let himself become absorbed in society, blindly follow its traditions, and by doing so lose his individual identity. Or he can defy his environment, relate to it with a distanced, critical mind, and hereby keep his personal identity, losing, however, identification with his origin.” (Pedersen, 2002, 207) Al-e Ahmad does not want to do the first, nor does he want to give into the consequences of the second even while generally embracing it. So he holds both at the same time (~p and ¬p as opposed to p and ¬p). The methodological similarity with the dialectic of Benjamin (or of Adorno) is striking. As Al-e Ahmad would write of Sadeq Hedayat, “the basis of the art of Hedayat lies in the nonexistence of nonexistent things.”(Al-e Ahmad, 1978, 33) Al-e Ahmad sees Hedayat as a brilliant but romantic tragedy which he links to his turning completely inward like “the Buddha” or “Yogis”; as I will discuss in chapter 4, Al-e Ahmad believes the same basis (pursuing the nonexistence of nonexistent things) must be externalized for the maintenance of the dialectic tension between individual and society.

209 Al-e Ahmad addresses this in the “Mechanosis” and “Hour Draws Nigh” chapters of Ghabrzadebi. I will return to this later in this chapter.

210 Or, more idiomatically, “A Tombstone.”

211 Al-e Ahmad, A Stone on a Grave, 95; Al-e Ahmad goes on to praise this “negation” as “freedom the size of a single solitary body.” And yet, without skipping a beat, he re-negates the negation as he declares his book itself to be a continuation in some sense of tradition, as tradition-negated begets further tradition: “I will place these pages just like a stone on a grave that is not the resting place of any corpse.” (Al-e Ahmad, 1980, 96)
see in Neaman’s description and his quotation from Jünger himself what the “same problem” was that Al-e Ahmad saw from a ‘different viewpoint’: the convergence of “nihilism” and “economic and spiritual exploitation.” And although their frame is different, this fear of the “shrinkage” of life is also a concern shared by Al-e Ahmad. I will return to this theme again in chapter 4, in order to discuss part of Al-e Ahmad’s own engagement with a dialectic that I see as very close to Benjamin’s in not believing in the ‘truth’ of something like the Hajj, and yet not believing in its *meaninglessness* either. For Al-e Ahmad this is a non-reductive but firmly materialist skepticism. It is dialectical but does not produce synthesis or sublation. Rather, it opens up greater space for inquiry. It is a kind of negative theology or, to borrow Adorno’s construction, “negative dialectics.”

But, for the moment, let us look at the question of “shrinkage” (i.e. reduction, the “murder” of “beauty and poetry,” “spirit and humanity”) and the horror of the convergence of what Jünger and Al-e Ahmad both call “nihilism” and “economic and spiritual exploitation”. This is the “same question” that Dr. Human is suggesting Al-e Ahmad and Jünger are addressing. And yet, even here there are “two languages,” and they are not necessarily merely German and Persian. “Nihilism,” for Jünger, is of a piece with the “spiritual exploitation”; it is “inner emptiness”; for Al-e Ahmad, “nihilism” is the ideology which affirms late capitalism in its place and “spiritual exploitation” is the alienation (in a Marxian sense) of people not only

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212 Al-e Ahmad, *Occidentosis*, 136.

213 Jünger, *Uber die Linie*, 269; Neaman, 179.

214 This is perhaps best understood in Al-e Ahmad’s description of politics in contemporary Europe: “Parties in a Western democratic state are forums to satisfy the melancholia of unbalanced and mentally ill persons who through daily regimentation before the machine, rising punctually and arriving on time, not missing the train, have lost the chance to express any sort of will of their own.” (Al-e Ahmad, *Occidentosis*, 125). To be clear, Al-e Ahmad – in his long road from the Tudeh – did not reject parliamentarianism per se. As I address more thoroughly in chapter 4, when it came to political demands (i.e. what he would actually like the state to be like) his ideas are shockingly mundane and recognizably liberal. Like Benjamin, he thought a different mode of politics was possible and
from their own local conditions – to be supplanted with unreal fantasies of “the West” – but of the potentials for new knowledge and new resistance in their “spiritual” heritage. “Economic exploitation,” for Jünger, was an individual and a romantic-conservationist concern; here he is aligned with Heidegger, contending that modern productive conditions transform both the inner life and Being-in-the-world of the modern individual and distort or destroy the natural landscape. For Jünger, the tragedy of “economic exploitation” is the end of a certain noble possibility in being and the end of a romantic sublime that exists in nature. And yet again I stress that for Al-e Ahmad, “economic exploitation” meant quite mundanely the systemic reproduction of conditions of impoverishment and imperial control in the third world. So, “two languages” indeed. But in both authors, the questions are on the table and the position of humanity is understood in relation to the “machine,” even as that too was understood in two very different languages. But what then of the answer?

Here, too, we see two different languages. As Marcus Bullock remarks in his study of Jünger’s work, Jünger embraced a late Nietzschean conception which insisted that “nihilism” could be overcome through the will to power and that Uber die Linie was a good example of the fact “that all his work is part of an ongoing struggle against nihilism.” Neaman is more explicit in what Jünger’s answer to the question looks like:

He conjures up a “heroic soldier” who will take on the force of nihilism the way the Germans overcame the ruins left by the war. Confident that nihilism can be overcome, everyone stands in battle, regardless of his or her rank in society, and with each victory over nihilism the world might be changed.

preferable that was indirect, but unlike Benjamin he was far clearer on the role of the state – that is, the actually-existing-bourgeois state.

215 I.e. colonialism.

216 Marcus Bullock, The Violent Eye, 114.

217 Neaman, A Dubious Past, 180.
In *Uber die Linie*, the “heroic soldier” is metaphorical; but that metaphor is based on a belief in the truth of heroic struggle as best understood in militaristic terms of armies, steel, and combat. It is in this that we can see the “highest values” reappear in the world. As Jünger writes in *Das Abenteuerliche Herz* [The Adventurous Heart]:

> In the last two years I have spent some time with pilots, and even lived for a few weeks one fall on an airfield. There is good company here because among them the very best blood possible in our day comes together. In them one finds the highest workerly and soldierly virtue stamped in fine metal, combined with intellect applied to the tasks at hand, and not without a certain freedom of style and an aristocratic delicacy.  

Unlike Heidegger, Jünger famously did not endorse the Nazis. Although this did not prevent Benjamin from seeing in Jünger the same “war mysticism” that he would later decry in the Italian Futurists as paving the road for fascism. As Benjamin suggested of Jünger and similar writers, “the most rabidly decadent origins of this new theory of war are emblazoned on their foreheads: it is nothing other than an uninhibited translation of the principles of *l’art pour l’art* to war itself.” Jünger’s rejection of the Nazis rested upon their *insufficient* understanding of what was at stake in total war; they ‘sullied’ the ‘pure’ struggle of war, in a paltry program of nationalism, anti-semitism, and imperialism. For Junger, actual ‘pure’ combat was the ideal of ‘struggle for struggle’s sake,’ best expressed and experienced in war. But, Jünger argued consistently, throughout his writings that this literal model of struggle as combat-in-war was the metaphorical way in which society should understand itself. I quote from Bullock at length:

> But what emerges in Jünger’s account of his war [the first World War] is not this surge of nationalistic or imperialistic feeling. The attitudes that the early writings show coming gradually into focus are distinct from this, opposed to it. While the commonplace illusions of grandeur or glory were ground away in the relentless mill of a struggle that threatened to consume everything without resolving anything, Jünger’s affirmation, rooted from the outside in a more radical

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218 Junger, *Das Abenteuerliche Herz*, 154-155; Bullock, The Violent Eye, 152.

219 This is Jennings’ phrase from the second volume of Benjamin’s *Selected Writings*. (Benjamin, 850)

220 Benjamin, *Selected Writings Vol 2.1*, 314.
agonism, underwent an extraordinary intensification. Nor was there any war-weariness or disenchantment as time went on. Jünger’s extensive diaries and commentaries on his experience as a soldier in the trenches show no diminution of his faith in the value of war throughout all the danger, the boredom, the discomfort, the decimation of comrades, the stench of rotting corpses that he documents so vividly, and the seven times he himself was wounded. In a strange reversal, the experience of defeat also contributed to this conviction. Because there was nothing gained by the struggle, it was all the clearer that he had not fought the war to achieve any particular end. He had not fought to fulfill some separate purpose formulated in the language of country, politics, or a conception of the state and society that he regarded as sterile, discredited, and irrelevant. The war was a revelation to him that such violence was the language of a different world, a different order, and a different value. It was a passion that defined being entirely in rites of absolute conflict. As he wrote in Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis in 1922: “It is the song of life devouring itself. To live is to kill”.

There are two reasons to linger so long with Jünger, and with Bullock’s account of him. The first regards Al-e Ahmad and his possible relationship to Jünger’s answer to their ambiguously shared “question.” Not only are the terms of the dilemma to be understood differently in Al-e Ahmad, the solution in terms of the valorization of war is precisely the opposite of everything Al-e Ahmad argues, in Khassi dar Miqat, Dar Khedmat va Khiyanat-e Roshanfekran, and Sangi bar Guri, and in Gharbzadegi itself. Al-e Ahmad explicitly names the military as one of the emptiest of the institutions of the Pahlavi state. Even its “struggle” is merely a waste of human energies best spent elsewhere. Al-e Ahmad writes, precisely in the kind of terms that Jünger decries:

All these soldiers and all these armaments accomplished nothing in Shahrivar 1320/1941 [when the allies invaded Iran in 1941] or on 28 Murdad [the date of the American-backed coup against Mossadeq]. To arm one hundred fifty thousand of the cream of our youth to the teeth (this is the official figure), to feed and train them so that one may rely on them to secure and perpetuate the rule of an individual – this is the whole meaning of our government’s military establishment. But in the climate for transformation and ceaseless building that is before us, it can never be well advised to constrain all this labor power to activities that do nothing to aid in the capital development of the country. In our circumstances, one must not drain the villages of the best of their labor force through conscription, sticking these people into barracks and setting them to learning the art of combat against some unknown future enemy. One cannot fold one’s hands and constrain at least three hundred thousand well-exercised shoulders to bearing arms and practicing tactics that have availed us nothing since the siege of Herat.

All of Jünger’s romanticism, all his Nietszchean overcoming, all his “war mysticism,” is completely absent in Al-e Ahmad, who would rather speak of labor, politics, social

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221 Bullock, The Violent Eye, 61.

222 Al-e Ahmad, Occidentosis, 107.
transformation, and financial waste. These qualities in Jünger are, in fact, inimical to his thinking. Al-e Ahmad and Junger are not merely speaking “two languages” when answering the same “question”; they could not be more diametrically opposed. Beyond seeing an absence of any productive usefulness in the military and in combat, Al-e Ahmad condemns war itself as “the war machine”:

Conformity in the workplace culminates in conformity in the party and union, which in turn culminates in conformity in the barracks – that is, before the war machine...This standardization of form, dress, and thought first in the service of the machine (Charlie Chaplin had such a powerful attraction, we value him so highly, because he was the first to perceive the danger of going like sheep to the slaughterhouse of the machine), then in the union, club, and party, then in the barracks, leads straight to the standardization of form, dress, and thought of the Blackshirts and Brownshirts that in turns leads the Western countries to bloodshed and calls the world to war every twenty years. It leaves all these consequences as memorials to itself. Warmongering – apart from the fact that it appears in the wake of the expansion of heavy industry and the search for new markets for exports – derives even its conventions and customs from the machine, which is itself the product of pragmatism, scientism, and positivism.224

Where is Jünger’s struggle for struggle’s sake? All Al-e Ahmad gives us instead, in discussing war qua combat or war as metaphor, is consequentialism. War is its consequences. There is no heroism here. What’s more, war helps reproduce the very internal conditions of bourgeois conformity which so aggravate Jünger. War is a crucible in which the non-synthetic dialectic of individual and community, which for Al-e Ahmad must be preserved, is overcome and all is

223 “Chaplin has become the greatest comic because he has incorporated into himself the deepest fears of his contemporaries” (Benjamin, Selected Writings 2, 792). I do not cite this merely to note that Al-e Ahmâd’s impression of cinema is remarkably similar to Benjamin’s. For that purpose, I would probably have drawn on Benjamin’s piece on “Mickey Mouse” where Benjamin argues that there is the possibility in popular cinema of this kind for the audience to recognize in a ‘distracted way,’ i.e. the kind of unconscious “powerful attraction” and “value” Al-e Ahmad describes here, the mutilation of subjects in modernity themselves. Adorno and Benjamin were in great conflict over this mode of Benjamin’s analysis; to Adorno the laughter evoked by Mickey Mouse is always laughter at the dismembered subject – it is cruel. Film is too mimetic and simultaneously too false for Adorno to hold the possibility that Benjamin’s interpretation demands. Al-e Ahmad clearly believes cinema – popular cinema at that – contains the possibilities Benjamin posits. But, as I said, the parallel is not just a neat fact; it helps show that Al-e Ahmad saw these insights precisely not on nativist grounds. Al-e Ahmad believed in some kind of universal sphere, as did Benjamin. Sartre says of Fanon that he is not talking to “you”[the European subject]. Unlike Sarte’s reading of Fanon, then, sometimes Al-e Ahmad is. As if all of his work translating and discussing European literary figures were not enough, here we see, right at the heart of Gharbzadegi, that Charlie Chaplin – a ‘Western’ product of technological art – is part of the material for the critical apparatus. Al-e Ahmad simply did not reject modernism or ‘the West’ in an ontological way.

224 Al-e Ahmad, Occidentosis, 125.
collapsed into similarity and conformity. Even that is illusory – and here we really get another
glimpse that Al-e Ahmad’s critique of technology is economic and sociological and not
essentialist – as war itself “derives its convention and customs from the machine, which is itself
the product of pragmatism, scientism, and positivism.” As I will discuss at the end of this
chapter, part of Al-e Ahmad’s critique of modernity as it is foisted by ‘the West’ is that it
promises two futures: annihilation in war or a literally de-sensitized, living death in a ‘shell’ to
protect what remains of the biological human being from a totalizing society. But we can see
both those ends anticipated here as the necessary consequence of “pragmatism, scientism, and
positivism.”

War is not an exceptional state. Jünger writes, in perhaps his most famous work, In
Stahlbreakwetter (Storm of Steel, 1924/2004), of his experience in war. It is an experience of
existential triumph. As he lies, stricken by a bullet in a trench, he holds forth: “Strangely, that
moment is one of very few in my life of which I am able to say they were utterly happy. I
understood, as in a flash of lightning, the true inner purpose and form of my life.”

But if we follow Al-e Ahmad’s comments on war, we understand that Jünger’s “true inner purpose” was
just another illusion, to reproduce conditions for more conformity, more commodification, more
markets, more imperialism, and more war. By Al-e Ahmad’s standards, Jünger’s answer is no
answer at all; it is just more of the problem. It is in this way that Al-e Ahmad and Jünger are
exploring “the same question, but in two languages.” Jünger prides himself on his service in the
First World War and before that in the French Foreign Legion fighting in North Africa. These
were “true” experiences in which he “overcame,” in ecstatic embrace of destruction and of
“struggle,” bourgeois conditions. This was the hiding place where the “highest values” were to

225 Jünger, Storm of Steel, 281.
be discovered; this was the secret of the “nobility” of those airmen. Jünger writes, “[to] live is to kill”; Al-e Ahmad sees death, dismemberment, and injustice in the “slaughterhouse of the machine.”

This is not the answer for Al-e Ahmad; this is the superstructural crisis of ‘the West.’ He says coldly of “Western Civilization”:

One basic problem of Western civilization – in the Western countries themselves, in the context of nineteenth century liberalism – is the constant need for vigilance against the seeds of fascism. In France, where we see de Gaulle wading through the Algerian problem, we have right-wing extremists in and out of the military, led by the gangsters of the Foreign Legion, who daily stain the streets of Paris and Algiers with the blood of those advocating a solution. In Italy and Germany, we have the remnants of the Brownshirts, and in America, the new John Birch Society, which regards even Mr. Eisenhower as a communist...

Jünger’s answers are what we are to be “vigilant against.” This excoriation is also a self-critique; it is precisely this type of culture which the Pahlavis have been promoting in Iran. I will discuss this in more depth in my extended reading of Al-e Ahmad’s chapter on the Pahlavis in a moment. But it is important to note that at the core of Al-e Ahmad’s critical practice lies a commitment to demystification, to iconoclasm, to revealing illusions. What Jünger extols is precisely one of those illusions. In making an argument from silence, I do not wish to even partially repeat, in reverse, the move that Boroujerdi and Mirsepassi make in reading Al-e Ahmad as deriving his thought from Jünger and Heidegger. However, I must point out that Jünger’s work simply never reappears in Al-e Ahmad’s. I hope that in the juxtaposition of these radically different points of view I have sufficiently dispelled the other specter of Al-e Ahmad’s “intellectual debt” to Jünger.

As I said after the long quotation from Bullock above, there are two reasons to linger so long on Jünger and Al-e Ahmad. The first reason is to demonstrate just how divergent Al-e

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226 Al-e Ahmad adds this to differentiate what he is now talking about from his earlier economic definition of West and East; now he is talking about cultural developments in the West.

227 Al-e Ahmad, *Occidentosis*, 122-123.
Ahmad's and Jünger's views were. The second reason pertains to my comparison of Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin. Jünger writes in *Storm of Steel*, “In those moments, I was capable of seeing the dead – I jumped over them with every stride – without horror.” This is not seeing, not for Al-e Ahmad, as I will show in Chapter 4, and certainly not for Benjamin, as I will explore in chapter 3. To see “the dead” “without horror,” and the war dead at that, is literally not-seeing “the dead.” It is not seeing the material conditions that made them dead nor is it letting “the dead” make their claim upon the now. Jünger thinks he has achieved something in being able to see without meaning, to see beyond meaning. This is perhaps where I will first point to, within my readings themselves, one of the “religious” moments in Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin, that to “see” clearly is to see a form meaning as inhering in objects, and/or meaning as understood by a reference point of “redemption.” This marks a different line, one that cuts right across the “same question” (that, as we have seen, it was the same question asked from different points of view) and “different languages” (the radically different ways that Al-e Ahmad and Jünger discuss the problem and their complete diametric opposition on what could be seen as an answer). Although I have drawn this line here, Bullock suggests that a similar line can be drawn between Jünger and a different thinker/tradition:

*I refer to ideas drawn from the Frankfurt School and Walter Benjamin in my discussion because they are often the source of extremely useful correspondences. Since they build on a similar mistrust in bourgeois society as the inheritance of industrial capitalism, albeit with a quite different view of change, they frequently arrive at positions that run parallel to Jünger’s, though in opposite directions.*

This, then, is the second reason, to linger with Al-e Ahmad and Jünger in comparative conversation; not because, as Boroujerdi and Mirsepassi would have it, Al-e Ahmad owes an “intellectual debt” to Jünger, but rather because the “useful correspondences” between Al-e

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228 Jünger, *Storm of Steel*, 214.

229 Bullock, *The Violent Eye*, 42.
Ahmad and Jünger, which hold a “quite different view of change,” “frequently arrive at positions that run parallel to Jünger’s, though in opposite directions.” In other words, they help us understand how close was Al-e Ahmad to Benjamin. Although I do not endorse all of Bullock’s arguments about Benjamin, Benjamin is something of a polestar for Bullock’s study, helping Bullock demarcate the difference and distance between two distinct critiques of modernity which might appear deceptively similar. Jünger is helpful here as well, both in distinguishing between Al-e Ahmad, the writer and political activist and “Al-e Ahmad,” the proto-fascist who was “to dominate the future of Iranian politics,” and in outlining a similar model for critique in Walter Benjamin.

Excursus: An Alternative Theory of Nativism/An Alternative Notion of Authenticity

I have devoted a great deal of space to an analysis of Boroujerdi’s particular theory of “nativism” as he outlines it in *Iranian Intellectuals and the West*, specifically to his argument about a primarily Heideggerian intellectual influence on Al-e Ahmad. Furthermore, the overall purpose of this project, the comparative philosophical evaluation of Al-e Ahmad, requires that I address the content of Al-e Ahmad’s claims as philosophical positions as opposed to merely addressing their social and political contexts. An alternative theory of “nativism” can, I think, help us understand some parts of Al-e Ahmad’s philosophy. Dabashi writes of Al-e Ahmad and “the roots of the Iranian intellectual nativism” in *Post-Orientalism* that:

In his attempt to de-colonize the mind of Iranians, Jalal Al-e Ahmad diagnosed a disease that he called “Westoxication” and thereby contributed massively to the domestication of the Spenglerian abstraction, “the West.” ... Al-e Ahmad began on the correct premise of his attempt to de-colonize the colonially constituted Iranian subject in order to restore historical agency to it. This was a necessary, admirable, and historically crucial move. But in the absence of a historically informed and a critical awareness of the joint projects of capitalist modernity and the Enlightenment, Al-e Ahmad fell squarely into the Hegelian trap of a ghostly attribution of authenticity to the

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phenomenal abstraction “the West.” “The West” was thus uncritically borrowed and categorically accepted as a reality sui generis. In response to that originating gesture, a native “authenticity” was sought from history, which is at once a-historical and constitutionally fabricated.²³¹ There are several key points to address here. First, Dabashi’s operating theory of nativism is almost entirely different than that of Boroujerdi. As opposed to Boroujerdi’s location – and condemnation – of nativism in “resurgence” and “resistance” through “native values,” Dabashi’s theory of nativism is a critique of the subjects of such discourses: namely, “the West” and “the native.” As Dabashi notes, these two subjects are a-historical reflections of each other. Whereas Boroujerdi’s reproduction of liberal universalism sublimates the identifiably “West” into the omnipresent universal, leaving the “native” alone as “manufacturing difference,” Dabashi’s theory frames both as a false, obfuscating binary. This theoretical frame has multiple effects. It allows Dabashi to locate at least Al-e Ahmad’s “attempt to de-colonize the colonially constituted Iranian subject” as “necessary, admirable and historically crucial.” Instead of a limited discourse of good universalism (secular liberalism) vs. bad universalism (colonial racism), Dabashi’s theory and analysis opens up the possibility for “native values” to negotiate on universal turf. The critique turns, instead, upon Al-e Ahmad’s ultimate move – and it is, as Dabashi notes, perhaps his most crucial failure – to reify the categorical ideas of “East” and “West” in ways that would come to have horrific consequences in Iranian political history.²³² This is a critique of nativism that focuses not on the presupposition of “native values” but on the production of “The Native” as an idea and as a category, as a “geographical space in need of discovery.”²³³

²³¹ Dabashi, Post-Orientalism, 258.

²³² This was the case even in ways that became obvious to Al-e Ahmad himself, who lived long enough to see some of his ideas spun wildly far from where he had began them.

As demonstrated in the previous section, Al-e Ahmad was not quite as fully ignorant of the “joint projects of capitalist modernity and the Enlightenment” as Dabashi suggests here. As I noted earlier and Dabashi argues on his next page, Al-e Ahmad does begin by trying to redefine the geo-cultural notion of “West,” “on the promising note of trying to locate Iran and the rest of the colonized world in relation of production to the centers of the capitalist cosmopolis.”

However, Dabashi’s critique vis-à-vis his alternative theory of nativism stands: Al-e Ahmad in the end fails to extend the logic of his critique in *Gharbzadegi* to the theoretically crucial dismantling of those geo-cultural poles themselves in favor of more productive concepts. This is in part an intellectual failure and in part a problem that Al-e Ahmad will address again – still without completion – in *Khassi dar Miqat*. As Dabashi states, Al-e Ahmad employs some questionable historical and linguistic arguments as well as a sometimes overly casual style that occasionally elides his economic and political arguments with cultural/civilizational ones. It is also a long-term strategic failure in terms of advancing his philosophical arguments. Especially in *Gharbzadegi*, Al-e Ahmad lessened or traded some of the universal philosophical implications of his own work for language that was more tactically useful in the immediate national context.

But it is worth pausing to evaluate the new “native authenticity,” as Dabashi puts it, that Al-e Ahmad conjured. Like his reimagining of the conceptual geography of “the West,” even if that too slid inexorably in later use back into simplistic geo-cultural language, Al-e Ahmad embarks on a radically peculiar version of what Dabashi calls “native authenticity.” As I remarked above in my discussion of Boroujerdi’s reading of Al-e Ahmad, Al-e Ahmad himself did not trade in the typical tropes and arguments of native authenticity, explicitly critiquing his contemporaries who did call for a “retreat into the depths of our ancient ways, our national and

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religious traditions” and labeling them as *gharbzadeh*. And yet, as Dabashi notes, there is something different concerning authenticity in Al-e Ahmad and this difference is crucial for coming to a fully nuanced understanding of Al-e Ahmad’s *gharbzadegi*.

Dabashi posits this authenticity as reaching into history and reconstructing an ‘authentic native identity’ out of an ahistorical amalgamation, à la all forms of recognizable ethno- or religious-nationalism. This kind of amalgamation is doubly ironic as it is usually constructed from imagined ‘traditional’ elements, themselves only newly recognized through the lens of the modern discourses of history, tradition and development. But Al-e Ahmad explicitly condemns this kind of thinking, even more so later in his chapter “Asses in Lion’s Skin or Lion on the Flag” (*khari dar poost-e shir ya shir-e elm*). Part of Dabashi’s focus on the more commonplace ethno-nationalist reading of *gharbzadegi* comes from the fact that he is both interpreting Al-e Ahmad and situating him in the development of radical Islamist political history both in Iran and globally, i.e. reading how *gharbzadegi* came to be used in the wake of Al-e Ahmad’s text. This historical contextualization causes him to focus on the “xenophobic maladies” of the “Truly Islamic or Genuinely Iranian” and particularly on the use of the term *gharbzadegi* by Khomeini and Khomeinists. It is undeniably true that the term *gharbzadegi* and the accusation of being *gharbzadeh* became enduring and indeed foundational aspects of Islamism in Iran (and beyond), to the point where Dabashi can safely claim that “no other term than ‘Westoxication’ has been the singular source of so much calamitous consequences in

235 Al-e Ahmad, *Occidentosis*, 78; *Gharbzadegi*, 59.

236 Al-e Ahmad, *Gharbzadegi*, 81; *Occidentosis*, 92. Alternatively: “An Ass in Lion’s Skin.” I think it is underemphasized in the existing literature how obviously this chapter is not only an explanation of the *gharbzadeh* character but also a thinly veiled, as-direct-as-possible criticism of Mohammad Reza Shah.
contemporary Iranian history.”\textsuperscript{237} However while, as Dabashi points out, Al-e Ahmad’s empirical and theoretical shortcomings in some ways allowed or invited some of these historical developments, the “Truly Islamic or the Genuinely Iranian” was not part of Al-e Ahmad’s own critique of gharbzadegi. In fact, Al-e Ahmad’s work was influential enough that within his own lifetime he heard these kinds of amplifications and distortions of what he wrote in Gharbzadegi and found them disturbing. In Khassi dar Miqat, there is a recurring vignette in which Al-e Ahmad encounters a Pakistani mullah preaching on gharbzadegi. After being a bit astonished and self-deprecating (calling it his “nonsense” [cherundiat]), his reaction is highly wary: even when the preacher was saying things closely related to some of his ideas, Al-e Ahmad quipped, “there was something about it I didn’t like.”\textsuperscript{238} Khassi dar Miqat, a travel diary and series of reflections on the Hajj, is a far more literary text than Gharbzadegi.\textsuperscript{239} At one point Al-e Ahmad even tries, and fails, to engage the man in conversation late in the text. But here the only other note Al-e Ahmad includes before moving on is a fond recollection of and negative comparison to Sayyid Jamal al Din Asadabadi, i.e. Afghani, the famed Islamic modernizer of the late nineteenth century.

But if it is clear that hewing to tradition is a symptom of, rather than a solution to gharbzadegi, exactly what is this theory of authenticity that is at work in the notion of gharbzadegi? It was not, in the end, a “new native authenticity.” Rather, gharbzadegi is a critique of inauthenticity that manages to avoid conjuring a specified authentic being by centering its discussions on self-knowledge, by taking a largely epistemological stance in

\textsuperscript{237} Dabashi, Post-Orientalism, 258.

\textsuperscript{238} Al-e Ahmad, Lost in the Crowd, 18; Khassi dar Miqat, 28.

\textsuperscript{239} See my discussion of Khassi dar Miqat in chapter 4.
response to an ontological question: how does what you know correspond to who you are? One of the reasons that “authenticity” is so slippery a concept in reading Gharbzadegi is that Al-e Ahmad is advancing a unique theory of inauthenticity that is not dependent on a performance or assumption of a singular authentic identity. In the next section I will discuss this understanding of gharbzadeh.

**Gharbzadegi: A Question of Self-Knowledge and Consciousness**

In order to understand Al-e Ahmad’s theory of inauthenticity, it is helpful to examine his lengthy description of the gharzbadeh (as Campbell translates, “the occidentotic”) in chapter seven of Gharbzadegi. It is here that Al-e Ahmad finally describes what gharzbadeh actually is: not its signs, not its symptoms, nor its effects or history, but the actual character of the condition.

Al-e Ahmad writes several long paragraphs describing the gharzbadeh. This is the first:

*The occidentotic is a man totally without belief or conviction, to such an extent that he not only believes in nothing, but also does not actively disbelieve in anything... He is a timeserver. Once he gets across the bridge, he doesn’t care if it stands or falls. He has no faith, no aim, no belief, neither in God nor in humanity. He cares neither whether society is transformed or not, nor whether religion or irreligion prevails. He is not even irreligious. He is indifferent. He even goes to the mosque at times, just as he goes to the club or the movies. But everywhere he is only a spectator. It is just as if he had gone to a soccer game. He is always to be seen off in the grandstands. He never invests anything of himself – even to the extent of moist eyes at the death of a friend, attentiveness at a shrine, or reflection in the hours of solitude. In fact, he is not accustomed to solitude at all; he flees it. Because he is in terror of himself, he turns up everywhere. He offers opinions, if it is appropriate, and particularly if it is fashionable to offer opinions, but only to someone from who he hopes to gain some further benefit. Never do you hear from him any outcry or protest, any but why or wherefore. He will explain everything with the utmost gravity and grandiloquence. He will feign optimism.*

From the very beginning of this description, Al-e Ahmad is telling us that gharbzdagei is not about believers and non-believers or about true or false Islam. It is about the inability either to believe or to have conviction. It certainly is not liberal or empirical or utilitarian skepticism that is under attack, as suggested by Boroujerdi, Mirsepassi et al., and which one would expect in a

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240 Al-e Ahmad, Occidentosis, 94; Gharbzadehi, 73.
work inspired by Heideggerian philosophy. The *gharbzadeh* is not irreligious; the *gharbzadeh* lacks the ability to be irreligious. In the place of performance *qua* identity, the *gharbzadeh* has pure performance, performance *qua* performance. It is important to remember that Al-e Ahmad is theorizing in this chapter and elsewhere in the book with two working examples of the *gharbzadeh*: the peasant who has migrated to the city and is unable to understand modernity and can only don its trappings, and the Shah himself, in much the same position, but on the world stage, merely “donning” the jet planes, oil wells and national ceremonies of the modern state. The *gharbzadeh* is not limited to these cases, but both exemplify the ultimately sad and tragicomic nature of the *gharbzadeh*. This is not a person against whom one musters the kind of vitriol associated with takfiri Islamists, attacking the unbeliever or the uncommitted Muslim. The *gharbzadeh* is a rather pathetic figure to be pitied. And crucially, this sadness comes not from his irreligion or from his modernization but from his fundamental incapacity to connect his being with his knowledge. Here, *gharbzadegi* is the disconnect between epistemology and (an uncertain) ontology.\(^241\) Al-e Ahmad is not sketching out the True Iranian or the True Muslim. He is lamenting a condition in which individuals have been anaesthetized and are incapable of commitment, even of some of the basic building blocks of commitment: emotion (“tears”), thought (“reflection”), “attentiveness.” The *gharbzadeh* is atomized and mentally bound.\(^242\)

Al-e Ahmad writes in this section that the *gharbzadeh* seeks, at best, “ease,” and “will do nothing for the sake of anyone else.” He is educated only enough to be able to successfully

\(^{241}\) In chapter 4, I discuss how in *Khassi dar Miqat*, Al-e Ahmad rejects the transparency of self-knowledge and of non-intersubjective self-knowledge.

\(^{242}\) As I discuss at the end of this chapter and more thoroughly in chapter 4, this “mentally bound” status refers to desensitization to aesthetic stimuli and an incapability to process these stimuli into consciousness itself, let alone some sense of ‘critical consciousness.’
execute the performance of an activity, fully incapable of understanding, critiquing or creating.

Al-e Ahmad continues:

_The occidentotic has no character. He is a thing without authenticity. His person, his home and his words convey nothing in particular, and everything in general. It is not that he is a cosmopolitan, that the world is his home. He is at home nowhere rather than everywhere. He is an amalgam of singleness without character and character without singularity._

Does this “thing without authenticity” [chizi bi-ehsalat] imply the kind of authentic thing that animates nationalist or Islamist discourses? Does this “thing without authenticity” imply the kind of nativist authenticity discussed above? Here we see something that can be taken to be the clearest instance of Heideggerian language.\(^{244}\) Campbell’s translation is accurate but in certain respects incomplete. _Ehsalat_ is often used to translate “authenticity” in the very context of translations of Heidegger. But it also moves in several other conceptual directions. It can indicate authenticity in terms of the essential, as those who advocate for the reductive nativist argument propose. It can also indicate authenticity in the sense of originality or of being sui generis in a Nietzschean, self-willed sense. This may seem like a scholastic distinction, but there is actually quite a bit of cognitive distance between the Heideggerian self-realization as becoming-what-you-essentially are and the Nietzschean self-actualization of becoming-what-you-will-to-be.

There is also a further sense of _ehsalat_ as “genuineness,” not in terms of essence but rather quite literally as the opposite of disingenuousness: genuine as in not dissembling, not pretending or posturing. It is this sense, I believe, that most closely expresses the argument Al-e Ahmad is making in this chapter and throughout _Gharbzadegi_. He does not make the case for the Truly

\(^{243}\) Al-e Ahmad, _Occidentosis_, 95; _Gharbzadegi_, 75.

\(^{244}\) Incidentally, nearly all of the critique of Al-e Ahmad’s supposed Heideggerianism is predicated on the question of technology – already addressed here – and on a reading of his call for “authenticity,” which, as I have shown here and will further demonstrate in chapter 4 is, at best, a serious misinterpretation. This section I am discussing is usually only addressed in a completely decontextualized fashion as regards the question of a return to ‘true’ “authenticity.”
Islamic or Purely Iranian. He makes the case against the disingenuous, the case against inauthenticity. However, the consciousness, the willed nature of action implied by dissembling, pretending or posturing, is purposefully absent in Al-e Ahmad’s rendering. The gharbzadeh lacks even the consciousness to understand his posturing. The gharbzadeh is shallow: his “words convey nothing in particular.” Most pointedly, he is not a “cosmopolitan.” To be a cosmopolitan would be to attain a self-possessed consciousness and this is the feature that the gharbzadeh in whatever form he takes – foolish urban dandy, parading nationalist hero, nostalgic traditionalist cleric – most certainly lacks. The gharbzadeh is ultimately a tragicomic figure. S/he is no great apostate, for apostasy is virtue beyond his/her grasp.

There is a moment in this description, particularly in the lines, “he is not accustomed to solitude at all; he flees it. Because he is in terror of himself, he turns up everywhere” which is reminiscent of the early Heidegger writing about das Man [the “they”] in Sein und Zeit. Heidegger writes:

> Everyone is the other, and no one is himself. The “they,” which supplies the answer to the “who” of everyday Dasein, is the “nobody” to whom every Dasein has always already surrendered itself, in Being-among-one-another. In these characteristics of being which we have exhibited—everyday Being-among-one-another, distantiality, averageness, levelling down, publicness, the disburdening of one’s Being, and accommodation—lies that ‘constancy’ of Dasein which is closest to us.245

Although there are superficial similarities between this argument and Al-e Ahmad’s description, it is important to note both the differences between what Al-e Ahmad writes and what Heidegger argues and, more importantly, how these lines on existential terror are something of an aberration in a section that is far less focused Dasein or Being (ontological concerns) than it is on consciousness or unconsciousness (epistemological concerns). Al-e Ahmad does not argue for gharbzadegi as an “averageness” cultivated through “everyone” being “the other.” It is not that

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245 Heidegger, Being and Time, 165-66.
the gharbzadeh becomes average through the “leveling” into “averageness” of interaction amongst the masses. Gharbzadegi is presented as intervening between the gharbzadeh and the rest of the world, including, and especially, “the other.” The gharbzadeh never encounters “the other.” A phantasmagoria of “the West” or of “tradition” – generated through an at least partially external economic-cultural apparatus – blinds, dazzles and stupefies the gharbzadeh. S/he is gharbzadeh through not knowing her fellows, not because of knowing them. This existential terror that Al-e Ahmad expresses is in fact a generic, common existentialist sentiment and one which is not dominant in this description or in Gharbzadegi in general. It is a sentiment which is also operating within a critique of inauthenticity that is neither an expression of “nativism” nor of the anxieties that Heidegger himself would later discuss in terms of technology.

This chapter of Gharbzadegi provides us with clear arrows pointing to its own theoretical framework and heritage. Its primary intellectual antecedent is not Sein und Zeit, Die Frage nach der Technik or Über Die Linie. It is Marx’s Der 18te Brumaire des Louis Napoleon [The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon]. Towards the beginning of the chapter, Al-e Ahmad specifies precisely which kind of people he is talking about. He does so both by the structure of his argument and by painstakingly transliterating Marx’s term: “lumpenproletariat.” The title of chapter seven is Khori dar poost-e shir ya shir-e elm? There are several ways to translate and read this. Campbell chooses the general: “Asses in Lion’s Skin or Lions on the Flag” (Campbell omits the question mark that is present in the original). An alternative translation

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246 The “existential terror” as I describe it here, is also comparable/traceable to Sartre or Camus, both of whom, unlike Heidegger, are actually addressed – and quite warmly – in the book’s final chapter on Europe’s philosophical and literal “existential crisis” vis-à-vis the potential for nuclear warfare.

247 Al-e Ahmad, Occidentosis, 93; Gharbzadegi 72.

248 I mentioned this earlier in my footnote 236.
could read the first part in the singular: “An Ass in Lion’s Skin.” An alternative translation of the second part of the title could read: “Lions of the Flag” or, more simply, “Flag Lions” (or the indefinite, singular versions). The multiple and simultaneous meanings and critiques cannot be overemphasized. 249 There are the general, mass gharbzadeh, “Asses in Lion’s Skin,” wandering about, country bumpkins transported to the city, wearing the newest fashions (including national fashion) and using the latest gadgets as if they were the magical talismans that once protected the itinerant traveler or cured gout, knowing nothing, understanding nothing, incapable of knowing anything or understanding anything. Then there is the simultaneous reading of “An Ass,” one, particular, singular, gharbzadeh ass: the Shah, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, the farce to Reza Khan’s tragedy. An ass who parades as a lion (the ancient national symbol) and who is both led and leads with Lions on the Flag or Flag Lions. These two dimensional phantasms of national legitimacy operate exactly as the “empty watchwords of the old society: property, family, religion, order,” that brought and maintained Louis Napoleon. As Marx writes:

> Every demand of the simplest bourgeois financial reform, of the most ordinary liberalism, of the most formal republicanism, of the most insipid democracy, is simultaneously castigated as an “attempt on society” and stigmatized as “socialism.” And, finally, the high priests of “religion and order” are themselves driven with kicks from their Pythian tripods, hauled out of their beds in the darkness of the night, put in prison-vans, thrown into dungeons or sent into exile, their temple is razed to the ground, their mouths are sealed, their pens broken, their law torn to pieces in the name of religion, property, of family, of order. 250

Add the additional watchword of “nation” to the panoply Marx supplies here, and Marx’s description of the betrayal of 1848 and the rise of Louis Napoleon mirrors Al-e Ahmad’s account, spread throughout the whole of Gharbzadegi, of the betrayal of Mossadeq in 1953 and the rise of Muhammad Reza Shah. The Shah also suppressed religious dissent and commentary

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249 Al-e Ahmad, Occidentosis, 148. Campbell even provides us in his notes with a further potential literary reference to the Musnavi of Rumi, arguing that Al-e Ahmad is referencing the misra [hemistich], “We’re all lions, but sewn to flags.”

under the auspices of official state Shiism. He squandered bourgeois wealth through rampant corruption, nepotism and concession. He presented himself as the Father of the Nation and the bulwark against anarchy and communism. And he did so with a paper-thin nationalism that suppressed actual national resistance, the nation’s security apparatus arrayed exclusively against the nation’s people, all of which was further augmented ignominiously by the fact of the Shah’s installation and maintenance by foreign powers, a bit of imperialist humiliation to compliment the revolutionary failure. Marx describes the peasants who supported Louis Napoleon as possessing nothing more than “mere local interconnection,” begetting “no unity, no national union and no political organization, they do not form a class.” These are the people about whom Marx famously pronounced: “They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented.”

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said linked this notion of representation to Marx’s incredible lacunae when it came to the relationship between colonialism, orientalism and the observable characteristics of “Asiatic” economy and society. As noted earlier Al-e Ahmad – in many ways anticipating the critique that Said would make some decades later – had already posited a fairly damning critique of the kind of orientalism in which Marx’s original “Asiatic mode” commentary had been made. What is so amazing here is that Al-e Ahmad is providing both an explanation to the phenomenon Marx is describing (transposed to Iran) and a companion to what Said would critique in Marx. What Marx has descriptively addressed here, about peasants in France, is linked to his most well-known orientalist observation. Al-e Ahmad addressed this same point critically, describing how these people without unity, organization, politics or characteristics beyond the trivial came to be. Al-e Ahmad, by providing a universal theory – a non-nativist theory, but certainly built from a “native” point of view and utilizing “native” values

251 Ibid, 608.
– pushes a variation on Marxist critique past its orientalist blinders and provides a prelude and companion to Said’s critique, explaining orientalism from the receiving end.  

In the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, Marx gives an account of a lumpenproletariat regime coming to power; bourgeoisie resistance to 1848 “brought the *lumpenproletariat* to domination, with the chief of the Society of December 10 at the head.”  

And of this head, he writes:

> But, above all, Bonaparte looks on himself... as the representative of the lumpenproletariat to which he himself, his entourage, his government and his army belong, and for which the prime consideration is to benefit itself and draw California lottery prizes from the state treasury.  

In the seventh chapter of *Gharbzadegi*, Al-e Ahmad presents this same image as the age of the “occidentotic leader” and the kind of society he brings:

> ... the lumpens from every trade and class customarily come to power – that is the misfits, the idle, those with no will of their own. The most unreliable merchants of the bazaar manage the chamber of commerce. The most idle of the cultural elite are directors of culture. The most bankrupt money changers are the bankers. Either the most lifeless members of society or the most gangsterlike end up as the representatives to the Majlis. The general rule in this land is to give power to the shiftless, the characterless if not the crooked and the depraved.  

The “entourage” of Muhammad Reza Shah is characterized in potentially two ways. First it is characterized, directly parallel to that of Louis Napoleon, as a rising of the lumpenproletariat to positions of power and influence. Or, in a slight but potentially significant difference with

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252 Al-e Ahmad writes: “…orientalism, almost certainly a parasite growing on the root of imperialism, dominates thought and opinion in occidentotic nations. On the subject of Islamic philosophy, the customs of Yogis in India, the prevalence of superstitions in Indonesia, the national character of the Arabs, or any other Eastern subject, the occidentotic regards only Western writings as proper sources and criteria. This is how he comes to know even himself in terms of the language of the orientalist,” i.e. a scholarly discourse wedded to a political hegemony. (*Occidentosis*, 98) Foucault’s critique under the terms of Gramsci, or, in other words, precisely what Said lays out as the theoretical frame in the introduction to Orientalism. I will discuss this in more depth in chapter 4 but this is one of the key areas where Al-e Ahmad, because he is being a good materialist, departs from Marxist doctrine.


254 Ibid., 615.

255 Al-e Ahmad, *Occidentosis*, 93; *Gharbzadegi*, 72.
Marx’s account, it is characterized as accentuating and cultivating the lumpenproletariat qualities from members in various classes. The characteristics of the *gharbzadeh*, including his/her “effete” enslavement to fashion, always ready to parade and consume, are a nearly note-for-note echo of Marx’s description of the “entourage” of Louis Napoleon:

*At the court, in the ministries, at the head of the administration and the army, a crowd of fellows pushes forward, of the best of whom it can be said that no one knows whence he comes, a noisy, disreputable rapacious Boheme that dresses itself in gallooned coats with the same caricature of dignity as the high dignitaries of Soulouque.*

The precursor for the *gharbzadeh* masses and also the *gharbzadeh* elite are, as Al-e Ahmad explicitly indicates, the lumpenproletariat.

As for the Shah himself, Al-e Ahmad writes, just obliquely enough to avert the censor’s gaze:

*Thus our occidentotic leader rides the waves and never comes to rest on solid ground. It is never clear where he stands; he can’t seem to take a stand on any issue or problem. He is bewildered and unsteady.*

The *gharbzadeh* leader is simply also *gharbzadeh*. He is no mastermind, grand ideologue, or even truly great tyrant. His horizons, just like those of his followers, are defined by their

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256 Al-e Ahmad, *Occidentosis* 96; *Gharbzadegi*, 75. Al-e Ahmad writes: “Adam-e gharbzadeh qerti ast.” The exact meaning of “qerti” or “gherti” is difficult to pin down. Campbell does his best in translating it as “effete,” but it also carries connotations of vain, posturing, over-dressed. Haim’s dictionary definition is a terse “effeminate beau” with no further explication. The not-so-subtle hetero- and gender-normativity is clearly present but is, in its own way, another site of consonance between Al-e Ahmad’s theory of the *gharbzadeh* and Marx’s theory of the lumpenproletariat. This consonance is sadly probably more a case of similar patriarchal structures existing in Germany, England and Iran in the time periods in question and less a case of the kind of direct philosophical influence that I have been discussing with the idea of the lumpenproletariat being the true philosophical antecedent to the *gharbzadeh*.

257 Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” *The Marx-Engels Reader* 617. Marx here mocks Louis Napoleon by naming him as “Soulouque,” an illiterate Haitian army general who crowned himself Emperor Faustin the I of Haiti and reigned despotically for several years. Again, the parallels with the Pahlavi dynasty and the notion of the *gharbzadeh* as this particular kind of the “inauthentic” could not be more direct.

258 Ibid., 93; *Gharbzadegi*, 72.
gharbzadeh, just as are Louis Napoleon’s by ultimately being of and for the lumpenproletariat. Marx’s description of Louis Napoleon is similar but goes further:

This contradictory task of the man [being representative of the lumpenproletariat] explains the contradictions of his government, the confusing groping hither and thither which seeks now to win, now to humiliate first one class and then another and arrays all of them uniformly against him, whose practical uncertainty forms a highly comical contrast to the imperious categorical style of the government decrees, a style which is copied obsequiously from the Uncle.

Replace “Uncle” with “Father” and this description, which begins like Al-e Ahmad’s of Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, reads like a rather prescient description by Marx of what would become of the second Pahlavi Shah after Al-e Ahmad’s death. In Al-e Ahmad’s own chapter on “contradictions,” chapter 5, Jang-e tezavha [The War of Contradictions], he explains in detail the “war” that was taking place in Iran to “modernize,” which was instead, in truth, a war on the newly discovered and newly declared “unmodern.” It was a war against the bazaar but for the market, a war against the religious but for religion, it was a war for the nation but against its people.

Al-e Ahmad identifies the gharbzadeh people with that mass of people described by Marx in the Manifesto as:

The “dangerous class”, [lumpenproletariat] the social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of the old society, may, here and there, be swept into the movement by a proletarian revolution; its conditions of life, however, prepare it far more for the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue.

Marx has in mind the criminal underworld, the corrupt, the hopelessly damaged or neglected members of society. He thinks of them as a contested site for ideological manipulation, beyond the reach of class consciousness, which is also to say, beyond the reach of self-


260 Al-e Ahmad, Gharbzadehi, 33; I go into more depth on this fifth chapter of Gharbzadehi at the beginning of chapter 4.

consciousness. But Marx, in his various descriptions of the lumpenproletariat, portrays this non-class mass as either being “thrown off” from the actual working class, or falling off, or merely as an anti-social given, perhaps naturally occurring. This is where the theory of gharbzadegi and the theory of the lumpenproletariat diverge. This is another place where Al-e Ahmad is expanding upon Marx, just as he explicitly claimed to be doing when he attempted to redefine the East/West dynamic.

Gharbzadegi is a mode of false consciousness. But it is a particularly damning mode of false consciousness in that it erodes self-consciousness of any kind, even the ‘standard’ false consciousness of the proletariat. The fully gharbzadeh cannot see themselves as any kind of unit or class, like the lumpenproletariat. Gharbzadegi is the process by which people are turned into fully unconscious beings, beings lacking any sense of or capacity for self-knowledge. It is the process of creating lumpenproletariat and expanding at least the unconsciousness of that sector to the far reaches of society. Like Gramsci and Althusser, Al-e Ahmad, who had already left the Tudeh, is answering what had become by the twentieth century an obvious question in Marxist (and post-Marxist) thinking: why had the revolution not come? Why, in some specific ways, was Marx wrong? While Gramsci pointed to the under-theorized and under-analyzed field of culture and Althusser to the contestation and reproduction of ideology, Al-e Ahmad points to gharbzadegi. He points to the phantasmagorias that do, in fact, originate through imperial exchange and conflict with “the West” as he defined it. One is the phantasmagoria of the happy ‘enlightened’ modern consumer who is completely oblivious to the foundations of the market and the enlightenment. At the same time, Al-e Ahmad also points to the phantasmagoria of the

\[262\] It is crucial for Al-e Ahmad, as I address in chapter 4, to understand the subsequent limits of this kind of knowledge.
traditional ‘Eastern’ religious or national soul – completely oblivious to the idea of the traditional as modern manufacture, to the empty nostalgia of illo tempore.

Gharbzadegi is the performance of modernity without any understanding of what it means to be modern; it is also the performance of tradition without any understanding of what it means to be traditional. When faced with the images of these phantasmagorias, these fantasies, the individual succumbs to gharbzadegi or, to borrow a theoretical formulation from Susan Buck-Morss, the individual experiences “anaesthetics. “ S/he is, in a sense, anesthetized. Her senses – both external and internal – are desensitized to material conditions and replaced with totalizing images of fantasy. Buck-Morss writes:

The human sensorium changes from a mode of being “in touch” with reality into a means of blocking out reality. Aesthetics – sensory perception – becomes anaesthetics, a numbing of the senses’ cognitive capacity that destroys the human organism’s power to respond politically even when self-preservation is at stake.  

This is also how gharbzadegi functions, through the empty images of consumption that Al-e Ahmad describes, “directly upon the bodily senses in order to contain rebellious potential,” but Al-e Ahmad adds the crucial observation for his own case of the additional, material observation of foreign intervention, foreign domination, and foreign production of the images in the first place. Gharbzadegi is then, quite literally, the affliction of being “struck” by “the West”:

Weststruckenness. If it is an intoxication, Westoxification, then it is closer to being punch-drunk than it is to a junkie’s habit. If it is an “infestation,” as Al-e Ahmad writes on the first page, Occidentosis, then it is an infestation of phantasmagoria, not an infection of “Westernism.”

263 Susan Buck-Morss, Dreamworld and Catastrophe, 104.

264 Ibid., 257.
Gharbzadegi’s Ends

There are three artists who are addressed in the bulk of Al-e Ahmad’s final chapter, “The Hour Draws Nigh”: Camus, Ionescu, and Bergman. Al-e Ahmad views Camus’s The Plague as something of a European parallel to Gharbzadegi itself. I would like to focus, however, on his readings of Ionescu’s Rhinoceros and Bergman’s The Seventh Seal. Al-e Ahmad writes of the latter:

A knight has returned from the Crusades, beaten, tired, and dejected. Note carefully! He has returned from the Crusades, during which he was never able to find the Truth, or in the Holy Lands he saw the same things that his European descendants see today in that world victimized by colonialism in the East and Africa but this knight unlike modern Europeans did not come to the East in search of oil, spices, and silk. He came in search of the Truth. The Absolute Truth at that; that is he thought he would find and experience God in the Holy Lands of Palestine. Exactly like the Apostles who, when they thought they had seen God, spread the word of the Gospels to the four corners of the earth... But, instead of Him, he found Satan blocking his path. At times he appeared as an opponent in a game of chess, or as a man of the Church, but always with the face of Azrael, the Angel of Death, who spread the seeds of plague in that land and was now the reaper of men’s souls. At the very time when this knight was returning from his pursuit of the Truth, tired and battered, the Church was ranting about the torments of hell and promising the Day of Judgement was at hand. This is Bergman’s allusion to the fact the era of faith is over and the era of empirical knowledge has begun.265

I take Al-e Ahmad at his word here. He thinks, with Bergman, that the “era of faith is over”; in relation to Truth, it never began. The Apostles only think they saw God. Besides, what was faith anyway? The knight “was never able to find the Truth,” in Palestine, “he saw the same things that his European descendants see today in that world victimized by colonialism in the East and Africa.” Instead of God or Truth, the knight found the “Satan blocking his path,” “at times he appeared as an opponent in a game of chess, or as a man of the Church,” “but always with the face of Azrael, the Angel of Death, who spreads the seeds of plague in that land and was now the reaper of men’s souls.” The “empirical knowledge” that the knight found in his journey was that the torments of hell were already at hand. Faith was merely pretending that hell was in a

265 Al-e Ahmad, Plagued by the West, 110-111; I have switched from Campbell to the Sprachman translation here because I find it is slightly more nuanced and closer to the Persian in this particular section.
different world and betraying the knight with promises of the “Day of Judgment.” But without faith, what is that “Day of Judgment,” “the era of belief is at an end and the age of experimentation is at hand; and experimentation leads to the atomic bomb. These are Bergman’s allusions, or at least my interpretation of them.”266 This is one end of history that Al-e Ahmad sees Bergman foretelling.

Al-e Ahmad may not believe (is not, himself, a believer) in faith, but it would be wrong to interpret this section as him saying that he does not believe (does not trust) in experimentation. He is not again science or technology; he is against scientism and mashinzadegi. It is easy to forget that Al-e Ahmad, in his fiction writing and his literary criticism, believes in the virtues of experimentation, of novelty. As noted earlier, Sangi bar Guri itself can be seen as an experiment, the transformation of an end of tradition into something new. There are two ends of humanity that Al-e Ahmad sees these existentialist authors foretelling; he precludes a fatalism towards both by his use of a conditional, “if we don’t reign it in.”267 Reign what in? What must be reigned is is “the machine demon,” read as expansively as possible to include the machine economy: not just the propagation of false consciousness, but the destruction of the conditions in which any self-consciousness itself is possible. Al-e Ahmad is simultaneously commencing and announcing a project: how to fix modernity, not only for the emancipation of Iran from economic and political exploitation and certainly not for the sake of some ontologically superior sense of Being within newly ‘awakened’ Muslims. His critique is a part of a universal project, because modernity itself is already everywhere and the crisis it brings promises global implications.

266 Al-e Ahmad, Plagued by the West, 111.

267 Al-e Ahmad, Occidentosis, 137.
Nuclear annihilation or the only slightly less dramatic “being crushed under the machine” is only one end of the world dominated by mashinzadeh modernity.

Al-e Ahmad describes the other end (of the world, so to speak) via Ionescu’s Rhinoceros:

*The disease is to become a rhinoceros. First one develops a fever. Then one's voice changes, becomes thick and coarse. Then a horn appears on one's forehead... the skin thickens and so forth. Everyone catches it, the housewife, the corner grocer, the bank manager, someone's sweetheart, and all take to the streets and trample city, civilization, and beauty. Of course, I need not translate the work to convey what the author is saying. But I have been thinking about translating this play into Persian since I first read it, indicating in the margins how our fellow urbanites [Tehrans in the original to be precise] are headed further toward becoming rhinoceroses by the day.*

The atom bomb may be the more dramatic of the two ends, but in many ways this end is the more important for understanding the actual content of Al-e Ahmad’s project, as opposed to the scope. The “disease” in question in Rhinoceros is “like occidentosis.” Gharbzadegi can become mashinzadegi if modernization is misunderstood as a project of progress, from one stage to the next. The horror here is not contemplating apocalypse in the face of the non-existence of any other world. The horror here is contemplating two kinds of ‘hardening.’ First, the hardening of social conditions, of both the gharbzadeh and the mashinzadeh. This hardening is to freeze in time current conditions forever, which is terrible enough for Ionescu in Europe and even more frightening for Al-e Ahmad in Iran; this would be to preserve the shape and the injustice of what I called in my first chapter “the uneven geometry of modernity.” The second kind of hardening is of subjective experience itself. To continue from the discussion of anaesthetics, to be gharbzadeh for too long requires the hardening of the body: the end of the possibility for anything but the reproduction of phantasmagoria. It is not merely self-alienation (understood in

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268 Ibid.
269 Ibid, 136.
270 Ibid.
Marxist, not an existentialist fashion) but here, at the end, as Al-e Ahmad would have it, it is a desperately expansive hardening against “beauty and poetry, spirit and humanity.”

Just as there are multiple valences for *gharbzadegi*, so there are for *mashinzadegi*. Up until now I have largely focused on the definition closest to the most productive reading of *gharbzadegi*—that is, to be “struck” by a phantasmagoria of “the West” is akin to being “struck” by alienated, mystified, and fetishized “technology.” But perhaps when contemplating Al-e Ahmad’s reading of Ionescu, I should employ the notion of being “afflicted” or “stricken” by “technology” as opposed to dazzled by it. The hardening of the rhinoceros skin becomes understandable in a different way, then. To understand this we must return again to Jünger. Bullock is not the only scholar who saw in Jünger some “points of convergence” with Benjamin; Buck-Morss also draws on Jünger in “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics,” in bringing us the idea to compliment the hardening image, from Jünger’s *Uber den Schmerz* [Concerning Pain], that “technology is our uniform.”

> Jünger connects this changed perspective with photography, that "artificial eye" which "arrests the bullet in flight just as it does the human being at the instant of being torn to pieces by an explosion." The powerfully prosthetic sense organs of technology are the new "ego" of a transformed synaesthetic system. Now they provide the porous surface between inner and outer, both perceptual organ and mechanism of defense. Technology as a tool and a weapon extends human power—at the same time intensifying the vulnerability of what Benjamin called "the tiny, fragile human body"—and thereby produces a counter-need, to use technology as a protective shield against the "colder order" that it creates.

One need only recall Jünger’s writings I quoted earlier on the “storm of steel” and the “stamp of metal” amongst the noble and heroic airmen. There is a beginning here of how we can understand the rhinoceros in the sense of a *mashinzadegi* of “being-stricken-with.” Technology has become part of the nature of the being that was once there. But in Jünger’s telling, this is not

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271 Ibid.


273 Ibid.
affliction per se but a wonderful armor. In the period in question, Jünger saw “technology… as the creator of a renewed order of heroic authority with a new place for art in its service.” As Buck-Morss notes, this individual transformation mirrors a social transformation. This would bridge then, the two levels of ‘hardening’ I discussed above in terms of Al-e Ahmad. As Jünger states in Uber den Schmerz, “This second and colder consciousness manifests itself in progressively sharper development of a capacity to see oneself as an object.” This is the basis of the “heroism” in Storm of Steel when Jünger reveled in his ability to see “the dead,” “without horror”; he was seeing them as object. This is, as I discussed in chapter 1, precisely the demand that scientistic naturalism makes today, not in the name of heroic overcoming of the self, but in the name of reductive ontology. Consider Daniel Dennett for example, announcing: “I declare my starting point to be the objective, materialistic, third-person world of the physical sciences.” Dennett proposes that much of philosophy is “folk psychology” to be taken as seriously as “folk physics,” i.e. that we have no reason to take seriously anything but the falsifiable and reproducible results of the natural sciences. The effect is the same as Bullock describes of Jünger’s in Uber dem Schmerz, “From the point of view of human happiness as we ordinarily understand it, and the avoidance of human pain, this notion is quite appalling. The values of the entire tradition of rationality are rejected. The distinction between positive and

274 Bullock, The Violent Eye, 26.


276 Daniel Dennett, The Intentional Stance, 5.

277 Ibid., 11. I unfortunately do not have the space to adequately address this here. I return to this theme in my conclusion.
negative contents of experience is dismantled in favor of the contrary sovereignty constituted by
the negation of those forces as powers over it.”\textsuperscript{278}

There is a tightrope which Al-e Ahmad tries to walk in preserving the dialectic necessity
of the co-determination of individuals and community without putting forth a positive proposal
of either or dissolving one into the other. This is not a question of the transcendent subject but of
actually existing human beings, representatives of what, as we briefly saw in Buck-Morss’
argument above, Benjamin called “the tiny, fragile human body.” Jünger writes in \textit{Uber den
Schmerz} that “the world of the individual who takes pleasure or bemoans himself is behind us”;
he would come to revisit and rethink his ideas about technology later in life, but \textit{this} would
always be his point of view. Thus he couched even his rejection of Nazism as a rejection of a
modern intoxicant that plays upon human weaknesses—that is, the very possibility to feel
pleasure and pain. Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin too viewed fascism as playing on pleasure, the
“aestheticization of politics,”\textsuperscript{279} but did not see the solution in rendering individuals as affectless
objects-in-the-world. To read Al-e Ahmad’s conclusion is to understand that this is part of the
problem.

Buck-Morss draws this phrase, “the tiny, fragile human body,” from Benjamin’s article,
“The Storyteller.” Benjamin writes:

\begin{quote}
\textit{With the [First] World War a process began to become apparent which has not halted since then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent – not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? What ten years later was poured out in the flood of war books was anything but experience that goes from mouth to mouth. And there was nothing remarkable about that. For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{278} Bullock, \textit{The Violent Eye}, 108.

\textsuperscript{279} I explore this more fully in the next chapter.
Following the First World War, a Benjamin describes a “process,” which had begun, a process Jalal Al-e Ahmad called, with many of the same formulations, mashinzadegi. And both Benjamin and Al-e Ahmad saw the purpose of their inquires as, in part, addressing the horror of this condition. This is one of the major vertices upon which Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin converge. I say converge because this also corresponds to the observations I have examined in Jünger, but his project is wholly alien. For Jünger does not see this as the impoverishment of experience but precisely its opposite: “Time only strengthens my conviction that it was a good and strenuous life, and that the war, for all its destructiveness, was an incomparable schooling of the heart.”

We do not need Benjamin’s article on “Theories of German Fascism” or his line here about “the flood of war books” to know that Jünger is not nearly as free as he proclaims himself to be. His freedom is an illusion, to prop up an alienated, diminishing ego with the Idea of freedom in the face of unfreedom. He has to not-see “the dead”. His “schooling of the heart” corresponds to a disability in the “eye of the heart” that Al-e Ahmad will bring up in Khassi dar Miqat. Jünger may not “aestheticize politics” in a direct way, but his is an aesthetic of war, an anaesthetic.

Buck-Morss draws her idea of anaesthetics from several of Benjamin’s writings in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” and The Arcades Project, among others. Both Benjamin and Al-e Ahmad had, as part of a critique and extension of Marxist analysis, come upon similar “languages” to the “same question.” Jünger, it turns out, is the proof text of a very different comparison. In this chapter, I

280 Benjamin, Illuminations, 84.

281 Junger, Storm of Steel, 1929 preface.
have analyzed and come to understand how to read *Gharbzadegi/gharbzadegi*. I have also here, through Buck-Morss’ conception of *anaesthetics*, seen one way in which Al-e Ahmad’s *Gharbzadegi* might be viewed in light of some of Benjamin’s observations. In the next chapter, I explore how and why Benjamin came to these ideas and why they are so analogous.
Chapter 3: Pereat Mundus? Anaesthetics and Epistemology

Introduction

“‘Fiat ars– pereat mundus,’ says Fascism…” This phrase proves quite slippery. In “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics,” Susan Buck-Morss translates it in a footnote as: “Create justice, transform the world.” In this translation, Buck-Morss preemptively recapitulates her argument from The Dialectics of Seeing that the silent shadow commentary to Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels [The Origin of German Tragic Drama] is a worldly, particularly Jewish and kabbalistic counter-argument to “the Baroque concept of Christian redemption” that “stood opposed to both nature and history.” This argument is that kabbalistic thought provided an alternative to the philosophical antimonies of not only Baroque Christian theology but also subjective idealism, its secular Enlightenment form. Specifically, Kabbalism avoided the split between spirit and matter which had resulted in the Baroque dramatists’ “treacherous” abandonment of nature and it rejected the notion that redemption was an antimaterial, otherworldly concern.


283 This is Buck-Morss’ translation from “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics.”

284 Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings Volume 4, 283; Gesammelte Schriften 1:3, 1055


286 Buck-Morss, The Dialectics of Seeing, 229. Incidentally, this translation is perfectly in line with Benjamin’s admonition in “The Task of the Translator” that the “language of a translation” must “give voice to the intentio of the original not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself, as its own kind of intentio.” (Benjamin, Illuminations, 79) The ‘harmonic voice’ of the translator here, reads the creative as opposed to other-worldly possibilities in this old imperial motto.

I will return later in this chapter to Buck-Morss’ use of the term “Kabbalism” here via the question of Benjamin’s engagement with kabbalistic thought. What I want to focus on for now is the way in which these observations translate what can be, and most frequently is, a particular motto (that is, *fiat iustitia et pereat mundus*) from an expression of a rigid, other- or anti-worldly deontological morality (“let there be justice, though the world perish”; that is, let there be static and already-given justice, even if the actually-existing world is destroyed) into a creative, contingent and yet still recognizably moral morality. Benjamin argues that justice must already include recognition of the epistemic limitations of being a part of the material world and modes of interpretation that are oriented toward the “redemption” of objects in the world. Buck-Morss’ translation not only incorporates her argument from *The Dialectics of Seeing* but also Benjamin’s play on it at the end of “The Work of Art…” It fuses the creativity of artistic practice with the creativity of interpretive practice as always set against the concept of Christian / secular redemption.

This is not to say that Buck-Morss’ translation is at all unfair or even exceptionally loose; the original Latin phrase provides a great deal of hermeneutic flexibility. Kant, famously, rendered it as, “Let justice rule on earth, although all the rogues in the world should go to the bottom.” This particular harmony incidentally provides some support for Buck-Morss’ contention about the connection or even equation between Christian other-worldliness and subjective idealism. I dwell on this motto here for two reasons. First, it is the jumping-off point

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288 In the next chapter, I expand on the seemingly simultaneity of these propositions, although Benjamin’s rejection of the Platonic conception of both truth and knowledge can be viewed clearly as early in the period I am focusing on as the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” to *Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels* [The Origin of German Tragic Drama].


290 See my footnote 286 in this chapter.
for Buck-Morss’ exploration of the concept of “anaesthetics,” which I argued in the last chapter is also part and parcel of an understanding of Al-e Ahmad’s critique of gharbzadegi. Second, this particular tension, between an other-worldly idealism and an active, this-worldly, creative, pursuit and construction of justice, is also, as Farzin Vadhat claims, “at the heart” of Al-e Ahmad’s critique of Shiism and, as I argue, more broadly, from there,\(^{291}\) his style of a materially and temporally grounded, organic thought that is still, in some way, universalizable.

In chapter 2, I described how Al-e Ahmad has been largely misunderstood and mischaracterized in much of the secondary literature about him. Furthermore, I argued that he was in fact engaged in a kind of post-Marxist critique that sought to understand several fundamental flaws in Marxist theory, most importantly the question of how the lumpenproletariat are produced and reproduced, and the attendant place/role of localized historical conditions in those processes. I claimed that the theory of gharbzadegi is largely concerned with this very question and is in many ways a response to and commentary addition upon Marx’s 18\(^{th}\) Brumaire of Louis Napoleon. Finally, I noted that the contours of the critique of gharbzadegi are similar to those that Walter Benjamin identified in his own critique/addition in regard to Marxism. The issue that both of these authors are addressing is the one that Susan Buck-Morss has called “anaesthetics,” a matrix of cognitive-sensory effects upon, within, and through human subjects in modern conditions. Although over the course of this chapter and the next I will perform several of my own readings of Benjamin and address a number of his commentators, I am building my arguments concerning Benjamin largely on the foundation of Buck-Morss’ reading of Benjamin – particularly in the *Dialectics of Seeing* (1991) and several articles. I do this for several reasons. I find her account of Benjamin’s work – which takes into account the entirety of

\(^{291}\) That is to say, Al-e Ahmad brings a question of geography and uneven development into the critique.
his output as well as historical context—among the most thorough and plausible readings of Benjamin and his oeuvre. Additionally, in hewing close to Benjamin’s own materialist, “theological,” and textual commitments—and not eliding these—her reading proves particularly resonant with this dissertation. That said, in this chapter and the next I am augmenting, modifying, and disputing several elements of Buck-Morss’ reading; indeed, part of the purpose of this form of comparative philosophical reading I am performing is to help elucidate and highlight elements of a thinker that may have been overlooked or unconsidered in previous renderings.

In this chapter, I will proceed dialectically from the starting point of “anaesthetics.” First, I begin with a brief discussion of Al-e Ahmad and roshanfekri [enlightenment292] that helps to connect much of the discussion of Benjamin below to my discussion of Al-e Ahmad in chapter 2 as well as to set up the parallels, convergences, and divergences which are the subject of my fourth and final chapter. In addressing the phenomenon that Buck-Morss describes as “anaesthetics,” Benjamin and Al-e Ahmad both present materialist arguments that include an engagement with religious practices as necessitated by materialist concerns.293 The primary topic of this chapter is how we should understand the close relationship between Benjamin’s most recognizably material concerns—the effect of material conditions on the sensory capacities of human bodies—with his seemingly esoteric concerns with Talmudic and kabbalistic interpretation. In order to address this topic, I must first explore how Buck-Morss constructs the concept of “anaesthetics” and how she connects it to Benjamin’s interest in Jewish practice. To do this requires addressing some of the most basic elements of Benjamin’s philosophy and

292 I will give a more thorough account of how roshanfekri can be understood in the next section.

293 These are, of course, different due to all the conditions discussed in chapter 1 and I address their differences in chapter 4.
methodology. I also attempt to elucidate Benjamin’s views of the kabbalah. Not only have these positions often obscured Benjamin’s other interests in Jewish practices and concepts, but they can appear to conflict directly with his stated anti-Neoplatonic positions. Finally, in order to discuss aspects of the broader Judaic contours of Benjamin’s thought, in terms of understanding his interest in *agaddah and halachah* and the difference between the ‘messianic’ and ‘apocalyptic,’ I address what I called in my introduction “The Critique of Violence School” of Benjamin interpretation, which has quite successfully obscured and confused these important contours and distinctions.

**Enlightenment and Roshanfekri**

Vadhat writes:

> At the heart of three related dilemmas that Al-e Ahmad never managed to resolve completely was the failure, indeed the inability, of secular movements to disseminate *rushanfekri* [enlightenment], as he called the universalization of empowerment. Secular ideologies could not penetrate the depth of the social universal, he maintained, as Iranian history had proven time and again... But at the same time, Al-e Ahmad found religion to be the greatest obstacle to disseminating *rushanfekri*. In particular he criticized the Shiite expectation of justice (*intizar*) upon the advent of the promised Imam...  

In other words, Shiism contained elements of both Christian other-worldliness and immanent, materialist critique. However, unlike Shariati, who would present this as an easy and obviously solvable problem, Al-e Ahmad saw that part of Shiism’s ‘success,’ at least in terms of its historical colonial resistance, was based in part on the very clerical intransigence and obscurantism that he wanted to critique.

> As Hamid Dabashi notes in *Theology of Discontent* and as Vadhat echoes, Al-e Ahmad began *Dar Khedmat va Khianat Roshenfekran* [On the Service and Treason of the Intellectuals]

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in the wake of the failed clerical revolution of 1963 – which, among other things, resulted in the subsequent exile of Ayatollah Khomeini. As Vadhat explains, Al-e Ahmad’s dilemma was twofold:

... on the one hand, he found clerics “ineligible” to become “indigenous” intellectuals and therefore political leaders of the nation because they, like members of the military, belonged to the realm of “obedience” (ta‘abd.)

This is to say that in addition to the devastating but primarily socio-historical critique of “traditionalism” he had already performed in Gharbzadegi, Al-e Ahmad was lodging a formal, philosophical and political critique as well: namely, that the structure both of the thought and of the organization of the Shiite clergy was not conducive to roshanfekri. Al-e Ahmad’s particular characterization of roshanfekri does not map one-to-one with “Enlightenment.” Vadhat notes that Al-e Ahmad defined roshanfekri partially as the “dissemination of free-thinking and the freedom to ask questions” in opposition to previous epistemic forms that relied on authoritarian “command” structures. This seems remarkably similar to a straight adaptation of the famous Kantian line that “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed nonage. Nonage is the inability to use one’s own understanding without another’s guidance.” However – and this seems to be a moment where Vadhat overlooks the Gramscian connection – this roshanfekri (literally “bright-thinking” or “enlightened-thinking,” that is to say, an activity), unlike the Kantian equivalent and clearly incorporating the historical revision of the Kantian project that began with Hegel and continued through Marx and others, is always contingent in its performance, form, and content on the historical conditions required to produce it. For Al-e Ahmad, ahistorical roshanfekri is literally impossible.

295 Al-e Ahmad, Dar Khedmat va Khianat Roshenfekran, 243; Vadhat, 118.
This epistemological commitment, in addition to considerations of political efficacy which Vadhat and others emphasize, led Al-e Ahmad to his paradoxical relationship and engagement with Shiism. As Vadhat continues:

_On the other hand, he believed that “by virtue of its defense of tradition, the Shiite clergy” was not only a “resistance force against the encroachments of colonialism whose primary target for pillaging is cultural and traditional,” but also “a bulwark against the Westoxication of intellectuals and the absolute submission of government to the West and its imperialism.”_

So Al-e Ahmad is left with the dilemma: Shiite clerics by their philosophical and political nature block the possibility of roshanfekri while they seem, simultaneously, somewhat unique in their ability to resist certain aspects of foreign economical, political and cultural imperialism.

Furthermore, as becomes evident in _Khassi dar Miqat_ [Lost in the Crowd] and _Sangi bar Guri_ [A Stone on a Grave], this dilemma not only apply to clerics, but concerns Shiism and Islam more broadly. It contains within it both the revolutionary potential and the reactionary impulse.

Vadhat accurately presents Al-e Ahmad’s “dilemmas” as “unresolved,” but there is at least one proposition upon which Al-e Ahmad insists, in terms of clerics and politics:

...if clerics decided to participate in sociopolitical movements, they would have to abandon their idea of government based on revelation or else refrain from political activity altogether.299

Although Al-e Ahmad never gives the concept of ‘religion’ the kind of explicit critique he performs in _Gharbzadegi_ upon the concept of the ‘traditional,’ he continues in _Dar Khedmat va Khianat Roshanfekran_ an extended and ultimately unfinished critique of religion. The critique starts with this particular admonition – the separation of revelation from politics – and extends to the conclusion of his Meccan travelogue _Khassi dar Miqat_, where he proposes what I read as the

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297 Vadhat, 121; Al-e Ahmad, _Dar Khedmat va Khianat Roshanfekran_, 255.

298 I give an extensive reading of the title of _Khassi dar Miqat_ in my fourth chapter; “Lost in the Crowd” is the title of the English translation by John Greene.

299 Vadhat, 121; Al-e Ahmad, _Dar Khedmat va Khianat Roshanfekran_ 271.
separation of a specific kind of ‘faith,’ that is, a ‘certain faith,’ from ‘religion.’ There he introduces the idea of religion without this kind of “faith,” a religion of “question marks.” This unfinished critique, as I’ve called it, is not merely incomplete; its trajectories are also unresolved. I will return to the question of this critique later in this chapter and also in chapter 4. For the moment, however, I will return to the discussion of “anaesthetics”.

**Anaesthetics and Benjamin**

I argued in the previous chapter that in *Gharbzadegi*, Al-e Ahmad was addressing one of the same primary concerns as do certain works of Benjamin: namely, an answer to the question of how certain material conditions, including economic, political, intellectual and psychological conditions, work upon people in different varieties of advanced capitalist economies to produce what amount to lumpenproletariat subjects, how specific varieties of phantasmagoria literally desensitize people. This is *one* of the areas Marx had overlooked, and also potentially one of the

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300 Al-e Ahamd, *Khassi dar Miqat*, 178-179; *Lost in the Crowd*, 122-123. I think, alongside but perhaps even above many of the sections of *Gharbzadegi* that I discussed in the previous chapter, this section of *Khassi dar Miqat* is Al-e Ahmad’s greatest and most unique contribution to philosophical questions of the relationship between epistemology and ontology, morality and the world, and therefore, philosophy and religion. I will explore this section in full detail towards the end of this chapter.

301 Scholem remarks in *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship* that the 18th Brumaire was for a long time the only text of Marx that Benjamin had read and that it remained the central text of Marx (if not of all Marxist thought) for Benjamin in his Marxist works. This statement is patently inaccurate in many senses. One merely need note the extensive set of notes on and citations from Marx’s oeuvre that permeate Benjamin’s work from a fairly early period, starting after the completion of the *Trauerspiel* which itself contains a number of discussions of Lukács’ work (Benjamin was reading Lukács during the composition of the *Trauerspiel* and beginning the conversations with Adorno and Asja Lacis that I will discuss later in the chapter). However, the *gist*, if you will, of Scholem’s comment has some merit: the 18th Brumaire clearly remained one of Benjamin’s primary touchstones where Marx was concerned, just as it did for Al-e Ahmad. This is most evident in the *Arcades Project* itself which turns so much upon the era of Louis Napoleon, Baron Haussmann, and so forth. As Buck-Morss has argued in *The Dialectics of Seeing*, regarding the 18th Brumaire, Benjamin, and Marx’s acknowledgement of the “role of images”: “So close is Benjamin to Marx’s own formulation that the fact that these passages are missing from the *Passagen-Werk* material must come as a surprise. Benjamin includes other passages from the 18th Brumaire, while leaving this discussion (which occurs at the very beginning of Marx’s text) unacknowledged. That the omission was accidental is unlikely. Rather, it suggests Benjamin realized that although his arguments paralleled those of Marx, they did not coincide.” (*The Dialectics of Seeing*, 123) However, even a cursory reading of explicit references in a piece like “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire” demonstrates Benjamin’s familiarity with the full range of Marx’s writing, from the at the time relatively recently discovered *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* to Capital itself.
answers to the post-WWI and -WWII question as to why Marx was, in some specific ways, wrong. This move in Benjamin has been best characterized, by Buck-Morss, as a critique of “anaesthetics.” Before moving further in my discussion of Benjamin and Al-e Ahmad’s different approaches to this conceptual problem, I think it worthwhile to spend some time understanding both how Buck-Morss defines the concept, comes to analyze it, and also how Benjamin formulated the ideas and work that led Buck-Morss to fashion the category in the first place.

Although Buck-Morss begins “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics” with Benjamin’s comments on the Fascist aestheticization of politics vs. the Communist politicization of aesthetics, the actual architecture she creates for the concept of “anaesthetics” rests on two foundations. The first is a location, both empirical and philosophical, of the “senses” as firmly ensconced within the material, biological human being. I also term this location philosophical because Buck-Morss is careful to avoid the trap of neuro-scientistic reduction of the human senses to merely the functioning of neurons, organs, etc. The biological realities constitute – indeed, must constitute – some part of the foundation for a philosophy of the senses, for aesthetics, but they do not constitute the limits of that philosophy. And beginning with the biological fact is not merely to be an ideologically ‘good’ materialist. Nor is it merely to write correctively against both Cartesian dualism and the anti-sensual in Kant. It also reconnects the question of “aesthetics” – so successfully abstracted from the sensual by Kant in the *Critique of Judgement* – with the senses themselves, as activities and effects of bodies which are fragile, manipulable, and which mediate between a bodily world and a sensory world, as opposed to linking a sensory world to an intellectual world.

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The second foundation is a story built upon the first: “Walter Benjamin’s understanding of modern experience is neurological.” This statement comes in relation to Benjamin’s discussion of the poetry of Baudelaire, its reception, and the audience it seemed to anticipate unconsciously, in his work on the poet. In this discussion, as Buck-Morss notes, Benjamin enters into one of his longest engagements with the work of Freud. However, he only does this after dismissing an entire early twentieth century philosophical phenomenon:

Since the end of the last century, philosophy has made a series of attempts to lay hold of the “true” experience as opposed to the kind that manifests itself in the standardized, denatured life of the civilized masses. It is customary to classify these efforts under the heading of a philosophy of life. Their point of departure, understandably enough, was not man’s life in society. What they invoked was poetry, preferably nature, and, most recently, the age of myths.

This is perfectly in line with Benjamin’s general disposition towards the early existentialist philosophers, particularly Heidegger. For Benjamin, the “true” being, as in a “true” atomic self or even a self-actualizing, autonomous self, was a ridiculous, ahistorical myth, and, he pointed out, one that had ended most recently with the universalizing mythological magical thinking of “Klages and Jung,” who, not coincidentally, “made common cause with

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303 Here I mean “story” as in a story in a building or other structure, much the way Simmel discusses his social theories as being a “story” below Marxism in the architectural sense.

304 Ibid., 16.

305 Benjamin, Illuminations, 156.

306 In an exchange with Gershom Scholem, Benjamin once wrote: “An essay (originally held as a lecture when he received the venia legendi in Freiburg) on "Das Problem der historischen Zeit" [The Problem of Historical Time] has appeared in the last or next to last issue of the Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik, and documents precisely how this subject should not be treated. An awful piece of work, which you might, however, want to glance at, if only to confirm my suspicion, i.e. that not only what the author says about historical time (and which I am able to judge) is nonsense, but that his statements on mechanical time are, as I suspect, also askew.” The lecture in question was Heidegger’s inaugural lecture at Freiburg, July 27, 1915. (Benjamin, Correspondence, 81-83)

307 Carl Jung, the psychoanalyst, and Ludwig Klages, the philosopher. In one of his many attempts at a proposed organization for the Passagenwerk, Benjamin entitles one entire prospective section as “Polemic against Jung, who wants to distance awakening from dream.” (The Arcades Project, 906) Earlier in Convolute K, he discusses Klages: “There is no more insipid and shabby antithesis than that which reactionary thinkers like Klages try to set up between the symbol-space of nature and that of technology.” (The Arcades Project, 390) This distinction is not merely a critical flourish for Benjamin; it is crucial, as I will discuss further in this chapter, for his philosophical
Fascism.” If there was a “true” as in a real to be apprehended, it was precisely in what was in “man’s life in society” and perhaps among some of the “standardized, denatured life of the civilized masses.”

This dismissal sets the stage for a friendly engagement with Jung’s teacher, Freud. Drawing on *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Benjamin writes, “In Freud’s view, consciousness as such receives no memory traces whatever, but has another important function: protection against stimuli.” This may seem an odd digression in an introduction to a reading of the poetry of Baudelaire, but Benjamin continues, following his discussion of Freud, to make the case explicit: “The question suggests itself how lyric poetry can have as its basis an experience for which the shock experience has become the norm.” Benjamin is deeply aware that he is moving Freud’s insight into “shock” in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* far away from its original context, namely “shell shock” and other war-related neuroses. As Buck-Morss continues:

> Perceptions that once occasioned conscious reflection are now the source of shock-impulses that consciousness must parry. In industrial production no less than modern warfare, in street crowds and erotic encounters, in amusement parks and gambling casinos, shock is the very essence of modern experience.

project to collapse the false antithesis between the “natural” and “human” worlds. It is not that Benjamin does not believe that there are special and unique qualities to humans. Rather, it’s that there is simply only one world and it is the natural world.

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308 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 156.

309 To briefly foreshadow a portion of the coming arguments: as discussed in the previous chapter, this mode of thinking was also a chief object of criticism for Al-e Ahmad. Read together, I would argue that to “retreat into the depths” of “true” being or “true experience,” is to, ironically, in the pursuit for an egoist freedom, construct a Fascist logic and program, a pursuit we should always be “vigilant against.” (Al-e Ahmad, *Gharbzadegi*, 101) It is also worth noting that this is a parallel if slightly different ironic move to the one Adorno and Horkheimer would make later in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.


311 Ibid., 162.

312 Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics.”
Benjamin, Buck-Morss argues here, was making the argument that to understand Baudelaire, we had to reconstitute our sense of the “norm” of the “modern experience” more broadly. In other words, Buck-Morss says through and with Benjamin that the “human sensorium” in modernity is “exposed” to:

...physical shocks that have their correspondence in psychic shock, as Baudelaire’s poetry bears witness. To record the “breakdown” of experience was the “mission” of Baudelaire’s poetry: he “placed shock at the very center of his artistic work.”

This, then, is the second foundation of the “anaesthetic,” the moment where the logic of aesthetics as understood as the interaction between the external world and the bodily senses, of which particularly ‘the arts’ (that is, what had historically been marked as particularly one of the primary objects of aesthetic philosophy) are exemplary, is turned on its head. Instead of an expansion of sensory and hence, simultaneously, cognitive experience, there is a “numbing,” or even damage or destruction of the effects of that nervous system. As she remarks later in the essay, “Beginning in the nineteenth century, a narcotic was made out of reality itself.”

If we can conceptually materialize and historicize the process that Benjamin is describing, and imagine a scene in which, instead of the Kantian abstract universal disembodied critic, a very much embodied critic, in a geography of an intellectual safe and sufficient critical distance were writing – in, say, Iran – we might imagine that this phenomenon would look an awful lot like ghārbzādegī, particularly in its intoxicating or active translation, like being struck by the West. Buck-Morss writes that “Drug addiction is characteristic of modernity. It is the correlate and counterpart to shock.”

Ghārbzādegī addresses within in its multiple valences both the sense of shock and the sense of addiction. It should scarcely be faulted, at least from a

314 Ibid., 21.
materialist point of view, in locating a particular economic (and frequently cartographic) geography that dominates the ways in which power moves along those valences. It is not that “modernity” is happening exclusively in Europe and centrally in Germany and France and then being viewed from afar, but rather that the modern landscape is remarkably different there, and the political, economic, and social forces and their attendant analyses and critiques appear remarkably and understandably inflected with a locality that is absent from their discourse.

However, we should not think of Baudelaire only as the site for critique. Benjamin marks Baudelaire as perhaps an intervention for “emancipation.”315 As Benjamin continues after the “mission” section Buck-Morss cites:

> He [Baudelaire] envisioned blank spaces which he filled in with his poems. His work cannot be merely categorized as historical like anyone else’s, but it intended to be so and understood itself as such.316

As Buck-Morss intimates, there is a connection between this analysis of Baudelaire and Benjamin’s cryptic comments about how Fascism aestheticizes politics while Communism politicizes aesthetics. I think, however, that Benjamin makes the point more or less explicit in this short passage: Baudelaire, a highly unlikely candidate for this role, is (perhaps not at all consciously) politicizing aesthetics by having “cushioned” the shock even while rendering the modern, urban conditions that are characterized by shock. In this way, he does not overwhelm the senses so much as it help them come to grips with the norms of the conditions those senses,

315 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 162. Here Benjamin anticipates Althusser’s parallel move nearly forty years later when he writes in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” almost as an aside, that “Ideological State Apparatuses may be not only the stake, but also the site of class struggle, and often of bitter forms of class struggle.” (Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, 147) Benjamin and Al-e Ahmad, both writing before Althusser, have, in fact, a far more sophisticated view of the general interconnections beyond the state, through culture, of all of what Marx would call “superstructure” and also of the generalizability of the model of class struggle to other forms of struggles against marginalization.

316 Ibid.
and the self they are ensconced within, exist in. This ‘cushioning’ does not harden human subjects to the “shocks of modern life,” but actually helps subjects understand and experience them, as these shocks, like everything else for Benjamin, have a messianic double: in this case, a shock that can effect a realignment of consciousness, even if for but a moment. Although Baudelaire comes up short in some ways for Benjamin, it is important to note that in Baudelaire there is something of the revolutionary, that is to say, messianic possibility that would later come to define Benjamin’s philosophy of history.

It is helpful to remember that Benjamin at one point intended the essays on Baudelaire (which later were separated from the mass of the material and became “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century”) as the introduction to The Arcades Project, as a kind of prologue and theoretical musing to set the stage for the staggering work to come. This, Benjamin states in a 1935 letter to Adorno, is much akin to the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” to the Trauerspiel study. In his letter, Benjamin writes that the Trauerspiel prologue will be much like the Baudelaire material in that “the self-contained exposition of the epistemological premises followed their probative formulation in the material itself, the same will be the case here.”317 Furthermore, Benjamin does not merely indicate a parallel but in fact a connective harmony between all these works:

Moreover, in a way surprising even to me, the analogies between this book and the Baroque book [the Trauerspiel] now emerge far more clearly than at any earlier stage of the plan. You must allow me to see this as an especially significant confirmation of the process of remelting by which the whole mass of ideas, originally driven by metaphysics, has reached a state of aggregation in which the world of dialectical images is secured against any objections provoked by metaphysics.318

317 Benjamin, Selected Writings Vol. 3, 51.

318 Ibid., 52.
The major works, the *Trauerspiel* and the *Passagenwerk*, are not merely shown to be analogous through the Baudelaire exposé. The 1935 exposé, which Benjamin is sending to Adorno for his review has ‘confirmed’ an original “mass of ideas,” formulated and “driven,” by “metaphysics,” through a “process of remelting,” and has reached a “state of aggregation,” containing so many “dialectical images,” that “objections provoked by metaphysics” fall away. That is to say the objections that people would make or have made to both the original positions and the fact that they were “driven” by “metaphysics” are addressed. This is a tremendous claim, for it prohibits any tidy bifurcation between different Benjamins (the “literary Benjamin,” the “theological Benjamin,” “the Marxist Benjamin,” etc.), a project scholars have attempted in the past. Earlier in the letter, Benjamin explicitly places himself within “the Marxist debate,” and indeed as holding a “strong position” therein because he is claiming – and I would concur with his claim – to be the first scholar to attempt to deal with “the fundamental question of the historical image,” which he is addressing “for the first time in all its implications.”\(^{319}\) Here, Benjamin is linking the question of the senses as raised in the Baudelaire essays, to the methodology and scope of the *Passagenwerk* and to the metaphysics explicitly and implicitly outlined in the *Trauerspiel*.

What’s more, he is saying that these later works help confirm and reinforce the metaphysics of the *Trauerspiel*.\(^ {320}\)

Despite Benjamin’s protestation that he “must” be allowed to see his project as “an especially significant confirmation,” Adorno felt quite differently. Writing in response to Benjamin, after several pages of criticisms of the piece, he embarks on several withering critiques of Benjamin’s effort. First, he admonishes Benjamin, saying that the grand work he has

\(^{319}\) Ibid.

\(^{320}\) For more on the idea of the ‘young Benjamin’ and particularly ‘his’ “metaphysics,” please see Eric Jacobson’s *Metaphysics of the Profane* (2003).
embarked on in the *Passagenwerk*, as introduced by the Baudelaire exposé, may in fact be reinforcing rather than dialectically undermining the archaic magical thinking of Jung:

*The collective consciousness was invented only to distract attention from true objectivity and from the alienated subjectivity that is its correlate. Our task is to polarize and dissolve this “consciousness” dialectically into society and individual, and not to galvanize it as a pictorial correlative of the commodity character. That no differentiation between classes remains in the dreaming collective speaks a clear enough warning... Thus, the disenchantment of the dialectical image leads straight to unrefracted mythical thinking, and here Klages sounds the alarm as Jung did earlier.*

Adorno warns Benjamin that he is slipping dangerously out of a truly materialist Marxist paradigm, which would identify each experience as not only primarily but thoroughly and completely determined through class position. In the presentation of the material constellations that constitute the *Arcades Project*, especially as framed through the lens of the Baudelaire exposé emphasizing the question of the numbing of the senses and the role of poetry and, *by direct connection*, philosophy, in filling in the “blank spaces” left by the shock of the modern condition, Adorno believes that Benjamin is reproducing, instead of explaining, “unrefracted mythical thinking.” In relating this criticism to the *Arcades Project* as a whole, Adorno correctly notes that Benjamin, despite populating the work with what amounts to various characters, does mark modernity as a unifying condition affecting all (albeit *always* in historically and materially specific and embedded ways). Adorno’s critique is apt, if one wants to preserve (as the Adorno of 1935 apparently did) certain elements of Marxist orthodoxy. Benjamin, as noted above, posits that he views this as part of “the Marxist debate.” But implicitly, he participates in that debate in order to introduce a corrective.

What Adorno does not appreciate here is that Benjamin is challenging not only what orthodox Marxists categorize as proper ‘theory’ and ‘philosophy,’ but also meditating on how to

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321 Adorno in Benjamin, *Selected Writings Vol. 3*, 56.
be true to the task Marx famously set out in his final thesis on Feuerbach: “the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.”\footnote{Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” \textit{The Marx-Engels Reader}, 145.} If we understand Baudelaire as writing poetry both as a necessary and perhaps even conscious creation of, and reaction to, a modern condition in which “shock” is the norm, then a different kind of philosophy altogether is called for. One of Adorno’s chief criticisms of Benjamin’s work in the mid-1930s was what Adorno viewed as Benjamin’s under-theorization, but Benjamin precisely wanted the arrangement of the materials – which accreted historical experience in them – to somehow allow the theory itself to produced by an individual coming to consciousness.\footnote{I return to this idea in my next chapter.} Benjamin may openly call this project an attempt at an \textit{Urgeschichte} of the nineteenth century [Ur-history, or as Edmund Jephcott translates, as related in the \textit{Selected Writings}, “primal history”]\footnote{Benjamin, \textit{Selected Writings Vol. 3}, 54. I prefer Ur-history.} but it is consciously written as such within and to the moment of the twentieth century. As such, in the name of historical materialism, self-criticism, and fulfilling Marx’s own maxim, Benjamin’s project pushes at the frayed edges of what constitutes class experience, what separates class experiences and individual experiences. It does not do so to reify a liberal conception of the individual, nor does it accept that there is only base and superstructure, discretely separate from each other.

For Benjamin then, a new mode of philosophy is demanded and practiced (as Buck-Morss asks broadly in the title of the appropriate chapter in \textit{The Dialectics of Seeing}: “Is this Philosophy?”). Adorno himself would, in some respects, come to reverse this particular position and to rethink these same edges in his post World War II work, particularly in \textit{Negative
Dialectics, at a point where edges were not merely frayed but completely torn. The philosophical intervention that Benjamin wishes to enact, and for which the Baudelaire exposé provides the metaphorical and material introduction, does not collapse paradoxes, conflicts and, above all, differences into archaic, ahistorical, transcendental, and pre-existing archetypes in the Jungian mode. Far from it. Benjamin seeks, as he later explicitly claims as the task of the historical materialist, to “explode a specific epoch out of the homogenous course of history.” That is to say, Benjamin understood this mass arrangement (in the Passagenwerk) of what Adorno saw as an attempt to “galvanize… a pictorial correlative of the commodity character” as an opportunity to present an impossibly exhaustive catalogue of a particular moment, as a “constellation overflowing with tensions” that has the potential to present “a revolutionary chance in the struggle for the suppressed past.”

Far from sliding into mass-collective consciousness to mirror Jung’s collective unconscious, Benjamin was formulating the Passagenwerk as an attempt at a new messianic philosophy of history that he was never able to fully articulate.

As Adorno’s response continues, he alights upon the most crucial turn in what Benjamin was proposing:

If I might venture to draw together the arc of my critique, it would have to encompass the extremes. How could it be otherwise? A restitution of theology, or rather a radicalization of the dialectic extending into its incandescent theological core, would necessarily also mean an extreme sharpening of the social – indeed economic – motif of the dialectic… But only a precise definition of the industrial form of the commodity as clearly distinct from the earlier form could fully yield the “primal history” and ontology of the nineteenth century. All allusions to the commodity form “as such” endow this primal history with a metaphorical character which cannot be tolerated in this important case.


326 Adorno in Benjamin, Selected Writings Vol. 3, 57. I read this as a critical rejection or at the very least pointing at a philosophical impossibility of Benjamin’s project. Adorno’s “dance” around this issue, as I call it on the next page, is itself highly elusive. Buck-Morss, in a footnote, takes it to be an encouragement to Benjamin to do precisely that: to “restore theology.” (The Dialectics of Seeing, 445) Alternatively – and this is how I read Adorno here – I think one could take Adorno to be letting his friend and respected colleague down easy. A “restitution of theology” would require “an extreme sharpening of the social – indeed economic – motif of the dialectic. That too would have to be
As I noted earlier, Benjamin thought his position particularly crucial within the Marxist debate precisely because it was the first to deal with historical “image,” with artifact and production in “all its implications.” Furthermore, Benjamin viewed this position as taking into account the idea that philosophy must stand not only on “definitions” as Adorno partly demands, but also upon “standpoint,” which, in essence, Adorno dismisses here. Adorno insists in this letter (and reinforces the same insistence a few lines later) on an abstracted theoretical framework, here, a recognizably Marxist one. “A precise definition of the industrial form of the commodity could full yield the ‘primal history’ and ontology of the nineteenth century,” only if Marxism is taken as a given and not as a guide. Benjamin is addressing material/industrial production, but also lived experience of the objects, images, texts, etc. He is also, in breaking from Marxist theoretical orthodoxy, emphasizing the positionality of the philosopher and of the reader. All are individuals within vast interlaced networks of material relation and production that make up the modern condition for which the Arcades are a paradigmatic case and emblem, and for which the

Passagenwerk is a philosophical intervention in the sense implied both by the exposé and

taken historically. The commodity character specific [Adorno’s emphasis] for the nineteenth century… would need to be far more clearly elaborated in material terms…” Even an evolving concept of history that had messianism at its center would be impossible, since that would imply, in fact, what amounts to, for Adorno, an ahistorical, idealist stance, i.e., for Adorno, theology. Adorno is telling Benjamin that he has taken up for himself a not only physically impossible task – something Benjamin would say himself of his own project time and again – but a logically impossible one as well. Adorno would elaborate on this idea some twenty-two years later in his short essay “Reason and Revelation,” when he argued that, “There once was a time when religion… insisted upon its truth even in the cosmological sense, because it knew its claim to truth could not be separated from its material and concrete contents without incurring damage.” (The Frankfurt School on Religion, 172) Adorno is doing two things here. One, he is advancing a generalizable category of religion which is synonymous with Christianity. He is of course not alone in this mistake, but it is particularly detrimental to his analysis here. Islam and Judaism had long reconciled cosmological truth with revealed Truth. Because of specific characteristics within Christianity, this is always a crisis. This leads to the second move: Adorno himself is guilty of deeply ahistorical thinking in this critique. He is positing that there was “real religion” sometime in the past and that now it is gone and only exists in facsimile form. Benjamin, as I will examine more closely in the next section, is working far closer to a vaguely kabbalistic-inspired position in which the theological idea, which is commentary upon reality, is always being produced historically and cannot have any “reality” other than its historical manifestation. Oddly, in this very same essay, Adorno remarks that Judaism, perhaps because of historicist insight, chose “to stipulate virtually no dogmas and to demand nothing but that people live according to the law.” Whatever the truth value of this claim, the fact that Adorno overlooked it in his concluding sweeping statements speaks to the power of the historically hegemonic position of Christianity.

327 Ibid., 52.
demanded by Marx’s final thesis on Feuerbach. To incorporate the lived, daily experience of individuals, philosophers and otherwise, within the modern condition, even at a safe historical distance, is to undermine the primacy of what Benjamin is implicitly critiquing as a now-ahistorical Marxist dialectics of economic and social conditions. Adorno – who, admittedly, is a strange choice to be playing the role of orthodox Marxist – describes these moves as “intolerable.” The discussion of the commodity “as such” is a reification of its phantasmagoria (in Marx’s original sense, the hiding of its origins in estranged labor). Any commentary on that can merely be “metaphorical” and not the “precise definition” that Adorno desires.

But above all, Adorno has illuminated the problem, if indirectly, perhaps out of deference to his friend and respect for his scholarship and acumen. And in this case Adorno proves more insightful than Benjamin, or perhaps just more transparent in his language. If Benjamin’s desire for a mass unified project as announced in his letter to Adorno is carried through it would, in its logical conclusion, require “a restitution of theology” and all the attendant work and

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328 It also cannot be emphasized enough that it was Benjamin’s insights into allegory in the Trauerspiel study that provided a great deal of the foundation of Adorno’s method of aesthetic critique. As Robert Hullet-Kentor reminds the reader in the foreword to his translation Adorno’s Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic: “With characteristic generosity devoid of any desire to claim Adorno as his student, it was Kracauer who pointed out in an affectionately careful and judicious review of the book [Adorno’s Kierkegaard] that its methodology derived from the concept of truth developed by Benjamin in his studies of Goethe and the Baroque drama.” (Adorno, Kierkegaard, xv.) Hullet-Kenter simultaneously reminds the reader that Adorno was Kracauer’s student (he had studied Kant most intently with Kracauer) and was building on a “concept of truth developed by Benjamin.” What is this concept of truth? Buck-Morss helpfully explains in The Origin of Negative Dialectics: “The ‘truth’ which Benjamin discovered in this literary form, one which had been lost in the history of its interpretation, was that allegory was not an arbitrary representation of the idea which it portrayed. It was instead the concrete expression of that idea’s material foundation.” (Buck-Morss, The Origin of Negative Dialectics, 56.) Although the idea of the ‘dialectical image’ would come to its most complete expression in more explicit Marxist-Judaic language and shape (and, hopefully without sounding too Hegelian, with a Freudian mediation), it was already present in this basic form when Adorno was writing his Kierkegaard study. As Benjamin writes in the Trauerspiel: “Considered in allegorical terms, then, the profane world is both elevated and devalued. This religious dialectic of content has its formal correlative in the dialectic of convention and expression. For allegory is both: convention and expression; and both are inherently contradictory.” (Benjamin, The Origins of German Tragic Drama, 175, emphasis Benjamin’s.) This dialectic is at the core of the ‘dialectical image’ and requires a particular religious critique of religion to undermine its ‘religious critique.’ Furthermore, as I demonstrate in this chapter, understanding both of these simultaneous ‘images’ in objects in the world required the rigorous “remelting” Benjamin tried to achieve.
reorientation that would involve. As I will address in the next section, the Baroque dramatists in
the *Trauerspiel* study required a “theological” critique that addressed their attitude toward the
fallen state of the world in a way that is parallel to Baudelaire’s poetry in being built from and
for the shocks of the modern condition. The *Arcades Project* is both a material ‘ur-history’ of the
nineteenth century and the enactment and provision of materials for the commencement or
possibility of an explosion of messianic time. Both of these, addressed together, correlate as a
cohesive whole quite well to the description Adorno provides of some kind of “restitution of
theology” or “radicalization of the dialectic extending into its incandescent theological core” (i.e.
extension, or re-attachment, of philosophy to theology.)329

Adorno, who is quite open about his criticisms of Benjamin’s work in this letter, seems to
dance around the issue of theology. What is clear, though, is that Benjamin took Adorno’s
criticism to heart and never wrote the “restitution of theology,” even as the theological and other
elements of the “metaphysics of youth” that had so excited him haunted his work until his death.
Theology, as such, as Benjamin’s first thesis in the “Theses on the Philosophy of History”330 tells
us, is wizened and must remain out of sight. I will address more closely Adorno’s use and
direction of thought after Benjamin’s death in Chapter 4. Now, however, I will set out to
understand how and in what manner, even “out of sight,” Benjamin returned to “theology.” What
was this theology? What kinds of thought and practices did it entail? Why did it remain
necessary in an *avowedly* “Marxist debate,” where it would seem least welcome?

329 Please see my footnote 326 in this chapter for a clearer understanding of Adorno’s understanding of “theology.”
As I explain both here and in my next chapter, Benjamin’s focus – unlike Adorno’s – was on theological *practice*
and on theological *concepts* and not generic ones either, specifically Judaic ones.

330 The original German title is *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, which Jephcott translates more literally in the
*Selected Writings* as “On the Concept of History.” However, I find Arendt and Zohn’s adaptation for *Illuminations,
“Theses on the Philosophy of History,”* to be a more helpful translation of what the text is doing. I will be clear in
the following discussions when I am addressing the German original or the Zohn translation or the Jephcott
translation.
Materialism, Religious Practice, and Judaism

Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” completed sometime in the Spring of 1940, were, in part, drawn from Convolute N of The Arcades Project and were intended as a “methodological introduction to” it. I would like to consider here and over the next several sections specifically the first thesis, as read in the context of other discussions of materialism and “theology” in Convolute N:

The authentic concept of a universal history is a messianic concept. Universal history, as it is understood today, in an affair of obscurantists.

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331 Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Illuminations, 266.

332 Buck-Morss, The Origin of Negative Dialectics, 169.

333 As Eiland and McLaughlin helpfully describe: “… the entire Arcades complex… remained in the form of several hundred notes and reflections of varying length, which Benjamin revised and grouped into sheafs, or “convolutes,” according to a host of topics. Additionally, from the late Twenties on, it would appear, citations were incorporated into these materials – passages drawn mainly from an array of nineteenth-century sources, but also from the works of key contemporaries (Marcel Proust, Paul Valery, Louis Aragon, Andre Breton, Georg Simmel, Ernst Bloch, Siegfried Kracauer, Theodor Adorno). These proliferating individual passages, extracted from their original content like collectibles, were eventually set up to communicate among themselves, often in a rather subterranean manner.” (Benjamin, The Arcades Project, x). The Convolutes were carefully titled and had epigraphs and a highly specified order and system of cross reference in which elements of one were indexed to elements of another not only by a kind of coordinate system but also by suggestive topical ‘tags’ after some passages which further connect them to running ‘themes’ in the Passagenwerk. These tags are set off from either the quotations or the commentary by small squares, Benjamin carefully inscribed into the manuscripts. It should also be mentioned that the Convolutes contained not only this mass of text but actual photographic images as well. Convolute N is central (both literally and conceptually) to the project in that it provides as much of the theoretical framework that Benjamin was willing to give.

334 Benjamin, The Arcades Project, 485, Convolute N [18,3]. This comment, Benjamin’s only original lines in this particular section of Convolute N, is surrounded entirely by quotations about the philosophical foundations of Marxism and about the relationship between Marxist practice, social science, and empiricism. It is most intriguingly situated near a comment from the German Communist thinker and leader Karl Korsch concerning Georgi Plekhanov, the Russian Social-Democrat and Marxist thinker. Plekhanov was a notable critic of the Bolsheviks particularly on the grounds that they were engaging in “political hallucinations” in the face of the actual material economic and political conditions of early twentieth century Russia. (Samuel H. Baron, Plekhanov in Russian History and Soviet Historiography, xiv) This is the line that Benjamin emphasizes from Korsch: “Plekhanov, in his eager pursuit of that ‘philosophy’ which might be the true foundation of Marxism, finally hit upon the idea of presenting Marxism as ‘a form of Spinoza’s philosophy freed by Feuerbach of its theological addendum.’” Benjamin’s two sentence response to all this suggests several radical arguments. One, it seems to endorse a view of Marx within a Spinozan, Jewish, proto-Haskalah space. Plekhanov was a notable critic of the Bolsheviks particularly on the grounds that they were engaging in “political hallucinations” in the face of the actual material economic and political conditions of early twentieth century Russia. (Samuel H. Baron, Plekhanov in Russian History and Soviet Historiography, xiv) This is the line that Benjamin emphasizes from Korsch: “Plekhanov, in his eager pursuit of that ‘philosophy’ which might be the true foundation of Marxism, finally hit upon the idea of presenting Marxism as ‘a form of Spinoza’s philosophy freed by Feuerbach of its theological addendum.’” Benjamin’s two sentence response to all this suggests several radical arguments. One, it seems to endorse a view of Marx within a Spinozan, Jewish, proto-Haskalah space. Two, it suggests – alongside the trajectory demanded by the XI Thesis on Feuerbach as discussed above – that perhaps this act of being “freed” from “its theological addendum” was not the best way to present or ground Marxism. One might note that this somewhat haphazard arrangement of Benjamin’s interpretive methodology employed here is precisely the kind demanded by the work: presenting the literary and philosophical fragments, the objects “as such” in order that a reader might rearrange them into “a
Bear in mind that commentary on reality (for it is a question here of commentary, of interpretation in detail) calls for a method completely different from that required by commentary on a text. In the one case, the scientific mainstay is theology; in the other case, philology.335

The story is told of an automaton constructed in such a way that it could play a winning game of chess, answering each move of an opponent with a countermove... A system of mirrors created the illusion that this table was transparent from all sides. Actually, a little hunchback who was an expert chess player sat inside and guided the puppet’s hand by means of strings. One can imagine a philosophical counterpart to this device. The puppet called “historical materialism” is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight.336

“Theology,” we are told here, “today” – that is to say, we are told by a marked Jewish intellectual, today, here, 1940, Nazi-Occupied France337 – is “wizened and has to keep out of sight.” The system appears to be fully autonomous, self-governing, and self-sustaining. But at a first glance at Benjamin’s description it can appear that what is being described is a deception. The spectators and the opposing player marvel at the seeming fully technological (the sign of the utilitarian scientific) apparatus that has bested all challengers. It seems a triumph not only of technology, and of ‘pure’ scientific thinking, but specifically of technology over nature. Humans have demonstrated full mastery over ‘nature’ (extending for just one second the spurious separation of ‘technology’ from ‘nature’). As Tiedemann reminds us in the Gesammelte

constellation overflowing with tensions.” The earlier section of Convolute N that is explicitly on methodology is expressed in a simultaneously descriptive and imperative tense. Benjamin himself reminds and instructs – very much in the Hebraic imperative mode of so many of the mitzvot, to zakhor, “remember,” which is implicit here—“How this work was written: rung by rung, according as chance would offer a narrow foothold, and always like someone who scales dangerous heights and never allows himself a moment to look around, for fear of becoming dizzy (but also because he would save for the end the full force of the panorama opening out to him.” The Arcades Project, 460, Convolute N [2,4]. A new mitzvah: זכור את המתווך [Remember the Methodology]. Theology is not Schmitt’s cosmological order; it is a religious activity.

335 Benjamin, The Arcades Project, 460, Convolute N [2,1].


337 This is, admittedly, my own ‘provincializing’ of Benjamin, but for the sake of a fuller, historically materialist account. There is no primal Sein behind Dasein, to reluctantly borrow Heidegger’s terminology, if only to, as Benjamin writes, “confirm my suspicion, i.e. that not only what the author says about historical time is nonsense, but that his statements on mechanical time are, as I suspect, also askew.” There is not some ur-state of Being outside of relational human conditions. There is no essence there. The only truths are empirical facts (always mediated), contingent states of being and moral truths. And even those are only hazily approached. The “da” always contains historicality, place, tradition, habitus, belief, wish, desire, body, difference.
Schriften notes, this was, in fact, the historical case, as the device in question was actually built by “the polymath scholar and inventor Baron Wolfgang von Kemplen to entertain his sovereign Maria Theresa… the automaton toured the great cities of Europe in 1783-1784, winning most of its matches.” It even, as Tiedemann tells us, defeated Napoleon in a game in 1809. To be fair, the phrase “most of its matches” indicates that the actual incarnation of the device, while perfectly in line with the trajectory of the dialectic outlined in Benjamin’s description, left some room for further technological improvement. But, particularly with the Napoleonic victory in hand, the ultimately inevitable and mechanical Marxist historical order and sense of progress is clear and ‘victorious’ over all other comers.

The “secret” of the actual apparatus was revealed in 1834 and the apparatus itself was soon packed away into a museum and forgotten.\(^{338}\) The revealed deception was that all along it was just a small man, who also happened to be a chess master, hidden inside, who was operating the device, moving the various mechanical arms of both game-playing and even performing a wide-variety of “expressive” motions. But this is only a deception within the logic of what Adorno and Horkheimer would later come to call the “dialectic of enlightenment”; it is only a deception if the goal is to have reason triumph over itself, which is to say, over reasoners. I would suggest, however, that this logic is only one element of the ways in which we can understand Benjamin’s presentation of the chess-playing automaton. The parallel follows to a certain extent. “Historical materialism” is like the apparatus; it appears to have a counter-move to every play, to fully understand the rules of the game, and to achieve its telos, winning. It appears a God-like triumph of both analysis and execution: human intellect analyzing a given scenario and imbuing inert matter with the power to best organic beings. Especially under the

\(^{338}\) Tiedemann in Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Vol. 4*, 398; *Gesammelte Schriften, I*, 702.
heading of *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, one can easily make the connection that Marxism ‘has all the answers’ to the “concept of history.” But this argument only works – and here is the ‘deception’ reading – with the hidden help of “theology,” with the help of specific theological practices and, in particular, a Jewish messianic view of history.

But there is another way to read Benjamin here that productively takes into account the specificity of the “small man.” It is not just a case of a small chess master hidden within the device, i.e. it is not merely that the device relies upon its hidden operator to achieve its success; it is not, to borrow a Benjaminian phrase from elsewhere, a “one way street.” The man, too, relies upon the device. The small man in question is in fact a buckliger Zwerg, a “hunchback dwarf” or a “crookback pygmy” or a “humpback midget.” Not only is the man a buckliger Zwerg, he is also, like “theology,” klein und häßlich. Again “small,” doubly emphasized, but also häßlich, ugly, deformed, hideous, ill-favored, gross. Zohn suggests the translation as “wizened,” bringing klein und häßlich together in a category of withered old age; this hunchback is, perhaps, wasting away. What begins to become apparent, though, is that eine buckliger Zwerg, klein und häßlich, even if he is also ein Meister im Schachspiel (a master at playing chess), needs the apparatus to play the game, and to win, at least as much as the apparatus needs the buckliger Zwerg to operate at all. He is deformed, ugly, miniscule, decrepit, and above all incapable of the activity to which he is most directly suited, Schachspiel. Historical materialism may need a messianic conception of history to work, but theology – understand as a religious practice – equally needs historical materialism to act on its own concepts, to fulfill its own messianic conception of history. These needs connect the critique of “anaesthetics” with which I began this chapter to Benjamin’s “theology.” But why then the need for the illusion or the deception at all? Why must the dwarf be kept “out of sight”?
I would argue that Benjamin seems to have internalized Adorno’s criticism-challenge from 1936, that Benjamin’s project would require a “restitution of theology,” as well as Adorno’s criticism from 1939 that “it does not seem to me [Adorno] that the concept of empathy with inorganic matter yields anything decisive,” particularly in terms of “Marxist pertinence.”\footnote{Adorno in Benjamin, Selected Writings Vol. 4, 205.}

In addition, Benjamin’s particular experience as an assimilated German-Jew should not be ignored.\footnote{In the next chapter, I return to these questions in discussing Benjamin’s reading of Kafka and halachah.} But in terms of “the concept of empathy with inorganic matter” – Adorno’s words, not Benjamin’s – Benjamin saw this concept as a fundamental and indissoluble link between theology as a religious practice and materialism as a transformative worldview. One must, he thought, remain “loyal” to the world of objects and to objects in the world. This is one of the unnamed concepts that, as Benjamin argues in his earlier letter to Adorno, extend from the Trauerspiel through the Passagenwerk. It is also one of the concepts that clearly demonstrates the Judaic character of his theology and of his messianism. To understand this, we must turn to the earlier work, the Trauerspiel, to grasp the way that Benjamin viewed a Christian worldview as “betraying” the very world it claims to save.

\textit{Die Versteckte Zwerg}

For “commentary on reality,” Benjamin says, “the scientific mainstay is theology.” To understand why this is the case, we must address the project which Benjamin sets out in the Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels. The Trauerspiel study is a historical materialist work, without being explicitly Marxist. Written largely over the course of 1923 and 1924, Benjamin’s work was nominally a utilitarian move to achieve Habilitation status in the German university system which, in turn, would allow him to work as a Privatdozent. However, Benjamin was, as
George Steiner argues, deeply committed to the project, “devouring” library archives like a “Coleridge or Marx” and “steeped in the actual composition of the Ursprung.” Particularly important in Benjamin’s development of the Trauerspiel was the time he spent finishing the work in the spring and summer of 1924, when meeting the Bolshevik actress Asja Lacis “raised in his mind the possibilities of ‘a radical communism’”:

Simultaneously, Benjamin was reading Lukács’ History of Class Consciousness; it was striking and, in a sense, validating, observed Benjamin, that Lukács, operating from wholly political premises, should have reached epistemological conclusions very similar to those he himself was now expounding.

One could argue that there was something in this simultaneity that helped Benjamin – still in his ‘pre-Marxist’ phase, but after he had met Adorno et al – to see a potential fusion between the more political “Manifesto” side of Marx and the political economist Marx of Capital. But there is a crucial connection between the Trauerspiel and the Passagenwerk that is still missing in my presentation.

In The Dialectics of Seeing, Buck-Morss makes the case that we must see the Trauerspiel as part of a complete project that culminates in the Passagenwerk. There is, she argues, a constant shadow counter-argument that runs throughout the Trauerspiel. Buck-Morss summarizes it as follows:

The German Baroque dramatists understood each of nature’s elements as full of signification that humans only needed to interpret in order to uncover truth. But the fact that each element could be translated in a multiplicity of paradoxical ways so that ultimately any object could stand for anything else, implied referential arbitrariness, which seemed to negate the very claim of a “meaningful” nature. As we have seen, Benjamin praised the Baroque dramatists for recognizing that this paradox demanded a “theological” (thus philosophical) solution, not an aesthetic one.

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341 George Steiner in Benjamin, The Origins of German Tragic Drama, 9-10.

342 Ibid. It is worth noting, if only for the ironic historical parallel, that Lukács was forced to abandon this line of thinking through his orthodox Communism only to leave an unfinished work, “A Defense of History and Class Consciousness,” which only appeared, in its incomplete form, posthumously.

343 This is the case that Benjamin stated, in his letter, examined above, that he wished to make.
But he criticized the particular theological frame which they employed, because in the dialectical leap from the hill of skulls to the resurrection of the spirit they “treacherously” abandoned to the devil the very sorrowful nature, the very physical suffering that had been their original concern.\footnote{Buck-Morss, \textit{The Dialectics of Seeing}, 229, emphasis Buck-Morss’.}

Here, Buck-Morss summarizes her rendition of Benjamin’s analysis and critique in the \textit{Trauerspiel}. The “German Baroque dramatists” had – in line, of course, with the historical material conditions of the nineteenth century – alighted upon part of a methodology that would allow them to interpret nature in search of truth. Benjamin argues in the \textit{Trauerspiel} that the use of allegory by the Baroque dramatists led them along a methodologically appropriate path to interpret nature as inherently laden with meaning, as “full of signification that humans only needed to interpret in order to uncover the truth.” This was in part “paradoxical” because the open ended nature of allegorical writing “implied referential arbitrariness,” or, as Benjamin himself puts it in reference to Plato’s \textit{Symposium} in the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” to the \textit{Trauerspiel}, “there is a hint of relativism here.”\footnote{Benjamin, \textit{The Origins of German Tragic Drama}, 31.} The dramatists had, in a sense, built upon Plato’s case for the intrinsic internal coherence of concepts, but confused this coherence for transcendent form, not the historical accretion of “convention.”\footnote{Ibid., 175.} They had erred in addressing phenomena because – rather in line with Nietzsche’s famous aphorism of Christianity as merely Platonism for the masses\footnote{Nietzsche, \textit{Beyond Good and Evil}.} – they sublimated that intrinsic internal coherence into ideal transcendence. They did not “redeem” them in “their basic elements,” from their “crude empirical state,” as Benjamin suggests. How does such a redemption take place? Benjamin responds as follows:

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\footnote{Buck-Morss, \textit{The Dialectics of Seeing}, 229, emphasis Buck-Morss’.}
\footnote{Benjamin, \textit{The Origins of German Tragic Drama}, 31.}
\footnote{Ibid., 175.}
\footnote{Nietzsche, \textit{Beyond Good and Evil}.}
As a salvation of phenomena by means of ideas takes place, so too does the representation of ideas through the medium of empirical reality. For ideas are not represented in themselves, but solely and exclusively in an arrangement of concrete elements in the concept: as the configuration of these elements.\footnote{Benjamin, \textit{The Origin of German Tragic Drama}, 34. It is not difficult to see here, as Benjamin himself would claim some ten years later, a kernel of the idea that, transfigured through a much deeper understanding of Marx, becomes the methodology of \textit{The Arcades Project}.}

If one takes a step back from the density of the argument for a moment, it can appear more clearly: “salvation of phenomena” can happen if and only if “through the medium of empirical reality.” If not, quite literally nothing is saved, nothing is redeemed.

This is precisely where the ‘treachery’ Buck-Morss describes enters the picture. The German Baroque dramatists adhered to a “\textit{particular} theological frame,” that of Christianity as a whole, and more specifically, Christian other-worldliness, ahistoricality, amateriality, and asceticism, which rendered material redemption impossible. The assumption of this impossibility had led them to sublimate “the very physical suffering that had been their original concern” into an ahistorical Christian sotierology. This sublimation is a theodicy which explains injustice instead of opposing it. This theodicy is what Horkheimer and Adorno decry as Hegel’s “transfiguration” in so many of the early texts of the Frankfurt School. This is of course nothing novel in the history of Christian discourse, whether we choose to begin such an analysis from the sayings of Christ himself related in the Gospels (“My kingdom is not of this world” John 18:36) or Augustine’s complete separation of the “Earthly” from the “Heavenly” city throughout \textit{City of God} or Luther’s treatise \textit{On the Freedom of a Christian}.\footnote{Augustine, \textit{City of God}, Book XIX, Chapter 17. Part of the mission of the \textit{City of God}, in the wake of the sack of Rome, is the decoupling of historical, political, and theological truth that had been so firmly established in the \textit{Tanakh}, in both Exodus with the \textit{Yetsi’at Mitzrayim} and reaffirmed time and again in Kings, Judges and the prophetic books. There is never any question in \textit{Tanakh} of any kind of necessary separation between a “heavenly” and an “earthly” human city. Augustine - while defending Christians accused of monumental historic guilt, and ironically underscoring the Gnostic and Manichean foundations he himself had turned away from so many years before – tears these apart with the ultimate separation achieved by Book XIX: “The heavenly city, or rather the part of it which sojourns on earth and lives by faith, makes use of this peace only because it must, until this mortal condition which necessitates it shall pass away. Consequently, so long as it lives like a captive and a stranger in the}
to the question of the Benjamin and the kabbalah as the implicit ‘theological other’ in the 
*Trauerpsiel* that is more fully expressed in the *Passagenwerk*, it is worth stopping to address this 
“treacherous” “theological frame” of the dramatists, both because Benjamin himself addresses it 
in the *Trauerspiel*, but also because there is yet another historical materialist argument that is 
being made by Benjamin. It is only now, once this “treacherous” ideological frame can be 
viewed and understood, that this new mode of interpretation can unfold both in idea and product. 
As Benjamin later argues in *The Arcades Project*, “Marxism, too, shares the expressive 
characteristics of the material products contemporary with it.”

*Trauerspiele* (that is to say, the 
actual ‘plays of sorrow’) were produced dialectically – drawn from and in reflection upon their 
historical conditions. In turn, Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel* study is produced dialectically from the 
historical reality and content of the *Trauerspiele* as set against the new historical reality and 
criticism that would arise in the nineteenth century.

Buck-Morss begins her discussion of the “treacherous” abandonment of the world to “the 
devil” with Benjamin’s concluding remarks in the “Allegory and Trauerspiel” section of the 
*Trauerspiel*. She writes:

> Evil disappears, but at what a cost! In order to remain true to God, the German allegoricists 
> abandon both nature and politics: “Their... intention ultimately does not remain loyal [treu] to 
> the spectacle of the skeleton, but treacherously [treulos] leaps over to the Resurrection.” This 
> “treacherous” leap from the mournful spectacle of history as “sad drama” to the miracle of the 
> resurrection, done in the name of allegory, is in a philosophical sense its negation... When the 
> allegoricists, claiming that the fragments of failed nature are really an allegory of spiritual 
> redemption as their opposite, a redemption guaranteed only by the Word, when they declare evil 
> as “self-delusion” and material nature as “not real,” then, for all practical purposes allegory 
> earthly city, though it has already received the promise of redemption, and the gift of the Spirit as the earnest of it, it 
> makes no scruple to obey the laws of the earthly city, whereby the things necessary for the maintenance of this 
> mortal life are administered; and thus, as this life is common to both cities, so there is a harmony between them in 
> regard to what belongs to it.” Augustine gives full voice to this separation, but it is the neoplatonic logic that 
> undergirds Christian discourse not only in Paul, as is commonly attributed, but to whatever we know of Jesus 
> himself, that is, throughout the Gospels.

becomes indistinguishable from myth... It “sweeps away” the entire objective world as a “phantasmagoria” and the subject is “left entirely on its own.” In short, Benjamin criticizes Baroque allegory for its idealism.\textsuperscript{351}

Their “treachery” lies in their abandonment of “both nature and politics.” They do not remain “loyal [\textit{treu}]” to either the “the spectacle of the skeleton” or to the “failed nature” which provokes and comprises such a spectacle. They escape into a “treacherous” sublation: the evil of this world “disappears” in proving the Truth of the next. Buck-Morss makes the case in her long footnote on page 445 that “much is riding” on her translation of the world \textit{treulos} as “treacherous.” She proposes this translation against the background of “earlier interpreters” who “have taken Benjamin to be establishing an ironic distance between this word and his own judgment.”\textsuperscript{352} That is to say that somehow Benjamin was ironically showing that the allegoricists through their “faith” [\textit{treu}] were “unfaithful” [\textit{treulos}] to what their true faith would have demanded. I agree wholeheartedly with Buck-Morss’ contention that this would in turn implicitly \textit{endorse} the truth of the Christian faith. She finds it “inconceivable that Benjamin should actually affirm the Christian idea of bodily crucifixion and spiritual resurrection, as it is so foreign in conception precisely to the “theological” elements of his thinking.”\textsuperscript{353} However, I am not sure just how much is actually riding on that particular definition of \textit{treulos}, or if, perhaps more importantly, her translation is as tenuous as she makes it out to be here. Furthermore, I think the scare quotes around “theological” are not quite necessary for precisely this reason.

One could read in \textit{treulos} that the German tragic dramatists do not remain \textit{treu}, as in faithful or true, to the “bones” and that they \textit{treulos}, faithlessly, “leap over into Resurrection.” It could be simply that in their leap into transcendence they are \textit{both} treacherous, in the sense

\textsuperscript{351} Buck-Morss, \textit{The Dialectics of Seeing}, 175, quoting from the last chapter of the \textit{Trauerspiel.}

\textsuperscript{352} Ibid., 445.

\textsuperscript{353} Ibid.
Buck-Morss describes, to the bones and their representation, but also faithless, in a very different definition of faith. Buck-Morss writes that in his ultimate critique, Benjamin faulted “Baudelaire for his inability to transcend the melancholy contemplation of the allegoricist.” She adds, “Benjamin’s own notion of transcendence was political: to ‘smash’ the mechanism that endlessly rearranged the fragments of the material world in its given state.” If Benjamin meant, as Buck-Morss’ “earlier interpreters” suggest, that he was ironically criticizing their treulos stance, surely he would have utilized a word more directly suggesting “faithlessly” in terms of belief, such as disbelievingly, like ungläubig. Buck-Morss has in mind a particular line from the Trauerspiel: “the intention does not faithfully [treu] rest in the contemplation of bones, but faithlessly [treulos] leaps forward to the idea of resurrection.” But in fact they don’t disbelievingly “leap into transcendence.” They do so believingly, and as such they are “faithless” and “treacherous.” For if they were to be treu, true, faithful, loyal to the “bones,” they would leap nowhere and immanently. They would “faithfully rest in the contemplation of the bones,” not to arrive at a standstill but to find those “bones” “re-discovered,” “playfully in the world of things,” as Benjamin explicitly says in the previous page that the allegorists fail to do. This is their treachery and it is because they have faith, that is, because they have Christian faith, the faith that now defines faith, faith against the world, against the evidence of the senses. To refocus for a moment on the comparative philosophy of this dissertation, this is the concept of faith (faith through authoritarian structures, expressed around revelation) mentioned for a brief moment

354 Ibid. I return to how we should understand this strange notion of “transcendence” in immanence in chapter 4.

355 Benjamin, The Origins of German Tragic Drama, 233; Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels, 1406; I am using Osborne’s translation here for simplicity.
before that so troubled Jalal Al-e Ahmad and that he wanted to exorcize from its firm post-Christian and post-colonial position within Shiism.\(^{356}\)

Benjamin sets up this final discussion and this definition of “treachery” in the Trauerspiel with an episode earlier in the text. He does so there under the rubric of *verrat*, which can be understood more directly as “betrayal,” “treason,” or “treachery.” When discussing the culmination and end of the *Trauerspiel* era, Benjamin discusses the particular play *Leo Armenius* by 17th century German poet and dramatist Andreas Gryphius.\(^{357}\) In this work, Gryphius presents the character of Michael Balbus, a general in Byzantine Emperor Leo V’s army, who “laments”: “Was ist der hof nunmehr als einie modergruben, | Als ein verräther-platz, ein wohnhous schlimmer buben?” [What is the court but a den of murderers, a place of treachery, a house of rogues and villains?]\(^{358}\) *Der hof*, the court, this *verräter-platz* [place of treachery], is neither an historical accident nor a dictate of God, as Benjamin is careful to point out. Benjamin ultimately critiques the dramatists in that they abandon this realm to “the devil” instead of trying to understand “that this time of hell is secularized in space,” in a material world which is also

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\(^{356}\) That is not to say that a concept of faith [*iman*] did not exist in Shiism prior to the colonial period; this would be an absurd claim. As I address more closely in chapter 4, Al-e Ahmad’s critique of “religion” is predicated on recognizing the specific characteristics in religious thought that undergird its non-*roshanfekr* possibilities: namely, faith and theodicy. These are, as I am exploring here, the *same* characteristics that Benjamin rejects. However, to remain with Al-e Ahmad, he understands that there is no way to historically ‘return’ to a pre-modern, pre-colonial conception of faith. Furthermore in dialectical critique (here in somewhat recognizably Hegelian form) he sees in Christian faith, a generalized condition of a flaw in ‘faith-like’ thinking and finds in Shiism a set of concepts and practices which can be reconstituted without this kind of “faith.”

\(^{357}\) *Selected Writings*, Vol 3, 86. Gryphius is a major figure in the *Trauerspiel* study and, as Tiedemann reminds us in the *Selected Writings* vol. 3, often referred to as the “German Shakespeare.”

\(^{358}\) *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, 97; This is Osborne’s translation of the German. Osborne has copied the German faithfully (no pun intended) from what Benjamin transcribes in *Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels* (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* Bd. I, 276) but I must admit that I can find no discernible reason for the bizarre and ungrammatical capitalization in this quotation from Gryphius. Nonetheless, I have maintained the idiosyncratic capitalization in my analysis although I have avoided drawing any special meaning from it (Benjamin does not mention it at all). There may be a reason for this but it is certainly well beyond the scope of this study.
“God’s world,” the only world, not heaven.\textsuperscript{359} Thus, Benjamin presents the German dramatists’ vision of the court in the \textit{Trauerspiele} as the realm of the “sovereign intriguer” who “is all intellect and will-power.”\textsuperscript{360} Benjamin continues:

\begin{quote}
As such he corresponds to an ideal which was first outlined by Machiavelli and which was energetically elaborated in the creative and theoretical literature of the seventeenth century... ‘Machiavelli saw the roots of political thought in its anthropological principles. The uniformity of human nature, the power of the animal instinct and emotions, especially the emotions of love and fear, and their limitlessness – these are the insights on which every consistent political thought or action, indeed the very science of politics must be based...’\textsuperscript{361}
\end{quote}

But of course this presentation of “human nature” was itself historically contingent. It was filling up the “empty time”\textsuperscript{362} that had been left in the wake of the Christian separation of ‘truth’ and ‘faith’ from the world. This “realm,” then, is not only created in the wake of Augustine’s skillful argument for the classical virtues of the “City of Man” as distinct from the new Christian virtues of the “City of God” but is possibly demanded by Jesus himself as in Mathew 22:21: “‘Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s.’” There are now at least two distinct kinds of unrelated justice. The loyalty and faithfulness one would have to this world are transmuted into faith in otherworldly salvation. Christ demands it. Jesus speaks in a time of Roman imperial rule and oppression, when many of the leading Pharisaic authorities

\textsuperscript{359} \textit{The Origins of German Tragic Drama}, 232. This is a critique, though, not simply a criticism. As Miriam Hansen helpfully explicates: “The idea of representation as a distorting mirror is a familiar trope of modernist aesthetics, implying that, since the world is already distorted, reified, and alienated, the iteration of that distortion, as a kind of double negation, is closer to the truth than any attempt to transcend the state of affairs by traditional aesthetic means, be they classical or reality. In Critical Theory, for instance, we find one highly influential articulation of this trope in Benjamin’s \textit{The Origin of German Tragic Drama} (1928) with its revision and rehabilitation of allegory, which in contrast to the romantic symbol’s semblance of organic beauty and totality, showed the petrified, fragmented landscape of history for what it was.” (Hansen, \textit{Cinema and Experience}, 8) Allegory is ‘revised and rehabilitated,’ then, not to, like the Baroque German dramatists, view every “turn of events,” as ending in “a miracle,” (Benjamin, \textit{The Origin of German Tragic Drama}, 234) but in showing “the petrified, fragmented landscape of history for what it was,” while simultaneously invoking networks of interlinked relations and meanings which must be understood, i.e. in providing the foundation of the ‘dialectical image.’

\textsuperscript{360} Benjamin, \textit{The Origins of German Tragic Drama}, 95.

\textsuperscript{361} Ibid., 96.

\textsuperscript{362} Benjamin critiques this in the “Theses on the Philosophy of History.”
were preaching at least passive, if not openly active, resistance. Such resistance was for both God and man. That is to say, for God through man. The Pharisees – a primary target of ridicule in the Gospels – did not recognize strict distinctions between the political, the “religious,” the economic, etc. Neither did their immediate rabbinical successors. They viewed these as linked by a thread of halachah [Jewish law]. There could be a quiescent resignation but that would still recognize that justice was in abeyance, not that justice would be theodical recompense in a spiritual afterlife. And, of course, the opposite was also possible: not long after Christ preached acceptance, Rabbi Akivah officially anointed a worldly messiah, Simon Bar Kokhba, to lead a worldly struggle for treu salvation against Roman rule.  

Augustine argues that the entire Weltanschauung, if you will, of classical antiquity, is not necessary for successful political governance of a political system like the Roman Empire. In this argument, still quite current, one can create a separate sphere of “religion” and still govern the “City of Man” according to the newly “secular” political virtues of the “City of Man.” But, Benjamin argues, those political virtues of the “City of Man” give way to the detached calculations of Machiavelli, which in turn gives way to the verräter-platz [place of treachery] depicted by the German dramatists. This is not a historical accident, according to Benjamin; it occurs as the long-term effect of the philosophical separation of the moral from the political. Benjamin gives us Machiavelli here via a long quotation from Wilhelm Dilthey, the

363 I am not arguing that Benjamin’s messianism is equivalent to Akivah’s. I mention this merely to underline just how radically different the early rabbinc and early Christian positions are.

364 It is a well-established and frequently argued point that Machiavelli himself did not necessarily ‘believe’ in or advocate for the political principles of The Prince and many Machiavelli scholars point to the Discourses and various missives as evidence of his fundamental belief in Republican virtue and good governance. However, two facts remain. One, Machiavelli did write The Prince. Two, he was able to formulate that kind of thinking in a unique way that deviated from an obvious and recognizable genre of which he was surely aware: the humanist tradition (Islamic and Christian) of “Mirrors for Princes” which did not adhere to the image Benjamin paints here vis-à-vis Dilthey as a realm of a “sovereign intriguer.”
Lebensphilosopher. Benjamin presents the verräter-platz as the manifestation of treulos Christian politics in its embrace of, in Dilthey’s words, the “uniformity of human nature,” and the “limitless” “power” on which “the very science of politics must be based.”\(^{365}\)

Later, at the end of the chapter on “Trauerspiel and Tragedy,” Benjamin again addresses the realm of the political in Trauerspiele, stating:

\[ \text{Wie hierin die Gestalt des Tyrannen, so ist durch die Treulosigkeit — einen anderen Zug des Saturnmenschen — die Figur des Höflings betroffen. Nichts Schwankenderes ist vorstellbar als der Sinn des Hofmanns, wie die Trauerspiele ihn malen: der Verrat ist sein Element.} \]

Osborne translates this as:

\[ \text{Just as this characterizes the figure of the tyrant so does unfaithfulness — another feature of saturnine men — characterize the figure of the courtier. It is not possible to conceive of anything more inconstant than the mind of the courtier, as depicted in the Trauerspiels: treachery is his element.} \]

The courtier, the man of the court, political man, is “characterized” by his “unfaithfulness,” his Treulosigkeit. Der Verrat is his element. The accuracy of the conjecture that Buck-Morss set out upon in her translation of treulos turns out to rest not only on its counter-argument (that it is unfathomable that Benjamin sought to affirm the Christian theological worldview in preferring the afterlife) but on a direct textual connection. “Unfaithfulness,” “faithless,” and “treachery” are all deeply connected in the Trauerspiel. What is more, they are simultaneously and purposefully theological and political terms. The Machiavellian courtier’s “unfaithfulness” or “disloyalty” [untreu] is expressed in a debased caricature in his “absorbed contemplative devotion” to the objects and art of power.\(^{367}\) It is because of faith, because of the complete worldview of the Christian faith, that he accepts, even revels in this. The caricature is to the image of true

\(^{365}\) Benjamin, The Origin of German Tragic Drama, 96.

\(^{366}\) Ibid., 156.

\(^{367}\) Ibid.
“loyalty” [treu] that is “completely appropriate only to the relation of man to the world of
things.” As Benjamin concludes the section:

Die Treue ist der Rhythmus der emanatistisch absteigenden Intentionstufen, in welcher die
aufsteigenden der neuplatonischen Theosophie beziehungsvoll verwandelt sich abzuspiegeln.

[Faithfulness is the rhythm of the emanatively descending levels of intention which reflect the
appropriately transformed ascending ones of neoplatonic theosophy.]

To remain with Osborne’s translation for the moment, we are now dealing with true
“faithfulness,” which, as Benjamin has just told us, is in fact loyalty to the material, existing
world. It is a practice defined in part against Christian faith, which is its foil. This difficult
passage is itself an explication of the previous and even more arcane passage in which Benjamin
states that we should contrast this image of “unfaithfulness” with its “isolated dialectic contrast,”
portrayed by “Abu Masar,” that is, the eighth century Persian astrologer and philosopher Abu
Ma’shar al-Balkhi, as “faithfulness in love.” Theosophy in any form (neoplatonic, Christian, etc.)
should be turned against itself, for Benjamin. Truth is not to be sought in the higher and higher

368 Ibid. 156.

369 Ibid. 157. Osborne excludes “neoplatonic” from his translation but I have added it here because Benjamin’s
explicit critique of neoplatonism is crucial for analyzing his own understanding – or lack thereof – of the kabbalah.

370 As Hansen reminds us, Benjamin was contemptuous of “all kinds of occultist, spiritistic, and parapsychological
discourses, especially theosophy…” (Hansen, Cinema and Experience, 118) Hansen draws on two Benjamin texts as
particularly representative of this hostility: his 1930 diary reflection on taking Hashish and a 1932 article, “Light
from Obscurantists.” In the former, Benjamin writes that “everything,” he has said concerning “the subject of the
aura,” “was directed polemically against the theosophists, whose inexperience and ignorance I find highly
repugnant. And I contrasted three aspects of genuine aura – though by no means schematically – with the
conventional and banal ideas of the theosophists. First, genuine aura appears in all things, not just in certain things,
as people imagine. Second, the aura undergoes changes, which can be quite fundamental, with every movement the
aura-wreathed object makes. Third, genuine aura can in no sense be thought of as a spruced-up version of the magic
rays beloved of spiritualists and described in vulgar works of mysticism.” (Benjamin, Selected Writings, Vol 2.1,
328) The latter writing, “Light from Obscurantists,” excoriates in particular Rudolph Steiner’s anthroposophists
along precisely the same lines that Adorno would address astrology in “The Stars Down to Earth.” Not only do they
engage in general occultist irrationality in “supernatural ways of seeing,” but like advertisements, they “drape
themselves in the world of knowledge,” with “technical information, classical rules on how to live, statistical tables,
and chemical and physiological data,” in order to conjure “the great universal harmony in which all in
dividual details are subsumed,” and to ‘allure’ with the semblance of scientific authority (in a pre-Enlightenment, argument
from authority sense). (Benjamin, Selected Writings, Vol 2.2, 655-656) I examine Benjamin’s own “mysticism” later
in this chapter, but it should already be clear from these writings and the Trauerpsiel that Benjamin is interested in
orders of a Gnostic reality that removes itself step by magical step from the world of material things but rather by examining in ever proliferating depth both the natural, historical, and potential meanings in objects. The dizzying array of celestial entities and levels should be understood as the distorted reflection of the real levels of meaning possible in objects and the intricate networks of relations that link them. The further we move into the material analysis of the world of things, and simultaneously are treu to the world of things, the closer we are to both truth and goodness. It is, to put it bluntly, a better faith, or perhaps, more accurately, better than faith. And it is not in a search for their ‘holy’ essences, but in the very empirical elements of objects themselves that redemption is to be sought.

understanding material relations and in consciousness. Benjamin’s theological practice and concepts are not supernatural and, furthermore, are, perhaps ironically, aimed at demystification of conditions.

371 Benjamin, in this frankly surprising discussion of Abu Ma’shar, is drawing on the work of the early twentieth century German art historians Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl in their article “Melancholia I” on the late medieval/early Renaissance engraving of the same title by Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528). Panofsky and Saxl went on to later expand this work, with the help of fellow German-Jewish exile, Raymond Klibansky, into the magisterial Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion, and Art. In Panofsky and Saxl’s original 1923 work, Dürer’s Melancolia I: Eine Quellen- und Typen-Geschichtliche Untersuchung, they write, in addition to the tyrannical qualities of Saturnine men, of them being “treu in der Liebe.” This is where Benjamin draws the phrase “faithfulness in love.” Panofsky and Saxl are discussing in this section the portrayal and collapse of multiple qualities into the category of “Saturnine” men in the works of Abu Ma’shar. But this “faithfulness in love” is described under the aspect not of the Saturnine Melancholic (as Benjamin had been discussing Panofsky and Saxl’s work earlier in the section) but here directly connected to deeply material, worldly planning for human happiness and prosperity: “plowing and agriculture,” “prosperity of the land, buildings, water and rivers,” etc. As Benjamin suggests, this is how we should understand Abu Ma’shar’s “isolated dialectic contrast.” This points at what treu means for Benjamin. As Panofsky and Saxl suggest, Abu Ma’shar was working in late antiquity with little to no distinction being made between scientific observation and mythological reporting, partly because he was fully in possession of a kind of critical distance which eluded the medieval Christian commentators who would come to rely so heavily on his texts for all of their knowledge of ancient astrology and astronomy. The sciences were open to inquiry and adaptation and the mythology was simply a question of transmission of a set of largely ‘foreign’ beliefs. It did not matter that astronomical research and geometric inquiry were portrayed alongside an already collapsed mythology that had combined Jupiter and Saturn into one category. None of it was static; it was all open to practical use and interpretation. As Panofsky and Saxl say, “thus are the seemingly chaotic texts of Abu Ma’sar [made] understandable.” Panofsky and Saxl, Dürer’s Melancolia I: Eine Quellen- und Typen-Geschichtliche Untersuchung 5-9 (the translations are my own).

The critique that Benjamin is making here and at the end of the Trauerspiel is that in unraveling this tangle, first the medieval Christian commentators and then, more importantly, the German Dramatists, took the negative thread of Saturn and wrapped it firmly around the Earth and material existence. They took the positive thread and thrust it at the heavens at precisely the moment, Benjamin argues, they should have attempted to entwine the two in affirming material life, and not just playing at the empty sign of mourning it. FIGURE A: “God the Father measures the
In the end, the apotheosis of individualized faith against the evidence of the senses is the meaningless farce of circular subjectivity. As Benjamin writes in the conclusion to the *Trauerspiel*:

*And thus it is that the fire of ecstasy is preserved, without a single spark being lost, secularized in the prosaic, as is necessary: in a hallucination, St. Theresa sees the Virgin strewing roses on her bed; she tells her confessor. ‘I see none’, he replies. ‘Our Lady brought them to me’, answers the Saint. In this was the display of manifest subjectivity becomes a formal guarantee of the miracle, because it proclaims the divine action itself. And ‘there is no turn of events which the baroque style would not conclude with a miracle’.*372

The “me,” Benjamin emphasizes, is the ultimate assertion of the purely subjective. All the passion that had been directed towards the hellish images of the world and the fantastic images of the world’s salvation is preserved but sublimated373 into the self-confirming circularity of “manifest subjectivity.” Knowledge is thus void as subjectivity confirms miracle, and miracle confirms subjectivity. But this is, in Benjamin’s words, a “hallucination.”

372 Benjamin, *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, 234, Benjamin’s emphasis.

373 Again, I use “sublimated” here in the chemical sense of matter changing form; it does not indicate “sublated” in the Hegelian sense of “overcome” or “negated.”
It is important to remember that for Benjamin, the significance of the Trauerspiele lay in their failure. It is easy to confuse the concept of allegory that Benjamin seeks to recover and the Trauerspiele themselves. Benjamin explains this via architectural metaphors. He approvingly quotes Karl Borinski’s presentation of Baroque architecture, “the impression of supernatural forces is supposed to be around in the powerfully projecting and apparently self-supporting structures precisely in the upper regions.”

But, “the reality of these laws is, on the other hand – in the lower regions…the enormous pedestals, the doubly and triply augmented projecting columns and pilasters, the strengthening and reinforcement of their interconnecting elements, all bearing – a balcony?” Borinski, rather astutely, notes that these elements reinforce each other (hence “a balcony?” which turns the gaze back to the supporting structure) but also point outwards at “the intervention of God in the work of art.” However, this “miracle” too is a “hallucination,” for Benjamin. In pointing to “the intervention of God,” the Baroque architectural form distorts the “reality,” of the physical construction and ignores that “the soaring miracle above” is only a differently distorted ideal reflection of the possibility of redemption in the material reality below.

Given this quite literal manifestation of base and superstructure, it should hardly be surprising or hard to explain the appeal of a certain kind of Marxian analysis to Benjamin. But “the inadequacy of the German Trauerspiel,” with its “banal equipment of the theater – chorus, interlude, and dumbshow,” endows it with a great virtue: it can transmit a concept of allegory itself which asserts that “Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins

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374 Benjamin, The Origin of German Tragic Drama, 234. It is also from Borinski, the late 19th and early 20th century historian of art and literature, that Benjamin draws his image of the allegorical as the “field of ruins.” (Benjamin, The Origin of German Tragic Drama, 178)

375 Ibid.

376 Ibid.

377 Ibid. In chapter 4, I explore the notion of “distortion” for Benjamin more fully.
are in the realm of things.” When the Trauerspiele try to tie the neat bow of “miracle” as the final “about-turn,” all they demonstrate is the flimsiness of the gesture. The “leap forward,” to faith, in the affirmation of Christ or in the Baroque architectural “intervention of God in the work of art,” merely confirms and reproduces the pure subjectivity of true Christian faith, as exemplified in St. Theresa’s statement. And, at the same time, it betrays what it so successfully demonstrated in attentiveness to historical and material reality, “the reality of those laws… in the lower regions.”

So Buck-Morss is on much firmer ground than she imagines when she interprets treulos and its connection to treachery. While she turns to her interpretation of Adorno’s language (which I differ on) to shore up her interpretation, it is in fact within the Trauerspiel itself that Benjamin advances the direct connection between treulos and Verrat. Indeed, he does so within a critique, just as Buck-Morss suggests, of a “particular theological frame,” as I have shown, that of Christianity. Benjamin, writing from the edges, so to speak, of the Jewish community and in the midst of Christian Europe, did not produce a convenient historical materialist critique of religion as a concept, although he did apply religion critically as in the essay “Capitalism as Religion” which posits Capitalism as a “religion” in very much a Marxist sense of the word. Benjamin does this provocatively against a dialectical historical image of what he calls the previous “so-called religion,” which he describes – in a style tantalizingly close to contemporary discussions of genealogies of secularism – as a Christianity upon which Capitalism has

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378 Benjamin, The Origin of German Tragic Drama, 178.
379 Ibid., 232.
380 Although I view this reading of the Trauerspiel as adequate to the task at hand and given time and space could apply it to the section and book as a whole, I recognize that the presentation here is incomplete. Sadly, however, a full reading of even this section is beyond the scope of this dissertation.
“developed parasitically” and which even traps its greatest critics: Benjamin lists Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche.

“Freudian theory,” Benjamin says here, \(^{381}\) “is, at bottom, still an illuminating analogy to capital—to which the hell of the unconscious pays interest.” What Adorno would call the palliative nature of Freudian psychoanalysis is here faulted for not delving deep enough to provide the material for a true break with historical continuity. It becomes, in Benjamin’s words here, part of the “priestly rule of this [capitalist] cult.” Benjamin continues, “This type of capitalist, religious thinking,” which again allows us for a moment to ponder something Benjamin refuses to let himself ponder, a non- or anti-capitalist religious thinking, “magnificently reconciles itself in Nietzsche’s philosophy.”

Although critical of Nietzsche in the *Trauerspiel*, there he at least acknowledges that Nietzsche’s critique of tragedy is valid: “Nietzsche’s renunciation of any understanding of the tragic myth in historical-philosophical terms is a high price to pay for his emancipation from the stereotype of morality in which it is usually clothed.”\(^ {383}\) Within this fragment, “Capitalism as Religion,”

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\(^{381}\) While here Benjamin is antagonistic towards Freud, elsewhere Benjamin presents a much more salutary image of Freud. Benjamin writes in the preparatory materials for the 1935 version of the Arcades exposé, “Freud’s doctrine of the dream as a phenomenon of nature. Dream as historical phenomenon.” (Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 908) This notion of the Arcades as a “dream-house” is one of the threads which most fully unites the project. To fully explore the relationship between Freud and Benjamin is well beyond the scope of this dissertation but it is clear that he derives the notion of the image of the modern as a “dream” from Freud and that, beyond this, and apart from what I am discussing here in “Capitalism as Religion,” Benjamin had great respect for Freud and particularly for Freudean (vs. Jungian) psychoanalysis. Freudian theories regarding dream interpretation, consciousness, and memory occupy key joints in Benjamin’s philosophy. I discuss the latter two in the next chapter.


\(^{383}\) Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* 102.
Benjamin’s critique of what Nietzsche actually prescribes (as opposed to his hermeneutics) is withering: the Ubermensch is nothing but a kind of Hegelian world historical individual. Even if read in aesthetic terms, the critique is damning: the Nietzschean Ubermensch may recognize the “genealogy of morals” but he merely, in Benjaminian terms, “keeps going,” much like the onlookers in The Gay Science when confronted with the madman who announces the death of God.

For Marx, according to Benjamin, the critique is much simpler: “the non-inverting capitalism becomes socialism with interest and compound interest, which are the functions of blame.” As translator Chad Kautzer notes, Benjamin is playing here on the German word Schuld, which, Kautzer says, “can mean either blame, guilt, or debt.” It can, of course, also mean “sin.” Benjamin notes later in the truly fragmentary section of the fragment that “Christianity in the time of the Reformation did not encourage the emergence of capitalism, but rather changed itself into capitalism.” So there are three intimately connected crises announced and embodied by Christianity, in reverse order: Capitalism, the treulos leap into other-worldliness, and the “empty time” invoked by the separation of politics from morality.

What, then, does it mean then to be treu immanently, and perform a theological critique? That is to say, what does it mean to recognize inherent meaning in the world, perhaps metaphysical, certainly meta-empirical, without performing a treacherous leap of faith? And if Benjamin, rather openly in the Trauerspiel and in this rather late fragment is fully comfortable

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385 This is also, of course, the key play on words in the 2nd essay of Nietzsche’s Genealogy of Morals.
386 Ibid. 261. This an inversion, in some ways, of Marx’s arguments in “On the Jewish Question” concerning capitalism and Judaism.
naming the specifically Christian as the object of critique, why is he so elusive about identifying
the critique itself? In Buck-Morss’ reading in *The Dialectics of Seeing*, these questions are
answered by Benjamin’s turn to kabbalah. However, I would contend that Benjamin’s
‘kabbalism’ is far looser than his friendship with Scholem might lead one to believe and, in fact,
often correlates to *other* Judaic practices of interpretation with which Benjamin was obviously
aware. It is partly his position as an assimilated German-Jew and his view of himself – and his
generation of Jews – as largely estranged from their own practices, that allowed Benjamin the
space to develop his rather unique formulation of historical materialism which is recognizable as
Marxian and Judaic at the same time.

**A Strange Case of the Productivity of Misunderstanding: Benjamin and the Kabbalah**

Earlier, I set aside the question of what I called the “constant shadow argument” in the
*Trauerspiel*, in order to spend more time on the question of Christianity and the *treulos* that is so
central to Benjamin’s critique of the German Dramatists. But what constitutes the shadow
argument, exactly? What is always in the background? Buck-Morss argues that it is the kabbalah.
After noting that “within philosophy, allegory has another status as the mode in which not the
subject, but the objective world expresses meaning,” she describes again Benjamin’s critique of
the German Dramatists in their particular resolution to the “sorrow-filled” world, in Christian
redemption. She asks: “Was another resolution possible? The *Trauerspiel* book does not tell us
explicitly but Benjamin knew there was.”

This is a provocative declaration in addressing what amounts to an empty space in
Benjamin’s own words. But Buck-Morss provides significant evidence:

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“I continue to find it very strange,” wrote Scholem in his reminiscences, “that around 1930 Benjamin told at least two men (Max Rychner and Theodor Adorno) that only someone familiar with the Kabbalah could understand the introduction to his book on tragic drama...” This was more remarkable, he continued, as Benjamin never discussed the connection with him, who alone would have understood it. But in dedicating a copy of the book for Scholem, Benjamin wrote: “To Gerhard Scholem, donated to the Ultima Thule of his Kabbalistic library” as if this work indeed somehow belonged in a kabbalistic library.388

I do not doubt Scholem that Benjamin did say this to Adorno and Rychner. Indeed he may have himself understood this to be the case, although I cannot help but offer the mere possibility that this inscription of Benjamin’s might be read as a joke, references to the “Ultima Thule” not generally being associated with ideas meant to be taken seriously.389 Speculation aside, however, in his writings to Adorno and Rychner, Benjamin never mentions kabbalah. He corresponds frequently with Scholem about the subject and in a manner that demonstrates more than just casual conversation with a friend about their work. What was Benjamin’s interest in kabbalah?

Buck-Morss hones in on it precisely:

It was a mystical mode of cognition that revealed previously concealed truths within nature, which were meaningful only in the context of a Messianic Age (in secular Marxist terms, a socially just, classless society). Kabbalists read both reality and the texts, not to discover an overarching historical plan... but to interpret their multiple, fragmentary parts as signs of the Messianic potential of the present. The truth thus revealed was expressed in the Kabbalistic writings inventively, indirectly, in riddles, providing an anti-authoritarian form of pedagogy. Kabbalist cognition replaced the dogmatism of institutionalized religion with a “novel and lived experience and intuition” of the doctrines it contained.390

Buck-Morss is correct that this is precisely what interests Benjamin. But is this interest particularly kabbalistic? The notion of the messianic age as a reorientation of the existing, natural world is common in many modes of Judaic thought (HaOlam HaZeh [this world] is

388 Ibid.

389 The classical Latin use of Ultima Thule was either as the specific reference to a mythical land north of Britain that was the northernmost landmass or, relatedly, an extreme limit of discovery or travel. In Benjamin’s day in particular, though, it had become associated, particularly in Germany, with occultist circles like the Thule-Gesellschaft [Thule Society] and with absurdities like Atlantis, etc. At the same time as Benjamin was making this reference, “Ultima Thule” was also being revived in the Gothic fantasies of Anglophone authors like Bram Stoker and H.P. Lovecraft; however, I do not know the reception of this literature in Germany in the interwar period.

390 Buck-Morss, The Dialectics of Seeing, 231.
HaOlam HaBah [the coming world]). The idea of a “book of nature” to be interpreted goes as far back at least as Maimonides and the other medieval rationalists, who also “read both reality and texts, not to discover an overarching historical plan.” These concepts are perfectly legible within Talmudic literature, including the messianic possibilities. Benjamin may in fact have believed that “Kabbalist writing” invited an “anti-authoritarian mode of pedagogy.” But he seems to have been blissfully unaware that the kabbalistic texts and certainly kabbalistic teaching practices were precisely the opposite; the “riddles” could only be translated with magic keys via texts or through a chain of authority from one master to the next. What did Benjamin really know of the kabbalah? The point here is neither to quibble with Buck-Morss’s interpretation nor merely to expose a possible lacuna in Benjamin’s thought. Nor is it, of course, to try to dismiss the Judaic element in Benjamin. Rather, it is to ask whether we have missed other Judaic elements in Benjamin? Not the seemingly transgressive kabbalah, but the more normative Talmudic categories of aggadah and halachah?

In the discussion of the Trauerspiel, I demonstrated, vis-à-vis my own readings of Benjamin and building on Buck-Morss’ interpretation, that Benjamin’s theological practice rejects theodicy, theosophy, and neoplatonism. Not to do so would be to make “the dialectical leap from the hill of skulls to the resurrection of the spirit they ‘treacherously’ abandoned to the devil the very sorrowful nature, the very physical suffering that had been their original concern.”391 But most kabbalistic thinking was, precisely, theosophical and neoplatonic. Take, for a major example, the Tanya (officially titled the Likkutei Amarim or collection of statements) of Schneer Zalman – one of the most influential of all kabbalistic thinkers of the modern period.

391 Ibid., 229.
and the founder of Lubavitcher Hassidism.\footnote{392} In it, Zalman argues in a nearly purely neoplatonic (and Gnostic) fashion that sparks of “divine light” are trapped within the physical shells [kelipot] of mundane being. Here kabbalistic interpretation is to smash those shells, not to reconstitute the messianic world – not to save natural phenomena – but to transcend them, not temporally but physically and cosmologically. The natural world is a series of “traps”; kabbalistic interpretation and the new understanding of Jewish practices are to help release these divine sparks from this sullied existence to return to the utterly transcendent God.\footnote{393} This transcendence is precisely what Benjamin decried in the Trauerspiel. Kabbalistic practice, in the example here of Zalman’s thought, is not about the transformation of the world; it is about a life after death or ecstatic reconnection with the Divine Other.

This idea is not limited to later Hassidic kabbalistic systems. Indeed, it is even more visible in earlier ones. Scholem writes, “The idea of the seven heavens through which the soul ascends to its original home, either after death or in a state of ecstasy while the body is still alive, is certainly very old.”\footnote{394} Here Scholem is discussing the school of Merkabah mysticism, which contemplates the shape, measure, etc. of the “chariot” of God.\footnote{395} What of other forms of

\footnote{392} i.e. Chabad-Lubavitch.

\footnote{393} Schneer Zalman, Tanya, 882-960. I cite the entire end summary for the reader who may not be familiar with Hebrew terms.

\footnote{394} Scholem, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, 54.

\footnote{395} Moshe Idel offers a third possibility in regard to “the contemplation of the Merkavah,” that of “allegories for the inner experience attained by the mystics…the supernal palaces can be gazed at and contemplated not by referring to an external event but by concentrating on one’s own ‘chambers.’”(Idel, Kabbalah: New Perspectives, 90) Idel, a major current authority on kabbalah and a student of Scholem’s, is also a major critic of several of Scholem’s positions. While Idel’s interpretation here offers up a major shift in possibility from Scholem’s, its stark internalization of the Merkabah mystical experience still does not seem to capture the external hermeneutic practice that Benjamin describes. Furthermore, elsewhere, Idel notes that regardless of which mode of contemplation is occurring, “While rabbinic literature is inclined toward a view that God cannot seen by mortals, Heikhalot [Palaces] literature,” which includes the contemplation of the Merkabah, “subscribes to a much more positive attitude toward the contemplation of the divine.”( Idel, Ascensions on High in Jewish Mysticism, 31) Again, whatever it is that Benjamin is doing, it certainly does not involve “positive,” “contemplation of the divine.”
Kabbalistic thought? Scholem argues that, in the Zohar itself, Moses de Leon does suggest a reunification in *this* world:

*Only the Fall has caused God to become “transcendent.” Its cosmic results have led to loss of the original harmonious union and to the appearance of an isolated existence of things. All creation was originally of a spiritual nature and but for the intervention of evil would not have assumed material form. No wonder that where the Kabbalists of this school describe the state of the Messianic world and the blissful knowledge of the devotee in a world purged of blemish, the emphasis is on the restoration of the original coexistence and correlation of all things.*

So this, then, is an instance of the kabbalistic “restoration” of things. There are several key propositions to notice here. First, the “material” itself is not what is being restored. Materiality is being annihilated in the “descent” of God who has been forced into “transcendence.” Second, the world of the “existence of things” is “isolated,” that is, bereft of divine meaning. Third, there is the mysterious “intervention of evil,” without which “material” form would never have existed. Finally, as Scholem notes a short while later, this is a theodicy: “The ancient Christian, and the medieval Jewish Gnostic, have both asked the question, *unde malum*? What is

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397 Not only does this “restoration” in Scholem’s description seem to have little relation to Benjamin’s “theological” hermeneutic practice that I have been describing here. Idel is again helpful in further differentiating the two as he notes that Scholem tends to *overemphasize* the negative theological and messianic aspects of kabbalah, “Though indubitably there are elements in Kabbalistic texts that represent negative theology, like some – though not all – of the discussions regarding the nature of the ‘Ein Sof, my assumption is that, by and large, Kabbalists were much less inclined toward negative theology than Scholem’s school assumes. In some cases, negative theological language was considered an exoteric strategy hiding an esoteric anthropomorphic propensity, which may be viewed as a sort of positive theology.” (Idel, *Ascensions*, 15) Indeed, as I am demonstrating in the main text, even this most negative theological and simultaneously materialist moment in Scholem seems, upon closer inspection, to be only loosely either.

398 Indeed as Scholem notes: “It will not surprise us to find that speculation has run the whole gamut – from attempts to retransform the impersonal *En-Sof* into the personal God of the Bible to the downright heretical doctrine of a genuine dualism between the hidden *En-Sof* and the personal Demiurge of Scripture.” (Scholem, *Major Trends*, 12) As Idel reminds us, even the seemingly hyper-negative theological *Ein Sof* in kabbalistic discourse was sometimes “hiding an esoteric anthropomorphic propensity.” However, it is the idea of the “Demiurge,” the evil other god or demi-god which creates the world and a series of barriers between humanity and the true good, spiritual God which is most pertinent here. This is a common idea in near-Eastern Gnosticism before and after the Second Temple period but it most closely associated with Manichean and Christian-Gnostic thought (in which Christ often appears as an emissary of the true God and in which the *Tenakh* is rejected as the word of a false, lesser god). This Gnostic and neoplatonic Demiurge should be distinguished from the actual Platonic Demiurge, found in the *Timaeus*. Far more relevant for my discussion are the broad implications in kabbalistic thought – particularly accented in the idea of the Demiurge – for a transcendental, anti-realist system of thought which is fundamentally inimical to Benjamin’s philosophy.
the source of evil?... to the intellect the problem is really no problem at all. All that is needed is
to understand that evil is relative, more that it does not really exist.” But this understanding is
precisely the ‘disloyalty’ described by Benjamin in the Trauerspiel. Theories of neoplatonic
ermanation and transcendence must be “transformed” to become loyal to the world; they must
become ever more material, ever more immanent in a mirror of the neoplatonic ascent.

Benjamin’s materialism becomes even more apparent when juxtaposed with such
instances of genuine kabbalistic thinking. And this example is from the supposedly pre-Marxist
days of the Trauerspiel (‘pre-Marxist,’ and yet he was reading and quoting Lukács and
discussing Marx with Asja Lacis). The theodicy in kabbalistic thinking is no less powerful than
Hegel’s justification of history that leads to his “slaughter-bench,” its answer no less Idealist.
Benjamin not only positions his project as the redemption of material things in their materiality,
it is a redemption drawn from their very baseness. Material things are not *kelipot* to be shattered
to release their inner sparks of divine light; they *are* of the divine light, distorted. In his
naturalistic – but not reductive – account, there is no difference between the two. This is both
radical negative theology and radical divine immanence. Scholem provides, indirectly, a clue,
as to the source of these qualities in Benjamin’s philosophy. When discussing the Merkabah
mysticism, Scholem writes:

*On the other hand there is a complete absence of any sentiment of divine immanence. J. Abelson
has made a valuable contribution to the understanding of the subject in his “Immanence of God in
Rabbinical Literature,” where he has devoted a particularly searching analysis to the theory of
the Shekhinah, God’s “immanence” or “indwelling” in the world, in the literature of the*

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400 Please see my discussion of Benjamin on neoplatonism in the Trauerspiel above.

401 Indeed, Benjamin’s “theology” here (in the traditional sense) and “divine” may only have meaning in an
ultimately ‘weak’ or adulterated Spinozan sense: Benjamin would like to adopt the “stance” as in attitude or
comportment towards the world as *Deus Cive Natura* without Spinoza’s geometrically complete philosophy.
Aggadah. But in the Merkabah mysticism with which we are dealing here, the idea of the Shekinah and of God’s immanence plays practically no part at all.\(^{402}\)

The clue here is the word *aggadah*. Messianism without faith, without God, which is this-worldly and remain true to both to the “world of things” and loyal to their materiality itself, demands some notion of – or like – divine immanence. As Moshe Idel simply puts it, there is a “paucity of discussions on the immanent nature of the Sefirot,”\(^{403}\) “the dominant pattern is viewed as existing not only beyond but also above the material realm,”\(^{404}\) “the path of immanence only rarely occurred in theosophical Kabbalah… but even these Kabbalists would unequivocally acknowledge the existence of a transcendent layer of the Divine.”\(^{405}\) In other words, kabbalistic thought and practice is largely alien and often inimical to Benjamin’s philosophy. But the *aggadot*, the illustrative stories that appear amongst the *halachah* or legal rules in the Talmud, or in midrash, are full of notions of divine immanence, the emergent materialist messianic, the utterly negative or entirely irrelevant God, and so on.

Benjamin’s conceptions of *aggadah* and *halachah* and his commentaries on them are found in his writings on Kafka, both in essays and in his letters, which I examine in the next chapter. But as, I will examine in more detail shortly, in one of the rare moments where Benjamin explicitly self-identifies his “theological” practice, he aligns it concomitantly with the “stance of the materialist,” which “seems scientifically and humanely more productive in

\(^{402}\) Scholem, *Major Trends*, 55.


\(^{404}\) Ibid., 153.

\(^{405}\) Ibid., 154. While many scholars have tried to hang Benjamin’s philosophy on discordant strands of kabbalistic thought through Scholem’s influence, Idel subtly suggests that a better understanding might be quite the other way around: “In this context it suffices to remark that the paramount role played by expressions that are understood as icons of negativity in modern scholarship of Kabbalah – radicalism, paradox, dialectics, antinomianism, anarchism – merits a separate study and may indeed be related to themes stemming from Hegelian and Marxist thought that entered the intellectual apparatus of Scholem and thus the basic language of modern Kabbalah scholarship.” (Idel, *Absorbing Reflections*, 424)
everything that moves us than does that of the idealist,” and “accord with the Talmudic teaching about the forty-nine levels of meaning in every passage of the Torah.” What Benjamin describes here as “Talmudic” is an extraordinary admixture of ideas from midrashic, Talmudic, and, indeed, kabbalistic traditions. It is not extraordinary for the mélange (nearly any Ashkenazi or Sephardi rabbi from the last five centuries or so would comfortably draw on all three) but for the way Benjamin chooses elements from each. These choices reflect, probably, in part, Benjamin’s incomplete knowledge and understanding of traditional Jewish learning but also show a remarkable philosophical intuition: he gravitates towards those elements in each which promote the dialectical, the negative, the hermeneutic, and materialism. Furthermore, Benjamin fundamentally alters many of these elements in outlining his philosophy and precisely along the lines that are suggested in Benjamin’s critique of the Trauespielen. Yet they are still

406 Benjamin, Correspondence, 372. “Materialist” here is explicitly Communist. As I discuss below, this letter is attempting to explain Benjamin’s “Communism” to Rychner.

407 As both David Stern and Moshe Idel note in passing, Benjamin’s method is far more of a piece with pre-kabbalistic Midrash (Stern, Midrash and Theory, 8 and Idel, Absorbing Perfections, 227)

408 For more particularly on the relationship between particularly Mishnaic methodology in the Talmud, dialectics, and the “physical world,” please see Jacob Neusner, Judaism as Philosophy, 252. It is tempting to speculate further, as Yosef Yerushalmi does in suggesting, “Those with an intimate acquaintance of Hebrew texts will recognize immediately that this one is written in melitzah, a mosaic of fragments and phrases from the Hebrew bible as well as from rabbinic literature or the liturgy, fitted together to form a new statement of what the author intends to express at the moment. Melitzah, in effect, recalls Walter Benjamin’s desire to someday write a work composed entirely of quotations.” (Yerushalmi, Freud’s Moses, 71) However, as interestingly parallel as this is, there is no evidence that Benjamin was acquainted with any such literature, although Scholem was.

409 The implication of this would be some kind of dialectical relation to Christianity which would be perfectly in line with the actual history of Judaism (that is Rabbinic Judaism as recognizable today) which, as Harold Bloom notes, begins not in the Bible or Biblical times but rather co-terminous with “the Roman destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 C.E. Judaism before that was a transitional seething of rival sects, including the followers of Jesus, among whom St. Paul won out over James the brother of Jesus. The ultimate heirs of James and his Ebionites, or “poor men,” were Muhammad and Islam.” (Bloom in Idel, Absorbing Perfections, xi) This final reference must be to the theory that Waraqa ibn Nawfal, a cousin of Muhammad’s wife Khadija, was an Ebionite (Jewish-Christian monotheists who rejected the divinity of Jesus). (David Thomas, Christian-Muslim Relations, 28) Indeed, this is textually evident in defamations of Jesus in the Talmud through the medieval Jewish literary genre of the Teldot Yeshu (a polemical anti-Gospel); please see David Biale, “Counter-History and Jewish Polemics against Christianity” in Jewish Social Studies, New Series, 6:1 (1999). Furthermore, there is even evidence that the late sixteenth century kabbalistic revival was predicated on Christian interest in kabbalah as a form of Jewish thought not only amenable to Christianity but that might actually encourage conversion, while Talmudic discourses were banned (or, indeed, burned) since they demonstrated the fundamental opposition between any kind of Nicene Christianity
recognizable: as Scholem reports, “if ever I have a philosophy of my own, he [Benjamin] said to me, it somehow will be a philosophy of Judaism.” Scholem assumed that this “philosophy of Judaism” would have theological concerns similar to Scholem’s own and subsequently viewed Benjamin’s Marxism as a pretension or a deception. But, as I have shown from at least the Trauerspiel, Benjamin was already thinking that this “philosophy of Judaism” should be oriented towards understanding the material world and not pondering the reality or unreality of the revelation of scripture. One year after completing the Trauerspiel study, Benjamin would write to Scholem regarding Scholem’s antipathy for Benjamin’s growing Marxism, “anyone of our generation who feels and understands the historical moment in which he exists in this world, not as mere words, but as a battle, cannot renounce the study and the practice of the mechanism through which things (and conditions) and the mass interact.” As I have already shown, the end of the Trauerspiel points towards materialism and at the same time suggests an implicit Jewish critique of Christianity and recovery of allegory. Benjamin’s turn to explicit Marxism did not end this Jewish critique, though. As Benjamin continues in the same letter, “radical politics that are ‘just’ and, precisely for this reason, are intended as nothing but politics will

and any kind of Rabbinic Judaism. Please see Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin’s excellent The Censor, the Editor, and the Text (2007) for a treatment of this complex topic, which also addresses the role of conversos in promoting this censorship from within the Catholic Church on behalf of Jews.

410 Scholem, Walter Benjamin, 41.

411 As I discuss in chapter 4, the major dispute between Benjamin and Scholem concerning Kafka was Scholem’s obsession with the question of the reality of revelation. Benjamin, in stark contrast, thought the question irrelevant, and was interested in how Kafka’s aggadic writings explicate and “complement” the material world, not scripture.

412 Benjamin, Correspondence, 300.

413 Indeed, some elements of this critique can already be seen in the same year (1917) that Scholem recalls Benjamin making that comment. Benjamin writes to Scholem asking for some clarifications: “1.) Does Judaism have the concept of faith in the sense of an adequate attitude toward revelation? 2.) In Judaism, is there somehow a fundamental division between Jewish theology, religious doctrine, and the pious Judaism of the individual Jew? My intuition tells me that the answer to both questions must be no, and both would then constitute very important antitheses to the Christian concept of religion. Some other time I will write about another important problem of Christianity that became evident.” (Benjamin, Correspondence, 99) Benjamin wrote his first essays on Trauerspiele in 1916.
always work on behalf of Judaism and, what is infinitely more important, will always find Judaism actively in support of them.”  

Here in this 1926 letter we see yet another instance of Benjamin’s view of an indissoluble but necessary dialectical relationship between Marxian thought and Judaism. As the comparative presentation with Al-e Ahmad helps illuminate, it may be helpful to look at some of the non-kabbalistic elements of Benjamin’s Judaism, especially as so many of them, especially as deployed by Benjamin, seem to resonate much stronger with the structure of his thought as a whole as well as his description of what he understood himself to be doing.

**Adjudicating Yiddishkayt**

Benjamin may have fundamentally misunderstood kabbalah, but it was a case of extraordinarily productive misreading. My point here is not to reinscribe ‘orthodox’ conceptions of what kabbalah is or what Judaism should be. Rather, it is to grasp a clearer understanding of Benjamin’s theological methodology (Marxian and Judaic) and to mark it as legitimate Judaism (and, I might add, legitimate Marxism). From where Benjamin stands, this is how Judaism ought to be best understood and employed. Benjamin’s stance is creative engagement and distanced critique. From his published and unpublished writings, his letters, and notes, we know that he was deeply familiar with certain understandings of Judaic concepts and practices without being fully fluent; and yet he invents a new understanding. Novelty is not illegitimacy. Perhaps Benjamin did make the remark about the kabbalah to Adorno and Rychner just as Scholem relates in *The Story of a Friendship*. Perhaps he saw his interpretive method as kabbalistic. But

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414 Benjamin, *Correspondence*, 301. There does not seem to be a grammatical reason for Manfred and Evelyn Jacobson’s choice to translate Judentum in the beginning of this letter as “Judaism” but on its second page as “Jewry.” (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften Breife*, 426)

415 The Yiddish spelling of *Yiddishkeit* [Jewishness].
he seems to have known little of the content of kabbalistic thought itself; he had an idea of it.\textsuperscript{416}

Benjamin’s knowledge of Judaism is uneven at best. This is also visible elsewhere in his work, for example, in his repeated confusion of the word \textit{aggradah} (as described above) with \textit{Haggadah} (commonly the Passover story or more generally a story that explicates a \textit{non-legal} passage in the \textit{Tenakh}).\textsuperscript{417} It is clear from the accompanying text that Benjamin means \textit{aggadah} and that he understands what \textit{aggadah} is, but nonetheless he makes this simple error at least twice. Benjamin did not know how to read Yiddish, Hebrew, or Aramaic.\textsuperscript{418} His “Jewishness” has always been up for discussion, by scholars and even by his friends. Scholem regarded it as an open and shut case; Benjamin, in his view, was a Jewish theologian “marooned in the realm of the profane.”\textsuperscript{419}

\textsuperscript{416} From his letters to Scholem that do indicate an interest in kabbalah beyond merely demonstrating interest in Scholem’s work, Benjamin seems to have gravitated towards precisely those elements in the Zohar that Idel notes as idiosyncratically emphasizing divine immanence or negative theology.

\textsuperscript{417} This happens, for example, in two of his texts on Kafka, separated by four years; it is in the original German and preserved in the English translations of Benjamin’s work. While Benjamin’s letters in his \textit{Gesammelte Schriften Briefe} [Collected Letters] and in his \textit{Gesammelte Schriften} [Collected Writings] clearly show that Benjamin writes “Hagada” in later Scholem collections (\textit{Correspondence of Benjamin and Scholem}, 134, 225, for example), Scholem has corrected this to “Aggadah.” For a clear explication of the distinction between “Haggadah” and “Aggadah” please see Berachyahu Lifshitz’s “Aggadah Versus Haggadah: Towards a More Precise Understanding of the Distinction” in \textit{Dine Yisrael} 24 (2007). However, my point is certainly not to demonstrate the obvious fact that Benjamin did not know all of the fine points of tradition or etymological roots in Aramaic, nor that he was somehow in fact immersed in the vast rabbinic literature which shows how the terms were at some points in rabbinic history interrelated. Rather, while Benjamin’s use of the adjective \textit{hagadischen} [haggadic] might be more understandable in light of common usage in reference to the above, in the texts he was reading that dealt with the subject (for example, Bialik’s essay which he read as a major source concerning these topics), the delineation in modern use was already clear. In German, Bialik’s essay appeared as “\textit{Halacha unde Aggada}” in \textit{Der Jude} 4 (1919-1920), the precise version that Scholem sent to Benjamin. (Scholem, \textit{Correspondence}, 126) There is no evidence here of a grand statement about the \textit{Haggadah} as a story of liberation or a heretical challenge to historical distinctions between \textit{Haggadah} and \textit{Aggadah}; Benjamin is, quite simply, mistaking two words which sound similar and have vaguely related meanings (both involve stories, at the very least). This mistake is shockingly basic.

\textsuperscript{418} Benjamin did attempt a half-hearted, abortive, and superficial study of Hebrew in the late 1920s (Benjamin, \textit{Selected Writings Vol 2.2}, 833) and almost certainly knew some \textit{spoken} Yiddish from his home (Benjamin, \textit{Selected Writings Vol 2.2}, 629 and, Benjamin, \textit{Early Writings}, 34)

\textsuperscript{419} John McBride, “Marooned in the Realm of the Profane,” 241.
In contrast, scholars like Tiedemann read precisely the opposite “this messiah is a symbol of the proletariat… Otherwise, it makes no sense.”

As I stated in chapter 1, the amount of secondary literature on Benjamin is staggering, even the subsection devoted to this very question alone. In my reading of Benjamin – especially in light of the comparison with Al-e Ahmad – it is not simply that we must account for Benjamin’s Judaism and his Marxism; it is also that there are elements in Jewish practice and thought that are necessary in a universalistic critique of Marxism and of modernity more broadly. To return for a moment to Benjamin’s first thesis on the philosophy of history: the dwarf needs the machine and the machine needs the dwarf. The messiah, theology, justice, waiting, interpretation, redemption, etc.: these are all necessarily both Marxian and Judaic, in an indissoluble dialectical relation. Benjamin’s Judaism is drawn from broad concepts, the life of growing up in an ‘assimilated’ but still Jewish family, the different Jewish movements at the time, second-hand learning from Scholem, Bloch, Kracauer, Rychner, Horkheimer, reading in Buber, Rosenzweig, Kafka and countless others. But this does not negate its “Jewishness.” In possibly misreading kabbalah, Benjamin helped fashion a new mode of hermeneutic practice

420 Ibid.

421 The constant description of Benjamin’s life and family as “assimilated” in nearly all sources can be confusing since “assimilation” in fin-de-siècle Berlin is a fairly radically different question than “assimilation” discourses in contemporary Europe or the United States. The “Jewish Question,” which was quite alive at the time, was about the persistence of Jewish difference, not about its dissolution. In numerous early writings, Benjamin demonstrates that he is very much involved in the various discussions (Liberal, Marxist, Social Democratic, Zionist) that were an active part of the daily life of even the most “assimilated” Jews of this period; please see Benjamin Witte’s Walter Benjamin: An Intellectual Biography (1991) or Scholem’s Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship for more on this. Benjamin’s own presentation of this milieu can be found in numerous places in early writings and letters in the 20s and 30s. In terms of his own family, during his recollections collected in “Berlin Chronicle,” Benjamin mentions while describing a trip to a synagogue for Rosh Hashanah that his mother came from a Reform background and his father from an Orthodox one (Benjamin, Selected Writings, 629). It is illuminating to note that this distinction (between Reform and Orthodox) was only beginning to be articulated at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

422 For more about this specific milieu of Jewish learning in Frankfurt, please see Miriam Hansen, Cinema and Experience, 20-23.
which, to reiterate the point, was both Judaic and Marxian. Susan Handelman writes perceptively:

> Similarly, the Jewishness of a Benjamin or Kafka is present in often fragmentary and esoteric form, revealed only negatively, through its “impossibilities.” But their greatness lay in the way these writers lived and wrote out of these very impossibilities, conjoining their despair with a strange utopian hope.\(^{423}\)

All of this must be accounted for. And yet, others have made the case that in accounting for the incredibly diverse set of texts and ideas we find in Benjamin, the attitude Handelman adopts here would be *overly* attentive to Benjamin’s Judaism (*and* in fact to his Marxism). Samuel Weber offers just this kind of argument in countering Scholem’s equally problematic reading of Benjamin’s “exclusively” Jewish oeuvre.\(^{424}\) But this leads to reading *over*, not to *close* reading. Weber is right in that Benjamin was in dialogue with quite a bit more than just Judaism and Marxism, including “Kant, the early Jena Romantics, Goethe, and above all Hölderlin.”\(^{425}\) Indeed, Goethe was a towering figure for Benjamin. But a figure of what? If we follow Benjamin’s own methodology as laid out in Convolute N of *The Arcades Project* and explicated in the “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Goethe helps us know a *moral, worldly* science and *how to wait for the messiah*. And one need only reread the *Trauerspiel* or “Religion as Capitalism” to know that the messiah, for Benjamin, is not Christ.

Weber goes on to note that in Benjamin’s “Franz Kafka” (1934) – just when it seems Benjamin is at his most Jewish – Benjamin raises ideas from Taoism, “Perhaps such studies were

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\(^{423}\) Susan Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption*, 13.

\(^{424}\) Samuel Weber, *Benjamin’s –abilities*, 214. As we have seen, not only is this exclusivity problematic in terms of treating Benjamin’s work as *solely* influenced by Judaism but in focusing exclusively on the kabbalah in terms of Jewish elements. My discussion of Weber in this section is only in terms of his deconstructive writing on Benjamin here and should not be misconstrued as an overall judgment of his total scholarship, especially his critical work in translation, which has been fundamental to the English language reception of the Frankfurt School.

\(^{425}\) Ibid.
worth nothing. But they stand very close to that Nothing, which alone can make Anything useful: that is to say, the Tao. This is true; Benjamin – always interested in new constellations of historical possibility – does mention the Tao in relation to Kafka. However, Weber is strangely uninterested in the fact that Benjamin introduces Tao and Lao-tze in the essay to differentiate Taoist parable and Kafka’s work: “Thus Lao-tze. Kafka was also a writer of parables, but he did not found a religion.” He is uninterested in the fact that these potentially Tao-like qualities in Kafka were suggested to Benjamin by Brecht in a withering critique of a draft of Benjamin’s Kafka essay. Weber is finally uninterested in Benjamin’s excoriation of Lao-tze in his “Ibizan Sequence” (1932) where Benjamin equates Lao-tze with Rudolph Steiner as a “philistine” (the boring, “normal failure”) whom Benjamin juxtaposes with the “Genius of failure: Chaplin or Schlemiel. The schlemiel takes offense at nothing; he just stumbles over his own feet. He is the only angel of peace who is suited to this world.” The “genius of failure,” is not reserved for comic film actors and Yiddish folk characters; it is also how Benjamin discusses Baudelaire and, of course, Kafka.

Taken together, these pieces of textual evidence clarify Benjamin’s meaning when he writes that those “studies,” in Kafka’s stories are “very close,” to “that Nothing, which alone can make everything useful.” They do not clarify “how complex a role ‘religion’ or ‘religions’ play in Benjamin’s writing,” as Weber hopes; they clarify how complex Benjamin’s attitudes were.

427 Benjamin, Selected Writings, Vol.2.2, 805.
428 Benjamin, Selected Writings, Vol.2.2, 786.
429 For Benjamin’s dismal opinion of Rudolph Steiner, please see footnote 370 in this chapter.
430 Benjamin, Selected Writings, Vol.2.2, 590.
431 Samuel Weber, 215
towards Kafka and his relationship to Judaism. Lao-tze’s nothingness, just like Steiner’s anthroposophy, is an anti-realist theodicy which captures and reproduces meaningless contemplation and can make “Anything seem useful.” In contrast, as Benjamin tells Brecht and as Benjamin writes in “Franz Kafka,” the nothingness that “studying” gestures at in Kafka turns the gaze back outward, toward life, in both its material, physical condition (“Kafka has in mind a specific place: Zurau in the Erzgebirge”\(^{432}\)) and simultaneously to “another village,” “the village in Talmudic legend….\(^{433}\) However, the turn to Talmudic legend (to aggadah) does not become “attached to the study of the Torah;\(^{434}\) rather, it turns back to the material world. It is on this very point that Benjamin criticizes Scholem. Scholem believes that the value of Kafka lies in the “nothingness of revelation”\(^{435}\) and “the existence of secret law.”\(^{436}\) Benjamin, instead, emphasizes the messianic “reversal,” “the small, nonsensical hope,” that is not in “Scripture, but life.”\(^{437}\)

Benjamin is obviously extremely unorthodox in his Jewish thought but in much the way that Handelman describes both Benjamin and Kafka. Thus, Benjamin writes in the same essay that Kafka’s “prose pieces” do not “belong entirely in the tradition of Western prose forms; they have, rather, a relationship to religious teachings similar to the one Haggadah has to Halachah.\(^{438}\) It is the second major task of my next chapter to examine how Benjamin engages


\(^{433}\) Ibid.

\(^{434}\) Ibid.


\(^{436}\) Benjamin, *Correspondence*, 453.

\(^{437}\) Ibid., 446.

\(^{438}\) Ibid., *Correspondence*, 453.
with the categories of *aggadah* and *halachah* in his philosophy. My task here, however, is to ask, why Weber is reading like this. It is clear that in examining Benjamin’s work on Kafka and the copious correspondence that accompanied it, one cannot escape that precisely in Kafka, Benjamin saw engagement for his materialism on both its Judaic and Marxian ends. The element of “Tao” within the essay is fascinating both in terms of intellectual history and in understanding how Benjamin is negatively defining both the Judaic and Marxian ends just mentioned. It certainly helps overturn Scholem’s attempt to portray Benjamin in purely Jewish terms, but more importantly, it helps identify just how different Benjamin’s positions on critical elements in Jewish thought were from Scholem’s. This is a difference that matters. However, in Weber’s reading in *Benjamin’s –abilities* (2008), both Judaism and Marxism are pushed off the table in favor of emphasizing trivial differences. The answer to the question I posed above is to be found in Weber’s methodology in this text.

In seizing on “Tao,” and elevating it, Weber, in following Derrida’s legitimate *a priori* methodological problem of “undecidability,” mistakes overturning the recognizable binary that Benjamin must be understand as *only* Jewish and theological (Scholem) or *only* Marxist (Tiedemann) with identifying the key aspects of Benjamin’s own project. To ask a similar question: why does Weber cite Hölderlin “above all” as an exemplar of Benjamin’s non-Jewish interlocutors and not, say, Baudelaire, a *distinctly* non-Jew – and an anti-Semite to boot – with whom Benjamin spent much of his later life and literally hundreds of pages struggling? Is it because Baudelaire was incorporated into the too overtly Judaic and Marxian materialist *Passagenwerk*? Is it because when Benjamin sent the manuscript of the piece of the

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439 Samuel Weber, *Benjamin’s –abilities*, 126-127. To [re-]Judaize Derrida, and to be as reductive, this is just the secularization of *pilpul*. 
Passagenwerk that would be finalized as “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire” to Adorno, he remarked, “I will let my Christian Baudelaire be taken into heaven by nothing but Jewish Angels”\(^{440}\). Sadly, I think all of these questions are probably answered by a no. There are several possible reasons for Hölderlin being held “above all.” Most importantly, for now, there are a sizable group of authors who view Benjamin’s career up to and including the Trauerspiel as the sole interpretive lens for “Benjamin.” If we look at Benjamin from the period before the First World War until the Trauerspiel (about 1913-1924), then Hölderlin’s importance would be greatly magnified. Benjamin’s protestations that his entire thinking changed after the First World War and really began during the Trauerspiel are, of course, irrelevant. The author is dead after all. I call this group of scholars “The Critique of Violence School” and they are the topic with which I end this chapter.

But there is one more vital dimension that must be examined in Weber’s reading. His reading, through logical extension, also leads to an unintentional, essentialist perniciousness.

\(^{440}\) Benjamin, *Correspondence*, 612. To further emphasize the point, Benjamin’s comment here is rife with possibilities if we read with Benjamin’s insistence on Marxian and Judaic materialism. Is heaven publishing? Is the company of Adorno and Horkheimer? Does Benjamin mean “Jewish Angels” as in those from tradition, or this a further riff on the “New Angel” that he describes from Klee? How can we understand Baudelaire as a Christian? To read Benjamin as Weber does here would be to miss all of this and just let these possibilities dissolve into “radical antinomianism.” (Weber, 2008, 218) As I will discuss in the main text, the problem of Benjamin for Derrideans is that they think he is one (and then criticize him for being a bad one). Thus, in the name of opening up meaning and opposing binaries, all we hear is “Reb Derrida’s” voice reproduced – borrowing Susan Handelman’s apt expression from *The Slayers of Moses* (Handelman, 1982). Weber misreads the argument in the Trauerspiel: “The fall of Satan, and the fall induced by Satan, were for him symptoms of the doubt that rose to challenge the promise of redemption through knowledge.” (Weber, 2008, 218) “Through knowledge”? You need not follow Buck-Morss or my readings to the letter, but it would be a rather Herculean challenge to read the “promise of redemption” from the German Tragedians as discussed in so much depth above as “knowledge” or “doubt” as “symptomatic.” Perhaps Buck-Morss goes too far in her reading of “treacherous” after all; and perhaps I push the argument too far in the critique of faith and Christianity. I do not think so, but I will entertain the possibilities as a thought experiment. Perhaps it is the Idealism or merely the more general sense of theodicy that is being criticized in the German Tragedians? One could come up with myriad plausible readings. But it is a complete distortion to read Benjamin as simultaneously denigrating “doubt” and “knowledge.” This misreading is different than the “Tao” case discussed above. This is not taking a justifiable critique of the Law of the Excluded Middle to absurd degrees. Weber simply cannot countenance the idea that Benjamin – now, no longer Benjamin the author or thinker but Benjamin the emblem – is not already a post-structuralist; that he actually thinks that knowledge is not necessarily only about power and control.
Benjamin is set against “Jewish tradition”; Scholem resides there comfortably. By placing Benjamin outside or against “Judaism” and “Jewish tradition,” Weber has reified a certain kind of orthodoxy. Weber’s understanding of Scholem – certainly not an Orthodox Jew – signals that, somehow, Scholem is ‘more Jewish’ than Benjamin. Is it simply a matter of self-profession and self-identification? Of course not, or else Weber would not be able to read over the centrality of all of Benjamin’s statements of “Jewishness,” of being a Jew, and of thinking in Jewish concepts. Weber thinks he has dissolved an essentialized Jewish tradition, but all he has done is reproduced one. And with tradition or Scholem it is one of the most ironic reproductions: Orthodoxy or Zionism? Justification of obedience or blood. The challenge – as stated above – is in seeing Benjamin, who is involved in so many conversations that inform both his Marxism and his Judaism, as also a legitimate expression of Judaism. This is crucial for this study because this is also the challenge for Al-e Ahmad. And in the negative space of considering these simultaneously local, elsewhere, and universal projects in thought as “legitimate” there is, in the negative space, even the possibility to see them as fulfilling aspects of the tradition previously unaddressed.

If we want to understand the Judaic and Marxian materialism that is found in the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” and The Arcades Project, we must turn to Benjamin’s writings on Kafka. These writings are pivotal in showing in what other sense (besides hermeneutic) Benjamin’s project can be deemed “religious” and can be fruitfully compared with Al-e Ahmad’s. In this chapter, I have demonstrated the connection between Benjamin’s materialist analysis of the desensitizing and narcotizing effects of modernity – what Buck-Morss calls

441 A note on the young Benjamin’s self-understanding of Jewishness and Zionists: “Their personality was inwardly by no means defined by Jewishness; they preach Palestine but drink like Germans.” (Witte, 1991, 27)
“anaesthetics” – and his theological method. I have furthermore demonstrated how this theological method was articulated as a necessarily concomitance to materialism and Judaic hermeneutic practices. In chapter 2, I demonstrated how Al-e Ahmad’s influential Gharbzadegi can be read as an analysis of a similar condition, based on perceived deficiencies in Marxian thought and how, in Al-e Ahmad, this opens up the possibility to a different kind of religious practice. In the next chapter, in reading and comparing Al-e Ahmad’s accounts of the Hajj and of waiting for the Mahdi, with Benjamin’s discussion of aggadah and halachah in relation to Kafka and the arguments made in this chapter, I show several points at which the respective philosophies gesture at each other without fully converging. But before I can do that I must address what I call here “The Critique of Violence School,” which argues, as we have seen here with the brief case of Weber’s reading of the “Tao” in Kafka, precisely against the line of reasoning I believe should be followed.

A Strange Case of the Production of Misreading: The Critique of Violence School

Please bear with this imprecise humanistic arithmetic for a moment: Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence” was written in 1921 and, depending on the particular edition, runs about twenty pages. It is a strange text in Benjamin’s oeuvre, even in the opinion of those who value it so highly. In it, Benjamin directly addresses topics that are otherwise largely absent from his work: violence, state law, legality, and the political. If I add up Benjamin’s writings on toys, play, and games – crudely, again – I end up with, conservatively, fifty or sixty pages. These latter writings span the whole of Benjamin’s adult life, but are concentrated in the early 1930s. Such writings – in stark contrast with the “Critique of Violence” – cover topics that seem vitally central to the Benjamanian project: material culture, interpretation, play, history, possibility, and politics. The numbers alone do not tell the whole story; it is not as if problems of interpretation
are solved by weighing stacks of papers on scales. What is fascinating is that there are some scholars who take the “Critique of Violence” as the lens, the Gnostic key if you will, to understanding Benjamin and his work (Taubes, Agamben, Derrida, and many others) and then there are scholars who actually read the latter work (Buck-Morss, Hansen, Cohen, and a few others). It is not that these latter thinkers do not take Benjamin seriously as a philosopher or as a political thinker. It is rather that they argue, in different ways, that the aesthetic philosophy, hermeneutic method, and interest in materialism writ large and specific instances of material culture, all constitute the basis on which Benjamin can be taken seriously as a political thinker; those are his politics. For the former, it is only that which is marked by violence, statist vs. anarchic vs. “divine” violence, which defines “the political.” Benjamin and “political theology” can be read at least two ways: political theology as the secularization of a hypostasized (and Christian) cosmology or political theology as in the hermeneutics of interpretation and its implications for political practice.

One could easily make the case that, for instance, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” has had a far more prominent place in Benjamin scholarship than the “Critique of Violence” ever did. But, like the writings on toys, “The Work of Art…” essay, again, deals with topics that Benjamin addresses repeatedly from the period of the Trauerspiel until his death. Thus “The Work of Art…” essay, as employed by some art historians and aesthetic theorists, is a better, if still limiting, lens through which to read Benjamin. It is beyond the scope of this section to review the entire work of all contemporary scholarship on Benjamin and the “Critique of Violence,” and I in no way wish to dismiss the ways – particularly in critical

442 The gendered dimensions of Benjamin scholarship are far beyond the scope of this dissertation.

legal theory – in which this school has been productively influential. I wish merely to note its growing prevalence and the ways in which it shuts down (in the name of opening up) certain other readings of Benjamin, readings that are vital for my project and far more broadly. What I will explore here are some of the key arguments for this “School.” Why does this text in particular become so attractive? Why does its idiosyncrasy mark it, for certain scholars, for special attention?

**Taubes and the Letter**

I can begin my discussion with either Jacob Taubes or Jacques Derrida. I will choose the former for the sake of historical clarity as it, in part, helps explain Derrida’s insistence on the primacy of a connection between Benjamin and Carl Schmitt in his work. In 1987, Taubes

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I do not wish to be misunderstood as dismissing the work of the thinkers I discuss here. I find Taubes’ work on Paul as a radical Jewish thinker, at the very least, a fascinating historical intervention and challenge to interpretive norms. Similarly, I think Derrida identifies many serious areas for philosophical inquiry. For example, his text “Faith and Knowledge” (which does not cite Benjamin as a precursor) has a remarkably interesting if not quite coterminous reading of the concept of “faith” as my reading of Benjamin in the *Trauerspiel*. What I am interested in interrogating here is the fascination with Benjamin *against* some imagined repressed version of Benjamin. I would also like to point out that, in choosing these three thinkers amongst so many other options, I am not trying to draw an easy historical, causal link. These three thinkers exemplify different facets of it. Historically, the body of thought I am called “The Critique of Violence School” can probably be traced to Ellen Kennedy’s article, “Carl Schmitt and the Frankfurt School” in *Telos* 71: 20 (1987) and in a long series of *responsa* that followed in *Telos* centering around a rehabilitation of a “left” Schmittian thought. Elements of this thinking can be found in wide array of contemporary thinkers like Slavoj Zizek, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, Chantal Mouffe, and many others, at times now completely divorced from the controversy surrounding Benjamin and his letter to Schmitt. Of course, the other major strand of “Critique of Violence School” thinking follows Derrida’s presentation of “Force of Law” at the 1989 Cardozo Law School conference on “Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice,” which spawned not only more conferences but also several special editions of the *Cardozo Law Review* which took the Derridean focus on the “Critique of Violence” as their primary topic. “Critique of Violence School” treatments of Benjamin or arguments influenced by these treatments appear in nearly all contemporary ‘Left’ Political Theology. See, for example, the mammoth *Political Theologies* (ed. Hent de Vries, 2006). Not all of the *responsa* in *Telos* nor in the *Cardozo Law Review* were, of course, in agreement with Kennedy or Derrida’s propositions. Indeed some, like Seyla Benhabib in “Some Comments on Deconstruction, Justice, and the Ethical Relationship” in *Cardozo Law Review* 13: 4 (1991), note the precipitous and possibly ill-advised proliferation of the discourse while simultaneously noting many of its obvious deficiencies with considerable overlap with what I cite in this section. There is no small irony in noting that Derrida’s nominally anti-apocalyptic, anti-anarchistic, and anti-violent text ended up part of a canon of apocalyptic political apologia for anarchistic violence. As Benhabib asks, in regard to the shocking proliferation and content: “Last year the conference was called ‘Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice.’ The title of Jacques Derrida’s paper was Force of Law: the ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority.’ This year’s conference is called ‘On the Necessity of Violence for Any Possibility of Justice.’ How did we get from there to here?”
delivered a series of lectures that were later collected as *The Political Theology of Paul* (Taubes, 2004). Earlier, Taubes relates that he “discovered” a letter that he claimed was a “mine that can blow to pieces our conception of the intellectual history of the Weimar period.” The letter was sent in 1930 from Benjamin to Carl Schmitt. What is at stake in the letter is that “this whole left-right scheme doesn’t hold and that in fact the old Frankfurt School [Taubes means pre-Habermas] stood in a very intimate relation to Schmitt if you count not only the official heads of the school, that is, Mr. Horkheimer and the *Musikus* Adorno, but the more profound Walter Benjamin…” The very first part of this statement bears much merit; the reductive left-right scheme, which Taubes specifically references on the same page to the student movements in 1968, indeed does not hold for the early Frankfurt School. But this aspect of the Frankfurt School project was never repressed. The very reexamination of theological concepts and categories marks one major site of just such an instance in which an explicitly left-committed philosophical project becomes deeply involved with arguments crassly associated with the political and philosophical right. However, this upsetting of the comfortable left-right orientation of politics and philosophy was openly discussed by both Horkheimer and Adorno, particularly by the former in terms of Schopenhauer and the latter in terms of Spengler. Benjamin – much to Adorno’s chagrin – was the most explicitly leftist of the three, embracing the aesthetics and politics, at least in part, of Brecht, and preferring “the clumsy and caddish analyses of a Franz

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445 It was, as Taubes himself states, Rolf Tiedemann who actually found and published the letter originally. Just as it would be beyond the scope of this dissertation to address every scholar currently writing on the “Critique of Violence,” it is also beyond the scope of this dissertation to address all of the literature devoted to this one letter.


447 Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 98.

448 Adorno himself wrote of it publicly and clearly. For example, in the preface to *Negative Dialectics*: “The author is prepared for the attacks to which Negative Dialectics will expose him. He feels no rancor and does not begrudge the joy of those in either camp who will proclaim that they knew it all the time and now he was confessing.” (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, xxi)
Mehring” to “the most profound paraphrases of the realm of ideas emanating today from Heidegger’s school.” Taubes’ palpable disdain for Adorno (the Musikus, “musician”) is not just idle slander. It is Adorno who is concerned with aesthetics and epistemology; Benjamin’s concerns, for Taubes, are much more “profound.” Considering that Adorno and Benjamin, even when they were in disagreement, wrote of their project largely as a shared one, particularly around the question of aesthetics, one must ask, where does Taubes find this ‘profundity’ in Benjamin? Benjamin spent nearly his entire career – including the early period – writing about the relationship between aesthetics and epistemology. But for Taubes, something else is much more important. It is this letter to Schmitt:

Distinguished Herr Professor,

You will be receiving in a few days from the publisher my book, Origin of the German Mourning Play. With these lines I would like not simply to announce its arrival, but also express my joy at being able to send it to you, at the suggestion of Mr. Albert Salomon. You will quickly see how much the book owes you in its presentation of the seventeenth century doctrine of sovereignty. Perhaps I may go even further and say that in your later works as well, above all in “Dictatorship,” your mode of research in the realm of political philosophy has confirmed by own mode of research in matters concerning philosophy of art. If in reading my book this feeling seems comprehensible to you, the purpose of my sending it will have been fulfilled.

With the expression of particular esteem,

Your very devoted,

Walter Benjamin

As Judith Butler succinctly states, this “formal expression of thanks hardly forms a basis for inferring that Benjamin condones Schmitt’s book in part or in whole.” Indeed, especially in light of Benjamin’s unusual formality, it could easily be read as the letter of a perennially unsuccessful scholar to a slightly better known one, hoping perhaps for a review or a reference

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449 Benjamin, Correspondence, 372.

450 Please see Buck-Morss, The Origin of Negative Dialectics (1977) for a full discussion of this relationship.

451 Translated in Weber, Benjamin’s –abilities, 176.

452 Judith Butler, “Benjamin’s ‘Critique of Violence,’” in Political Theologies, 207.
(why exactly is Saloman suggesting Benjamin contact Schmitt?). But even read as a sincere expression of “thanks,” while its mode is effusive, its claims are reserved. Benjamin does not say the book agrees with Schmitt’s arguments about sovereignty; he says it “owes much” to them. It is also worth noting the “mode of research”; this “mode” would be Schmitt’s arguments about the “secularization” of concepts from the theological to the political realm. Benjamin’s comments would suggest that he too is “secularizing” concepts but in the aesthetic realm. But whose concepts? Which secularization? To answer this, let us examine Benjamin’s use of Schmitt in the Trauerspiel:

Whereas the modern concept of sovereignty amounts to a supreme executive power on the part of the prince, the baroque concept emerges from a discussion of the state of emergency, and makes it the most important function of the prince to avert this. [Benjamin cites Schmitt in Political Theology here]. The ruler is designated from the outset as the holder of dictatorial power if war, revolt, or other catastrophes should lead to a state of emergency... The theological-juridical mode of thought, which is so characteristic of the century, is an expression of the retarding effect of the over-streained transcendental impulse, which underlies all the provocatively worldly accents of the baroque. 453

What has happened between the modern and baroque periods is “secularization” à la Schmitt:

All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development – in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state... but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts. 454

Benjamin’s wording in his letter is quite apt: he owes [verdankt] much to Schmitt’s theory in this particular case. Schmitt argues that political concepts that are taken to be sui generis, rational, and/or secular have both historical and formal theological (Christian) antecedents/counterparts. Benjamin agrees that this is how “the political” has come to be created. Benjamin and Schmitt do agree about the identity of these concepts in terms of the state. But for Schmitt this ‘unveiling’ serves to reinforce the legitimacy of a dictatorial vision of the modern order. Schmitt’s critique of


454 Schmitt, Political Theology, 36.
parliamentary democracy is that it fundamentally misunderstands the true and good nature of politics or sovereignty (as defined by the corresponding theologico-juridical concepts from Christianity) as completely distinct from rational or sociological precepts. Benjamin’s critique of parliamentary democracy, on the other hand, is that in thinking political concepts are based on rational or sociological precepts, liberals and social democrats misunderstand not only those concepts but how to challenge them. Benjamin, as I will show, frames this ‘challenge’ in explicitly historical and/or aesthetic terms, not in juridical ones. Furthermore, Benjamin’s critique of Social Democracy is particularly predicated on its idealism. That is to say, on the grounds of their faith in progress and their conviction that the bourgeois state would transform gradually, along this course of progress, into the “classless society.” Schmitt defines the existing political accurately; what Benjamin wants to tell us about is the other politics that are possible. Thus, revisiting the long quotation from the Trauerspiel, we can see that Benjamin simultaneously agrees with Schmitt’s genealogy but calls it “an expression of the retarding effect of the over-strained transcendental impulse, which underlies all the provocatively worldly accents of the baroque.” The “over-strained transcendental impulse” may provide the foundation for “all the provocatively worldly accents of the baroque,” but it is also the same “impulse” which turns to betray the world in individualized transcendent salvation. Its ideological form is the eternal justification and preservation of present conditions. The political order that Schmitt

455 Benjamin, Selected Writings, Vol 4, 401.

456 I am distinguishing the ontological political from the epistemological politics. As Schmitt himself demonstrates so convincingly, the political understood ontologically involves answering only one question (and without reference to any criteria): Who is the Enemy? Naming the enemy, defines the identity of the “Friend.” Even without his political theological apparatus, this form of ontological politics ordains from its first principle all other positions that can possibly follow. In contrast, the notion of politics understood epistemologically would have to rely on a variety of criteria and could be judged according; it is not pre-ordained correct based on identity. (Please see Buck-Morss, “A Commonist Ethics,” 2011, http://globalization.gc.cuny.edu/?p=670; I have added the Schmittian dimension to her discussion of the political and politics.)
desires and views as fundamentally correct is central to the “betrayal” of the world that Benjamin discusses in the Trauerspiel.

Taubes seeks to establish that Benjamin is a Jewish thinker in line with, of all people, the apostle Paul. But he conveniently overlooks that it is Pauline transcendentalism – from Paul through Hegel – which Benjamin marks as treacherous. Therein he completely confuses Pauline/Christian “apocalypse” with Benjamin’s “messianism.” Taubes achieves this confusion through a reading of the notoriously difficult “Theological-Political Fragment.”

Benjamin writes:

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457 Taubes, The Political Theology of Paul, 72.

458 I will give a more complete account of just how different Christian apocalypse is from Benjamin’s understanding of Jewish messianism in my final chapter, but this requires being attentive to the nuances in Benjamin’s arguments about the messianic in his work on Kafka, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” the Passagenwerk, and the Baudelaire essays that are drawn from the Passagenwerk mass. This is precisely what is precluded here.

459 A few historical notes are helpful in understanding this fragment. There remains debate about when this fragment was written. Both Scholem and Adorno agreed that it was a significant writing in Benjamin’s corpus. However, Scholem insisted it was the early 1920s, based on what he perceived as textual similarities between the fragment and Benjamin’s writings of that period, and Adorno was equally insistent that it was written in the late 1930s, based on what he perceived as textual similarities between the fragment and the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” as well his clear recollection “that Benjamin had read the text, describing it as ‘the newest of the new,’ in San Remo in late 1937 or early 1938.” (Eiland and Jennings in Benjamin, Selected Writings Vol. 3, 306.) Eiland and Jennings, taking further into account what they see “as an early formulation of the complex of ideas,” concur with Adorno’s conclusion, although with “hesitancy.” What is at stake for both Scholem and Adorno is whether this fragment falls more firmly within what Scholem views as the ‘purer’ Jewish theological work of the early era and what Adorno views as the mature Marxian work of the later era. The authors of “The Critique of Violence School” side firmly, even adamantly, with Scholem’s view because they need to see this fragment not as related to some Marxist debate that Benjamin is working out in the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” but as buttressing the validity and centrality of the “Critique of Violence.” (1921) For the purposes of my understanding of this fragment, however, I would note that beyond agreeing with Eiland and Jennings ‘hesitant’ dating, it is partially irrelevant: the fragment is already built, at least in part, on Bloch’s thoroughly Marxist book Geist der Utopia [The Spirit of Utopia] (1918), thus buttressing what I view, along with Adorno, Eiland, and Jennings as the affinities of the piece (philosophically even if inconclusively in terms of intellectual history) with the Marxian dimensions of the “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” Finally, it is Adorno who gave the fragment its title, which, with its allusion to Spinoza’s Tractatus Theologico-Politicus [Theological-Political Treatise], seems apt. Spinoza’s distinction between the early modern state (or rather normative description of what the political state should be) and his simultaneous rejection on theological grounds of a theocratic state (much as both Benjamin and Bloch do) could be quite illuminating in terms of understanding Benjamin’s proposition from the fragment that, “The secular order should be erected on the idea of happiness,” as well as with his critique of social democracy, not on grounds of the state but on grounds of idealism concerning the state. Sadly, a full exploration of this illuminating comparison is beyond the scope of this dissertation.
Only the Messiah himself completes history, in the sense he alone redeems, completes, creates in relation to the messianic. For this reason, nothing that is historical can relate itself, from its own ground, to anything messianic. Therefore, the Kingdom of God is not the telos of the historical dynamic; it cannot be established as a goal. From the standpoint of history, it is not the goal but the terminus [Ende]. Therefore, the secular order cannot be built on the idea of the Divine Kingdom, and theocracy has not political but only religious meaning. To have repudiated with utmost vehemence the political significance of theocracy is the cardinal merit of Bloch’s “Spirit of Utopia.”

Taubes says of the first line, “A very difficult sentence. All right, first of all, one thing is clear: There is a Messiah. No schmontses,”⁴⁶¹ “like ‘the messianic.’” This is a strange reading of the first line, in which Benjamin puts the “Messiah” in direct relation to the “the messianic,” and also which is principally about “the messianic” and its relation to “history.” Indeed, Benjamin follows this proposition with two conclusions about how we should understand “the messianic,” not the Messiah. The first is as follows: “Therefore, the Kingdom of God is not the telos of the historical dynamic; it cannot be established as a goal.” This statement is a negation of Hegel’s teleological history and state⁴⁶² and the way in which this aspect of Hegel persists in Marx. The second conclusion is as follows: “Therefore, the secular order cannot be built on the idea of the Divine Kingdom.” This statement seems to be a rather stark repudiation of Schmitt. Benjamin is not just restating the historical critique of teleology; he is saying, additionally, that this “secular order cannot be build on the idea of the Divine Kingdom.” That is to say, an ordering of the political like Schmitt suggests, which mirrors the transcendent Christian cosmological order, is

⁴⁶⁰ Benjamin, Selected Writings, Vol.3, 305.

⁴⁶¹ Shmontses [שمتازס, nonsense], similar to the German Schmonzes [tripe, balderdash] but also carrying the connotations of “kitsch” (Seth L. Wolitz, Hidden Isaac Bashevis Singer, 281) or, more directly, “bullshit” (common usage).

⁴⁶² “The final goal of the world, we said, is Spirit’s consciousness of its freedom, and hence also the actualization of that very freedom.” (Hegel, Introduction to the Philosophy of History, 22) Hegel’s argument is precisely, of course, that “the State is the divine Idea, as it exists on earth. In this perspective, the state is the precise object of world history in general.” (Hegel, Introduction to the Philosophy of History 42) Benjamin quite clearly rejects this teleological structure of history, the telos itself, and the idea that the state is the “object of world history.”
also challenged by the realization that “nothing that is historical, can relate itself, from its own ground, to anything messianic.”

It is important to recognize that the “Theologico-Political Fragment” operates on two levels as a critique of a philosophy of history and a critique of the existing “secular order.” Benjamin is very precise here. It is not that there is no relation between history (as a practice) and the messianic but rather that if there is a relation between the historical (that is the existing, real of the “secular order”) and the messianic, it cannot be related “of itself, from its own ground.” This “of itself” [*von sich aus*] is crucial to understanding the complex argument Benjamin is making, particularly in regard to certain political positions in Marxist discourse that view the subject as actively bringing about the utopian classless society. Benjamin clarifies and intensifies his first two conclusions by following this passage with the normative statement: “The secular order should be erected on the idea of happiness.”

Taubes overlooks nearly all of this. He dismisses the second two sentences of the fragment, with the statement, “Benjamin shares Scholem’s idea… that apocalyptics knows no transitions, but posits between the Now and the Then a time of catastrophe, a time of silence, a time of total destruction and annihilation.” Not only does the assertion ignore what Benjamin actually says, it is not entirely clear that it is even true. He also dismisses the second half of

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463 More literally: “on its own.”

464 This Marxist aspect, present from the outset in Bloch, also bolsters the dating Adorno, Eiland, and Jennings support for this fragment, as discussed in my footnote 459 in this chapter. A full understanding of the importance that the distinction between direct and indirect plays in Benjamin’s notion of the messianic requires a review of the Kafka work, which I do in my next chapter. However, its necessity is quite clear in this piece on its own.

465 Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Vol.3*, 305.

466 Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 71.

467 For example, Scholem’s notion of the messianic expresses an apocalyptic longing for a cosmological judgment of humanity by God when “your court examines us.” (Benjamin, *Correspondence*, 448) Benjamin, in direct contrast,
the paragraph and in particular the line about Bloch by saying, “It’s not quite possible to recognize Benjamin’s intention here, because the sentence is too enigmatic, too short.” Taubes suggests instead are a series of “Christian concepts,” which are “highly political and explosive, or become so at certain moment.” Taubes offers a two-fold proposition: first, that “the messianic” in Benjamin is the same as in Scholem and is the same as in the Christian apocalyptic longings expressed for example, in “Romans,” and “Revelations”; second, that Benjamin wants this “total destruction and annihilation.” This proposition fails the test of logic for two reasons: 1) it does not make sense in terms of the way Benjamin describes the messianic in his writings on Kafka, Baudelaire, the Paris Arcades, and in the “Theses on the Philosophy of History;” and 2) it make sense neither in light of the arguments Benjamin makes in the _Trauerspiel_ that I examined above, nor in light of the fact that one of Benjamin’s chief criticisms of “the baroque” is that in knowing “no eschatology,” it invites not only a frantic theodicy of the present but an eschatological “vacuum, one day to destroy the world with catastrophic violence.” This criticism directly follows Benjamin’s citations of Schmitt on the nature of

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468 Taubes, _The Political Theology of Paul_, 71.

469 Taubes, _The Political Theology of Paul_, 71.

470 Ibid., 71.

471 Benjamin, _The Origin of German Tragic Drama_, 66. Agamben has disputed that this line in the _Gesammelte Schriften_ reproduction of the German original, “Es gibt keine barocke Eschatologie,” (Benjamin, _Gesammelte Schriften_ Bd. 2, 246) is in error. He writes that “the editors, with a singular disregard for all philological care,” have added the “k” to “eine” (Agamben, _State of Exception_, 4.4) and thus that the line should read “Es gibt eine barocke Eschatologie,”[There is a Baroque eschatology] or, as Agamben suggests following Steiner’s English rendition, “The Baroque knows an eschatology.” Indeed, in the 1928 printing of _Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels_ the line is “Es gibt eine barocke Eschatologie.” (Benjamin, _Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels_ (1928), 56) But this is far from conclusive. Firstly, Agamben, in this particular case, is not working off an original archival manuscript but rather comparing two German editions. (Durantaye, _Agamben: a Critical Introduction_, 149) He gives no evidence – nor have I found any elsewhere – as to why the 1928 printing is definitive. However, more importantly, the way Benjamin poses the argument in this passage does not turn on whether there is “no” eschatology or “an” eschatology. As I suggest in the main text here, even the _keine_ reading implies a kind of implicit eschatology in the
sovereignty and constitutes a component of his critique of the “over-strained transcendental impulse” discussed before.

Taubes proceeds to read “happiness” as the only pertinent word in the statement, “the secular order should be erected on the idea of happiness.” He likewise ignores Benjamin’s quite intricate explanation of this principle:

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This explanation is extraordinarily rich. Benjamin’s discussion of “secular order” should not be confused with current debates about secularism. Benjamin’s “secular” [Profane, profane, mundane, worldly] here is speaking of the “historical.” Benjamin also provides a rare – although maddeningly abrupt – glimpse at what actual politics would look like within Benjaminian philosophy. Quite simply, the vector of the “quest of free humanity for happiness” is related to the “Messianic Kingdom” only in the sense that the vector of happiness indirectly allows for the “most unobtrusive approach” of the messianic. Although there might seem to be an indication that “happiness” and “the messianic” are opposite conditions, it is merely the “path” of their “forces” which are so. The relationship of the condition of “happiness” itself and the condition of

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Baroque which Benjamin rejects. The only difference the “k” makes, in this context, is whether the eschatology is implicit or explicit. It does not change that whether that eschatology is implicit or explicit, Benjamin rejects it. Agamben assumes an equation between eschatological, apocalyptic, and messianic that has no basis in Benjamin.

472 Benjamin, Selected Writings, Vol.3, 305.
“the messianic” is left unexplained. But even without turning to the writings on Kafka, one can see from the above and from this section, that there is a clear distinction between the notion of apocalypse as the final “total destruction and annihilation” of all things and Benjamin’s messianism. Quite contrary to the violent apocalypticism that Taubes wants to impute to Benjamin, Benjamin offers a quiescent politics of happiness that runs quite perpendicular to the illegitimate “secular order” that Schmitt builds on an image of divine order. Through the medium of a “secular order,” which “should be erected on the idea of happiness,” a messianic order can emerge indirectly, in a “most unobtrusive approach.”

Taubes ignores all of this. He does not even propose a reading of any of the above section except the word “happiness,” which he links with “downfall,” completely ignoring what Benjamin writes of both “happiness” (see above) and “downfall.” Taubes links “downfall” with apocalypse, with cessation, whereas Benjamin links it with quite the opposite: namely, “transience.” Taubes misses the fact that Benjamin in the last two paragraphs of the fragment (it is only two pages long) critiques a “spiritual restitutio in integrum,”474 which “corresponds to a worldly restitution that leads to an eternity of downfall.”475 This is the same dilemma of the other-worldly, individual salvation that Benjamin critiqued in the Trauerspiel. Put differently, a “spiritual restitutio in integrum” is something of a contradiction in terms. Taubes links “happiness” to “downfall” [Unterganges] and equates “downfall,” to “passing away”

473 Again, to understand why this is the case, it is crucial to read Benjamin’s writings on Kafka. Benjamin believes that it is impossible to describe the messianic condition – even negatively – because of an epistemological problem and a political one. The epistemological problem is that although the “messianic” is a mere “distortion” of the material world, to address it as a historical materialist would be to note that subjects in secular history cannot even pose questions that would be pertinent to the nature of the world in the messianic condition. (Benjamin, Correspondence, 449) Secondly, to define the messianic condition would be to raise yet another transcendentdal, utopian concept that recreates the telos and teleological structure of Hegel’s (i.e. Christian) theodicy.

474 Restitutio in integrum, restoration to original condition or, in Christian theology, a kind of bodily resurrection.

[Vergängnis]. Although Eiland and Jennings (and Taubes) translate Vergängnis as “passing away,” I think “transience” captures both the word and Benjamin’s meaning more precisely.\textsuperscript{476} But Benjamin wants to distinguish the connection between “happiness” and “downfall,” on the one hand, and “happiness” and “transience,” on the other. The former “leads to an eternity of downfall.” The latter leads to an understanding that that “nature is messianic by reason of its eternal and total transience.”\textsuperscript{477} The “eternity of downfall” from the former expresses an infinite sweep of time, the “empty, homogenous time” which Benjamin ascribes to historicism in the “Theses on the Philosophy of History.”\textsuperscript{478} But in the latter distinction, it is not “eternity” [Ewigkeit] but “eternal” [ewigen], and even that “eternal” is an aspect of nature’s “total transience.” This “eternal and total transience” does not express an expanse of time but rather, as Benjamin writes, an “eternally transient worldly existence, transient in its totality, in its spatial but also temporal totality.”\textsuperscript{479} This statement expresses the utter contingency of time and space, not only in the sense of historical possibility but also in the sense that there is the possibility to think time and space themselves anew in each moment. Thus, while the “secular order,” “erected on the idea of happiness,” facilitates in an indirect “most unobtrusive approach” “the coming of the Messianic Kingdom,” nature, by virtue of its utter “spatial” and “temporal” contingency, facilitates the possibility of the messianic. Unlike the spiritual which is static and singular, “an eternity of downfall,” the natural, “eternal and total transience,” is portrayed as having a “rhythm” and “the rhythm of this eternally transient worldly existence… the rhythm of messianic

\textsuperscript{476} Eric Jacobson also suggests this translation. (Jacobson, \textit{Metaphysics of the Profane}, 49)

\textsuperscript{477} Benjamin, \textit{Selected Writings, Vol.3}, 306. I have altered the translation to include my rendering of Vergängnis as “transience.”

\textsuperscript{478} Benjamin, \textit{Selected Writings, Vol 4}, 396.

\textsuperscript{479} Ibid.
nature, is happiness.” The happiness in the “idea of happiness” is different than the happiness in this “rhythm.” The former is linked to the needs of real human beings, the “quest of free humanity for happiness.” The latter is linked to spatial and temporal possibility of the messianic condition, which is natural.

So while Taubes is correct when he identifies that there is a subtle critique of Nietzsche here, in his zeal for his Pauline reading, in pursuit of which he has misread or read over nearly the entire text he claims to be reading carefully, he misinterprets entirely the very last line of the fragment:

*To strive for such a passing away – even the passing away of those stages of man that are nature – is the task of world politics, whose method must be called nihilism.*

Taubes thinks that the key word here is “nihilism,” saying, “I contend that this concept of nihilism, as developed here by Benjamin, is the guiding thread of the *hos me* in Corinthians and Romans.” I could not summarize this position better than Taubes’ editors do in *The Political Theology of Paul*: “Taubes sees the closest parallel to Benjamin’s ‘nihilism as world politics,’ in Paul and in his relation to the world in the mode of ‘as though not’ (*hos me*).…Benjamin is for Taubes a Paulinian… like Paul he proceeds from the desperation and

480 Ibid.

481 Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 72.

482 Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol 4. 396. Although this is the translation that both Eiland and Jennings and Taubes use, I am not entirely convinced that this is an accurate rendering of “Diese zu erstreben, auch für diejenigen Stufen des Menschen, welche Natur sind, ist die Aufgabe der Weltpolitik, deren Methode Nihilismus zu heißen hat.” (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* Bd.2, 204.) It seems to me that the “Diese” could be referring to any number of concepts in the preceding passages and, quite possibly, to all the concepts having to do with the messianic. However, this question is not of immediate importance to my argument.

483 *Hos me* [as though not], a Greek phrase used by Paul to indicate the futility of action in the face of the impending apocalypse. (Parker, Harris, and Steineck, ed., *Time: Limits and Constraints*, 317)

484 Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 72.
irredeemability of creation.” As I have shown throughout this chapter, this is almost entirely at odds with any recognizable form of Benjamin’s thought. But what is most crucial here is that Taubes has missed that they key here is not “nihilism” but “to strive” [zu erstreben]. “To strive” for Vergängnis violates the precisely indirect formulas that Benjamin presents in the fragment. This entire last sentence is a critique of existing “world politics,” not an endorsement of them. In terms of the philosophy of history, it is an argument against utopianism and teleology. In terms of political philosophy, it critically juxtaposes the “nihilism” of existing “world politics” with “the idea of happiness” that the “secular order should be erected on.” “To strive” in this way precisely undermines the messianic possibility. Paul suggests with the hos me (for example, in Corinthians 7:25-36) that worldly actions are meaningless because apocalyptic destruction is at hand. Benjamin, in stark contrast, argues that worldly actions are most meaningful because they may indirectly bring about a messianic transformation. The emergent messianism in Benjamin’s formulation of historical materialism could not be more different than the anticipated destructive apocalypse in Paul’s formulation of ahistorical spiritualism. As I have demonstrated before, Benjamin has no use for the supernatural and specifically for the Christian notion of faith.

Needless to say, these are quite central for Paul.

Taubes, in presenting the Pauline hos me wants to distinguish it from what he called the Adornan “as-if”. He views Benjamin’s messianism as more “substantial” than Adorno’s “aestheticization.” Yet, he ignores that it is Benjamin who presents the arguments, in the “Theologico-Political Fragment,” by way of visual, auditory, and heptatic aesthetic figuration, in the “arrows,” “paths,” and “rhythms.” Taubes also ignores that in the very letter, which he claims

485 Ibid., 134.
486 Ibid., 74-75.
“blows to pieces” all existing conceptions of the early Frankfurt School period, Benjamin specifically labels his “own mode of research” as one in “philosophy of art.”

To pose perhaps obvious questions: why should we imagine that Benjamin would want to reproduce what he has just decried? In other words, why should we assume he is “secularizing” Christian theological cosmology? Benjamin writes in 1931 in a letter to Max Rychner:

> Perhaps I may also assume that, when you asked me the question to which all of what I have said here is very loosely related, you did not do so without having quietly considered some solutions for yourself. Of those, the one most familiar to me would be to see in me not a representative of dialectical materialism as a dogma, but a scholar to whom the stance of the materialist seems scientifically and humanely more productive in everything that moves us than does that of the Idealist. If I might express it in brief: I have never been able to do research and think in any sense other than, if you will, a theological one, namely in accord with the Talmudic teaching about the forty-nine levels of meaning in every passage of Torah. That is, in my experience, the most trite Communist platitude possesses more hierarchies of meaning than does contemporary bourgeois profundity, which has only one meaning, that of an apologetic.  

This passage from Benjamin’s letter to Rychner is crucial. First, Benjamin rejects another new variant on “faith,” that is, materialism as dogma. Instead he endorses the “stance of the materialist.” This could not be further from Taubes’ argument that Adorno aestheticizes Benjamin. Taubes writes, quoting Adorno:

> “But beside the demand thus placed on thought, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters.‘ There you have the aestheticization of the problem. Benjamin by contrast begins with ‘the Messiah.’ These are the same ideas diverted into the aesthetic... It hardly matters if it’s real. In Benjamin, it does matter.”

Except, of course, in this letter to Rychner, it doesn’t. It is the stance that matters, not the cosmology. That stance is measured by what is “productive,” “scientifically and humanely.”

Even here as early as 1931, we see a kernel of Convolute N of *The Arcades Project*. Marx, who “lays bare the causal connection between economy and culture,” must be fixed by demonstrating

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487 Benjamin, *Correspondence*, 372, emphasis in original.

488 Indeed, he is quoting the Adorno passage from *Minima Moralia* that was in my introduction.

489 Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 75.
“the milieu in which Marx’s doctrine arose affected that doctrine through its expressive character (which is to say, not only through causal connections); but second, it will show in what respects Marxism, too, shares the expressive character of the material products contemporary with it.”

But of course in doing that, Benjamin must “bear in mind” that the “scientific mainstay” for “commentary on reality” “is theology.” Benjamin does not view this “theology” as in any way relating to faith or “dogma.” Rather, it is dialectically oriented to Benjamin’s “materialism,” here. Benjamin in this letter proposes that “the most trite Communist platitude possesses more hierarchies of meaning” measured “scientifically and humanely” than does any Idealism or “bourgeois philosophy.” This is an application of a “theological,” indeed Talmudic methodology which posits at least “forty-nine levels of meaning in every passage of the Torah.” However, in the Passagenwerk, these “forty-nine levels of meaning” are applied as “commentary on reality.”

There is still one final aspect to the passage in the letter to Rychner: apologetics. For anyone familiar with Benjamin’s corpus, “contemporary bourgeois profundity” is easily identifiable as Heideggerian ontology (cf. the quotation above about “Heidegger’s school”; these comments can be found in multiple places in the Passagenwerk and in Benjamin’s correspondence). But, putting Heidegger aside for the moment, Schmitt too, in his critique of the

490 Benjamin, The Arcades Project, 460.

491 Benjamin, The Arcades Project, 460.

492 It is difficult – and ultimately irrelevant – to ascertain whether Benjamin is yet again confusing different Jewish principles (the four levels of meaning in the Talmud, traditionally understood and the forty-nine levels implied in some kabbalistic schools) or if he is trying to either ‘Talmud-ize’ the kabbalistic point or simply use the “forty-nine” from Kabbalistic sources to create a gesture at multiplicity or possibility of depth in meanings. There is even the possibility that Benjamin was being very precise and including the kabbalistic “forty-nine” as an extension of the fourth “secret” level of Talmudic interpretation. The point, however, in all these interpretations, is, again, multiplicity and levels. However, this last possibility is particularly fascinating as it would indicate that Benjamin was adhering to a shockingly Orthodox position that holds some kabbalistic speculation as valid but subordinated to Talmudic principles.
bourgeois state, does not overcome the “apologetic.” Schmitt’s challenge is not to current conditions – particularly as understood in terms of economic justice – but rather to what he views as popular but erroneous understandings of the origin and order of the modern state. For Benjamin this would be an apologia for an equally unjust order, an order in which the worldly is still sacrificed for a greater good.

Here too, Convolute N begins to come into focus: the “annihilation of progress” is the end of theodicy. Marxism offers some of the pieces when it begins by seeking to eradicate evil in explaining it, and not simply enduring evil by explaining it. But Marxism itself needs to be wedded to a “stance” that sees the world as laden with meaning; it needs Talmudic interpretation, theological practice. As in the “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” both Judaic messianism and Marxian thought seek a materially redeemed world. But Marxism needs Judaic interpretations of these concepts to annihilate its own utopian impulses which lead it back into idealism, back into theodicy. Judaism needs Marxism as the most “productive” system of thought to understand and realize its own materialist loyalty, “scientifically and humanely.” The machine needs the dwarf. The dwarf needs the machine.

**Derrida: the Eclipse of Reason**

Taubes’ claims about the importance of the letter “haunt,” to use one of Derrida’s favorite words, Derrida’s “reading” of Benjamin. The actual reading occupies less than a third of the essay; the frame text is what is important, since it predetermines the “reading” beyond measure. About the actual “Critique of Violence” I will say little beyond what I already have: it is unrepresentative of Benjamin’s work as a whole both thematically and stylistically, which makes it a poor choice to read his entire body of work through. Its most confounding feature, its notion of “bloodless” “divine violence,” is almost certainly a reference to Sorel’s general strike
and the possibility of non-violent practice. And although it inveighs against casual “childish” anarchism, it does contain something of an anarchistic spirit from which Benjamin distanced himself quickly afterwards. It marks a brief infatuation with Sorel and an abortive attempt at writing formal legal critique. Seyla Benhabib, in discussing Derrida’s “Force of Law,” presents a quite nice summary of the general failings of Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence” in terms of political philosophy:

Professor Derrida suggests that with some careful reading and analysis, the Benjamin text may still be able to illuminate our reflections on the problems of ethics, legality, and legitimacy in democratic societies. I am skeptical that this is so; my reasons here are threefold. First... I find it very difficult to extricate the Walter Benjamin text from the political constellation of the confrontation at the time between the Social Democrats and the Communists and the fate of the eventually developing Weimar Republic. Second, and perhaps from a systematic point of view this is a more interesting reason, I find in Derrida’s text a certain confirmation and continuation of the vision of politics as the activity of what Nancy Harstock calls the “warrior-hero.” This is a vision of politics as the agonistic struggle of male bodies with the problem of violence at its center.

As I demonstrated in my close examination of the “Theologico-Political Fragment” above, it appears Benjamin himself would largely agree with many aspects of Benhabib’s critique of the “Critique of Violence.” Yet Derrida, in a text nominally about the topics of justice and reading, in addition to violence and law, manages simultaneously to not read the “Critique of Violence” and to be unjust while doing so. Thus, the issue at hand – unlike in the case of Taubes’ reading of the letter to Schmitt or his reading of the “Theologico-Political Fragment,” as inaccurate and misleading as those are – is not to produce a reading of Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence.” It is to try and understand, rather, Derrida’s “Force of Law” and this essay’s strange privileging of the “Critique of Violence” while devoting so little space to Benjamin’s actual text, so accurately and succinctly contextualized and critiqued by Benhabib here.

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493 Benjamin writes to Scholem in 1926: “I am not ashamed of my “early” anarchism but consider anarchist methods to be useless.” (Benjamin, Correspondence, 301)

494 Benhabib, “Some Comments on Deconstruction, Justice and the Ethical Relationship,” 1219.
We must begin from Taubes’ letter (really Tiedemann’s). By 1989, under Derrida’s watchful gaze, Taubes’ letter first metastasizes into a second completely imaginary letter, and no sooner than this new letter is conjured, Benjamin’s work is suddenly afflicted with a full blown case of Nazi correspondence: “Carl Schmitt, whom Benjamin admired and with whom he maintained a correspondence, congratulated him for this essay.”\(^{495}\) Needless to say, this congratulatory letter does not exist and the “correspondence” thus referenced is, in fact, the one letter already discussed above. The imaginary letter and correspondence is not the only imaginary correspondence that Derrida invokes. Apropos of nothing, shortly into the preamble to the “reading,” Derrida remarks, “The words Walten and Gewalt play a decisive role in a few texts by Martin Heidegger…”\(^{496}\) Why does this statement appear other than to mark the utterly trivial occurrence of two common German words in Benjamin’s text (this one text is all we are talking about, according to Derrida) and a “few texts by Martin Heidegger”? Derrida deigns to explain nearly twenty pages later in his second preamble of “certain analogies”:

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\ldots \text{between the discourses of some “great” German, non-Jewish thinkers and some “great” German Jewish thinkers: a certain patriotism, often a German nationalism, and sometimes even a German militarism (during and after the First World War) were not the only analogy, far from it, for example in Cohen or Rosenzweig, and in the converted Jew, Husserl. It is in this context that certain limited but determinate affinities between Benjamin’s text and some texts by Carl Schmitt and even by Heidegger seem to me to deserve a serious interrogation.}\]^{497}

Derrida’s first point, if again trivial, is not without merit. There is no special magic in being Jewish that made German-Jews as a total group immune to German militarism, patriotism, and nationalism.\(^{498}\) Benjamin, however, partook of none of these. He did not serve and broke with


\(^{496}\) Ibid., 234.

\(^{497}\) Ibid., 261.

\(^{498}\) This point is quite in accord with Benjamin.
many of his youthful affiliations over their enthusiasm for the War. But Derrida tells us this is not the “only analogy” and that there are “certain limited but determinate affinities.” The affinities with Schmitt are the inflated false claims evaluated in my section on Taubes, here multiplied by Derrida’s inflationary theory of correspondence. What is the analogy, or what are the affinities, with Heidegger? First, Derrida presents the fact above that they both used common German words while writing in German. Derrida tells us:

*Derrida perhaps has in mind Benjamin’s arguments in the prologue to the *Trauerspiel* concerning the true origin of philosophy being in Adam’s naming. However, this is clearly an allegorical argument, so even if that were the argument, it would be hard to justify. But Derrida is not referring to that case. In fact he is so thoroughly collapsing Benjamin and Schmitt in thought that he is claiming Benjamin is nostalgic for “absolute monarchy” like Schmitt.*

As we will see shortly with Agamben, it is easy to misread Benjamin as an anarchist, particularly if one is not attentive to other definitions of law. For example, Benjamin writes in “Critique of Violence”:

*Taking up occasional statements by Marx, Sorel rejects every kind of program, of utopia – in a word, of lawmaking – for the revolutionary movement: “With the general strike, all these fine things disappear; the revolution appears as a clear simple revolt, and no place is reserved either for the sociologists or the elegant amateurs of social reforms or for the intellectuals who have made it their profession to think for the proletariat.” Against this deep, moral, and genuinely revolutionary conception, no objection stands that seeks, on grounds of its possible catastrophic consequences, to brand such a general strike as violent.*

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499 Witte, *Walter Benjamin*, 34.


501 Ibid.

Benjamin certainly seems to be taking up Sorel’s “general strike” and his anarchism more broadly. However, not only would Benjamin come to repudiate many of these positions in short time, but they are hard to reconcile with his arguments for non-violence in the same essay. Still, they display an anarchistic sympathy that is hard to ignore.

However, to misread Benjamin as an absolute monarchist requires a certain level of skill. I am tempted to stop at this point and conclude that Derrida has already disproven his own method, in terms of this essay, as far as he is from any tenable interpretation. But there is much more to deal with that will get us closer to the heart of the misreading itself. Derrida continues:

_The analogy with Schmittian or Heideggerian schemas does not need to be emphasized. This triangle would have to be illustrated by a correspondence, I mean the epistolary correspondence that linked these three thinkers (Schmitt/Benjamin, Heidegger/Schmitt)._ 503

At least we get a clearer picture of the frame, shaped as a triangle: one side is made up of the (largely imaginary) Schmitt/Benjamin correspondence; one side of the Heidegger/Schmitt correspondence 504; and what of the third side? We must recall that Derrida already gave it to us before: Benjamin and Heidegger both use the German words _Gewalt_ [violence] and _walten_ [prevail]. Even Derrida backs away from his final underlining of this “affinity” when after making much of the (meaningless) play of _walten, Gewalt_, and Walter (as in Benjamin), he adds a footnote disavowing it. 505

This disavowal is particularly characteristic of Derrida’s text. Derrida at one moment says that he will not speak of the “Critique of Violence” as an exemplar of Benjamin’s thought and then concludes with a specific (and _un_meaningful) self-contradiction: “This text, like many

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504 It should be noted that the Heidegger/Schmitt correspondence also consists of a grand total of one letter and the exchange of some books.

others by Benjamin, is still too Heideggerian, too messianic-Marxist or archeo-eschatological for me.\textsuperscript{506} Is it or is it not exemplary? If only this were the only contradiction. Nominally, the essay is about “justice.” We are told first that “the suffering of deconstruction…is perhaps the absence of rules of norms, and definitive criteria to distinguish in an unequivocal manner between law and justice.”\textsuperscript{507} This seems a fair evaluation. Surely a philosophy which involves only the disruption of definitions, even of definitions in tension, even of the kinds of dialectic tensions I have been discussing in terms of Benjamin (and Al-e Ahmad in the last chapter) does not provide definitions, even \textit{negatively}. Of course, Derrida follows up on this ten pages later:

\begin{quote}
\textit{“Deconstruction is justice.”}\textsuperscript{508} Clearly, Derrida cannot mean for this to be accepted \textit{prima facie}. He precedes this statement by writing, “Justice in itself, if such a thing exist, outside of beyond the law, is not deconstructible.”\textsuperscript{509} We are already quite far from the understandable “the suffering of deconstruction,” and its inability “to distinguish in an unequivocal manner between law and justice.” But in stating that “Justice in itself… is not deconstructible,” Derrida would seem to be actually demarcating where “Deconstruction” as a philosophical system cannot successfully apply. This, in turn, would make Derrida’s project in “Force of Law” more understandable: namely, as an anti-systemic philosophical criticism of systemic philosophy which points to the fact, value, or proposition that the systemic philosophy cannot and yet must contain, akin to Kierkegaard’s existential challenge to Hegel’s systemic logic. But in his emphatic “\textit{Deconstruction is Justice}” Derrida denies this reasonable possibility and invites speculation as to the grounds on which such a claim is being made.
\end{quote}

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{506}] Ibid., 298.
\item[\textsuperscript{507}] Derrida, \textit{Ibid.}, 231.
\item[\textsuperscript{508}] Ibid., 243, emphasis in original.
\item[\textsuperscript{509}] Ibid.
\end{itemize}
It is on precisely these grounds that Nancy Fraser addresses Derrida’s “Force of Law” in her response essay, “The Force of Law: Metaphysical or Physical?” Fraser writes:

There are three things worth noting about this account of “the force of law.” The first is the unnecessarily paradoxical character of the discussion of judgment. Derrida goes too quickly from the uncontroversial claim that judgment is not calculation to the hyperbolic, and, I think, indefensible claim that it is “madness,” “mystique,” and “violence.” There is no discussion of intermediate positions, such as those derived from the Aristotelian conception of phronesis, which understand judgment as neither the application of an algorithmic decision procedure nor the exercise of an irrational will. Because he fails to consider alternatives like these, which give nonaporetic accounts of noncalculative judgment, Derrida fails to justify his claim that judgment is shot through with aporias. On substantive grounds, then, his account is flawed.  

I do not quote Fraser to defend Aristotelian conceptions per se. Rather, what Fraser notes here goes beyond demonstrating the substantial failure of Derrida’s account on basic philosophical grounds; she suggests that Derrida is being inattentive to positions that might meaningfully disrupt the binary that Derrida himself conjures between “calculation” and “violence.” This helps explain Derrida’s attempt to clarify the claim that “Deconstruction is Justice,” when he states, “Deconstruction is possible as an experience of the impossible, there where, even if it does not exist, if it is not present, not yet or never, there is justice.”  

Although presented in the context of law, justice, and violence, this is an argument about justice in speculative philosophy. As Fraser goes on to argue, “his [Derrida’s] account directs our attention to a level of so-called ‘violence’ in law that is constitutive and inescapable. This is a ‘violence’ that can in no meaningful sense be called ‘political,’ since it is independent of any specific institutional or social arrangements and since it is not subject, even in principle, to change. Thus, ‘the force of law’ in Derrida’s account is essentially metaphysical.”  

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510 Nancy Fraser, “The Force of Law: Metaphysical or Physical?”, 1327.


512 Nancy Fraser, “The Force of Law: Metaphysical or Physical?”, 1327.
It is telling that in Fraser’s whole essay she does not feel the need to mention Benjamin at all. Benjamin is seemingly *irrelevant* to the arguments Derrida actually wants to make about law, justice, and deconstruction. Perhaps it is this metaphysical “responsibility without limits,” which is necessarily ahistorical in addition to being effectively apolitical, as Fraser suggests above, that spurs Derrida to read Benjamin and the “Critique of Violence” as “an experience of the impossible, there where, even if it does not exist....” Perhaps convinced by the ‘scandal’ of the Schmitt letter, Derrida wants to read Benjamin as a cautionary tale of how the “revolutionary” “also includes the sense of the reactionary.” But, this would be an unproductive approach to questions of law, justice, and violence – this is Fraser’s point. This is also, I would suggest, an unproductive approach to trying to understand the “Critique of Violence” and even more so Benjamin. When he finally gets to addressing some elements that are actually in the “Critique of Violence,” Derrida writes that the text is “revolutionary in a style that is both Marxist and messianic.” But the “Critique of Violence” is “revolutionary in a style” that is neither Marxist nor messianic. Sorel’s anarcho-syndicalism or what Benjamin describes as Sorel’s “taking up occasional statements by Marx” fails at being Marxist *precisely* on grounds of style. If Derrida had made the claim that the “Critique of Violence” was part of a long chain of literature that drew on Marx for inspiration, that would be defensible. But in terms of the *style* of the essay, its rhetorical, philosophical, and scientific contents (if all three can be so discretely separated and if we note the third merely by its rhetorical and philosophical absence), what Benjamin (and Sorel for that matter) does in this essay does not resemble Marx at all. The case for the messianic style is even worse. Not only is there nothing like the intricate discussion of

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messianism that I discussed before in terms of the “Theologico-Political Fragment,” but the Messiah, messianism, the messianic, even some sense of the ‘emergent’ beyond the word “revolutionary” are also completely absent.

Derrida attempts to clarify his position on justice again ten pages after his declaration that “Deconstruction is Justice” by stating that he “would hesitate to assimilate too quickly this ‘idea of justice’ to a regulative idea in the Kantian sense, to whatever content of a messianic promise… or to horizons of the same type.”515 To give us a better idea of just what is eclipsed in the elevation of deconstruction to the very definition of justice – whatever that can possibly mean – Derrida lists what he has in mind: “messianism or determinate messianic figures of the Jewish, Christian, or Islamic type, the idea in the Kantian sense, eschato-teleology of the neo-Hegelian type, Marxist or post-Marxist, etc.”516 In doing so, Derrida helps clarify what he means when he writes “revolutionary in a style that is both Marxist and messianic.” He seems to mean any thought – other than deconstruction, I assume – that can potentially affect social or political transformation. Thus, I should augment Fraser’s earlier analysis. Deconstruction is not in “no meaningful sense political”; it is, perhaps simply conservative.

But what is truly frustrating is that when Derrida finally tries to justify his entire “reading” of Benjamin, he says it is to resist the “great antiparliamentarian and anti-‘Aufklärung’ wave upon which Nazism will have, as it were, surfaced and even ‘surfed’ in the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s.”517 I will return to the bizarre chronology at play in the whole of Derrida’s essay, but I want to stop and address this question of “antiparliamentarian and anti-

516 Ibid.
517 Ibid., 259.
Aufklärung”. I am earnestly confused as to what is left of Aufklärung [the Enlightenment] if everything Derrida lists above is discounted as “messianic”; surely even the liberal tradition would fall under an “etc.” that broad. But what does Benjamin write of parliaments, even in the “Critique of Violence”?

*When the consciousness of the latent presence of violence in a legal institution disappears, the institution falls into decay. In our time, parliaments provide an example of this. They offer the familiar, woeful spectacle because they have not remained conscious of the revolutionary forces to which they owe their existence. Accordingly, in Germany in particular, the last manifestation of such forces bore no fruit for parliaments.*

Even here at the height of Benjamin’s explicit writing on a political institution, he turns to questions of consciousness; one is reminded, again, of Benjamin’s letter to Schmitt. This is not because they share a critique of parliaments (they both critique parliamentarianism for different reasons and Benjamin more or less only in this text) but rather because, reading alongside Buck-Morss, Beatrice Hansen, Margaret Cohen, James Martel, and Benjamin himself, we must conclude that the politics in Benjamin read “seriously as a political thinker” are to be found precisely in his theories of aesthetics and epistemology. That is to say, precisely where I began this chapter, with problems of knowledge, judgment, the senses, and consciousness. However, even Benjamin’s explicitly anti-parliamentarian idea here is predicated on two factors: first, his lack of consciousness; and second, his effort to answer the question he poses, “Is any nonviolent resolution of conflict possible?” Benjamin answers his own question, “Without doubt.” Before he moves into the allegorical territory that so enchants and confuses Derrida, he writes, “Nonviolent agreement is possible wherever a civilized outlook allows the use of unalloyed

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means of agreement. Legal and illegal means of every kind that are all the same violent may be confronted with nonviolent ones as unalloyed means. Courtesy, sympathy, peaceableness, trust, and whatever else might here be mentioned, are their subjective preconditions.” 521 A judicious or, indeed, just reading of Benjamin would probably venture a connection between “bloodless” violence and this discussion of “non-violence.” As I said, I do not need to defend the “Critique of Violence”; I think even the point Benjamin makes here and the discussion he enters into are a kind of naïve and pointless anarchism that Benjamin discards as his thought develops, particularly in the period during which he was composing the Passagenwerk. But the point is that Derrida is so unjust a reader that instead of seeing poorly formulated anarchism and a kind of non-violent aspiration, he actually reads Benjamin as Nazi.

And I do not use the word “Nazi” lightly. Derrida, making a running leap over any kind of historical logic, 522 claims that the text is “haunted in advance” by “the final solution”:

I believe this uneasy, enigmatic, terribly equivocal text is haunted in advance (but can one say “in advance” here?) by the theme of radical destruction, extermination, total annihilation of the law, if not of justice, and among those rights, human rights, at least such as can be interpreted within a tradition of natural law of the Greek type or the “Aufklärung” type. 523

Again:

The temptation [is] to think the holocaust as an uninterpretable manifestation of divine violence insofar as this divine violence would be at the same time annihilating, expiatory and bloodless, says Benjamin, a divine violence that would destroy current law... 524

Again:

521 Benjamin, Reflections, 289.

522 As Derrida writes, “The chronology of such events cannot be taken for granted.” (Derrida, Acts of Religion, 260) It must be noted that Benjamin’s own radical notion of history still allows for causality, responsibility, and differentiation.


524 Ibid., 298.
When one thinks of the gas chambers and the cremation ovens, this allusion to an extermination that would be expiatory because bloodless must cause one to shudder.\textsuperscript{525}

Of course, this very reading that Derrida so fears is the one he has produced based on imaginary history, imaginary letters, imaginary affinities, and bizarre associative non-logic. Here is what Benjamin actually writes about “divine violence”: “Mythical violence is bloody power over mere life for its own sake, divine violence pure power over all life for the sake of the living.”\textsuperscript{526} There is a bit of power worship and something a bit Nietzschean here. But I see no reason to read the last phrase, “for the sake of the living,” as anything other than a permutation of a kind of non-violence. Certainly Derrida gives me no such reason. Here is what Benjamin actually writes about “bloodless violence”: “if mythical violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates; if the former is bloody, the latter lethal without spilling blood. The legend of Niobe may be confronted as an example of this violence with God’s judgment on the company of Korah. It strikes privileged Levites, strikes them without warning, without threat, and does not stop short of annihilation.”\textsuperscript{527} The story of Korah and the Levites (Numbers 15-16) is indeed disturbing. Yet we have little reason here to read the Levites as arbitrary – as possible stand-ins for just anyone. Benjamin says it clearly, “privileged.” This may still prove disturbing, even if suddenly justified. Although, again, there is no reason to read Benjamin this way; Derrida certainly provides none. Judith Butler provides a reason far more resonant with Benjamin’s work in general and even within this very text: “Is there another kind of violence that is not only waged against coercion but is itself non-coercive and, in that sense if not some others,

\textsuperscript{525} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{526} Benjamin, \textit{Reflections}, 297.

\textsuperscript{527} Ibid.
fundamentally nonviolent?” Butler does point out that it is “not finally clear where he [Benjamin] can make good on this promise.” This last observation may in fact be the most salient one to make about the “Critique of Violence”; it fails in its descriptive and normative dimensions. It is a poor critique and its claims, descriptive and normative, fall out of Benjamin’s project. Outside his inflammatory and audacious frame, which circularly requires the very same frame, Derrida’s reading makes no sense. Why, therefore, does Derrida produce this reading?

At one point in “Force of Law” Derrida cites his own concept of “undecidability” and its relationship to “deconstruction.” He writes: “Undecidable – this is the experience of that which, though foreign and heterogeneous to the order of the calculable and the rule, must nonetheless – it is of duty that one must speak – deliver itself over to the impossible decision while taking account of law and rules.” I would like to remove this definition from the context of “Force of Law” for the moment, so as to strip it of the trappings of legal theory and focus on its primary claim reformulated: undecidable is the experience of something which is foreign and heterogeneous to a given or apparent order, of which it is a duty that one must speak. But taken as an imperative “duty” (perhaps this is the sense of Aufklärung that Derrida wishes to preserve?) it runs the risk of quickly devolving into the kind of mania for the heterogeneous element that we observed in Samuel Weber’s reading of Benjamin on Kafka before. It also means the desperate attempt that Derrida performs here. Where the heterogeneous element is simply boring, a more exciting one must be fashioned: Benjamin, the Nazi. Meanwhile, in the process, truly heterogenous elements that require strict attention and scrutiny (“messianism or

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528 Butler, in Political Theologies, 201.
529 Ibid.
531 Ibid.
determinate messianic figures of the Jewish, Christian, or Islamic type, the idea in the Kantian sense, eschato-teleology of the neo-Hegelian type, Marxist or post-Marxist, etc.”⁵³²) are lazily and necessarily elided to make the impossible point possible.⁵³³ What is sad is that what begins in Taubes as a partially legitimate observation – that left and right were not quite as clearly defined in the early Frankfurt School as one might presuppose – descends into complete farce. Derrida’s rejection of Benjamin at the end of the essay is all too correct in many ways to let go; if ever there were a case-in-point of how Benjamin is in no way some kind of early manifestation of deconstruction or post-structuralism, it is here.

There is a certain irony here. If there is one clear intention that Derrida has in “Force of Law,” it is to warn of the catastrophic dangers of apocalyptic thinking in any form. And yet, in reading Benjamin as he does, he helps facilitate the legitimating of a specific kind of apocalyptic thinking that Benjamin himself – in other texts – help us think against.

⁵³² Ibid., 254.

⁵³³ To offer an alternative point-of-view on what I have called here this “mania,” it is helpful to recall Foucault’s remarks in the History of Sexuality Vol.1: “But there may be another reason that makes it so gratifying for us to define the relationship between sex and power in terms of repression: something that one might call the speaker’s benefit. If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression. A person who holds forth in such language places himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power; he upsets established law; he somehow anticipates coming freedom… we are conscious of defying established power, our tone of voice shows that we know we are being subversive, and we ardently conjure away the present and appeal to the future, whose day will be hastened by the contribution we believe we are making.” (Foucault, History of Sexuality, 6-7) For Foucault this leads to an historical investigation not only of the reality of sexual repression but also of the way in which that repression is intertwined and, perhaps, reproduced by the “deliberate transgression” he writes of here. It is important to realize that although Foucault suggests this hypothesis in terms of the investigation of the history of sexuality it is not sex or sexuality per se that is operative in this particular theory but “repression” and “deliberate transgression.” This could help explain, for example, Taubes’ insistence on the “repression” of left-right connection in Frankfurt School thought. This desire for “deliberate transgression” could help explain in the context of a philosophy of Deconstruction why certain heterogeneous elements – the “Tao” in Samuel Weber’s reading of Benjamin on Kafka, the “Critique of Violence” itself in Derrida’s reading of Benjamin – are more attractive than others. In Derrida’s discussion of how he is “tempted to interpret… the mystical foundation of authority,” he explains that he thinks of this “mystical foundation” in terms of “Wittgensteinian” silence. (Derrida, Acts of Religion, 242) But, if we take the possibility seriously, he is not articulating what “one cannot speak”; he is speaking the deliberately transgressive unspeakable.
Agamben and Beyond: the Reproduction of Mania

The problem does not end with Derrida and a gross misreading of Benjamin. What is most surprising is the way in which even the random associations and the most radically unjustified elisions ossify and are reproduced through what, for lack of a better phrase, I can only deem a kind of cult of personality. On the waves of ‘pure textuality,’ what begins as a project to overturn binary thinking and the ossification of thought itself, ends up reproducing the most arbitrary association and prejudices. Thus by The State of Exception (Agamen, 2005), three propositions would be true: Benjamin is both a Schmittian political theologian and an anarchist; the Jewish messianic and the Christian apocalyptic are one and the same; and Benjamin is primarily a legal theorist and his most important statement on law is the “Critique of Violence.” Indeed, Agamen now expands the “exoteric dossier” of Benjamin and Schmitt with an “esoteric one,” in which Agamen asserts that “the first document that must be included in the dossier is not Benjamin’s reading of Political Theology, but Schmitt’s reading of Benjamin’s essay ‘Critique of Violence.’” Adam Kotsko, in his examination of this question, points out the absurdity of this claim on the grounds of simple chronology. Like Taubes (whom Agamen cites, alongside Derrida), Agamen thinks Benjamin should be read as a kind of Pauline Christian apocalyptic thinker. But Agamen is interested in capturing both the messianic and the Marxist dimensions of Benjamin in terms of this Christian apocalyptic thinking. Thus, Agamen extends Taubes’ arguments about Benjamin’s Pauline apocalypticism and Agamen’s

534 Again, as I stated in regard to Weber’s reading of Benjamin earlier, this section should be read as a critique of these particular arguments he makes about Benjamin here and not as a dismissal of Agamen tout court. Indeed, it must be acknowledge that without Agamen’s extensive archival and philological work on Benjamin, much of the work of this dissertation would not have been possible.

535 Agamen, State of Exception, 4.1 (This is an ebook citation.)

own imaginary Benjamin/Schmitt “dossier” all the way to Benjamin’s final known writing, the “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” He does so, of course, by seeing the “Critique of Violence” as the key connective tissue.

Agamben is focused, in particular, on the eighth thesis and writes,

*The decisive document in the Benjamin-Schmitt dossier is certainly the eighth thesis on the concept of history, composed by Benjamin a few months before his death. Here we read that “the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of exception’ in which we live is the rule. We must attain to a concept of history that accords with this fact. Then we will clearly see that it is our task to bring about the real state of exception, and this will improve our position in the struggle against fascism.”*

The question which should be asked here is why this document should be read as part of a “Benjamin-Schmitt dossier.” As already discussed, the actual, non-imaginary texts which would comprise such a dossier consist of handful of citations in the *Trauerpsiel* and the letter. The “Theses on the Philosophy of History” was written sometime in early 1940. The Nazi “state of emergency,” which characterized the period in which Benjamin wrote the “Theses,” began on February 28, 1933.538 The most obvious reading of the “Ausnahmezustand” [state of emergency, state of exception] that Benjamin writes of here in conjunction with the “struggle against fascism” is that Benjamin is writing about this historical condition. Agamben is aware of this but still insists on the primacy of linking this “Ausnahmezustand” with the Ausnahmezustand of Schmitt’s *Politische Theologie* (which Benjamin read in the early 1920s), in which “the exception [Ausnahmezustand] in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle [Wunder] in theology.”539 Indeed, if one is looking for it, Ausnahmezustand appears in a handful of other Benjamin texts. Benjamin writes in “Marseilles,” (1929) “Outskirts are the state of emergency

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537 Agamben, *State of Exception*, 4.5.

538 William Shirer, *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, 194.

[Ausnahmezustand] of a city, the terrain on which incessantly rages the great decisive battle between town and country.” 540 But this passage is not about jurisprudence or, more simply, law at all; the Ausnahmezustand is in reference to structure of a city and the “battle between town and country,” is a recognizable motif from Marx: as Marx says, “The antagonism between town and country begins with the transition from barbarism to civilization.” 541 This Benjamin passage taken as a whole would be seeing a historical condition as expressed in material form; in other words, this is an instance of Benjamin describing the capacity to see (as in aesthetics) the historical. Indeed, this line from Marx is also recognizable in Benjamin’s famous line from thesis VII: “There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.” 542

If Benjamin is talking about Schmitt at all in “Marseilles,” he has moved Schmitt’s Ausnahmezustand from jurisprudence to an aesthetic-historical domain. There is no mention of “law” or “violence” here at all, nor “jurisprudence” or “force.” Neither is there such a mention in the entirety of the Theses. Even the “weak messianic power” of thesis II is “eine schwache messianische Kraft,” 543 not the infamous Gewalt of the “Critique of Violence.”

Yet, Agamben insists that Benjamin’s prime concern is “a nexus between violence and law.” 544 Agamben argues, “While Schmitt attempts to reinscribe violence within a juridical context, Benjamin responds to this gesture by seeking every time to assure it – as pure violence – as existence outside of the law.” 545 This entire argument hinges on several of Agamben’s

540 Benjamin, Selected Writings, Vol. 2.1, 235.
541 Marx, The German Ideology, 69.
542 Benjamin, Selected Writings Vol. 4, 392.
543 Benjamin, Gesammelte Schriften Bd.1, 694, emphasis in original.
544 Agamben, State of Exception, 4.5.
545 Ibid., 4.6.
assumptions which have no textual, historical, or philosophical justification: first, that there is a fundamental equivalence between the eschatological, the apocalyptic, and the messianic; second, that Benjamin’s primary philosophical interest is in jurisprudence and violence; third, that Benjamin’s notion of the messianic is centrally linked to the question of violence; and fourth, that the “Critique of Violence” exhausts Benjamin’s discussions of “law,” is the “key” to Benjamin’s work, and is the historical basis of supposed near two-decade-long “esoteric” dialogue between Benjamin and Schmitt. As I have demonstrated throughout this chapter, not a single one of these assumptions is justifiable.

The logic of the “Critique of Violence School” requires suppressing nearly the entirety of Benjamin’s corpus not only in the terms of the readings I have given here of Benjamin’s views on materialism, Marxism, Judaism, and Christianity but even of recognizing Benjamin’s clear primary interest in the relationship between aesthetics, history, and consciousness at all. It is in relation to these categories that Benjamin’s politics are to be found. Instead, the reader is encouraged to see illusory affinities instead of demystified ones. Beyond the unjustifiable readings of Benjamin, what is truly frustrating about the “Critique of Violence School” is that they cannot see what is quite literally in front of their noses: not only the material I addressed in the first half of this chapter but in particular Benjamin’s writings on Kafka. Agamben cites Benjamin on Kafka, but reads over Benjamin’s writings to find in them elements of the “Critique of Violence”. Derrida discusses Kafka in “Force of Law,” but again only in relation to law understood in the strictly legalistic definitions of the “Critique of Violence”.

But Benjamin has an entirely different reading of the messianic than the one assumed by Taubes, Derrida, and Agamben. And Benjamin has an entirely different reading of law that does not follow the logic laid out in the “Critique of Violence” and has nothing to do with sovereignty
or jurisprudence. To address Benjamin’s particular formulation of the messianic and understanding of the *halachah*, I turn in the second half of my next chapter to Benjamin’s writings on Kafka. But to understand how his reading of the messianic and *halachah* converge and diverge with Al-e Ahmad’s understanding of the *Mahdi* and critical ritual action, I must first turn to Al-e Ahmad’s writing on “awaiting the Imam of the Age” and his theoretical reflections on the Hajj in *Khassi dar Miqat*. 
Chapter 4: Religions of Doubt

Introduction

Throughout this dissertation, I have been slowly performing the comparison of Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin. In this chapter, the final shape of this comparison takes shape. I begin by reading Al-e Ahmad’s account of a messianic index within the context of Shiism, historical and political paradoxes in Shiism, and political conditions in twentieth century Iran. I then turn to my reading of *Khassi dar Miqat*, focusing on Al-e Ahmad’s ‘vacillations’ in his description of his Hajj pilgrimage, and, in particular, on his concluding philosophical reflections at the end of the book. In these reflections, I explain what I call Al-e Ahmad’s theory of critical ritual action, which is crucial for understanding the philosophical framework of a “religion of doubt.” In order to understand Benjamin’s own messianic theory and where it converges and diverges with Al-e Ahmad’s and this theory of critical ritual action, I examine Benjamin’s use of *aggadah* and *halachah* in the context of his writings on Kafka. During each of these steps, I attend to key junctures in the comparative philosophical analysis of Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin such that at the end of this chapter I am able to present the staging ground for the synthetic philosophical framework I describe in my conclusion.

Waiting for the *Mahdi*

Jalal Al-e Ahmad writes in *Gharbzadegi:*

\[\text{And they’re all awaiting the Imam of the Age. Well, we’re all awaiting him, each in our own way; and we have a right to because none of our ephemeral governments has lived up to the least of its promises, because oppression, injustice, repression, and discrimination are pandemic.}\]

\[546\text{Al-e Ahmad, } Gharbzadegi, 52; Occidentosis, 71.\]
Al-e Ahmad was not always “awaiting the Imam of the Age.” By his own admission, he went a good two decades without uttering a prayer or giving much thought to Islam outside of a Marxist understanding of it as part of a cultural superstructure obfuscating and reproducing the material conditions that kept Iran exploited, undeveloped, and oppressed. As Ali Mirsepassi correctly observed in his earlier work on Iranian intellectual history, Al-e Ahmad often portrayed religion “in a class system... as an instrument of petty anger” in his early short stories. And yet at this moment, in his most celebrated text, he switches from a discussion of waiting for the Mahdi [the Hidden Imam] as the language of the poor and as the ‘opiate of the people’ to an active language that he and others can claim, that they have a right to. Existing conditions are mostajel: fleeting, hurried, contingent, “ephemeral,” as Campbell suggests in his translation. Al-e Ahmad had just finished writing, concerning the peasants who were most passionate in their messianic beliefs, that “the poorer these people are, the more they must rely on religious beliefs as the sole means of making life bearable. Those enjoying no success in the present necessarily seek it in heaven, in religion, in the afterworld.” And yet in the span of a few sentences, Al-e Ahmad opens up a new space: not only the Marxist opiate but something that perhaps everyone can have a right to. It is the existing government which is now fleeting in contrast with the unseen Imam’s literally ephemeral government. This contrast is illustrating the rapidly expanding gap in economic, political and social justice. How and why Al-e Ahmad opens this space constitutes the first task of this chapter.

547 Al-e Ahmad, Khassi dar Miqat, 9-10; Lost in the Crowd, 5-6.
548 Mirsepassi, Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization, 103.
549 Al-e Ahmad, Gharbzadegi, 52; Occidentosis, 71.
The “we” in question is clearly not limited to the peasants described a few lines earlier. Al-e Ahmad had just finished listing a series of “contradictions” [tezad] in Iranian society that constitute the conditions of the modern economy, or what Al-e Ahmad calls the “machine economy.” These are contradictions of incomplete and artificial modernization but also contradictions that Al-e Ahmad sees in modernity itself. In terms of modernization, Al-e Ahmad recognizes that viewing this concept within national boundaries is absurd. Al-e Ahmad saw Iran, accurately, as already part of a global modernity that not only included Iran but necessitated that Iran and other places like it function as sources for raw materials, both cultural and ‘natural,’ as well as to be ‘free’ markets for the dissemination of modern industrial and consumer goods. As discussed in chapter 2, this is how he understood the import of the “machine” and the contradictions it provokes. Al-e Ahmad specifically names many of the contradictions:
incomplete and inorganic urbanization that lacks the most basic, necessary economic and social foundations; uprooted, uneducated masses with, as Al-e Ahmad puts it, a village mentality, suddenly becoming the primary workers of this machine economy; the displacement and dismemberment of local forms of production without the development out of feudal conditions of property; all types and manners of emulated mores, promoting consumer desires for the sake of an unjust and imbalanced consumer economy; and the condition of women, whose advancement Al-e Ahmad argues should be the cornerstone of any just society (“material and spiritual equality,” “equally valued and paid,” and certainly outside of family life and work which should be properly be a “function of both men and women”). All of these conditions

550 Al-e Ahmad, *Gharbzadeh*, 51; *Occidentosis*, 70; “Unless the work of men and women and their services to society are equally valued and paid, unless, alongside men, women assume responsibility for administration in society (other than the home, a private function to be shared between men and women), unless material and spiritual equality is established between the sexes, we will have succeeded only in swelling an army of consumers of powder and lipstick – the products of the West’s industries – another form of *gharbzadeh*.” Although Campbell does a masterful job of bringing together a series of short abrupt sentences in Al-e Ahmad into a clearer statement in English, I have modified his translation in places to bring in closer to the original. For example, Campbell translates
have been granted a literally cosmetic transformation under the Shah. This last contradiction helps underline the question of agency in Al-e Ahmad’s analysis and reinforce Al-e Ahmad’s commitment to the anti-authoritarian possibilities in roshanfekri. The problem is not that, to use this last contradiction as the example, Iranian women are doffing the veil or that they are wearing cosmetics. 551 It is they are doing the former under political diktat and the latter as part of global economic hegemony. And that furthermore, these images of “modernization” obfuscated the actual conditions in Iran, which in turn helped to reproduce the ahistorical national modernization narratives. These narratives, in turn, obscure the fact that actual conditions in Iran are an integral part of the modern condition. 552 This section on contradictions is certainly Al-e Ahmad at his most Marxian – particularly Gramscian. And yet, it is also a place where his critique moves beyond the terms of Marx and Gramsci.

All of these contradictions are between image and reality within ‘modernizing’ Iran, i.e. within ghurbzadeh Iran, but they are also contradictions between a promised national utopia and the yardstick of a messianic yearning. “Awaiting the Imam of the Age,” understood as a quiescent, passive, transcendental condition, might be the opiate of the apolitical masses. But,

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551 A note should perhaps be added here regarding Al-e Ahmad’s general lack of personal observance. As Dabashi (and Wells and other commentators) notes, not only did Al-e Ahmad not pray – which Al-e Ahmad discusses himself – he was quite fond of particularly French wine and other not traditionally halal cuisine. (Dabashi, Theology of Discontent, 100)

552 It is tempting here, in comparative discussion with Benjamin, to address Al-e Ahmad’s acknowledgement of the nuanced possibilities in “image” for the second edition of Gharbzadegi, after the Shah had admitted women to the Majles. His original point – that women had no agency in the new “modern” laws that pertained to their bodies – he argued, still stood, since the Majles remained a powerless entity. Yet even as he argued that this admittance was “whitewashing the walls of a street along which the Shah is going to pass,” he also ends this rumination with a question, “But don’t you think a barrier may after all have been broken?” (Al-e Ahmad, Gharbzadegi, 71)
Al-e Ahmad suggests, within Shiism this messianic yearning can also be the paradoxical hope for the materialist aims of small-land owners, new urban workers, disaffected intellectuals and women in the workplace – not the usual constituency of the Hidden Imam. What is more, even though this idea relies on Shii understandings of history and conceptions of justice, Al-e Ahmad expresses it as a potentially universalizable concept. In this phrase, “awaiting the Imam of the Age,” Al-e Ahmad is drawing on one of the most recognizable Shii narratives and crafting a historiography from it. Discussions of Shiism often revolve around either the historical crisis of succession following the death of Muhammad or, alternatively, around the doctrinal openness of Shii philosophy and jurisprudence to *ijtihad* [interpretation] and *aql* [reason]. However, the central narrative that Al-e Ahmad is drawing from here in discussing “awaiting the Imam of the Age,” the “ephemeral governments,” and “oppression, injustice, repression, and discrimination,” is the battle of Karbala, the martyrdom of Hussein, and the events set into motion which resulted in the ‘ occultation’ of the twelfth Shii Imam. This narrative certainly requires both the originary historical crisis, and there is an element of the ‘doctrinal openness’ that is a part of Al-e Ahmad’s seeming ease at reconfiguring, transforming, and reorienting aspects of Shiism while still viewing himself in some sense as Shii. But Karbala and the martyrdom of Hussein are what must be remembered, in much the sense that Benjamin describes in the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” as “the sign of a messianic cessation of happening or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past.” Al-e Ahmad, as a “historical materialist,” drawing on Shii narratives and practices, “grasps” Karbala as an element in a “constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one.”

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553 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 263.
In the previous chapter, I demonstrated how Benjamin drew on Jewish hermeneutic practices and conceptions of history in addition to Marxian analyses in order to attempt to fulfill both; in Benjamin’s formulation, they required each other. Here, Al-e Ahmad performs a similar theoretical move with Shiism. The contradictions he describes and which I have listed here, even down to the language of historical contradictions themselves, are predicated in Gramscian terms and yet Al-e Ahmad also draws on the concept of “awaiting the Imam of the Age” in understanding them. In order to correct the flaws he saw in Marxism, but also to fulfill the promise of Marxism itself, Al-e Ahmad draws on Shii views of history, political order, and justice. Al-e Ahmad does not describe the same historiography that Benjamin does; rather, he inhabits it. Al-e Ahmad’s Shiism argues for a particular view of history which is certainly not “homogenous empty time”\textsuperscript{554} but is always reliving and recapitulating the failed “revolutionary chance” for a just political order. Al-e Ahmad’s Shiism is to live “history gone awry.”\textsuperscript{555} The ‘occultation’ of the last Imam permanently removes the possibility for a truly just political order; political order is marked as always and necessarily corrupt. Utopianism is therefore beyond the pale. Yet, simultaneously, in reliving and re-inhabiting the narrative (through \textit{naqali} [teahouse recitations], \textit{taziyeh} [dramatic performances of the key events before and during Karbala], Ashura processions, and countless other practices) Shia, “wherever and whenever they are, see themselves accused of being like the people of Kufa and having abandoned their imam, their Prince of Martyrs, their beloved Imam Hossein… The guilt of having abandoned and in effect having killed their son has had a gripping effect on the rest of Shii history.”\textsuperscript{556}

\textsuperscript{554} Benjamin, \textit{Illuminations}, 264.

\textsuperscript{555} Dabashi, \textit{Shiism}, xii.

\textsuperscript{556} Ibid., 84.
A powerful conceptual matrix of history and politics emerges out of this narrative, an alternative “secularization” of “significant concepts” for an alternative “modern theory of the state.” It is not that Shiism is inherently anarchic; Shia are not Kharijites. Recognizing that Hussein’s struggle was in history (even if its fulfillment would necessarily be beyond history), and that even if impossible it was towards the reform of a particular historical state, reinforces a notion of some kind of necessity of the state. An indissoluble tension is implied: the state is necessary, but simultaneously necessarily corrupt. This particular framing of the tension provides a unique way of approaching the classic political theory dilemma of “dirty hands.” In different ways, Machiavelli (through the ‘logic’ of power), Hobbes (through the counter-example of anarchy/civil war/the “State of Nature”), and Max Weber (through the “ethic of responsibility”) all advance some form of a consequentialist politics. In contrast, Shiism posits that the problem of “dirty hands” is one that, of course, states will have to engage with, much as Weber suggests, but simultaneously challenges Weber’s very conception of the state as having a “monopoly on the legitimate use of force,” via institutions, practices, and narratives of critical and ritual negation. Thus, Shiism also needs the state as the object of negation. This unique approach should not be confused with some contemporary discourse on “civil society”:

... that arena of the polity where self-organizing groups, movements, and individuals, relatively autonomous from the state, attempt to articulate value, create associations and solidarities, and advance their interests. Civil society can include manifold social movements (women’s groups, neighborhood associations, religious groupings, and intellectual organizations) and civic associations from all social strata (such as trade unions, entrepreneurial groups, journalists, or lawyers.)

557 Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation, 7. I do not mean to single out Linz and Stepan, I merely find their description broadly reflective of prevailing views in the contemporary discourse around civil society.
This “idea of civil society” is “a normative aspiration” and “a style of organization.” But the institutions, practices, and narratives that I mentioned above, predicated on the Shii conception of history and politics, are not “relatively autonomous from the state.” They are both within the state in a literal sense, partially made possible through Hobbesian logic, and simultaneously beyond the state, in a meaningful way not described by the phrase “relatively autonomous.”

Furthermore, these institutions, practices, and narratives are not merely oriented in regard to the state but to economics and other social systems as well. However, in terms of the state, as Al-e Ahmad states above, Shiism is always at the ready to challenge the sovereignty of the state, to remind it that it is merely an “ephemeral government,” and to do so in the terms of critical negation; Al-e Ahmad cites, in these terms, “oppression, injustice, repression, and discrimination.” The state can posit new “promises” and these can be better. The critical negation does not take the form of finally arriving at or crafting a perfect state, but rather of always addressing a materialist critique (do the “promises” and reality match?), as Al-e Ahmad does in most of Gharbzadegi, and simultaneously an interpretive theological critique (how do the reality and the “promises” even compare to an inarticulable index of the government of the Hidden Imam, of the non-ephemeral government). Because this index is inarticulable, it always takes the form of negation, in an Adornan rather than a Hegelian sense.

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558 Ibid. This does not negate practices and institutions associated commonly with “civil society” in themselves. It posits an alternative power structure that can even help enact some of those very practices and institutions. Al-e Ahmad himself participated in several “civil society” bodies, albeit briefly since they were mostly quickly quashed when making recognizably liberal, civil, democratic demands, such as for freedom of speech and assembly, greater political power to the parliament [majles], etc.

559 Adorno writes in regard to his view of the failures of the phenomenological project (specifically here of Husserl and Bergson): “To be insisted upon, against both, would be the goal they pursue in vain: to counter Wittgenstein by uttering the unutterable. The plain contraditoriness of this challenge is that of philosophy itself, which is thereby qualified as dialectics before getting entangled in its individual contradictions.” (Adorno, Negative Dialectics, 9) Adorno is primarily countering the Wittgenstein of the Tractatus, not the later Wittgenstein.
The interplay of a guilt that drives toward action (one is always a Kufan who could have saved Hussein) and yet is a purely negative critical mode produces several paradoxes. Dabashi describes one of the most glaring of these as follows:

> Shiism, in the end, is a paradox. It thrives and is triumphant when it is combative and wages an uphill battle; it loses its moral authority and defiant voice the instant it succeeds and is in power. It is, paradoxically, only in power when it is not in power – when it is in power, it lacks legitimacy, authority, audacity.

It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to address the politics of the Islamic Republic in a comprehensive way. However, I would like to make a few notes pertinent to this discussion of paradoxes in Shiism. In Khomeini’s concept of valayat-e faqih [the Guardianship of the Jurisprudent], the clerical government assumes the role of a ‘caretaker’ government or, even more directly, an ‘expression’ of the government of the Hidden Imam. Thus, all of the logic discussed above is undermined. Suddenly the Shii state must attempt (as it has done) to discourage, regulate, or outright ban the many of the practices of critical narration and reenactment, as these practices reinforce a Shii view of political illegitimacy. Additionally, since the Shii state views itself as now both the legitimate state and the legitimate expression of Shiism, it must do what previous Iranian governments (even nominally Shii ones) were never fully able to do: eliminate the system of precarious sovereignty or challenged sovereignty that is embodied, ironically, in the independent Shii clerical establishment itself. Thus while a great deal of attention is often paid to the Islamic Republic as a theocratic state, analysts often overlook that one of its most successful repressions is of the clergy itself. Khomeini was the last major Iranian politician to be a true marja-e taqlid [object of emulation], his formal successor, Ayatollah Ali Khameini, being something of a ‘battlefield’ appointment because no qualified marja could be found who supported valayat-e faqih unreservedly. The state had to try and

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560 Dabashi, Shiism, xiv.
refocus the illegitimacy of power and the critical apparati described above to exclusively naming enemies, both external and internal. The logic of state sovereignty – in Schmitt’s terms – trumped Shiism itself. Indeed, in the sense implied by Asad’s genealogy of religion and Schmitt’s theory of secularization, the Islamic Republic ironically succeeded, against great odds and resistance, in completely Christianizing the Iranian state.

In many ways, Al-e Ahmad was quite prescient about this paradox. This is precisely why in *Dar Khedmat va Khiyanat-e Roshanfekran* he called for clerics to have no role in government and, both there, in *Gharbzadegi*, and in *Khassi dar Miqat*, he took a rather dim view of the overly juridical implementations of Shiism based on “medieval criteria” and of the preservation of tradition *qua* tradition as itself a *gharbzadeh* gesture. He also knew that, historically, there had been a wide variety of responses to the tensions described above and the resulting paradoxes if their resolution was attempted. Shiism could be a “religion of protest,” as it had been during the Tobacco Revolt or the Constitutional Revolution, or it could take its independence and its unique view of sovereignty and disengage, become largely quiescent and other-worldly. As mentioned in chapters 1 and 2, Al-e Ahmad’s critique was also of Shiism, and specifically of those elements which promoted this other-worldly quiescence. Where Benjamin juxtaposed, for example, the Christian theodicy in the *Trauerspiel* with a Judaic hermeneutics of “loyalty” that was required both for and by materialism, Al-e Ahmad understood that Shiism contained both of these tendencies (and others) within itself: a personal, transcendent paradise and a this-worldly messianic state; an idea of injustice that requires materialist critique (and which is required for materialist critique) and also an ascetic impulse that was expressed through a juridical emphasis to restrict pleasure and happiness in this world for the sake of the next. Al-e

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561 Al-e Ahmad, *Occidentosis*, 73.
Ahmad, in his “return” to Shiism, had to make a choice. And the same interest in redressing injustice that had driven him to Marxism drove him also to Hussein and to this world. In *Khassi dar Miqat*, he approvingly quotes a joke from one of his fellow Hajjis, “Oh, Imam Hussein! Come and save me from the evils of God!” I will shortly examine *Khassi dar Miqat* to demonstrate just how wry this joke is for Al-e Ahmad. In that text, I will also show how Al-e Ahmad’s materialism was second nature to him, even at his most “religious.”

Al-e Ahmad needed to negotiate a series of paradoxes. Theocracy was a particularly acute paradox, both for the structural reasons suggested by Dabashi but also because – and this proved historically very much the case – the move to “return” to Shiism would be read as an Islamic Ideology akin to other modern ideologies: a positive ideology with a utopian telos. But given both his concept of history and his experience of the failures of liberalism, nationalism, and Marxism within Iran, Al-e Ahmad simply did not believe in utopianism of any kind. As Simin Daneshvar would later note, Al-e Ahmad’s was “a partial return to religion and to the Hidden Imam.” Indeed, his Shiism was so “partial” that he had to defeat God or, more importantly, the concept of faith (as described in chapter 1) in order to remain within his own version of “loyalty” to the world of things. And yet, while the index of “the Hidden Imam” and embracing the history of Karbala as a lived experience helped remove the utopian from the realm of the possible and promoted the practices of critical negation discussed above, it simultaneously promoted a view and theory of state sovereignty that is highly precarious. Furthermore, in arguing against the faithful and the juridical in Shiism, Al-e Ahmad was not only laying the foundation for his materialist “religious” philosophy, but also helping to collapse some of the

562 Al-e Ahmad, *Lost in the Crowd*, 104; *Khassi dar Miqat*, 150.

practices and concepts in Shiism that historically maintained the relative stability of that precarious sovereignty. Al-e Ahmad’s challenge was to walk a tightrope between needing to challenge the theodical qualities in the quiescent interpretations of Shiism while at the same time not allowing the ‘activist’ mode of Shiism to become a self-defeating utopian project. In a word, his problem was politics.

While Benjamin critiqued theodicy and any sort of transcendental soteriology, as we have seen, as early as the Trauerspiel, his full break with actually-existing-Communism in the form of Soviet Bolshevism developed slowly over the course of the 1930s.\(^\text{564}\) Even in the 1920s, he was articulating radical critiques of utopianism that would certainly mark even his tendencies towards “vulgar” Marxism as peculiar\(^\text{565}\) – part of which turned on the notion that the perfect, utopian society is a messianic idea and thus, as both a concept and a practice, logically beyond the capacity of humans to bring into being. However, Benjamin’s politics were always indirect. But Al-e Ahmad’s disillusionment with Marxism as defined by the Tudeh, the Soviet-approved official Communist Party of Iran, grew out of his lived experience of the corruption of that party’s aims and of its internal structures. At the moment I have been examining in Gharbzadegi, Al-e Ahmad’s “return” to Shiism was also a realization that injustice was better understood through gesturing at the nonexistent government of the Hidden Imam that was beyond history than in the anticipated future utopias that were actually impossible. The messianic aspects of Benjamin’s thought drew on a political abstraction: the messianic age, the world redeemed. The messianic aspects of Al-e Ahmad’s thought drew on an actual historical moment of failed

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\(^\text{564}\) Benjamin’s 1927 article “Moscow” and the diaries he drew on to write it (published only in the 1980s as The Moscow Diary) already demonstrate a nuanced ambivalence towards the Soviet experiment.

\(^\text{565}\) Benjamin, “Theologico-Political Fragment,” The Frankfurt School on Religion, 263.
political struggle; as Dabashi notes, “politics is Shii in its quintessence.”\textsuperscript{566} Al-e Ahmad also desired an indirect mode of politics. Like Benjamin, he saw one avenue for this mode in aesthetic practice and analysis, but unlike Benjamin, he saw another in a refashioned engagement with ritual practice. Benjamin also explored a similar question of ritual practice through \textit{halachah}.\textsuperscript{567} But it is in these two areas, direct politics and ritual action, where we see the starkest distinctions. And such distinctions are not merely predicated on the conceptual differences between \textit{Moshiach} [messiah] and \textit{Mahdi}. They also turn on the difference in the position of both authors on the uneven geometry of modernity, in all its dimensions, that I proposed in chapter 1.

But before I can complete my comparison of Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin, I must first turn to my reading of \textit{Khassi dar Miqat}, where we encounter Al-e Ahmad’s attempt to walk this tightrope. I also want to acknowledge that up till now in this chapter I have been, in some sense, speaking in two voices, one in terms of precise specificity (\textit{naqali}, \textit{taziyeh}, \textit{Moshiach}, \textit{halachah}, Hajj) and in terms of, perhaps, frustrating generality (“institutions, practices, and narratives of critical and ritual negation”). It is important to note that the seeming conceptual generality of the latter carry over meaningful form and content from their respective points of origin. However, I am doing so in order to facilitate what I see as an additional necessary discussion in my conclusion: a brief review of the possibilities in comparative philosophy as I have described and practiced it here beyond the comparison of Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin. I begin my reading of \textit{Khassi dar Miqat} with an examination of \textit{active} waiting, a notion I first discussed in Benjamin at the end of chapter 1. However, as I show, there are crucial differences between Al-e Ahmad’s and Benjamin’s formulations.

\textsuperscript{566} Dabashi, \textit{Shiism}, xiii.

\textsuperscript{567} I discuss Benjamin and the question of \textit{halachah} in my section in this chapter “The Problematic Status of \textit{Halachah}.”
“Waiting, waiting, waiting,” writes Al-e Ahmad in the middle of his Hajj diaries, which he would publish in 1964 as *Khassi dar Miqat*. This *intizar* [waiting, anticipation, expectation, etc.] is the same “awaiting” Al-e Ahmad discussed in *Gharbzadegi*, as in “awaiting the Imam of the Age.” However, the same *intizar* can also be the mundane waiting that Benjamin discussed as “boredom,” the waiting of “homogenous, empty time.” This is how Al-e Ahmad describes it here:

> Waiting, waiting, waiting, for the road to open, for the commotion to die down, for the heat of the sun to subside, for there to be water in the faucets, for the privy to be empty, for food to be ready, and a thousand other “fors.” On this journey you continually go from this “Miqat” to that “Miqat”. But time is so meaningless that it has no structure.

But Al-e Ahmad does not let time as “meaningless” and without “structure” last for more than a moment. In the very next line he writes, “I’m not suggesting that with all this waiting to obtain the most minimal of daily necessities there is no room for the world of the unseen and its expectations.” This quick vacillation is characteristic of *Khassi dar Miqat* as a whole. One moment, Al-e Ahmad is describing the Hajj and his experience of it in the most specific, materialist, even scientific ways, and often indeed with Marxian commentary. Here, description

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568 As I would like to explore this phrase fully, I am not including the traditional “[...]” translation here.

569 Al-e Ahmad, *Lost in the Crowd*, 85; *Khassi dar Miqat*, 120. Green has translated the phrase “az ein ‘Miqat’ be an ‘Miqat’” bizarrely as from “one rendezvous to another.” I have adjusted the translation to the more literal, including Al-e Ahmad’s own scare quotes. Green is correct that Al-e Ahmad plays with concept of *Miqat* as being read temporally in addition to spatially throughout the text. However by specifically using the word “rendezvous,” Green completely confuses a very specific comparison Al-e Ahmad draws between *Miqat* and *Meyadi* [literally, rendezvous] at a different point in the text and which also happens to be important for my reading. Here, Al-e Ahmad is poking fun at the assumed meaningfulness of the *Miqat* by calling each of these mundane events a “*Miqat*.” I will return to this below.
takes the form of complaint. But elsewhere, Al-e Ahmad gives us ethnographic-style ‘thick-descriptions,’ poetic celebrations of sensual pleasure, or ironic juxtapositions of particularly religiously significant moments or actions in the Hajj with the most basic realities of the embodied experience in those moments: fatigue, claustrophobia, gastro-intestinal distress. But he continually opens up more space by a mode of critical negation. In this opening, he is not posing paradoxical binary oppositions. Rather, through his vacillating, both expanding possibility for additional critique and suggesting a dialectical relation between the two. Here, in the context of Al-e Ahmad’s description of waiting-as-frustration, he contrasts “time” that “is so meaningless it has no structure” with “room for the world of the unseen and its expectations.” This might seem to imply a space for a theology of transcendent faith, for the ‘truth’ of the Hajj. But earlier, Al-e Ahmad reads the “world of the unseen” multiply and against this very interpretation. He writes:

*If you came and took the “world of the unseen” out of this multitude, what would be left? In our system, neither the individual nor society has priority. Priority goes to the world of the unseen, which is connected to the market, and has come under the control of companies. The individual and society are two transient phenomena contrasted with something that signifies eternity: but they are the two sides of the same coin. It is only in such a domain that “Sign of God” and “Shadow of God” have meaning.*

This statement comes in the context of a discussion of Al-e Ahmad’s fear of the destruction of the individual within a mass ritual action (in this case the *say* of the Hajj) in a horrifying mindless mass and his realization that in the antithesis, “the ultimate individualism,” the individual “is sacrificed in isolation just as much as it ‘sacrifices itself’ in society.”

Al-e Ahmad critiques the “world of the unseen” that would sacrifice the individual or society. He connects faith in a classic cosmological theology with the market; both are (falsely) mysterious

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570 Al-e Ahmad, *Lost in the Crowd*, 63; *Khassi dar Miqat*, 92.

571 Ibid.
forces through which society and individual both come to be sacrificed. In critique, both of these illusions must be dispelled. Al-e Ahmad – and this is one of the most central tensions in his work and in particular in *Khassi dar Miqat* – sees a necessary dialectical tension between individual and society, that they are “two sides of the same coin,” but that both these sides must somehow negate each other and be preserved. So for Al-e Ahmad, the “world of the unseen” must take on yet another possible meaning: the meanings of, or in, this tension. “It is only in such a domain that “Sign of God” [Ayatollah] and “Shadow of God” [zil Allah] have meaning.” In a critique of the “world of the unseen” that is also connected to the market, an analysis must take place in which the material relations of objects in the world (Al-e Ahmad frames this entire reflection around his “quenching his thirds with one of these ‘colas’”572) is fully expressed. And yet, in that critique the tension described here must be preserved. Al-e Ahmad presents us with a very different possibility in the “world of the unseen”: it is only in the “world of the unseen” as the meaning of this tension that we can understand “Sign of God” and “Shadow of God.” In terms of the former, Al-e Ahmad is both taking a bit of critical swipe at the clergy (i.e. the Ayatollah, literally the Sign of God), saying that they should not conceive of themselves as representing an order of transcendent truth, but as representations of “the domain” of this dynamic tension. He is also playing with the literal Arabic: the Ayat Allah [Signs of God]. Signs of God are the meaning that emerges from this tension and, as we shall soon see, in concert with so many other tensions. In terms of the “Shadow of God” [zil Allah], he is, to use the same terminology, taking a bit of a critical swipe at the Pahlavis and, in general, at the legitimacy of the theory of sovereignty itself. It is only in relation to “the domain” of this dynamic tension that the zil Allah (or the farr in pre-Islamic Persian), the transient “Shadow of God” that confers temporary legitimacy on

572 Ibid.
“ephemeral governments,” can be understood. Transient legitimacy is conferred on a state that (at best, in many ways) allows the possibility for the creative exploration and fruition of this tension between individual and society. He is also, of course, refashioning the very possibility of what might be meant by God. In this there is finally some sense of understanding what Al-e Ahmad means when he writes that there is “room for the world of the unseen and its expectations” at the same time as the most mundane intizar. Indeed, those are intizaresh [its expectations], literally the “waiting” of the “world of the unseen,” the “awaiting” of the Imam of the Age understood in the world. Understood this way, the boredom-waiting, which is part of the material reality of the experience of the Hajj, is brought together with a different conception of time altogether, one that is pregnant with possibility.

Yet there is at least one more dimension of intizar for Al-e Ahmad. He writes, “A person learns the meaning of religious expressions here. Waiting, waiting, waiting, as in the past. The saving grace is that in such a situation I immerse myself in this little notebook, sequestering myself behind its paper doors – no matter what happens.” Here, “intizar, intizar, intizar” is a bit of a joke; everything is taking so long in his journey that it is like the historical experience of people waiting (for over a thousand years) for the Mahdi.

But waiting for the Mahdi, as a reference for a joke or as a reference for reality, is not the only “saving grace”; Al-e Ahmad’s retreat into his writing is as well. This is not just a momentary fact in Al-e Ahmad’s diary. It is part and parcel of his Weltanschauung. As discussed in chapter 2, part of Al-e Ahmad’s critique of gharbzadegi was the way in which it ‘hardened’ human beings, necessarily desensitized them to sensory experience, particularly aesthetic

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573 Al-e Ahmad, Lost in the Crowd, 78; Khassi dar Miqat, 84.
experience. In *Khassi dar Miqat*, Al-e Ahmad is also recounting this act of writing, or rather the critical reflection required therein, as a necessary component of the strange way he is going about the Hajj. Towards the end of *Khassi dar Miqat*, Al-e Ahmad asks himself whether it would not “have been better if I had done the same thing a million other people did this year who came to the Hajj?” That is, would it not have been better to just believe and do the ritual out of faith or obedience? He answers, “Obviously, with this notebook I have given a negative answer to this sincere question.”

“*Khassi dar Miqat*”

What is “this notebook”? Or put differently, what is *Khassi dar Miqat*? Most basically, *Khassi dar Miqat* is a safarnameh, a Persian travelogue. Indeed, at several points in the text, Al-e Ahmad compares what he is doing with the work of Nasir Khusrow in his epic *Safarnameh* of the 11th century CE. It is also a diary of Al-e Ahmad’s personal experiences and reflections on the Hajj and on going on the Hajj. A complete treatment of *Khassi dar Miqat* would have to address these features and the rich variety of references and observations that Al-e Ahmad makes. However, for my present purposes, I am reading *Khassi dar Miqat* as the fruition of a philosophical argument that begins in *Gharbzadegi*, and focusing on those aspects of *Khassi dar Miqat* which are pertinent to what I demonstrate to be its philosophically coherent conclusion. This may concern some for whom philosophy is itself a discrete genre and I also consider it beyond the scope of this dissertation to fully address that question. However, I will point out that (a) I am aware that in some sense I am further ‘translating’ a political essay and a travelogue into

574 Al-e Ahmad, *Lost in the Crowd*, 123.

575 Ibid. As this is the actual conclusion to the ending section of the book, I will return to exactly what Al-e Ahmad means by this answer later in this chapter.
a philosophy in my own words and (b) even excluding the classical Hellenistic form of the
dialogue, even in the modern era and within the European world, conducting philosophy in the
form of letters, notes, diaries, dialogues, novels, and indeed, travelogues\textsuperscript{576} has a long respected
tradition. \textit{Khassi dar Miqat} produces by its end a set of arguments and, while I do rephrase them
in more recognizably philosophical language towards the end of this chapter, I do so only for the
clarity of my own comparison and philosophical arguments.\textsuperscript{577} In many ways, the style of \textit{Khassi
dar Miqat} strengthens its final positions; it is an extraordinarily honest inquiry. Al-e Ahmad
gives a series of reflections which lead to questions which lead to further reflections, and so on.
Furthermore, he does this not from some mythical ‘view from nowhere’ but rather in a grounded,
specific, embodied place and way. We understand the circumstances and the experiences that
inform each question and each idea. We are privy not only to understanding how the final
arguments unfold but to how the questions themselves are formulated.

One of the other unique characteristics of \textit{Khassi dar Miqat} is that it only figures out
what it is at its end. Al-e Ahmad does not begin by stating, for example, why he is going on the
Hajj, or why he is writing a text of it. Nor does he begin with a question to be answered. Al-e
Ahmad here tests many of the tensions explored in \textit{Gharbzadegi}, as I discussed in chapter 2. And
what begins as a kernel of an idea in \textit{Gharbzadegi} – that Shiism could provide something of a
missing element in Marxian analysis – is explored more fully here as well in looking at how
what Benjamin would call “historical materialism” was also necessary for Shiism. For Al-e

\textsuperscript{576} For a recent example, see Jean Baudrillard’s \textit{America} (1998).

\textsuperscript{577} In my first chapter, I discussed what I viewed as limitations in a complete embrace of Roland Barthes’ death of
the author. However, I was careful to note that in doing so I was not seeking to make the author the sole or
authoritative ‘voice’ on a text. I can demonstrate that \textit{Khassi dar Miqat} produces arguments and that these
arguments, especially in the final section of the book, are fairly recognizable as such. Whether Al-e Ahmad \textit{intended}
these to be \textit{philosophical} arguments, who can possibly say? For my purposes here, it only matters that they can be
recognized and employed as such.
Ahmad, importantly, this was not limited to analysis but extended to another form of practice – ritual action – which he saw as vitally necessary for his materialism. Many of these tensions and ambiguities are expressed in the title itself, Khassi dar Miqat, and it is worth noting that this title was written after the composition of the text. John Green translates Khassi dar Miqat as “Lost in the Crowd.” As Green notes:

No English word has the connotations of the term Miqat, designating the area containing the shrines at Mecca which are a goal of the Muslim pilgrimage. The term Khassi means “a chip of wood” or “a piece of straw.” A literal rendition might be “A Chip of Wood Among the Muslim Shrines,” but explanation would still be needed for many readers.⁵⁷⁸

Even this ambiguity does fully express the possibilities in understanding the title. In addition to “a chip of wood” or “a piece of straw,” Khassi could be read as a ‘mote’ or a ‘speck.’ Miqat, as Green records in a footnote, “can designate either the area containing the Muslim shrines in Mecca, or the entry stations surrounding the shrines where the purification rites are performed.”

With his choice of “Lost in the Crowd,” Green has clearly entertained the thought that the character of Khassi might affect how we understand Miqat: like ‘a chip in a woodpile,’ ‘a straw in a pile of straw.’ I am not rehearsing these meanings to quibble with Green’s translation. Rather, I believe this title expresses many but not all possible tensions within the text itself. ‘A straw in a pile of straw’ can give us some sense of the tension between individual and society discussed above, the latter threatening to swallow the former and yet being defined by the former. There is also the tension of meaning, meaninglessness, and reduction in terms of humans; should Al-e Ahmad or an individual be considered simply a straw, a chip, or some other insignificant inanimate object? Similarly, there is the critique of religion: should the “holy precincts” be considered nothing but a pile of wood? Or the alternative critique of religion: should the a pile of wood be considered as meaningful in the same sense as the “holy” precincts?

⁵⁷⁸John Green in Al-e Ahmad, Lost in the Crowd, acknowledgments.
As I have argued, Al-e Ahmad proposes that these positions be held in an irresolvable dialectic relationship with one another, an indissoluble tension; to see either the Kaaba or to understand the materiality of it, and of the Hajj itself, requires seeing the “holy precincts” and the “woodpile” at the same time.

**Vacillation**

In *Khassi dar Miqat*, these indissoluble tensions take the form of constant inconclusive vacillations between extreme positions. I offer, for example, this extended description of witnessing the circumambulation of the Kabaa itself:

> I went up on the Eastern roof and kneeled to pray in a place at the roof’s edge overlooking the entire House [i.e. the Masjid al-haram] and surrounding area...The last circumambulations lined up instantly, but there was still a flurry of activity in that corner where the Black Stone sits in one of the Kaaba’s walls as I began my prostrations. By the time I raised my head again the entire mosque population was lined up, from one end of the porticos to the rooftops to the other.

The first thing to notice is that Al-e Ahmad’s descriptions of prayer is straightforward and untroubled; he seems to be almost comfortable, if still distanced, in the activity.\(^{579}\) This is in rather stark contrast to a near constant refrain in *Khassi dar Miqat* regarding prayer, as Al-e Ahmad writes entries like, “Frankly, it isn’t the same anymore. I feel like a hypocrite. It just isn’t right. If it isn’t hypocrisy, neither is it faith. You do it just to blend in with the crowd.”\(^ {580}\) This non-genuine (as opposed to *inauthentic*) performance is, of course, a deep concern of Al-e Ahmad’s. But here, not only is Al-e Ahmad comfortable with conducting prayer, he continues as follows:

> The greatest number of human beings anywhere who are gathering in one place in response to a command. This assembly must have some meaning! A meaning higher than this dealing, marketing, tourism, discharge of obligation and ritual enactment, economy, government and a

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\(^{579}\) The ellipsis covers only further detail about timing and crowd description like in the rest of the quotation.

It is worth noting that this entire passage comes right after Al-e Ahmad’s reflections on the dangers of the individual being subsumed in the mass, in society. There Al-e Ahmad writes of this *same mass* that “one is utterly helpless in the midst of such a multitude,” of its “loud mumbling,” “being jostled by others,” “the self abandon of people,” “the glazed stares of the crowd, chained together in little groups,” and so on. He asks: “Can you keep your wits in the midst of such self-abandon? Act as an individual? The pressure of the crowd drives you on. Have you ever been caught in the midst of a terrified crowd fleeing something?”

But here, “this assembly must have some meaning!” And not just any meaning, it must have a “meaning higher than this dealing, marketing, tourism, discharge of obligation and ritual enactment, economy, government.” Al-e Ahmad spends a good part of *Khassi dar Miqat* in his most straightforward Marxian ‘social science’ and critique mode: the ratio of Arab to American workers in Saudi Aramco, daily Saudi oil production at the time (“2,000,000 barrels”, apparently), the relationship between the pilgrimage population swell on local prices of, say, yoghurt (“1/2 rial”) or a barrel of water (also “1/2 rial”), a rough estimation of the amount of meat “wasted” in sacrifice as part of the Hajj (“this would be about 20,000 tons of meat, apart from skin and entrails”) and several proposals for what can be done with that meat (an example, obtain “ten refrigerator trucks and

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581 Al-e Ahmad, *Lost in the Crowd*, 61-62.

582 Ibid., 89. Al-e Ahmad also offers a psychoanalytic explanation for the sacrifices, satisfying repressed, “primitive human urges” through social mechanisms as well as a sort of pseudo-evolutionary psychology explanation: people had developed the sacrificial practices in the Hajj to inculcate a necessary form of full body exercise, “Finally, this is a form of human exercise. Standing and bending, skinning the carcasses, dallying with them, and so on. We get no other exercise on the Hajj except walking and pelting the pillars. This primeval picnic needs two or three vigorous activities...” (Al-e Ahmad, 1984, 90.) There is also a general humanistic critique at hand: although Al-e Ahmad is not a vegetarian (he even notes with displeasure during his more economic critique of the sacrifices that “2/3rds of the people don’t even eat meat once a year,” he is clearly disturbed by the mass brutality of the seemingly pointless waste.
take all these carcasses to Jedda in an hour… put them all in a 2- or 3-thousand ton ship for cooking and preserving, freezing and salting, and send them as gifts to the poor people of the world”).

He even tries to explain at one point to another Hajji that “the dangerous heart in the East is foreign capital, and Aramco and the other oil companies are its hands,” and in reflecting on the globalized market for food production that is on display at the Hajj (“The compote I had for lunch was from Japan, something like peaches and apricots. The mango juice was from India. Everything is from somewhere… All these people, such a market! Perhaps one should say that the Hajj rites provide an occasion to liquidate surplus for all the factories in the world?”)

But, in this description of the moment of Al-e Ahmad’s witnessing circumambulation, the meaning is “higher” than symbolic or economic capital, the crowd is “stately,” its motions beautiful, described in an almost mesmerizing manner. From his comfort in prayer to his assertion of a “higher” meaning, this would seem to be the moment for Al-e Ahmad to ‘give in,’ following Green’s translation, to get “Lost in the Crowd,” to embrace faith and the aspects of Shiism that eschew the material world for a “higher” one. However, Al-e Ahmad continues:

*The gentlemen who built these new arched porticos were aware of the grandeur of their task, but it’s a pity. And God save us from all these molded reinforced concrete structures. Despite this, when finished it will be the largest uncovered temple on earth, with two new monstrous minarets competing for height.*

It is as if with the sudden memory that humans in fact built the entrances (another translation of *Miqat*), the temptation to faith comes crashing back to earth like so many “molded concrete reinforced structures.” Green is a bit loose with his translation here. Al-e Ahmad does not say “And God…” He says “And Imam…[va Imam].” God is nowhere to be seen here. It is helpful to

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583 Ibid.

584 Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Lost in the Crowd*, 74.
recall the joke Al-e Ahmad finds so amusingly correct, “Oh, Imam Hussein! Come and save me from the evils of God!”

As I descended the steps I suddenly realized my foot was burning painfully. I withdrew into a corner and bent over to find the cause of the burning, and saw that there were new blisters. Then I looked at my shins and saw they were covered with red blemishes, which continued higher up. I hiked up my ihram. It was on my chest and belly too, as well as my arms. Because of my bad liver and this hot sun. As I straightened up to leave, I caught a woman lifting her eyes, looking me over.585

And as Al-e Ahmad “descended the steps” both physically and metaphorically (that is, back to where meaning belongs) even this momentary lapse into dissolution in the mass and into transcendental thinking proves Al-e Ahmad’s critique of theodicy: he suddenly realizes he is actually in acute pain. What is more, he is in fact covered in “blisters,” and “red blemishes.” The pains of this world are not to be transcended; they are to be addressed, in the here and now. In the previous section, Green elides and diminishes Al-e Ahmad’s exclamation, *Ama hif* (اما حیف) It is a separate sentence from the line about the gentleman, and literally says, “But pity.” I do not point this out to quibble with Green, who has made a perfectly legitimate translation choice in smoothing Al-e Ahmad’s rhythmic form of writing and rendering a more grammatical “, but it’s a pity.” However, for my reading of Al-e Ahmad, it is important to note that as a noun, *hif* has the meanings of “injustice” and “oppression.” Al-e Ahmad, if we might recall Benjamin’s argument in the *Trauerspiel* from chapter 3, is exhibiting the fact that “Die Treue ist der Rhythmus der emanatistisch absteigenden Intentionssstufen,” that is, as explained, “faithfulness,” understood as loyalty to the material world, “is the rhythm of the emanatively descending levels of intention.” Al-e Ahmad offers up an explanation, nominally, for his ailments, “Because of my bad liver and this hot sun.” But throughout *Khassi dar Miqat*, this is a running motif. If there is ever a moment when transcendent faith approaches, when something like assured, uncritical,

585 Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Lost in the Crowd* 65-66; *Khassi dar Miqat*, 94-95. This reference applies to the above four long quotations.
“meaningfulness” is afoot, Al-e Ahmad suddenly starts to talk about indigestion, sores, food poisoning, heat stroke, etc. Finally, Al-e Ahmad’s alienation from the mass is pushed further as he realizes he is being watched, and possibly judged, by a woman nearby. The vacillation – so characteristic of *Khassi dar Miqat* – is complete. Al-e Ahmad has gone from near complete dissolution into the mass into near complete isolation from it. He has gone from prayer, assertion of higher meaning and purpose, from seeing what is not there, to seeing what *is* actually there: concrete blocks, sickness, injustice. It is not that meaning has vanished; it is back in the dialectic tension, where Al-e Ahmad states it belongs. It is not that “society” or “the mass” has been overcome for individuals, it is again that both are only possible in the other.

It would be easy from this extended reading of one complete ‘vacillation’ in *Khassi dar Miqat* to conclude that what Al-e Ahmad is doing invokes a classic Manichean dualism between the rank baseness and ultimate ‘evil’ of the physical and the beautiful, sublime and transcendent ‘good’ of the spiritual, even as Al-e Ahmad sees it as necessary to dwell in the material. There is no question that for Al-e Ahmad an understanding of the “world of the unseen,” which is understood as the beautiful, transcendent, sublime good, is as much of an “illusion” as the “free market.” Another dimension of *Khassi dar Miqat* is that in addition to the way transcendence and annihilation in the mass are temptations away from loyalty to the material world and to human beings in it, asceticism is a lure towards a world of purely inner truth: “To give peace of mind over to asceticism, for if one is nothing in the manifest world of action outside the self, one can at least impose the design of one’s will on one’s body!” This interior move is a sacrifice of this same dialectic necessity.\(^{586}\) Thus, a large portion of Al-e Ahmad’s text is devoted to friendly exploration of encounters with the physical. Al-e Ahmad spends quite a bit of time talking about

\(^{586}\) Al-e Ahmad, *Lost in the Crowd*, 63.
how proud he is of himself for remembering to bring along his favorite cigarettes; about really
great fresh yoghurt and coffee; about the ugly gaudiness of Saudi architecture vs. historically
more appealing styles; and a not inconsiderable amount of ink is spilled in describing how
physically attractive he finds black women from Africa.

In examining this vacillation, we have seen many of the irresolvable dialectic tensions in
Al-e Ahmad. Indeed, as I have argued, these are many of the best ways to understand the title
phrase “Khassi dar Miqat.” However, there is at least one other key interpretation that is
suggested by Al-e Ahmad himself:

The sky and the stars overhead were very low, the sky was amazingly close, Scorpio was right in
front of us, and the wind blew in our faces constantly (some 80-100 kilometers per hour). We were
huddling all the time. Then there was the job of looking after my uncle, an old man who was
continually nodding off and in danger of hitting his head on the back of the seat in front of him.
Never have I spent a night so awake, and so conscious of nothing.587 Under the cover of that sky
and that infinity, I recited every poem I’d ever memorized – mumbling to myself – and looking into
myself as carefully as I could till dawn. I saw that I was only a “piece of straw” [khasst] that had
come to the “Miqat” and not a “person” [kassi] coming to a “rendezvous”. I saw that “time” is
“infinity,” an ocean of time, and that “Miqat” exists always. And everywhere. And with the self
alone.588

First, of course, Al-e Ahmad sets the scene in poetic terms, approximately (probably ludicrous)
scientific ones, and sociological ones, grounding his long inward gaze externally. Then there is
the very specific play of words between khassi [piece of straw, etc.] and kassi [a person]. Al-e
Ahmad is not giving a reductive reading of himself; he is seeing himself, to borrow the language
of current debates in analytic philosophy, from both a first and third person point of view. As a
mere reductively natural being, he has come to a material place. This is part of the truth. The key

587 I have altered Green’s translation of جنان هشیار به هیچی from “so mindful of nothingness” to the more literal, and I
think more appropriate, “so conscious of nothing.”

588 Al-e Ahmad, Lost in the Crowd, 57-58; Khassi dar Miqat, 83. I have also altered Green’s last line here from
“always and everywhere, and with the self alone” back to Al-e Ahmad’s original sentence fragments, as the Green
translation implies, I believe, a sense of conjunction where Al-e Ahmad implies addition. I have also corrected
Green’s translation of تنها as “just” as if it were an adverb to “only” as it is an adjective. The change in meaning in
each of these cases is not in substantial.
is the “rendezvous” [meyadi]. If Al-e Ahmad sees himself as a fully meaningful person in terms of coming to the Miqat, then Miqat appears temporally in an elevated fashion, as a “rendezvous,” as the result of a kind of fate. That is to say, this would be the view that he was somehow meant to be at the Miqat. In the quotation with which I began my Intizar section, Al-e Ahmad plays with the assumed meaningfulness of Miqat, calling each of the frustrating stops a “Miqat.” There is an implicit, even blasphemous – and Al-e Ahmad is perfectly comfortable with blasphemy – question implied in this: what makes the actual Miqat, which can easily be regarded as a pile of woodchips, or some concrete blocks, necessarily more meaningful than waiting for food, the bathroom, or traffic to clear? There is another question implied in thinking about those events as “going from ‘Miqat’ to ‘Miqat’”: why assume that the order, in time, involved in the Hajj, in going to the Miqat, is meaningful?

Al-e Ahmad (more or less) follows the order and observes the ritual of the Hajj, but he is careful not to attribute – or to actively prevent himself from attributing – more meaning to one moment or the next. This ordering is another reading of Miqat, not of space but of time; each step ordains the next. The spatial Miqat which is also a temporal “rendezvous” engenders a view of time that is neither “meaningless,” “without structure,” nor an “ocean of time” as is described here. Again, I do not read Al-e Ahmad as trying to reduce kassi into khassi. Rather, he is radically rethinking the possibility of time, in order to take the assumption of meaning at a particular time and place out of a future appointment and to put meaning instead as emergent only within the tension between time understood as “meaningless,” and “without structure” – in which the Miqat is a joke, meaningless step after meaningless step – and time understood as “an

589 Al-e Ahmad, Lost in the Crowd, 85; Khassi dar Miqat, 120.
ocean of time” which is pregnant with the possibility of meaning in Miqat but then “always,” “everywhere,” but also, “with the self alone.” Just as with the “individual” and “society,” these views of time are “two sides of the same coin.” The tension between these views turns the future-orientation of Intizar, when it is understood as anticipation, into what Benjamin would call, Jetztzeit: Now-time. It strips “the future of its magic” and in doing so allows the “Miqat” or “the Imam of the Age,” or other transcendent and, indeed, other transcendent concepts drawn from Shiism to become possibilities in the material world. Additionally, for Al-e Ahmad,

590 Perhaps I am too literal, but I do not read “ocean” as “without structure” and I think Al-e Ahmad’s overall logic indicates this as well.

591 Al-e Ahmad illustrates the temporal “always” with a narrative of spatial “everywhere”; “I realized how beautifully that other atheist [zandiq], Mayhanahi, or Bastami, had put it when he told that hajji bound for the House of God at the gates of Nishapur, “put your sack of money down, circumambulate me, and go back home.” (Al-e Ahmad, Lost in the Crowd, 58; Khassi dar Miqat, 83) Here, Al-e Ahmad, in the midst of his ‘solitary’ night gives us this version of his take on Bastami, a 9th century Iranian Sufi with close ties to the Shii Imams. An extreme is expressed here (that Al-e Ahmad will revisit at the very end of the book): the Kabaa /God “everywhere” and the Kabaa/God within Bastami / the self. It is also important to note that An zandiq-e digari is Al-e Ahmad openly calling himself an “atheist” or, at least, a “heretic.” Even here, there is a bit of a grounding joke, as Bastami has essentially robbed this unsuspecting Hajji in addition to declaring the everywhere/he is God. Of course, just a few pages later, in the midst of the circumambulation chaos, Al-e Ahmad writes: “I realized what a mistake that atheist Bastami made by not coming to throw himself at the feet of such a crowd or at least his selfishness…” (Al-e Ahmad, Lost in the Crowd, 62; Khassi dar Miqat, 90; I have edited Green for consistency). A small vacillation that overlaps the longer one fully explained in the body text. Until the very end, when Al-e Ahmad produces his arguments, these are vacillations; it is not that one position supplants the other like in a more traditional dialectic. This momentary condemnation gives way quickly to frightening descriptions of the crowd. The most Al-e Ahmad provides is when he identifies one of these ‘tensions’ as in the coin metaphor for individual and society.

592 Benjamin, Illuminations, 264.

593 For both Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin, the Kantian distinction between “transcendent” and “transcendental” is largely irrelevant. Both see the possibility for “transcendental” a priori knowledge requiring a view of the subject which is “transcendent.” This is partly the view of Richard Rorty in Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (Rorty, 1979, 307) Not surprisingly, Hegel’s supposedly immanent critique of Kant would also lay bare the form and function of “transcendental” thinking. Both Benjamin and Al-e Ahmad take a non-Platonic, limited view of the scope of human knowledge in terms of both subjects and objects. Even reason itself is contingent. This is one of the reasons why both are simultaneously so comfortable with the natural sciences (if ambivalent – Al-e Ahmad more so – about technology); a seemingly verifiable, reproducible, and shared set of facts (even if they must be contingently read) is the only stable ground for any kind of ontology. And yet, through their epistemologies of limited human knowledge, scientific ontology is necessarily a partial, incomplete view of truth. Again, this is merely a short introduction to a key point for later discussion. But Al-e Ahmad lays out the terms of self-knowledge and epistemology partially in this section: both “knowing self” [khod-ra shenakhtan] and the knowledge of “humanity” [adam-ha] are “narrow” [tang], “slight” [khakir], and “trifling” [puch]. Al-e Ahmad offers this view as one of the reasons to travel in the first place. “Knowing” comes in the encounter between individuals and objects, other individuals, societies, and places, “in the various laboratories of climates and by means of human encounters and events.” (Al-e Ahmad, Khassi dar Miqat, 83). These translations are my own. In this sentence which is incredibly inimical to corollary English grammatical structure, I find Green’s translation muddled and limiting.
in the tension between an “ocean of time” – which is not necessarily “meaningless,” where “Miqat” is “always,” and “everywhere” – and a meaningless “time,” there is the possibility for a different kind of ‘reliving’ and ‘reinhabiting’ of these concepts as moments in time.

A Ritual of Doubt

Benjamin argues that in “historical materialism,” “to articulate the past,” “is to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger… the danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers.” Al-e Ahmad recognizes that shifting from a view of time as “meaningless” and without “structure” to one in which the present is viewed as reliving or re-inhabiting crucial moment(s) in the past “affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers.” Up till now, I have been describing the ways in which Al-e Ahmad’s Shiism and Marxism were, in his view, necessarily concomitant in terms of analysis. As discussed in chapter 3, Benjamin’s “theology” should be understood as a Jewish hermeneutic practice and as informed by the specifically Jewish contours of some of his concepts. But that Jewish religious – that is, religious at least within the specific terms of this dissertation – practice still concerns analysis. Neither of these analytic moves should be undervalued – particularly Benjamin’s, which is vast, intricate, and nuanced and contains within it the possibility that it is in this analysis, or through it, that critical consciousnesses and practices might emerge. But what Al-e Ahmad develops in Khassi dar Miqat is a theory of critical ritual action. Al-e Ahmad formulates this theory of critical ritual action as something beyond argument, which reinforces the “historical materialism” in his Shiism, the Shiism in his “historical materialism,” and the critical consciousness necessary to sustain the entire structure of thought. To “seize hold of a memory,”

504 Benjamin, Illuminations, 255.
for Al-e Ahmad, is not only to gesture in theory but literally to gesture: this is to embody both the memory and the theory materially. In one of the most ironic arguments in the history of Marxian thought, Al-e Ahmad argues that a particular iteration of religious ritual is, in part, an externalized grounding of materialism. In Al-e Ahmad, this performance and its dialectical counterpart, critical reflection on the performance, help preserve the location of the theory/theorist within the dialectic tensions discussed here. Alongside his analyses, this performance also stabilizes some of the inherent instabilities within Shiism discussed at the opening of this chapter via its reinforcement of materialism; this is how Al-e Ahmad critiques the theodical qualities in modernity and within Shiism itself without spiraling into a self-defeating utopianism. Although safarnameh itself, at least the act of writing, comprises part of the process of critical reflection in the theory of critical ritual action, one can see within the ‘vacillations’ just described from Khassi dar Miqat the way in which this ritual performance – emptied out of assumed meaning – and subjected to materialist critique, prevents Al-e Ahmad’s Shiism from becoming a transcendent or immanent theodicy, and simultaneously reinforces and expands the possibility for meaning to emerge in his Marxian materialism.

Al-e Ahmad begins the penultimate entry in Khassi dar Miqat from back in an airplane, this time returning from Saudi Arabia to Iran. It is a long description, full of absurdities and details like so much of the book. But then Al-e Ahmad shifts in tone entirely and he announces this shift, writing, “Now, I’ve turned to my notebook, to see whether I can write something worth reading.”\(^{595}\) The shift, in my reading of Al-e Ahmad, is to a philosophically speculative reflection on the ‘vacillations’ I have written about here.

\(^{595}\) Al-e Ahmad, Khassi dar Miqat, 179; Lost in the Crowd, 122.
The way I see it, I've come on this trip mostly out of curiosity, the same way I poke my nose into everything, to look without expectations. Now, I've seen it, and this notebook is the result. This was an experience too, in any case, or perhaps a very simple event. Every one of these experiences and events was simple and "uneventful." Although it was quite ordinary, it was the basis of a kind of awakening, and if not an awakening – at least a skepticism.596

Green’s translation is once again a bit loose here; this is another case where he has smoothed Al-e Ahmad’s language from extremely terse, abrupt statements into single and (in Green’s mind) easily comprehensible sentences. Green translates the idiomatic sar mizanam [to head into, to visit] followed by ke be har surakhi as to “poke my nose into everything.” But Al-e Ahmad writes har surakhi, “every hole,” or “every place.”597 He follows this immediately with the phrase, “To see without hope.”598 These are intimately connected ideas, if we have been following Al-e Ahmad through Khassi dar Miqat. The various poles he vacillates between are dialectical in that they determine the understanding of each other and yet they do not and cannot resolve. In being a good materialist, in attending to the evidence at hand, Al-e Ahmad must “visit,” “poke his head into” or – bringing in idiomatic possibilities from surakhi as Green does – “poke his nose into” the surakh: literally, holes, but in this context, gaps, or empty spaces that would otherwise be overlooked, spaces that one could ‘stick one’s nose into.’ These surakh are the spaces produced within the dialectic tensions where, as Al-e Ahmad argued earlier in the text, phrases like Ayatollah and farr might have meaning, spaces where meaning may emerge. To attend to these surakh, Al-e Ahmad must “see without hope.” Without hope is not merely without the sense of expectation as preconceived notion – although that is certainly present – it must also be viewed specifically as the utopian hope within the structures of both Marxism and

596 Ibid.
597 Ibid. 
598 Ibid.; عین سری که هر سوراخی میزنم. I would like to thank my friend and colleague Kamal Soleimani for his patience in explaining this very idiomatic sentence.

Al-e Ahmad specifically uses amidi and not one of the standard Persian words for “expectation”; it is not that Green’s translation is misleading here but rather that we lose the particular nuance that connects this ‘seeing without hope’ to attending to ‘the holes.’ In emphasizing the (truly present) sense of some kind of ethnographic stance, it misses the anti-utopian messianic possibilities.
Shiism. Assuming this utopian “hope” would both run the risk of collapsing one side of the tension or, in a move closer to classic dialectics, of filling in or overlooking those “holes.”

Viewing the Hajj this way, Al-e Ahmad notes that “although it was quite ordinary, it was the basis of a kind of awakening,” or “at least a skepticism.” Al-e Ahmad proposes at most an “awakening,” but in the ordinary, “at least a skepticism,” within “awakening.” But what is the nature of this skepticism? He continues:

In this way [tariq] I am smashing the steps of the world of certainty one by one with the pressure of experience [tejarbe], beneath my feet. And what is the result of a lifetime? That you come to doubt the truth, solidity, and reality of the primary axioms that bring certainty, provoke flights of fancy, or incite action, give them up one by one, and change each of them to a question mark. 599

Al-e Ahmad is playing with “way” as method and “way” as path (tariq can mean either) vis-à-vis the metaphor of “steps” and “feet.” He is also taking advantage of the word tejarbe, which means “experience” but can also indicate “experiment.” There is nothing supernatural or theological in Al-e Ahmad’s descriptions. Rather, he is reflecting on a methodology of “doubt” [shek] produced in conjunction with the performance of ritual. To put it another way, his ritual performance pulls him back from “the primary axioms” to the world of his “feet.” The critical ritual action tempers “certainty,” “flights of fancy,” and a certain understanding of inciting “action.” It keeps Al-e Ahmad vacillating between abstraction and empirical reality, but his epistemological position has shifted. He does not give these concepts up to reduce or to negate but rather to expand, to “change each one of them to a question mark.” This is “skepticism” as “awakening.” The “world of certainty” is both the world of transcendental faith but also the

599 Al-e Ahmad, Lost in the Crowd, 123; Khassi dar Miqat, 179. I have needed to alter Green’s translation of خیال انگیز from “gives cause for reflection” to “provoke flights of fancy” (a more literal translation of “coming,” or “feeling from a dream” can work too even if a bit unwieldy). Green’s translation does not carry the implications of many of the common uses of the word khial [phantom, hallucination, dream, imagination] or the context in which Al-e Ahmad clearly intends the “question mark” to be an opening for thought, not a cessation of causes “for reflection.” It should also be noted that اصالت is also the Persian word used precisely to translate the Heideggerian notion of “authenticity.” Al-e Ahmad is explicitly rejecting that there can be an اصالت that is a priori.
world of *scientistic* and/or positivist truth. *Yaqin* [certainty] also carries the connotation of “positive knowledge”; Al-e Ahmad will be critically negating from his “question marks,” held within dialectic tension by both theory and ritual action. What is explicitly epistemologically rejected, then, is any Platonic notion of truth.

This rejection does not make Al-e Ahmad a relativist, anti-science, or anti-modern; in his philosophy, to be a consistent materialist is to recognize the limitations of human cognition and existing human knowledge. Indeed, this epistemological shift, consistently materialist, is what in Al-e Ahmad’s view demands the critical ritual action, to keep the theory and theorist ‘grounded,’ as it were in the material world, embodied, skeptical. Al-e Ahmad’s materialism is consistent but in the name of it, of reckoning with local conditions, of seeing through illusory universalism and offering up different local fragments of potential universalism, he is also forced to abandon the epistemically complete picture that orthodox Marxism suggests, along with theological faith, and scientism. As Al-e Ahmad continues, “At one time I thought my eyes saw through all the world’s illusions,” i.e. when he was an actual Marxist Communist. This “certainty” Al-e Ahmad had to give up, “Now that I belong to one corner of the world,” i.e. now that he recognizes the impossibility of the universal subject that Marxism depends on and thus that he is an embodied human being, with a history, a language, a literature (a literature of both *text* and *ritual*). But this localized, embodied, historical condition is not the end of universalism. It is a “historical materialist” beginning of it: “Now that I belong to one corner of the world, if I fill my eyes with images from all other corners of the world, I will become completely worldly.”

*Worldly,* here, does not merely indicate “cosmopolitan” – although it absolutely also does mean that, “a

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600 Al-e Ahmad, *Lost in the Crowd,* 123; *Khassi dar Miqat,* 179, emphasis mine. I have changed Green’s translation of همه دنیوی as “[a man] of the entire world” to “completely worldly”; I want to again thank my colleague Kamal Soleimani for emphasizing that دنیوی directly connotes not only a cosmopolitanism but also a specific sense of “this-worldliness” as opposed to “other-worldliness.”
man of the whole world,” as Green originally suggests – it also means “this-worldly.” Yet, what could Al-e Ahmad possibly mean by “images,” after several books devoted precisely to his variety of iconoclastic ‘illusion’ smashing? And it would be easy to take this phrase for the conclusion of the argument, or the argument completely explained: a sort of piece-meal, reconstruction of universalism from all the “corners of the world.” But to do so would be an error.

For in fact, Al-e Ahmad immediately continues in the text to illuminate the question of what he means by these “images,” and to explain that this is not the sort of universalism he is gesturing at:

But then, I think it was Paul Nizan who wrote in “Aden, Arabie” that “A man is not merely a pair of eyes. If, in your travels, you cannot change your historical situation just as you change your geographical situation, what you have done is futile.” Along the same lines, I realize that a person is an aggregation of both the biological and cultural, with specific capabilities and bounded relations.

The “images” that interest Al-e Ahmad are not simply appearances or even just analyses; they have to do with a new “situation” in historical relation just as one is resituated geographically in “travel.” This is a step toward full material embodiment. But the problem is that this

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601 Green omits the [But then, or, However] which helps explicate that the following statements on Nizan illustrate the former argument further.

602 Al-e Ahmad, Lost in the Crowd, 123; Khassi dar Miqat, 179. I prefer the relational (and literally, contextually, and logically justified) translation of موقعیت تاریخی as “historical situation” as opposed to Green’s “position in history”; the latter, quite simply put, makes no sense in the sentence whereas situation implies position in relation, as in ‘being resituated.’ It is important to remember that Al-e Ahmad is not quoting from Nizan here. He is offhandedly summarizing what he remembers Nizan saying in the book. Similarly, I find Green’s rendering of و همین جوری متوجه شدم که یک آدم یک مجموعه زیستی و فرهنگی باهم است. با لیاقت های معین و مناسبت های محدود completely insufficient for expressing the full meaning (or range of meanings) in Al-e Ahmad’s text. He clearly writes “biological” and not the vaguer “life”, and “biological” strongly resonates with the naturalistic mere life connotations of the geographical.

603 I stress “material” to underline the distinction between what Al-e Ahmad means by ‘embodiment,’ i.e. recognition and reckoning with the historical, cultural, and even reductively natural “facts” of human embodiment. The existentialism in Al-e Ahmad (coming largely through French literary sources) is predicated on this view of human being and not Heidegger’s Dasein.
resituating is not, of itself, entirely possible. There is no ‘vacillation’ here. Rather we are presented with facts: a “person is an aggregation of both the biological and the cultural, with specific capabilities and bounded relations.” There will be no easy ‘piece-meal’ universalism. As each individual is always bound both by biological and cultural limitations which prevent them from resituating themselves, at least “in travel,” historically. The comparative example that Al-e Ahmad chooses is telling: Nizan is a committed Marxist (leaving the Communist Party at the announcement of the Nazi-Soviet pact) who, in *Aden, Arabie* (1931) travels to Aden in pursuit of an exotic fantasy of the Muslim world and arrives only to find much of the bourgeois life of Paris which he thought he had left far behind, reproduced but in sad, recognizable, and yet simultaneously, decrepit and alien forms. Nizan writes: “The Orient reproduces the Occident and is a commentary upon it.”604 Nizan is a good enough materialist – at least by Al-e Ahmad’s standards – that he recognizes that there is no reality to the romantic fantasy of the Orient. But what he discovers in his journey is that he cannot change his historical relations as simply as he changes his “geographical situation,” in other words, just by traveling. Modernity, in one of its peaks or valleys, is already everywhere, and yet Nizan’s particular “capabilities and bounded relations” render his attempt “futile.” Nizan is culturally tied to his point of origin, in his reflections and in his orientation and yet lacks any means by which to transform or change this orientation – the only aspect that is changeable or negotiable, the origin and biological facts being immutable. Nizan here can be seen as something of a traditional Marxist foil: materialist enough to see past the illusion of Aden, not enough to take the Gramscian step towards local

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604 Nizan, *Aden, Arabie*, 110. Although I disagree with much of its content, I found Lamont Lindstrom’s article “Cargoism and Occidentalism” (Carrier, 1995, 33) to be helpful in identifying key moments in Nizan’s book. I find the entire premise of “Occentialism” as argued most famously by Avishai Marglit as preposterous. It completely ignores the vital role of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony for Said’s critique and mistakes it at best as purely discursive and at worst for a simple matter of prejudice and stereotype. For a far more thorough critique, please see Akeel Bilgrami, “Occidentalism: the Very Idea,” in *Critical Inquiry* 32 (2006).
language, and not enough to take Al-e Ahmad’s further move of critiquing qualities of the universal itself and offering up new ones to challenge them, to critique Marxism on materialist grounds that return the theorist to a living, breathing body, with location, history, language, and literature.

As we have seen, Al-e Ahmad has already suggested by this point that there is a fundamental difference between travel and the kind of critical ritual practice that he is describing. Nizan’s case in Aden, Arabie is illustrative of this difference; he travels both with an imagined, “hoped” for destination and with the assumption that he can disentangle himself from his particular origin, not just in his “geographical situation” but in his “historical situation.” Of course, this is also implied in a different way by traditionalist understandings of the Hajj; Al-e Ahmad’s account of the Hajj, and the theory of critical ritual practice that he develops through it, is also a critique of the Hajj.

Travel for Nizan, like the Hajj traditionally understood, implies an imagined destination, or a foregone conclusion. However, Al-e Ahmad proposes to remove the element of faith from the performance of ritual, even ritualized travel such as pilgrimage. Critical ritual practice is a language of gestures consciously performed and dialectically addressed. It is a material grounding and reminder of the body, but also a critical evaluation and interpretation of movement in relation to “historical and geographical situation.” And yet simultaneously cognizant of moving both individually but also as a trajectory from the theorist’s historical and geographic point of origin to a critical engagement a new historical and geographical situation.  

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605 I must re-emphasize my argument from chapter 2 that Al-e Ahmad does not believe in anything like the ‘purity’ of the nation – even at his most nationalistic, he thinks of culture as fluid, contingent, and dialogic. I have not discussed Al-e Ahmad’s nationalism at great length, but it should be noted that his nationalism is far closer to the nationalism of nineteenth century utopian socialists like Lassalle than to an ethno-nationalist position. This is perhaps best witnessed in some of his writings on Israel which discuss both the possibilities in cultural revival and
This new locale must be understood itself as involving both “facts” of nature and history that are outside the theorist’s mind (i.e. not solipsism) but which are necessarily mediated through both the origin and trajectory of that theorist. In this way, Al-e Ahmad proposes critical ritual practice as a way in which the theorist can change her historical and geographical situation, can be resituated. A traditional Marxist response to this notion of a language of gestures would be to see them as an irrational and epiphenomenal “expression” of real conditions but indexed to the “other-world of truth,” in opposition to the “truth of this world.” To a reductive naturalist this notion would be meaningless: arbitrary vestigial traces of memetics, cultural tail-bones. However, as we have seen, Al-e Ahmad sees them as potentially, if practiced according to the theory Khassi dar Miqat suggests, not irrational at all but rather a dialectical engagement with historical and geographical facts of origin and of natural facts of body, entirely of a piece with the “secular” “truth of this world.” This is neither irrational nor is it, of itself, rational: it is non-rational. The performance of the non-rational, for Al-e Ahmad, has the additional, materially necessary purpose of reinscribing the epistemological shift described above. It is also not

the limitations in terms of the actual practice of politics. I have already shown how in Gharbzadegi, Al-e Ahmad explicitly rejects ethno-nationalist pretensions in the state as little more than mystification and sees ethno-nationalist and cultural purity as a ‘trap.’ Many have suggested that Al-e Ahmad encourages a religious nationalism in place of ethno-nationalism but, similarly, Al-e Ahmad argues in Dar Khedmat va Khiyanat-e Roshanfekran that when it comes to the actual practices of politics in the state or the constitution of the state, clergy in particular would have to “drop the idea of government based on revelation or else refrain from political activity altogether.” (Vadhat, God and Juggernaut, 66) Nations are more akin to changing bundles or interlaced threads of these “trajectories” for Al-e Ahmad. I discuss how this plays out in terms of his theory of cosmopolitanism in this section.

Surprisingly, I have found Daniel Dennett’s notion of the “intentional stance” incredibly helpful in understanding what Al-e Ahmad is doing with this “resituation” and what Benjamin is doing with his assumption of meaning in the world. I will discuss this further later in my conclusion. But for now, it is useful to remember that in Dennett’s version of the “intentional stance” he is interested in prediction (since being an avowed “greedy reductionist” he views the models of the natural sciences as the best – if not perhaps only – mode of the production of knowledge) and within the thought experiment imbues objects – particularly objects that appear as an unthinkable or not-understandable other – “as rational agents.” (Dennett, The Intentional Stance, 17) In doing so, Dennett argues, we can predict the behavior of the other (or object) “in many – if not all – instances.” The eventual goal is to arrive at fairly accurate prediction and to understand the distinction of subject and object as – counterruititively from the starting point – object and object. In oddly similar structure but with incredibly different results, Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin (in particular) can be taken as proposing something like a “meaningful stance.”

arbitrary; to argue this would be, for Al-e Ahmad, to make an ahistorical, idealistic argument about human nature. One may have no wish to identify, participate, or continue any particular line of historical and cultural context that one is born into (and, as we have seen in *Sangi bar Guri* [A Stone on a Grave], this is an end that Al-e Ahmad himself embraces towards much cultural inheritance), but that does not change the fact the one is a historically and culturally contingent human being in *addition* to a “merely” organic one; one is an “aggregation of biological and cultural” facts.

Part of this view is deeply Gramscian. Al-e Ahmad wants us to recognize the material and historical facts that one is “from one corner of the world.” But for Gramsci, this “situation” implies a dialectic unfolding towards a universal subject, in line with both Hegel and Marx. As Gramsci writes:

> Even if one admits that other cultures have an importance and a significance in the process of “hierarchical” unification of world civilization (and this should certainly be admitted without question), they have had a universal value only insofar as they have become constituent elements of European culture, which is the only historically and concretely universal culture – in so far, that is, as they have contributed to the process of European thought and been assimilated by it.\(^{608}\)

There can be little doubt that for Gramsci of both a substantive singularity of the eventual ‘universal subject’ or of the fact that it is *universalizing* in the sense of ‘making the same.’

Gramsci critiques a lacuna in Marxist thought. Culture is not mere superstructure, he argues; it is itself the material condition that constitutes the lives and contexts of peoples. Gramsci observes that many of the mechanical postulates of especially the late Marx and Engels are crucially impoverished as a result of this misconception. Culture can, in a sense, arrest history. However, the role of the ‘organic’ in Gramsci’s “intellectual” is recognizing his place in the “people-nation,” is “feeling the elementary passions of the people… connecting them dialectically to the

lives of history and to a superior conception of the world.” In his materialist critique, Gramsci deepens currents prevailing in Marxism at the time to look at culture as material facts. But he does not turn this same critique on the vestiges of Idealism in the progressive teleological project of Marxism; it is a closed system, and nothing of “knowledge” is contributed by culture’s “feelings.”

Al-e Ahmad finds even this iteration of Marxism insufficiently materialist. Al-e Ahmad (and Benjamin, in a different way) is not assimilated into “European thought.” He borrows a “process of European thought” and with it critiques both orthodox Marxism and Shiism. In doing so, however, he does not see himself as retreating from a universal space; to “become completely worldly” is to recognize that there is irreconcilable difference in universalistic space. Being a “cosmopolitan” is to be ‘rooted’ in precisely the way that Stalin would decry Jews as rootless, to understand one’s trajectory, one’s geographic and historical situation, even as one moves physically and in philosophy. This critique must be viewed as immanent vis-à-vis Marxian thought, as Al-e Ahmad critiquing Hegelian Idealism as a truly universal philosophy and its

609 Ibid., 418.

610 Ibid. I am not arguing that Al-e Ahmad wants to “emotionalize” “knowledge” but rather that he sees “culture” as a source of actual knowledge or possible knowledge.

611 One of the episodes in Al-e Ahmad’s life that has most confounded scholars is his activities and statements as a Visiting Fellow at Harvard in 1965; most simply mention it and others just mark it as confusing or aberrant. In The Mantle of the Prophet, Mottahedeh portrays the episode in quite vivid detail, from Al-e Ahmad’s initial concerns about the whole thing being funded by the CIA (it was, partially), to his excitement at meeting other American and Third World intellectuals, to even his leisure time activities (getting drinks at a local Boston bar in some kind of half-hearted ethnographic impulse to understand the American working class). (Mottahedeh, 1985, 320-323) However, Mottahedeh is completely befuddled as to why at this conference Al-e Ahmad, in discussing gharbzadegi, argued that its critique was consonant with the notion of “world culture” or “a mixture of all cultures.” To explain this, Mottahedeh and several other scholars claim that Al-e Ahmad was simply playing to the crowd. This is unconvincing even within Mottahedeh’s own evidence; Al-e Ahmad was never someone to hide or mollify his opinions. He was most excited to meet and converse with Ralph Ellison who he admired both aesthetically and philosophically, but that did not stop his from speculating – in full knowledge of Ellison’s love of jazz – that jazz music might be an idealistic refuge for African-Americans, like “Christianity.” A much more plausible reading of Al-e Ahmad’s comments is that he took the Harvard opportunity to discuss – beyond the chapters in Gharbzadegi and universalized moments in Khassi dar Miqat – how his critique addressed the question and possibility of the non-particular.
influence on Marxist thought, including Gramsci, on materialist grounds. This critique is not limited to the question of universalism but also to the question of teleology. Gramsci, in elaborating the thesis I quoted above, argues that even “European culture has undergone a process of unification,” and that “this has culminated in Hegel.” Gramsci’s theory is still predicated on a conception of a singular, universal, universalizing, teleological process of history.

Al-e Ahmad, as I have already described, did not discuss utopian futures and his vision of cosmopolitanism-in-the-now is remarkably Habermasian: he imagines a kind of public sphere where these people as these trajectories would cross and, for lack of a better word, philosophize. In recognition of these “bounded” conditions, Al-e Ahmad was skeptical of a world government, but sanguine about “world culture.” In his dialectical view of Shiism and Marxism as necessarily co-determinant, Al-e Ahmad had also come to view such a world government as messianic in precisely Benjaminian terms, as beyond the realm of actual history and politics. Furthermore, his image of universalism as a space of the movement and resituation of specific bodies and ideas with specific historical and geographic origins and trajectories is of a piece with Benjamin’s argument in Thesis III of the “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” Namely, that for the historical materialist, “nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history,” but that methodological maxim should be understood as in Jetztzeit and it is “to be sure, only a redeemed mankind which receives the fullness of its past.” This did not make Al-e

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613 Mottahehdeh, *Mantle of the Prophet*, 322.

614 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 254. This point of Benjamin’s is more fully articulated by Adorno in *Minima Moralia*. As Buck-Morss argues, “Indeed, in both style and theme, the books was strongly reminiscent of Benjamin’s work.” (Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 181) Adorno writes, apropos this passage in Benjamin: “The familiar argument of tolerance, that all people and all races are equal, is a boomerang. It lays itself open to the
Ahmad a relativist; he clearly thought that certain concepts and practices (and theories of practice) were translatable and transmittable, and that some were better than others. Obviously, he found materialist ontology (in terms of both science and historical materialism) simply truer than transcendental idealism of any kind. Similarly, he clearly found his version of a Shiimessianic view of history truer than either a quiescent view or any mechanical, teleological view.

Yet there are limitations to how far this ‘reconciliation’ can go. That is to say, even a ‘reconciliation in difference,’ at least within the scope of actual lived history. As Al-e Ahmad continues his conclusion:

_In any case, a man is not merely a mirror, but a mirror in which specific things are reflected, even that Hamadani pilgrim who’s still wearing his sheepskin vest. But then, a mirror has no language, and you only want to have a language. Is this not what separates the eye of the head from the eye of the heart? When I assess the matter I can see that with the eye of my heart I don’t even know myself and the familiar life of Tehran, Shemiran, and Pachinar._\(^{615}\)

The “Hamadani pilgrim” is a “thing” that is “reflected” in Al-e Ahmad’s “mirror,” but is also himself a “mirror,” and possibly more. _This_ is image for Al-e Ahmad: a representation that is beyond language. In descriptive philosophical terms (i.e. not intellectual historical ones) there is simple refutation of the senses, and the most compelling anthropological program proofs that the Jews are not a race will, in the event of a pogrom, scarcely alter the fact that the totalitarians know full well whom they do and whom they do not intend to murder. If the equality of all who have human shape were demanded as an ideal [i.e. Hegelian reconciliation] it would not greatly help. Abstract utopia is all too compatible with the most insidious tendencies of society. That all men are alike is exactly what society would like to hear. It considers actual or imagined differences as stigmas indication that not enough has yet been done; that something has still been left outside its machinery, not quite determined in its totality.” (Adorno, _Minima Moralia_, 66) However, there is another way to understand reconciliation: “An emancipated society, on the other hand, would not be unitary state, but the realization of universality in the reconciliation of differences. Politics that are still seriously concerned with such a society ought not, therefore, propound the abstract inequality of men even as an idea. Instead, they should point to the bad equality today… and conceive the better state as one in which people could be different without fear.” (Adorno, _Minima Moralia_, 67.)

\(^{615}\) Al-e Ahmad, _Lost in the Crowd_, 123; _Khassi dar Miqat_, 180. It _may_ be tempting to view the “eye of the head” and the “eye of the heart” as mapping quite neatly onto Cartesian dualism and mirroring an understanding of Al-e Ahmad’s “awakening,” to “doubt” as mirroring Cartesian skepticism, but this would be to miss the vital fact that Al-e Ahmad’s philosophy _begins_ with aesthetics, i.e. with aesthetics as sensory experience and its extension as the only basis for knowledge, and that he calls into question the opacity of self-knowledge itself in this passage.
something Kantian here. The “Hamadani pilgrim” is, in one sense, a thing-in-itself, and this is inaccessible to language. But morally speaking, Al-e Ahmad also apprehends a gulf between a thing-in-itself and a human being. If it is reductive to view the Kabaa as merely a pile of stones, it is actually violent, Al-e Ahmad is telling us, to view this man only in terms of Al-e Ahmad’s own depiction of him. Unlike in Kant, however, for Al-e Ahmad, a priori principles are not apprehended through reason, apart from sensory experience (and unlike in Heidegger, there is no Sein before Dasein, human beings can only be understood contingently and relationally). Again, as we have seen throughout Khassi dar Miqat and particularly in this section, there are facts at play, both scientific and historical. These constitute the sub-image that is seen through the “eye of the head” [چشم سر]. But recall that Al-e Ahmad writes this passage mere lines after stating that his “awakening or at least skepticism” was “to doubt the truth, solidity, and reality of the primary axioms that bring certainty, provoke flights of fancy, or incite action, give them up one by one, and change each of them to a question mark.” His “doubt” as “awakening” is unlike Kant’s (or Descartes’, for that matter). Al-e Ahmad is extraordinarily

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616 Mirsepassi writes: “Al-e Ahmad’s two most important books are the best representatives of radical epistemic violence that prophetic intellectuals have inflicted in the Iranian intellectual and social context. Westoxication is a totalistic condemnation of modernization in the Iranian context, a radical intolerant attack on every facet of modern life in contemporary Iran. In its scathing account of an Iranian society gripped by inauthenticity and spiritual decline as if by disease, it raises the genre of the narrative of despair to new heights. His other book, On the Service and Treason of the Intellectuals, is an even harsher and more violent critique of modernist intellectuals in Iran.” (Mirsepassi, 2011, 33) In the context of the Hamadani pilgrim, I want to address Mirsepassi’s complete misrepresentation of Al-e Ahmad, particularly in the question of “epistemic violence” and “violence” of any kind. As when comparing Gharbzadegi with Jünger’s writings, it is patently clear that Al-e Ahmad has no love of violence. Here, with the Hamadani pilgrim, we can observe something of the Kantian means/ends distinction bubbling up at precisely the moment in Al-e Ahmad’s analysis where he might want to reduce a human being – even one he has described as engaging in patently silly behaviors a few pages earlier – to a mere thing (or perhaps even an emblem of traditionalist gharbzadegi). In this sense, Al-e Ahmad is remarkably weary about epistemic violence as well. Al-e Ahmad’s critiques are indeed “scathing.” But as I have demonstrated throughout this dissertation, these critiques are aimed most frequently at concepts like faith, conditions like inequality, and the effacement of difference, i.e. epistemic violence against human difference. Al-e Ahmad was not Gandhi, but neither was he Fanon; he was a realist concerning violence but did not consider violence the sine-qua-non for the transformation of social conditions.
precise here: it is primary axioms betűhât eurûle] that he comes “to doubt the truth, solidity, and reality of,” not the world of sense perception. The “eye of the head,” in terms of materialist scientific and historical critique is ‘reliable’; indeed, scientific ontology is crucial for Al-e Ahmad’s project as I have described it here. However, for Al-e Ahmad, it is fundamentally epistemically limited. It does not account for the full “image” of anything. Indeed, its greatest strength arises from this limitation: scientific ontology provides a very good account of the empirical qualities of objects that exist in the world. Hence Al-e Ahmad’s easy dismissal of the supernatural and cosmological claims of Shiism. In this sense, Al-e Ahmad is a “naturalist” and he is a “realist” in that he both accepts the existence of a world independent in some measure of his mind and rejects the empirically (and additionally, in his thought, rationally) impossible. But this provides such a “thin” account of the world that in its easy verifiability, reproducibility, and transmissibility, it cannot account for the full range of reality, much less the full range of

\[617\] could also be translated as “self-evident truths” by itself.

\[618\] And Al-e Ahmad is even more explicit in Gharbzadegi: “Thus do we study; thus do we gather statistics; thus do we conduct research. This makes sense insofar as science has universal methods: scientific methods bear the imprint of no nationality.” (Al-e Ahmad, Occidentosis, 44). This position, especially as Al-e Ahmad employs it in Khassi dar Miqat, is particularly confounding to Wells, who writes at one point in exasperation that Al-e Ahmad “sounds like an outraged public health inspector.” (Wells, Jalal Al-e Ahmad, 131) In some sense, Wells isn’t too far off the mark. As I address in the main text, Al-e Ahmad is aware that scientific methods aren’t quite this simple or neutral. But he is making the point to underline a.) the central importance of science and b.) the possibility of a universal sphere even in a world of bounded difference. Al-e Ahmad is also aware of the way in which scientific practice supposedly for one purpose can be repurposed by Capital. He expresses this most poignantly in Sangi bar Guri when he talks of being transformed from a patient into a “customer” of doctors and the increasingly pseudo-nature of the science he was experiencing.

\[619\] I give a further account of why I find this to be a philosophically justified position in my conclusion.

\[620\] I use “thin” here in both the sense implied by Geertz’s notion of “thick description” as well as in conjunction with Bilgrami’s notion of “thin” in terms of the reach of “scientific rationality.” Especially in terms of my comparison, I should note that Benjamin draws the same distinction between what he calls the “exact sciences” (i.e. the natural sciences) without which contemporary “critical thinking” would not be possible, and “positivism” (Benjamin, Selected Writings Vol. 4, 139) Raymond Geuss provides an excellent summation of this view of “positivism”: “In Frankfurt usage a ‘positivist’ is a person who holds: (a) that an empiricist account of natural science is adequate, and (b) that all cognition must have essentially the same cognitive structure as natural science.” (Geuss, The Idea of a Critical Theory, 2) Thus empiricist and rationalist accounts are bundled in most Frankfurt School texts as “positivism” and, as Geuss notes later in the book, “scientism.”
human experience and knowledge in terms of norms, ethics, aesthetics (traditionally understood), and what I described before as the realm of the non-rational.621

At the same time, “the eye of the heart” is epistemologically limited. The range, scope, and depth of the knowledge it “sees” are unknown; as Al-e Ahmad writes, “with the eye of my heart I don’t even know myself and the familiar life of Tehran, Shemiran, and Pachinar.” The “eye of the heart” is where Al-e Ahmad “awakens” to “doubt,” “certainty.” Al-e Ahmad’s use of the metaphor of “eye” is not accidental. He is discussing the kind of knowledge that begins with perception, a first person point of view, and experience. This shares a great deal of common ground with a phenomenological approach. However, Al-e Ahmad discovers, from such a point of view, uncertainty and the realization that this kind of knowledge, even when applied to himself, is uncertain, is a “question mark.” Recall Al-e Ahmad’s discussion of individual and society earlier in Khassi dar Miqat. He recognizes the dialectical dependence (and, of course, tension) between autonomous individuals and society but he fully rejects inward retreat as a kind of mystification or delusion. It is not that Al-e Ahmad rejects the first person point of view or consciousness. Rather, he rejects, most fundamentally, that this point of view produces a knowledge similar to “the eye of the head” similar to science with its ironically powerful epistemic limitations. But as we have seen quite clearly, this does not lead Al-e Ahmad to reject scientific knowledge; within his broader materialist critique of materialism, Al-e Ahmad makes a scientific critique of scientism: there is no scientific reason to treat that which can be understood through the natural sciences as fully-descriptive of true reality.622 Thus, Al-e Ahmad

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621 Again, although it is far beyond the scope of this dissertation to give a full account of current debates in philosophy of science, I will address these ideas more specifically in my conclusion.

622 Although I see no textual evidence for Al-e Ahmad’s acquaintance with Nietzsche, this position is very similar to the critique Nietzsche makes of “faith in truth.” (Nietzsche, Genealogy of Morals, 150) Al-e Ahmad’s claims are actually much more modest.
views *intersubjectivity* as fundamental for coming to know anything, even – perhaps especially – that “self” which “belongs to one corner of the world.” But even so, this is tentative, unsure knowledge that is further mitigated through the translation of “image” to “language.” Yet, Al-e Ahmad is insistent that “you want to have only a language.” Why does he phrase this in the imperative, especially if “language” here is an approximation of an already epistemologically limited sub-image of the world?

One answer can be found in the phrase “eye of the heart” itself, which contains both the epistemological sense described above but also, indeed perhaps *primarily*, a conception that is driven by a *perception* of injustice. After describing just how necessarily limited any reading in this realm will be, he asks why it is imperative that he write this limited sub-image:

> So what image have I given in the mirror of this notebook? Wouldn’t it have been better if I had done the same thing a million other people did this year who came on the Hajj? And those millions and millions of other people who’ve visited the Kaaba during these 1400 years or so and had things to say about it, but said nothing and took the results of the experience with them selfishly to the grave?... Isn’t it really better if we let the experience of every event rot like a seed in the center of its fruit? Instead of eating the fruit and planting the seed? Obviously, with this notebook I have given a negative answer to this sincere question.

Which “sincere question” is Al-e Ahmad giving a “negative answer to” by writing “this notebook”? Syntactically, it cannot be the last or the first (which are not yes or no questions.) Al-e Ahmad is saying no to the second question, which has two implications that he explores over the course of the next several sentences. The first is quite simple and unsurprising: Al-e Ahmad does not think it would have been “better” to perform the Hajj in a fully-traditional manner as a ‘believer.’

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623 This view helps explain some of the self-deprecating rhetoric that forms a pattern in Al-e Ahmad vis-à-vis his own work; he always describes it as “rubbish,” “garbage,” “gibberish,” etc.

624 Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Lost in the Crowd*, 123; *Khassi dar Miqat*, 180.
However, the second implication speaks to Al-e Ahmad’s perceived imperative to write the book. As we have seen earlier, writing itself is a component of Al-e Ahmad’s critical ritual action as both a practice to force critical condensed reflection and as a refuge for the as-autonomous-as-possible individual. But that was writing as part of the critical ritual performance, whereas what Al-e Ahmad is now discussing is not simply writing but dissemination. In line with the theory he has been developing, Al-e Ahmad does not claim exclusive authority on the experience, not because he does not believe in the rigor of his own theory and practice but rather because part of that theory is that there is no authoritative “image” of this experience. Clearly part of this dissemination is that Al-e Ahmad thinks the way he has “eaten the fruit” of the event – its material reality and his uncertain, limited perspective of his experience of it – might plant a useful “seed” of this very theory which assumes within it multiplicity of uncertain, limited experiences. Al-e Ahmad is saying no to the traditional practice which, he argues, ends in silence. For ‘believers,’ this silence encourages the reproduction of transcendent, absolute faith, not only in the meaning of the “event” itself but in a cosmologically true and perfect order. I have shown how this kind of faith, in Al-e Ahmad’s philosophy taken as a whole, is critiqued on the grounds of a theodicy that reproduces injustice. However, here we see how justice itself enters the argument. Their faith-based practice effaces, indeed denies, the material truth of the Hajj and produces their “silence,” which facilitates the reproduction of the same “faith” – a vicious cycle of untruth which does not do justice to the possibility of meanings in reality.

Put more strongly, the ‘believers’ are gharbzadeh not by the phantasmagoria of ‘Western’ modernity but by the phantasmagoria of ‘traditionalism’ and ‘religion,’ the Christian-modern construct which demands a strict separation between the world of “religion” and the
“mundane.” But here, in *Khassi dar Miqat*, when discussing the “eye of the heart,” Al-e Ahmad does not condemn the “Hamadani pilgrim” for being *gharbzadeh* in either its ‘traditional’ or ‘modern’ form; the “rhinoceros” hide from the end of *Gharbzadegi* has not fully hardened. Al-e Ahmad the ethnographer recognizes that this “Hamadani pilgrim” and “millions and millions” like him perceive *some* part or aspect of the uncertain and indeterminate aspects of the real phenomena all around them. Al-e Ahmad the philosopher understands that this is an important part of his theory that, even in their false consciousness, they are not yet completely incapable of critical consciousness. And thus he spits out the “seed” of his “notebook,” and he has done the organic intellectual task required such that they might be able to grasp hold of their own diverse experiences. This aspect of the task addresses the arguments against “faith” and traditionalism that are dismissed by Al-e Ahmad by stating with his “negative answer” that his approach, if necessarily incomplete, is *better*. However, Al-e Ahmad the polemicist, after writing, “with this notebook I have given a negative answer to this sincere question,” asks, “And why?” And he turns his gaze from phantasmagoric traditionalism to a very different audience: “Because Iranian intellectuals spurn these events, or walk among them gingerly and with distaste. ‘The Hajj?’ they say. ‘Don’t you have anywhere else to go?’”

If we follow the arguments from *Gharbzadegi*, Al-e Ahmad does not even consider their dismissal even a reduction to the “eye of the head.” Rather, they have their *gharbzadeh* “faith” in phantasmagorical images of ‘Western’ modernity which looks at the Hajj as meaningless, trivial, or at best romantically archaic. Al-e Ahmad, now mixing his polemical with his philosophical, addresses them in terms of their insufficient materialism, their *unworldliness*, their

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625 Please see the end of Chapter 2 for my full discussion of *gharbzadegi*.

626 Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Lost in the Crowd*, 123; *Khassi dar Miqat*, 180.
transcendental faux-cosmopolitanism: “[They are] Ignoring the fact that this is a tradition that calls a million people to a single place each year and prevails upon them to engage in a single ritual.”627 This is a material and historical fact that he has just spent a good deal of his book describing. Al-e Ahmad is, at the most basic level, saying to these intellectuals: your disinterest does not demonstrate how modern you are, but either how anxious you are in your modern ‘pose’ or how limited is your understanding of modernity; you are just faithfully repeating received truths on authority, just like the pilgrims you so seek to distinguish yourselves from. But unlike in Gharbzadegi, with this “notebook,” Khassi dar Miqat, Al-e Ahmad stages a theoretical intervention that says, look at this event: it could have meaning. This ‘could’ expresses an extraordinary range of possibilities produced through Al-e Ahmad’s theory: perhaps not the transcendent meaning even he momentarily entertains only to dismiss within the text, but at the very least it is a historical fact. Beyond that, a fact that, in Al-e Ahmad’s thoroughly materialist critique, entertains the possibility not only for meanings in reality but even something as seemingly transcendent as the index of the “Hidden Imam” in time, an index of political critique and possibility. Surely such an extraordinary historical fact should evoke more disdain or “distaste.” Thus, we finally come to understand just how thoroughly the critique begun with the concept of gharbzadegi is not a proposition for an authentic subject; it is an argument against unwarranted epistemic closure and (in line with the Marxian inheritance) the conditions which reproduce that epistemic closure.628

627 Ibid. Emphasis mine.
628 I refer to “epistemic closure” here in the sense of the problem in philosophy and not in its almost inexplicable reappearance in recent popular American political literature to refer to closed systems of information within political communities.
Despite the critical importance of a certain conception of scientific ontology for Al-e Ahmad, it is clear that the possibilities of history as something that can be seen materially animate more of Al-e Ahmad’s life and thought. These possibilities are what brings him to reexamine Shii views of history, the *Mahdi* as an index of justice, and to explore the Hajj ritual with reference both to these historiographies and this index, but also as an embodied performance of human epistemic and epistemological limitations, as a language of gestures to be interpreted, and a critical performative apparatus against the ahistorical, unscientific, and immaterial tendencies toward idealism, abstraction, and reduction. Critical ritual action is not to bring the mind into embodiment; it reinforces that the body and senses are an extension of the mind and vice versa. As a language of gestures derived from historical specificity, it is living and dynamic in terms of meaning and even, if we take some of Al-e Ahmad’s asides seriously, in form. As both historically “situated” but non-static, as performing ‘dialectic tension’ instead of declaring antinomies, it makes possible the ‘resituation’ that marks the beginning of the very different kind of universalism I have been described here. But it is always, in the words of Al-e Ahmad, “smashing the steps of the world of certainty,” “an awakening – or at least a skepticism.” It is a ritual of doubt.

As I stated in the introduction to this chapter, in order to understand Benjamin’s philosophy and where it converges and diverges with Al-e Ahmad’s and this theory of critical ritual action, it is crucial to examine Benjamin’s use of *aggadah and halachah* in the context of his writings on Kafka and, in turn, the relationship of those concepts to Benjamin’s own formulation of a messianic theory.
Benjamin and Kafka

In the previous chapter, I discussed the sense of “law” that goes unconsidered in the vast majority of the literature that has arisen in reflection upon Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence,” the very different kind of law suggested by the concept of *halachah*. Indeed, as Michael Mack has suggested, part of Benjamin’s “messianism” is “nowhere clearer to view than when he contrasted Kant’s secularization of Christian values with, in his view, the absent world of rabbinic law and messianic justice.” While Al-e Ahmad certainly viewed current conditions in discord with a sense of “messianic justice,” he took very seriously the possibility that in being attentive to the material conditions of history, a reconsideration of the world of ritual action was in order: this, too could and in fact *should* be ‘secularized.’ For all the resonances I have been discussing in terms of their projects, their different attitudes towards the possibility of something like a ‘theory of critical ritual action’ is, in terms of this study, one of the most important differences between the two thinkers. Susan Handelman, another scholar attentive to Benjamin’s discussion of *halachah*, suggests that “historical materialism supplied the concretion, the *halakah*, the ethic of action in the crude world, the directives of justice between humans.” But this, too, does not quite fully come to terms with how Benjamin addresses the question of *halachah*.

*halachah* is particularly pressing in my comparison since Al-e Ahmad so focuses on the question of movement, travel, etc. *halachah* is often defined not simply as “Jewish Law” but in the much more mundane sense implied by its etymological root שָׁלַח [from which are derived words of movement and specifically “going”] as quite literally “the path that one walks.”

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629 Michael Mack, *German Idealism and the Jew*, 158. Mack’s study is incisive in its discussion of the relationships between German Idealism, Judaism, Jews, and Jewish philosophy. However, in his chapter on Benjamin, he tries, directly citing and following Derrida’s “Force of Law,” to read Benjamin’s understanding of *halachah* in terms of the “Critique of Violence.” In doing so, he fails to understand the crucial role that the concepts of *aggadah* and *halachah* play in Benjamin’s philosophy in favor of assimilating and reducing them into the Derridean framework.

630 Susan Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption*, 61.

631 The question of *halachah* is particularly pressing in my comparison since Al-e Ahmad so focuses on the question of movement, travel, etc. *Halakah* is often defined not simply as “Jewish Law” but in the much more mundane sense implied by its etymological root שָׁלַח [from which are derived words of movement and specifically “going”] as quite literally “the path that one walks.”
another of his incomplete projects, his several essays, letters, and the planned (but ultimately unwritten book) on Kafka which he also worked on, intermittently, during the 1930s, alongside the *Passagenwerk*. If the shape of the *Passagenwerk* provoked such alarm in Adorno (that it was at the “crossroads of magic and positivism”), the Kafka work – far from nudging Benjamin towards a fully, exclusively theological theory – seemed to Scholem’s dismay to confirm in some part what he called Benjamin’s “Communist credo.” Benjamin protested this interpretation both on the grounds of misunderstanding his materialism but also on his rejection of the very concept of “credo,” which he described as the one form in its extreme “unpractical, unproductive form” that should not be “affirmed.”

In his most famous essay on Kafka, Benjamin describes Kafka’s “philosophical tales” as “unfolding,” like “a bud unfold[s] into a blossom.” This definition is in contrast to what Benjamin thinks of traditional parables which are akin to demonstrating how a piece of origami “unfolds into a flat sheet of paper… this second kind of ‘unfolding’ is really appropriate to parable; the reader takes pleasure in smoothing out so that he has the meaning on the palm of his hand. Kafka’s parables, however, unfold in the first sense, the way a bud turns into a blossom.” The differences between the two theories of parable are manifold. The ‘traditional’ form of parable is didactic in message and heuristic in process; the parable unfolds neatly into a “flat sheet of paper,” and “the reader takes pleasure,” in a sense learns, “in smoothing out.”

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632 Benjamin, *Correspondence*, 438.

633 Ibid., 439. Unfortunately, a full treatment of the history and nuance of Benjamin’s Kafka essays and his proposed book is beyond the scope of this study, where I must restrict myself merely to the question of how this relates to the question of halachah and aggadah in comparative reflection with Al-e Ahmad. However, Benjamin and Scholem’s equal rejection of the “theological” approach of Max Brod, only to arrive at very different modes of theological and materialist readings of Kafka, deserves a full and complete treatment elsewhere.

634 Benjamin, *Selected Writings Vol 2.2*, 802.

635 Ibid.
Kafka’s parable, in contrast, provokes “reflections that are endless.” What is more, these “reflections” on “Kafka’s parables” and provoked by “Kafka’s parables” do not themselves unfold the “bud” “into a blossom.” That unfolding, if we take the metaphor seriously, would seem to happen on its own. In Kafka’s parables capacity to provoke multiplicity in reflection Benjamin states, “That is why their effect is literary.” However he immediately clarifies how we should understand the word “literary” here and, in turn, the incompleteness of the metaphor of the blossom:

This does not mean that his prose pieces belong entirely in the tradition of Western prose forms, they have, rather, a relationship to religious teachings similar to the one Haggadah has to Halachah. They are not parables, yet they do not want to be taken at their face value; they lend themselves to quotation and can be recounted for purposes of clarification. But do we have the teachings which Kafka’s parables accompany and which K.’s postures and the gestures of his animals clarify? They do not exist; all we can say is that here and there we have an allusion to it.636

Benjamin wants to introduce, indeed in a sense secularize, another set of concepts into the universalistic lexicon: aggadah and halachah. And, indeed, this clarifies both the significant distance he sees between these stories and the purely, or solely, or Western, “literary” and simultaneously the metaphor of the blossom; the bud may unfold into the blossom on its own but it is only through reflecting on the unfolding (reflecting on reflections, what could be more Talmudic?) that we can understand what the bud is and in an indirect, secondary way, assist in its unfolding.637 Although the blossom emerges of its own accord, one could not even recognize it as such without these reflections. However, further away from the metaphor, Benjamin suggests: it may not unfold at all without them even though they do not cause its unfolding the way hands unfold the paper in the simpler understanding of parable. This is not only a question of literary

636 Benjamin, Selected Writings Vol 2.2, 803.

637 This can also be seen as a critique of Hegel’s teleological use of a similar metaphor in the Phenomenology of Spirit especially as applied to “world history” as in The Introduction to the Philosophy of History.
interpretation. Benjamin views Kafka’s parables not only as “philosophical tales.” But, much like Baudelaire’s poetry was for the nineteenth century, Kafka’s parables are also commentary and reflection on and of current conditions in the twentieth century. In fact, I argue that it is through the lens of Benjamin’s secularization of *aggadah* that we can better understand his engagement with Baudelaire and the *Passagenwerk* as a whole.

**Aggadah and Time**

Benjamin writes in a later letter to Scholem:

*Kafka’s work is an ellipse with foci that lie far apart and are determined on the one hand by mystical experience (which is above all the experience of tradition) and on the other by the experience of the modern city dweller. When I speak of the experience of the modern city dweller, I subsume a variety of things under this notion. On the one hand, I speak of the modern citizen, who knows he is at the mercy of vast bureaucratic machinery, whose functioning is steered by authorities who remain nebulous even to executive organs themselves, let alone the people they deal with. (It is well known that this encompasses one level of meaning in the novels, especially in *The Trial.*) On the other hand, by modern city dwellers I am speaking of the contemporary of today’s physicist.*

In the previous chapter I addressed how “mysticism” should be read quite broadly for Benjamin; here he helpfully expands this still further to “the experience of tradition.” To understand “the experience of the modern city dweller” is partially to take seriously the experience [*Erfahrung*] in its socio-historical dimensions vis-à-vis experience of “vast bureaucratic

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638 Benjamin, *Correspondence*, 563.

639 “Experience” in each of these Benjamin quotations is a rendering of the German *Erfahrung*. This is important to note because Benjamin – particularly in the *Passagenwerk* and the works on Baudelaire that were constructed out of it – goes out of his way to distinguish his use of *Erfahrung* from *Erlebnis*. He views focus on the latter as exemplary of a “strange situation” in German philosophy: “Since the nineteenth century, philosophy has made a series of attempts to grasp ‘true’ experience, as opposed to the kind that manifests itself in the standardized, denatured life of the civilized masses. These efforts are usually classified under the rubric of ‘vitalism.’ Their point of departure, understandably enough, has not been the individual’s life in society.” (Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 314) He notes that “Dilthey’s book *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung* represents one of the earliest of these efforts, which culminate with Klages and Jung, who made common cause with Fascism.” When Benjamin writes *Erfahrung*, as he makes clear here, he means both the empirical reality underlying experience and common understandings of it through the individual in society. This *Erfahrung* carries the empirical/historical facts of tradition in it and cannot be separated from them. This is also, as we have seen, Al-e Ahmad’s understanding of tradition and experience. It is important here to underline the dialectical engagement with modernity that Benjamin and Al-e Ahmad share: they do not wish to come to terms with modernity (experientially, scientifically, historically, etc.) only to peel it back to
machinery,” but also the empirico-naturalist account of today’s physicist. In both these directions Kafka’s work reaches out from text and story into historical experience and physical reality.

After Benjamin gives a long quotation from the British astrophysicist and philosopher of science Arthur Eddington on self-description fully-informed by the knowledge of modern physics which expresses the sheer absurdity of trying to experience ordinary human motion with simultaneous full-knowledge of the physical implications in every aspect of the act, he writes, “I can think of no passage in literature which displays the characteristic Kafka-gestus to the same degree. One could easily juxtapose sentences from Kafka’s prose pieces with just about any point in this physical aporia; and it says not a little about Kafka’s work that many of his most ‘incomprehensible’ sentences would be at home here.” He continues:

*So that if one states, as I have just done, that an enormous tension exists between such experiences in Kafka and his mystical experiences, one has stated only a half-truth. What is actually and in this precise sense crazy about Kafka is that this absolutely new world of experience comes to him by way of the mystical tradition... The long and the short of it is that an individual (here, Franz Kafka) who is confronted with the reality that presents itself as ours – theoretically in modern physics and in practice by military technology – would clearly have to fall back on nothing less than the powers of this tradition. I would say that this reality is now almost beyond the individual’s capacity, and that Kafka’s world, often so serene and pervaded by angels, is the exact*

find some general *a priori* epistemological or ontological reality that was more readily available at some primal origin. It is in and though modernity that catastrophe is both continued and potentially overcome. When Benjamin talks about “ur-history,” or primal history, he is discussing the origin point *in time* and place; this, of course, has a relation to the past, but does not indicate a more “true” experience in the past or a clearer way of addressing a question in the past. It is to see what concepts, what arrangements, what material histories, and so on, form the primal *image* of that moment in history. In a concept of history in which “progress has been annihilated,” each of these primal histories is distinct not only for individual and society but in different times. Benjamin helpfully clarifies this in Convolute N of the *Passagenwerk* when he writes, “It is not the economic origins of culture that will be presented, but the expression of the economy in culture. At issue, in other words, is the attempt to grasp an economic process as perceptible. Ur-phenomenon, from out of which proceed all manifestations of life in the Arcades (and, accordingly, in the nineteenth century).” (Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 460) The task is to perceive in the apparent the economic (but also cultural, philosophical, etc.) network of relations as being as real as the objects themselves, the history which Benjamin views as having gathered into these objects. Thus, “Ur-,” and “primal,” in Benjamin are not *a priori* ontological principles; they are *a posteriori* aesthetic and epistemological ones that change over time, that are utterly contingent.

complement of his age which is preparing to do away with considerable segments of this planet’s population.\footnote{Benjamin, Selected Writings, Vol. 3, 326, emphasis in original. I have switched to the Eiland and Jennings translation because in places they are a little more attentive to nuances of Benjamin’s German. For example, here in the translation of the German Toll, they give “crazy,” and add a footnote that it could also be read as “mad” or “great.” The earlier translation gives here “folly,” which does not really convey the sense of crazy-great that Benjamin clearly implies.}

I would be remiss were I not to again address question of “this reality,” “now almost beyond the individual’s capacity” to perceive (the “anaesthetics” discussed in chapter 3) which, as we have seen, was also one of the primary concerns for Al-e Ahmad, alongside a concomitant notion that this is simultaneously reflective of the potential for mass annihilation. Indeed, mirroring Al-e Ahmad’s critique of the Shah’s government as a lumpenproletariat regime, Benjamin notes that Kafka correctly surmises that even the “authorities” seem “nebulous to the executive organs themselves.” Furthermore, it almost goes without saying that Benjamin endorses the world as presented in “modern physics,” as at least partially correct. What is extraordinary, “crazy,” is that Kafka has been so attentive to the contemporary world in his storytelling that he has managed to produce an “exact complement of his age,” both here in the furthest reaches of contemporary physics and earlier in the historical reality.

Eiland and Jennings provide a very important footnote to Benjamin’s use of the word “complement.” It may seem to imply a reflection or a negative image, but it is actually a reference to Niels Bohr’s theory of complementarity in quantum mechanics, the view that, “confronted by the contradictions resulting from the attempt to describe atomic events in the terms of classical physics, this theory states that the interpretation of matter as particles is complementary to its interpretation as waves, just as knowledge of an electron’s position is complimentary to knowledge of its velocity or momentum; both views are necessary for
understanding atomic phenomena, though they are mutually exclusive." I want to be clear that I do not think Benjamin’s use of this theory is intended to be ‘proving’ his philosophy through Bohr’s theory. Indeed while Bohr’s theory (in Eiland and Jennings’ gloss and in the original I include before) discusses mutually exclusive truths that must be viewed as both true in complementary “totality,” Benjamin is more interested in the idea of seeing a single “object,” through two different lenses, as two completely different phenomena at once. Thus, metaphorically, he is saying that Kafka’s stories are an unreal “complement” to the realities of “his age.” When Benjamin writes that Kafka’s world is “serene and pervaded by angels,” he of course does not mean this as literal truth. Indeed, on the same page he writes that Kafka “gives up on truth.” Rather, instead we get a glimpse at a “state of the world” in which such questions (of the Judgment, the Law, etc.) are meaningless, i.e. the messianic age.

642 Benjamin, Selected Writings Vo.3, 328. As I state in the main text, Benjamin is using this metaphorically. But it is interesting to read Bohr in the original on this point, “This crucial point, which was to become a main theme of the discussions reported in the following, implies the impossibility of any sharp separation between the behavior of atomic objects and the interaction with the measuring instruments which serve to define the conditions under which the phenomena appear. In fact, the individuality of the typical quantum effects finds its proper expression in the circumstance that any attempt of subdividing the phenomena will demand a change in the experimental arrangement introducing new possibilities of interaction between objects and measuring instruments which in principle cannot be controlled. Consequently, evidence obtained under different experimental conditions cannot be comprehended within a single picture, but must be regarded as complementary in the sense that only the totality of the phenomena exhausts the possible information about the objects.” (Bohr, Discussions with Einstein on Epistemological Problems in Atomic Physics, emphasis mine) It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to pursue this thread but this is yet another possible dimension to understanding the full scope of the “dialectical image” in Benjamin.

643 Benjamin, Correspondence, 449. In this letter of July 20, 1934 to Scholem, Benjamin writes, in response to several questions posed by a “didactic poem” (Benjamin’s description) to accompany Benjamin’s “Franz Kafka” (1934) piece: “The last stanza raises the question of how one has to imagine, in Kafka’s sense, the Last Judgment’s projection into world history. Does this projection turn the judge into the accused? And the proceedings into the punishment? Kafka, so I contend, had no answers to these questions. But the form in which they presented themselves to him… contains indications of a state of the world in which such questions no longer have a place, because their answers, far from being instructive, make the questions superfluous. Kafka sought – and sometimes glimpsed as in a dream – the structure of this kind of answer that renders the question superfluous.”
The Problematic Status of *Halachah*

To be able to perceive all of this, Kafka (or any individual) would have to rely, according to Benjamin, on “this tradition,” the broadly understood tradition of Jewish religious hermeneutics as discussed in chapter 3. Benjamin is furthering the case I described before as the “secularization” of certain concepts out of Jewish tradition as universalizable. This is also visible in Benjamin’s untroubled connection between the work of Kafka and the painter Paul Klee, whose painting *Angelus Novus* (1930) plays such a pivotal role in Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” in this same letter. But why is *aggadah* conceptually ‘secularizable’ in Benjamin, but *halachah* is not? This is the question which must limit my focus in reading Benjamin on Kafka because it is in answering this question that we come to see how and why Benjamin rejected much of what I described as so unique in Al-e Ahmad above: an engagement with critical ritual practice as part of critical theoretical practice itself. Although Benjamin viewed his own method as a practice of “theological interpretation,” he concludes in regard to Kafka and *aggadah*:

*Kafka’s genius lay in the fact that he tried something new altogether: he gave up truth so that he could hold on to its transmissibility, the haggadic element [sic.] His works by nature are parables. But their poverty and their beauty consist in their need to be more than parables. They don’t simply lie down at the feet of doctrine, the way Haggadah [sic] lies down at the feet of Halakhah. Having crouched down, they unexpectedly cuff doctrine with a weighty paw.*

Between 1934 and 1938, it is clear, at the very least, that Benjamin primarily, unequivocally, and relatively comfortably deploys the category of *aggadah* for understanding what Kafka is doing and, by similarity, for understanding several of the authors and artists he interested in, especially Klee and Baudelaire. Kafka’s *aggadot*, as discussed before, reach out “beyond” their text and

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644 Benjamin, *Selected Writings Vol. 3*, 326.
into historical experience and physical reality, but not with “truth.” It is hard to read this “truth” in isolation; what Benjamin means is “positive,” verifiable truth.

Indeed, in terms of reflective truth, Benjamin has already told us that Kafka’s work shows that he uncannily apprehended multiple levels in the experience of “the modern city-dweller.” What Benjamin has in mind about negativity and untruth he expresses a few lines earlier, “there is no doctrine to be learned, no knowledge to be preserved. What are caught flitting by are snatches of things not meant for any ear. This points to the rigorously negative aspects of Kafka’s work.”645 Benjamin wrote earlier that the agadic nature of Kafka’s work lends it the possibility of philosophical “quotation,” and that they can be “recounted for purposes of clarification.” But quotation for what and clarification of what? For the negation of doctrine, or to show the distance between existing conditions and the “complementary” “state of the world” in which questions of doctrine no longer make sense. In these ways, for Benjamin, agadah can be advanced as a concept independent of cosmological-theological truth, a concept absent doctrine. Agadah can be commentary on absence or “distortion” just as much as it is on presence. We can also see several fundamental ways in which Benjamin viewed halachah as fundamentally different. First, he views halachah fundamentally as inextricable, indeed, even synonymous with doctrine/dogma; second, he views that doctrine as forgotten; and third, given the first two points, he views the remembering of halachah like the remembering the messiah. It is not something one can do positively or actively, it must emerge, and by Benjamin’s logic, in the messianic world.

645 Benjamin, Selected Writings Vol. 3, 326.
In terms of the first view of halachah, it is clear that Benjamin does not consider it possible, as Al-e Ahmad does, to think about ritual outside a purely doctrinal context. Several times in his correspondence with Scholem, when Benjamin was first writing about Kafka, Benjamin asks Scholem for a copy of Haim Bialik’s essay “Aggadah and Halakah” to clarify Benjamin’s own understandings of the subject. Scholem recounts in his memoir that he sent it. Perhaps Benjamin took either its Zionist message of a “new” aggadic literature implying the need for a “new” halachic law in a “new” Zionist world to heart or its argument that halachah was in some sense a different kind of aggadah but the one which was not illustrative commentary but expressive (doctrinal) life. What is strange in this first view, however is how out of place it is in the long history of Jewish thought which had often entertained the notion of ritual as disconnected from cosmology or specific doctrine. This disconnection can be seen, for example, in the famous aggadah of the Oven of Aknai in the Talmud’s Baba Metzia where miracles and the voice of God are ruled irrelevant to the interpretation of a ritual action or in Moses Mendelssohn’s arguments in the sometimes neglected second half of Jerusalem (1783) that “the ceremonial law” was a “kind of script” for continuous interpretation and re-imagination, “to connect action with contemplation, life, and theory.” Instead, Benjamin seems to have internalized the notion that halachah is the reification of a doctrine which is wholly alien in the modern world. For all his critical reengagement with Judaism, this aspect maintained the modern image of “religion” as static.

646 Cf. “Aggadah and Halakah” in Haim Bialik, Revelaunt and Concealment (2000). I have given an extraordinarily cursory presentation of Bialik’s rich essay here which is worth reading in its entirety.

647 Mendelssohn, Jerusalem, 128; Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia 59b.
The second view, that ‘doctrine is forgotten,’ is far easier to come to terms with; in fact, it involves one of the ways in which Kafka succeeds as *aggadah*, in illustrating the idea of “forgetting.” As Benjamin writes:

> Whenever figures in the novels have anything to say to K., no matter how important or surprising it may be, they do so casually and with the implication that he must really have known it all along. It is as though nothing new was being imparted, as though the hero were just subtly invited to recall to mind something he has forgotten. This is how Willy Haas has interpreted the course of events in *Der Prozess* [The Trial], and justifiably so: “The object of the trial – indeed, the real hero of this incredible book – is forgetting, whose main characteristic is the forgetting of itself... Here it has actually become a mute figure in the shape of the accused man a figure of the most striking intensity.” It probably denied that “this mysterious center... derives from the Jewish religion.” “Memory plays a very mysterious role as piousness. It is not an ordinary quality but... the most profound quality of Jehovah that He remembers, that He retains, an infallible memory ‘to the third, fourth, even to the hundredth, generation.’ The most sacred... act of the... ritual is the erasing of sins from the book of memory.”

There are a few preliminary observations that must be made about this passage. For one, although Benjamin calls Haas’ analysis “justifiable,” he clearly wants to distance himself from Haas’ focus on God; as we have seen, God is not really the question for Benjamin. Additionally, clearly for Haas, ‘mysteriousness’ plays a role as aporia whereas for Benjamin it is a sign of absence or possibility; in good Marxian fashion he wants to dispel the “mysterious.” But within his own method, he simultaneously wants to engage with what it was standing in for or the possibilities it expresses in, to use a popular word from his Kafka studies, “distorted” form. However, that said, one can see how this reading of Kafka gestures in several productive directions for Benjamin: toward “forgetting” as commentary on the absence of consciousness of material relations and simultaneously toward disconnection from what Benjamin would later describe as “the weak messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim.”

648 Benjamin, *Selected Writings Vol. 2.2*, 809; all ellipses are Benjamin’s.

“ritual,” as “erasing of sins from the book of memory.” In another letter to Scholem (August 11, 1934), Benjamin writes, “For the work of the Torah – if we abide by Kafka’s account – has been thwarted.” Scholem adds that in Benjamin’s notes he included the sentence, “And everything that Moses accomplished long ago would have to be reaccomplished in our world’s age.”

Benjamin’s own methodology, as I examined in the previous chapter, moves the question of memory and remembrance into his messianic philosophy of history and aesthetics of the present. But these movements neither “erase sins from the book of memory,” nor “reaccomplish” the work of Moses in history. The former can only happen in the sense of the redemption of the past and present from continuous catastrophe and the latter is the literal work of the messiah. Benjamin views both of these concepts as logically outside or beyond actual history. This quotation from Haas is the only time the word “ritual” appears in the essay apart from the implication of ritual within the Hebrew “Halachah,” and it is associated with “erasing sins from the book of memory,” which, understood in Benjaminian historiography, would be precisely the definition of historicism and theodicy. In his indirect remembrance of the past via pregnant constellations in Jetztzeit, Benjamin seeks to allow memories of the past, which are precisely indexed to the present, to burst forth into the present. But in his messianic view (which, as I have shown in chapter 3, is also simultaneously an immanent critique of Marxism for its catastrophic utopianism) the most one can do is do this history or produce “distorted” ‘profane illuminations’ of the world as Kafka, Klee, Baudelaire, and, of course, the Surrealists do. It turns out that Benjamin was interested in precisely everything that Taubes said he was not.

650 Benjamin, Correspondence, 453-454.

651 Benjamin coins the phrase “profane illumination” in his 1929 essay “Surrealism” to describe the effect of Surrealist art: “But the true creative overcoming of religious illumination certainly does not lie in narcotics. It resides in a profane illumination, a materialistic, anthropological inspiration…. ” (Benjamin, Selected Writings Vol.
It is these observations which lead to the third view of Benjamin’s necessarily disengaged attitude towards *halachah*. If *halachah* is just forgotten doctrine, then, at the very least, it can only reappear in historical constellation (or possibly in profane illumination) and even then, only as a “distortion” or, at best, a glimpse at mere shards of messianic redemption. If *halachah* is in fact inextricably linked with doctrine as the positive expression of true principles, in totality, in the world, then it describes the “law” of the messianic age itself. Thus, *halachah*, at least systemically – which is the only way Benjamin addresses it here – can only be emergent, and then only concomitantly with the messianic age, i.e. beyond the end of history. It is important here to recall that Benjamin’s concept of messianism is both derived in reaction to a perceived fundamental flaw in Marxian thought *and*, through the recognition of the (Christian) theological dimensions of that flaw, an attempt to advance alternative conceptions that Benjamin draws from Judaism in a non-identitarian fashion. Thus, ironically, to understand this rejection of *halachah*, in messianic terms, it is helpful to recall the materialist claims that are part of the dialectical critique of Marxism. To make this clearer, I would like to address Benjamin in his more recognizably materialist mode both to understand why he thinks his (Judaic) messianic view of history is materially more apt and, in doing so, to bring the contours of that messianic thought more clearly into view. How does Benjamin specifically address the question of “forgetting,” in terms of remembering and memory, outside the mode of his new historiography?

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2.1, 209) Benjamin’s use of “religious” here is in reference to Lenin adopting the view of “religion as the opiate of the people” from Marx. Benjamin is countering that theodical, other-worldly religion (i.e. Christianity) with a profane, materialistic, anthropological “illumination,” which I have been arguing should be understood as part of his Judeo-Marxian synthesis. In Benjamin’s 1938 letter to Scholem on Kafka, Benjamin notes that the “Surrealists’ interest in Kafka” “was by no means foolish,” and among many other things should not have been dismissed by Max Brod.
Materialism, Time, and Action in Benjamin’s Messianism

Benjamin addresses the idea of a memory coming to the fore in an emergent fashion in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (another of Benjamin’s final writings) at first through Proust’s mémoire involontaire. As Benjamin writes:

One afternoon, the taste of a kind of pastry called a Madeleine... transported him back to the past, whereas before then he had been limited to the promptings of a memory which obeyed the call of conscious attention. This he calls mémoire involontaire. Its signal characteristic is that the information it gives about the past retains no trace of that past. “It is the same with our own past. In vain, we try to conjure it up again; the efforts of our intellect are futile.” In sum, Proust says that the past is situated “somewhere beyond the reach of the intellect and its field of operations, in some material object..., though we have no idea which one it is, And whether we come upon this object before we die, or whether we never encounter it, depends entirely on chance.”

“But,” as Benjamin adds, “there is nothing inevitable about the dependence on chance in this matter.” Benjamin has already dismissed – via Proust – Bergson’s notion that these memories can be called up by specific concentration of cognition, as a “matter of free choice.” So what then can Benjamin mean when he says that “there is nothing inevitable about the dependence on chance”? He continues, “A person’s inner concerns are not by nature of an inescapably private character. They attain this character only after the likelihood decreases that one’s external concerns will be assimilated to one’s experience.” Or, put differently, given different social conditions in the now, the ‘chances’ of this mémoire involontaire could change quite dramatically. Benjamin would like to bring the social and the historical into the question of “memory”; both Proust and Bergson think of these as isolated affairs and Benjamin believes that this is then reflected in their fully internalized theories of memory. Benjamin gives the example of journalism as one such social practice which hinders this process which, through its principles of “newness, brevity, clarity, and above all, lack of connection between individual news

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652 Benjamin, Selected Writings, Vol. 4, 315.
items, “decreases the likelihood” of a social condition in which *memoire involontaire* might occur. It is not that these conditions *directly* cause the memories to return; it is that the receptivity of the social conditions increases the chance that they will. As I will explore further in a moment, the actual content of these memories – which is what is most crucial for Benjamin – has no relationship to these changed social conditions beyond this question of probability and receptivity.

In order to further clarify this, Benjamin continues shortly thereafter:

*In seeking a more substantial definition of what appears in Proust’s mémoire de l’intelligence as a by-product of Bergson’s theory, we would do well to go back to Freud. In 1921 Freud published his essay Beyond the Pleasure Principle, which hypothesizes a correlation between memory (in the sense of mémoire involontaire) and consciousness… Freud’s fundamental thought, on which these remarks are based, is the assumption that “emerging consciousness takes the place of a memory trace.” Therefore, “it would be the special characteristic of consciousness that, unlike what happens in all other systems of the psyche, the excitatory process does not leave behind a permanent change in its elements, but expires, as it were, in the phenomenon of becoming conscious.”*  

There are several focal points to Benjamin’s interest in Freud’s “more substantial definition” of what Proust intuited with his *mémoire involontaire*. The most basic is that the memory is involuntary; the kind of memory Freud is interested in here (and I will return to this shortly) is the kind which arises in “the sort of dream that may afflict accident survivors – those who develop neuroses which cause them to relive the catastrophe in which they were involved.”

But Freud raises an extraordinary proposition about consciousness. These involuntary memories arise into “dream”; if they were to emerge into consciousness (indeed, an “emerging consciousness”) they would, in Benjamin’s understanding, be integrated into that “emerging consciousness,” which “takes the place of a memory trace.” However, as Benjamin helpfully

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654 Ibid., 317.

655 Ibid.
interprets, this is not where Freud’s theory leads for thinking about “consciousness as such.” Benjamin writes that the “basic formula,” of Freud’s “hypothesis is that ‘becoming conscious and leaving behind a memory trace are incompatible within one and the same system.’”656 Benjamin – and we can begin to see more of the relationship to his messianic concept here – is interested in the idea that involuntary memory can be integrated as itself, not as a “memory trace” (not as a ‘distorted image’) into “emerging consciousness,” that it ceases to be a memory and becomes part of conscious reality. Benjamin is aware he is moving away from Freud’s intent and theory657 (and he cites work by Freud’s student Theodor Riek as, for example, closer to his own regarding this question of memory) but he is interested in another of Freud’s insights here as well. “In Freud’s view, consciousness as such receives no memory traces [of a very particular kind] whatever, but has another important function: protection against stimuli.”658 Benjamin notes that the particular kind of “memory traces,” that Freud is discussing are those which appear in dreams of “accident survivors – which cause them to relive the catastrophe in which they were involved.”659 This is not surprising: as Freud notes, memory traces, “are often most powerful and enduring when the incident which left them behind was one that never entered consciousness.”660 In other words, what interests Benjamin is that “consciousness as such” reacts to such stimuli by

656 Benjamin, Selected Writings Vol.4, 317.

657 It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to fully explore this proposition but Benjamin’s analysis seems to be practically invited by the comments Freud makes at the end of Beyond the Pleasure Principle concerning a “starting point for fresh investigations.” (Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle, 77)

658 Benjamin, Selected Writings Vol.4, 317.

659 Ibid.

660 Ibid.
preventing an integrative experience [Erfahrung] and instead producing an isolated, individual experience [Erlebnis].

Benjamin is interested in these two questions which he is reading through Proust and Freud on the one hand (involuntary memory) and, on the other, just Freud (existing consciousness as a “shield,” against stimuli) in a social and historical understanding. Freud was drawing on not just “accident survivors” but indeed war survivors. But for Benjamin, modernity more and more is characterized by the “shock experience” itself, and the “shield” of (false) “consciousness” narcotizes or desensitizes subjective individual consciousnesses. This is the principle explored under Buck-Morss’ rubric of “anaesthetics” in chapter 3. It is also one of the key marks of Baudelaire’s genius for Benjamin: “Baudelaire envisaged readers to whom lyric poetry would present difficulties… Willpower and the ability to concentrate are not their strong points. What they prefer is sensual pleasure; they are familiar with the ‘spleen’ which kills interest and receptiveness.”

661 See my footnote 639 in this chapter for further elaboration of this distinction.

662 As Freud writes: “The terrible war which has just ended gave rise to a great number of illnesses of this kind, but it at least put an end to the temptation to attribute the cause of the disorder to organic lesions of the nervous system brought about by mechanical force.” (Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle, 10.) Freud is, of course, speaking of shell shock, not of any direct “mechanical” trauma. The importance, for Benjamin, is that “traumatic shocks” can constitute the basis of a more general condition which may or may not involve direct “mechanical force.”

663 Although the examples in the Passagenwerk are literally too numerous to cite just within this essay, Benjamin points to the experiences of the individual in the crowd, the worker in the factory, and even the gambler at play as examples of how individuals in everyday society are confronted with a similar kind of shock experience which their consciousnesses “parry” in the interest of self-preservation.

664 Benjamin approvingly quotes from Marx at the opening of the important methodological section of the Passagenwerk, Convolute N: “The reform of consciousness consists solely in… the awakening of the world from its dream about itself.” (Benjamin, The Arcades Project, 456). Benjamin finds Freud’s insights in Beyond the Pleasure Principle to be a useful inquiry into how consciousness is achieved. He wishes, in part, not unlike Fromm in this measure, to socialize Freud’s insights into consciousness into Marx’s theory of consciousness. Benjamin wants a better theory of false consciousness and awakening than he believes either Marx or Freud have by themselves. He does not, however, view a synthesis of the two as sufficient.

665 Benjamin, Selected Writings Vol.4, 313.
audience of his current historical conditions and the characteristics of his historical moment. Furthermore, Baudelaire seems to have internalized – just as Kafka has – that this must be done indirectly. In Baudelaire, this takes the form of “lyric poetry,” which as a poetic “experience” “sterilizes this incident for poetic experience.” Baudelaire wants to “parry” the shocks but not to restore the individual “shield,” rather to soften it so that there can be some kind of reception and integration of the experiences in their fullness, in consciousness. Of course, Benjamin sees Baudelaire, like Kafka, as ultimately a failure. This is both an internal criticism of these authors on their own terms but also, Benjamin thinks, the nature of all such works, historical-aesthetic or aesthetic-historical. Their genius lies in their failure. They aim at a social condition in which individual memory and memory in “tradition” and, following Proust, even the material objects, which are indexed to these memories, must be available to consciousness and in reality in the material world. Of course, such a state of things is impossible and therefore the projects are impossible. To this impossible state of things, Benjamin gives the name ‘messianic,’ not only because of the way in which these ideas can be encompassed in such a concept but also in recognition of the (Christian) theological ordering of the social conditions he is describing, which, to bring us back to Proust, makes the memoire involontaire appear purely subject to “fate.”

Despite the deep Freudian debt here, it is important to situate these observations within both a Marxian framework and a critique of Hegelian idealism and Marxist utopianism. In Hegel’s history, grossly simplified, the past is overcome and whatever was of necessary substance in it is preserved in each “overcoming” (although in ever decreasing quantity and quality) until the perfect state is achieved. Marxism correctly, at least in part, grounds or

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666 Benjamin, Selected Writings Vol.4, 313, emphasis mine.
"inverts" Hegelian idealism by insisting on the primacy of modes of economic production and class conflict as the ‘engine’ that drives history. But, from the Benjaminian point of view, Marxism did not go far enough in its materialism insofar as it maintains the Hegelian view of historical progress and conception of historical utopia. These are both secularized Christian concepts for Benjamin. Benjamin proposes a very specific version of a Jewish messianic concept. He does so not on grounds of revelation (as we have already seen numerous times), nor of identity; one could hardly claim a Jewish identitarian exclusivity on behalf of a thinker who places a Catholic anti-Semite (Baudelaire) at the center of his magnum opus. Rather, Benjamin sees that in “secularizing” his version of Jewish messianism (which is dialectically co-determined alongside his Marxism) that he can advance a concept that contains the insights into memory, emergence, and indirect action described above and the critiques of idealism and utopianism briefly sketched here. Alongside these insights and critiques, it provided what Benjamin saw as the necessary theological underpinnings of historical materialism. These underpinnings are theological not in the sense of faith or a cosmological order but rather a Jewish hermeneutic theological practice which does not conflict with materialism in its naturalist accounts and indeed is necessary, in Benjamin’s view, for historical materialism to understand itself.

Thus, in Benjamin’s messianic conception, the questions are of the emergence of the past not through direct action or cognitive insight, but rather indirectly, through changing the social

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667 Please see Chapter 3 for a more thorough discussion of these points.

668 Again, please see my discussion of Benjamin’s critique of Christianity in chapter 3, particularly the sections which touch on the early piece “Capitalism as Religion” which was written around the same time as Benjamin was composing the Trauerspiel.

669 These are addressed more thoroughly in chapter 3.
conditions via aesthetic-historical or historical-aesthetic interventions which, themselves, only negatively gesture at the messianic age and even in so doing merely serve to make “emergent consciousness” possible. As Benjamin describes in both the “Theologico-Political Fragment” and “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” even Marxist politics itself should be seen, or perhaps should be refashioned, to reflect that even these politics do not bring about the messianic age. They merely serve to increase the possibility of social ‘receptivity’ for individual experience and experience of the past to be integrated (heterogeneously) into the experience of the now.

Finally, although Benjamin’s theory remains “revolutionary,” (both in self-description and actuality) its revolutionary qualities are eschatologically distinct from the Christian apocalypse. This is one of the most crucial aspects of Benjamin’s thought that is missed in current discussions of Benjamin where he is read out of his specifically Jewish context, and read into specifically Christian contexts (particularly vis-à-vis Schmitt and contemporary left political theology), either openly, or through the invisibility of the Christian conceptual order that masquerades as the secular order. As Benjamin writes towards the end of his 1934 Kafka essay:

“They are distorted. The “cares of a family man,” which no one can identify, are distorted; the bug, which we know all too well represents Gregor Samsa, is distorted, the big animal, half-lamb, half-kitten, for which “the butcher’s knife,” might be “release,” is distorted… The same symbol occurs in the folksong, “The Little Hunchback.” This little man is at home in distorted life; he will disappear with the coming of the Messiah, who (a great rabbi once said) will not wish to change the world by force but merely make a slight adjustment in it.670

This “Little Hunchback,” “this little man,” is not the Zwerg [dwarf] whose figure Benjamin uses to describes theology in the present day in the “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” Here instead of Zwerg, we have “Männlein,” literally “little man.” While we have a slightly different fairy tale creature, they share, along with the rest of these creatures and situations, a “distortion.” Kafka’s aggadot do not reveal how the object will appear in the messianic age, but rather

670 Benjamin, Selected Writings Vol. 2.2, 811.
describe the distortion that is not currently visible which marks the distinction between the messianic age and the present. Benjamin writes that this “little man” will “disappear.” This seems strange until we consider the song Benjamin is referencing in which the *Männlein* acts as an agent of injustice. Indeed, it is tempting to conclude that in some sense it is merely as distortion that this “little man” will “disappear.” But most importantly, here we receive, in Benjamin’s reading of Kafka, an image of what messianic revolution, messianic transformation, can be for Benjamin: “a slight adjustment” in the world. This slight adjustment (of which, even if slight, we still have no certain knowledge) removes the “distortions” which Kafka so intuitively expressed, simultaneously, as two foci on an ellipse, expressing the horizons of socio-historical injustice and naturalistic physical reduction.

Not only does this analysis provide a clearer understanding of Benjamin’s messianism and its specific Jewish and historical materialist dimensions but it also further grounds a textual explanation for Benjamin’s view of *halachah* as fundamentally different from *aggadah* in terms of potential for philosophical secularization. *Halachah*, for Benjamin, is the positive expression of a lost “Holy Writ,” and, as he approvingly notes of Kafka, “Kafka doesn’t dare attach to this study the promises which tradition has attached to the study of the Torah.” And yet, “the law which is studied but no longer practiced is the gate to justice,” and “the gate to justice is study.” If there is *halachah* in Benjamin, it is emergent, perhaps only in the distant way that the messiah too is emergent, but in the aesthetic-historical and historical-aesthetic practices, we

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671 Recall Benjamin’s comment that in Kafka what is most important are the “rigorously negative aspects.”

672 Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 158.

673 Benjamin, *Selected Writings 2.2*, 815.

674 Ibid.

675 Ibid.
may see its “distorted” image. This does not, however, change the fact that Benjamin’s “theology” was one of practice. As he wrote to Scholem on August 11, 1934, “Kafka’s messianic category is the ‘reversal’ or the ‘studying.’ You guess correctly that I do not want to shift the path taken by theological interpretation itself – I practice it myself…” 676

**Secularizations**

Earlier I quoted Benjamin’s notion that “the danger” in seizing “hold of a memory” “affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers.” In Al-e Ahmad’s seizing of the Hajj or of Karbala, the “content of the tradition” is radically affected. The cosmological, supernatural truth claims, if you will, are transformed into critical conceptual categories. This is yet another form of the “secularization” of “theological concepts” that does not directly conform to Schmitt’s. 677 But what is also crucial is that this “secularization,” unlike “secularization” in Schmitt’s sense or in the sense of most modernization theories, does not necessarily imply a sense of loss. 678 This is an important overlapping dimension of Al-e Ahmad’s and Benjamin’s projects. In their respective dialectical theories of demystifying the material conditions of reality, both view the possibility that the material world grows richer in possible meaning even as they simultaneously acknowledge how the capacity for understanding transforms. Al-e Ahmad argues

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676 Benjamin, *Correspondence*, 453.

677 I am using Schmitt heuristically here; please see the end of chapter 3 for my discussion of Schmitt’s radically overinflated role in several accounts of Benjamin’s intellectual history.

678 As Tracy Strong helpfully reminds us in her introduction to *Political Theology*, “what has been lost since the sixteenth (‘theological’) century has amounted to a hollowing-out of political concepts.” (Schmitt, *Political Theology*, xxv) This sense of loss is certainly visible in Weber’s “disenchantment” (Schmitt was himself a student of Weber) and in other theories of secularization (to be understood here in the ordinary, non-Schmittian sense) as part of modernization, but also in the more mundane political science discourses on secularism as a political arrangement; one ‘gives up’ “religious” claims or practices in the public sphere in return for some sense of equal protection / equal treatment by, in, and through the state. This is an exchange, much like the common discussion of liberty and security. There is a loss of ‘meaningfulness’ in the world in exchange for public peace. Not incidentally, one finds a similar sense of loss in many discourses of strict philosophical naturalism; I will return to this question in my conclusion.
in *Dar Khedmat va Khiyanat-e Roshanfekran* for a theory of secularization that is an almost point-for-point challenge to the singularity of Schmitt’s theory and also to the notion of loss that it conjures. First he argues that, “Shiism, in the beginning was a kind of intellectual movement in the time of the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates which had emerged as imitators of Empire and Monarchy.” Al-e Ahmad defines the true intellectual in that text as “a questioner, a rejecter,” “a non-acceptor,” someone “with the intention of reform or change in the conditions of the time, and a view of his contemporary society, with the influence of the word.” Thus Al-e Ahmad argues, echoing yet simultaneously undermining Schmitt, that the originary “concept” is not the sovereignty of God but rather *zandiq* [heresy or atheism], accompanied by *ertedad* [apostasy]. These remain in the transformation into modernity. But *mojezh* [miracle], which *never was real in the first place*, is supplanted by *kalam* [the word], which for Al-e Ahmad is the creative interplay of language, literature, and hermeneutic theology all at once.

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679 Al-e Ahmad, *Dar Khedmat va Khiyanat-e Roshanfekran*, 142; translated in Wells, 112.

680 Al-e Ahmad, *Dar Khedmat*, 147; Wells, 108.

681 Al-e Ahmad, *Dar Khedmat*, 139; Wells, 110. Al-e Ahmad is clearly playing with the word *kalam* [the word] here which can, and should be read, as language, literature, and hermeneutic theology all at once. This is illustrative of the comments Al-e Ahmad makes elsewhere when pressed on his nationalism, that it is “cultural” and based solely on questions of “language, literature, and religion.” His “religious” hermeneutics and theory of critical ritual action should also not be mistaken for transcendent cosmologies or arguments from authority. Al-e Ahmad marks one of the most the crucial aspects of Shiism not as adherence to dogmas but as heresy and apostasy from its inception.

682 I am not arguing that Al-e Ahmad was thinking of Schmitt or had even read Schmitt (I see no evidence of his having done so and the possibility seems remote), merely that when thinking about the relationship of “modernity” to “religion,” Al-e Ahmad offers a position which challenges the position that Schmitt argues as exclusive and legitimate.

683 Al-e Ahmad, *Dar Khedmat*, 144; Wells, 111. I must credit Wells with his identification of these key passages even though I disagree with nearly all of his interpretations. That said, Wells’ commentary can sometimes be helpful in its honest confusion. At one point, in reflecting on *Khassi dar Miqat*, Wells, as part of his dismissal of Al-e Ahmad as a serious thinker, writes, “Ultimately, however, the ambiguity in Jalal remains unresolved. The spiritual awareness does not come to terms with the cynical pragmatist; both sides exist concurrently, and the result is often a curious mixture of hardnosed reality offset by a wistful idealism. The contrast of his experience of the mas’a and the tawaf is illuminating, indicating that even his spiritual awareness is tempered by a sense of earthly order.” (Wells, 132). I do not quote this merely to dispute Wells’ use of terms “idealism,” “pragmatism,”(which Wells uses throughout the text in place of “materialism” despite Wells’ constant stipulation that Al-e Ahmad is obviously a socialist) and “spiritual awareness.” Rather, I cite it to point out that he occasionally stumbling onto readings of Al-e
In carrying out Al-e Ahmad’s propositions, cosmological or supernatural theology is a mystification, an illusion, that once dispelled, far from leaving the world bereft of meaning, leaves it open for a vast proliferation of meaning within dialectical tension. This is Benjamin’s Talmudic “forty nine levels of meaning,” or, Al-e Ahmad’s “skepticism,” that is also an “awakening.” Furthermore, the contrast between Al-e Ahmad and Schmitt helps illustrate Benjamin’s remarks that “the ‘state of emergency’” in which we live is not the exception but the rule… the current amazement that the things we are experiencing are ‘still’ possible in the twentieth century is not philosophical.” For Benjamin, history is a continuous “state of emergency,” and this is a flawed status. “Sovereign is he who decides the exception,” Schmitt famously argues. This is a descriptive statement in Schmitt but also a normative one; what is at stake in not recognizing the essential theological analogies is also capitulation to the “onslaught” that threatens to mar, disfigure, or dissipate this ultimately true and proper nature of things. In contrast, for Benjamin a “philosophical” understanding leads to the conclusion that justice demands that this order be challenged, but not on its own terms. That is to say, not with a new, ahistorical, theological sovereignty (Christian quietism) or a new, ahistorical, theological anti-sovereignty (Christian apocalypticism) but with a new hermeneutically theological

Ahmad that he views as simple contradictions but which actually mark the sites of Al-e Ahmad’s most creative philosophical work. Wells assumes that good theoretical and philosophical work “dissipates tensions” and thus, that Al-e Ahmad’s approach is “theoretically dubious.” (Wells, 134) However, I still find this reading – both in its recognition and engagement with the facts on the page and in Al-e Ahmad’s life – Marxism, religious ambiguity, etc. far more interesting and productive than Boroujerdi’s one-note reduction and dismissal.

684 Al-e Ahmad, Khassi dar Miqat, 123.
685 Benjamin, Illuminations, 257, emphasis in original.
686 Schmitt, Political Theology, 5.
687 Ibid., 65.
“conception of history” (Benjamin’s Judeo-Marxian “historical materialism”). It turns out that *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* [On the Concept of History] is actually about history.⁶⁸⁸

Schmitt’s “political theology” views the transcendent cosmological order, even if its time has passed in terms of political reality, as fundamentally salutary. He wants an “omnipotent law giver,” who is “analogous” to “the omnipotent God.” In losing the transcendent medieval image of God, Schmitt thinks modern Europe has lost its way in terms of the proper order of “the political.” In contrast, Benjamin and Al-e Ahmad do not view this as a “loss” at all; it is, rather, emancipation. Thus, their versions of ‘secularization’ are relevant to “secularization” in Schmitt only in recognizing the possibility of the movement of “theological” “concepts.” Benjamin’s critique of theodicy in *The Origins of German Tragic Drama* and Al-e Ahmad’s critique of the concept of faith in Islam in *Khassi dar Miqat*, “historical materialism” frees both thinkers from theodical faith in a transcendent God and faith against the evidence of the senses; i.e. it frees them theoretically from Christianity.

“God” can appear negatively, in kaleidoscopic ways: for example, in the reframing of the *farr* in terms of the *illegitimacy* and *incomplete* nature of sovereignty or of the Ayatollah as as the “Signs of God,” instead of a cleric, i.e. the possible meaning produced in dialectic tension.⁶⁸⁹ In Benjamin, we have observed this tension in the principle that, in the face of the limitations of human epistemology, we are obligated to be “loyal” to the world of objects; that through that “loyalty” “we are endowed with a weak messianic power”; and that “the past carries with a

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⁶⁸⁸ The text is also, *primarily*, about the critique of progress in concepts of history. Thus, if there is a ‘hidden’ interlocutor, behind the overt critiques of the Social Democrats in Weimar, it is Hegel.

⁶⁸⁹ These do *not* have to be strict binaries. The Ayatollah can be read both as the “Signs of God,” i.e. the meaning produced in dialectic tension or, if we follow Al-e Ahmad’s arguments about intellectuals in *Dar Khedmat*, clerics should rethink their own positions as intellectuals whose specialization is in exploring this potential meaning produced within the dialectic tension, within materialism, between mere reality and the possibility of a reality imbued with memory and narrative.
temporal index by which it is referred to redemption.” These concepts do not fall within Schmitt’s debate with Blumenberg; they are not about the legitimacy or illegitimacy of “the Modern Age.” This is about the illegitimacy of a social order within modernity. This is about recognizing, through modernist critique, that there are indeed “secularized theological concepts” that constitute unexamined aspects of the modern condition (which is, as I argued in chapter 1, an uneven shifting geometry) and, specifically, which undergird the Hegelian (both of Hegel and Hegel-like) assumption that modernity is quintessentially fixed as a justification of the present status quo either in terms of the present order (as Schmitt does) or in terms of a necessary future (as Hegel and Marx do). This is about recognizing that other “secularized theological concepts” should be advanced as part of the project of modernity, not simply to make it more ‘complete’ but to make it more ‘true’ to its own theoretical underpinnings, to be better materialists, to be better moderns. Both Benjamin and Al-e Ahmad want to further modernize modernity while recognizing that there can never be a fully modern modernity without elements of something which modernity would cast as “religious.” For Schmitt, the true Christian cosmology is reflected in a realizable (and, in his works from 1933-1936, in some sense realized) true, legitimate, and justified juridico-political order. He reads “miracle” as analogous to an “exception in jurisprudence.” On the contrary, emancipated from such a cosmology, Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin read “miracle” as a different kind of exception to that very order. This

690 Benjamin, Illuminations, 254.

691 This social order is not nearly as discrete as Schmitt’s strict separation of spheres which, as discussed in chapter 3, itself an artifact of a Christian view of history.

692 Schmitt, Political Theology, 36.

693 Although not one of his primary concepts, “miracle” appears in several places in Benjamin, as early as the Trauerspiel and as late as “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.” For example: “To give these covert laws their due outside his verses as well was Baudelaire’s intention in Spleen de Paris, his collection of prose poems. In the book’s dedication to the editor-in-chief of La Presse, Aresene Houssaye, Baudelaire wrote: “Who among us has not dreamed, in his ambitious moments, of the miracle of the prose poem, musical yet without rhythm and without
difference is not only that instead of proving the order, it challenges its legitimacy and necessity, but also in that in both thinkers the challenge is expressed as and in the expansion of the possibilities of meaning in aesthetics and epistemology.

**Comparative Philosophy and the Uneven, Shifting Geometry of Modernity**

Throughout this dissertation, I have presented analyses of Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin which demonstrate that a comparative reading of their philosophies helps us better understand underexplored or underemphasized aspects of each thinker, as well as providing a foundation for new philosophical perspectives apart from many prevailing contemporary schools. This comparison has certainly not been exhaustive and has focused on particular questions and issues in their respective Shia-Marxian and Judeo-Marxian projects; the questions of aesthetic perception and consciousness; the question of materialism and epistemological limitation; the question of memory and history; the question of messianism and anti-utopianism, and so forth. However, as we have seen, there are key areas of shared interests, nuanced differences in their positions, areas of mere overlap, and views of nearly diametric opposition. As I have indicated, I do not view the projects as ‘the same,’ nor do I claim that if pushed in certain directions they would eventually converge on a single vanishing point. My point is not to collapse the thinkers into each other or to draw a false equivalence. While both authors have a large corpus of work – particularly if you take into account Al-e Ahmad’s fictional works, which I have left largely unaddressed here – Benjamin’s is far more staggering not only in size but in its more nuanced, sophisticated, and expansive engagement, especially, with materialist aesthetics and

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*rhyme, supple and resistant enough to adapt to the lyrical stirrings of the soul, the undulations of reverie, and the sudden leaps of consciousness. This obsessive ideal is born, above all, from the experience of giant cities, from their intersecting myriad relations.” (Benjamin, *Selected Writings Vol.4*, 320) “Miracle” also appears – directly, not by quotation – in reference to aesthetic possibilities in the *Trauerspiel.*
epistemology. Additionally, Benjamin, despite his many idiosyncrasies that have plagued his commentators, translators, and interpreters over the years, wrote in a language steeped in the concepts and traditions of classical and early modern philosophy in general and German Idealism, Romanticism, and Marxism in particular. While Al-e Ahmad certainly demonstrates familiarity with many branches of ‘Western’ philosophy, it requires, as I have noted, a certain form of disciplinary ‘translation’ to present his ideas in a recognizable philosophical idiom.

That said, Al-e Ahmad has several philosophical intuitions and insights of which Benjamin seems to have been incapable; furthermore, as I will now demonstrate, there are some aspects of the overall structure of Al-e Ahmad’s philosophical system that I find more inherently justifiable or perhaps simply reasonable than the equivalent aspects in Benjamin. This, I think, is particularly visible in four areas: (1) Al-e Ahmad’s concept of the Mahdi as a historical index of possible meaning and Benjamin’s insistence that the messianic must be present in some “distorted” form in every object; (2) ironically for the prevailing readings of Benjamin today, Al-e Ahmad not only has a more novel and practicable theory of sovereignty than does Benjamin but he also has a more thorough engagement with and critique of actual politics and the state; (3) the concept, properly understood, of gharbzadeh itself;\(^{694}\) and (4) what I have described here as Al-e Ahmad’s theory of critical ritual practice which I regard as potentially Al-e Ahmad’s most important contribution to universalistic philosophy. I have presented this comparison through

\(^{694}\) It is perhaps important to note that it is Buck-Morss who coins the concept of “anaesthetics” by performing a synthetic reading of Benjamin that he either was unable or did not have a chance to articulate himself. Additionally, while I think that gharbzadeh and “anaesthetics” are so reflective of each other as to form one of the key focal points in the comparison of Benjamin and Al-e Ahmad, I think gharbzadeh is, itself, an equally useful concept for further philosophical and theoretical discourse and critique. For example, I think gharbzadeh as broadly interpreted as I present it in chapter 2, could have extraordinarily productive potential in feminist theory, critical race theory, queer theory, and other analyses in which there is an “anaesthetic” dynamic but which specifically involves not only the potential numbing of aesthetic sense and consciousness but also the specific and concomitant interplay of internalization/self-actualization/performance of “images” that are specifically inflicted, intoxicated, or bombarded from an external apparatus of power.
textual analysis and intellectual history while attending simultaneously to issues in philosophical inquiry – both in the authors’ eras and our own – and to socio-historical and occasionally even biographical context for trying both to understand the authors’ positions in terms of themselves and in terms of resonances, overlaps, differences, and disagreements between the two. However, I would like to introduce now, in a necessarily abbreviated fashion, socio-historical conditions which I did not already address in chapter 1 or in my readings of Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin that are nonetheless crucial for understanding their divergences.

The central issue is that of distance and closeness, both in a literal geographic sense and also in figurative imagination. Benjamin can view the Arcades, even in their ruined form, as something he can experience firsthand, pass through, identify with (even through such an alienating figure as Baudelaire), and still critique in terms of the “ur-phenomena” of consumer culture. Al-e Ahmad reiterates again and again that the sources of the “image” of modernity are particularly to be found in public advertising and the press (magazines, newspapers), “like the display cases of large shops selling fancy goods, and like every other simulation with which in the name of western civilization we give a transient and false varnish to our lives.”695 Al-e Ahmad understands that these images are not modernity; Iran and its current condition are necessitated as part of modernity. Benjamin can critique the Arcades as a “dream house,” but Al-e Ahmad critiques the magazine as “dreams” from someone else’s “house.” Indeed, even the concept and image of the traditional is sent back from a distance. That the “images” of modernity can be so obviously external and yet the condition so obviously global is central to the simultaneity of the universalistic and particular in gharbzadegi (even responsibility is bifurcated, as in the quotation above) and even in Al-e Ahmad’s realization that even the local and

695 Al-e Ahmad, Seh Maqaleyeye Digar, 17.
seemingly familiar can be utterly ‘foreign’ in the sense of being unknown as he discusses at the end of *Khassi dar Miqat*; and that, in turn, the question of center and periphery while an *economic* reality, need not be a philosophical one.

At the same time, this understanding of ‘distance’ almost certainly contributed to some of Al-e Ahmad’s propensities to slip away from his own nuances and reify, even fetishize both West and Difference from West. In contrast, Benjamin’s closeness may have made it difficult to think beyond the geographical boundaries of Europe, but it also made his insights into the European experience of modernity – and the role of the non-European within it – far more probing into the self-imagination of the supposedly universal modern. As he would once write to Scholem, “Something else must be expressed just as conditionally: the question of surroundings. Where is my productive base? It is – and I have not the slightest illusions about this – in Berlin W. WW, if you will. The most advanced civilization and the most ‘modern’ culture not only are part of my private comforts but are in part simply the means of my production.”696 Benjamin may hold to the imaginative geography of the center, but he understands that his entire critique of modernity is tied to this very position. More specifically, writing in response to yet another of Scholem’s attempts to get Benjamin to join the Zionist project in Palestine, Benjamin understands that his critical project is tied to the question of being a Jew in Berlin, to being, as he would write elsewhere of Kafka (who was actually of course Czech) “both German and Jewish.” Benjamin is also recognizing that the other resources – intellectual and simply monetary – necessary for his project were in Europe.

696 Benjamin, *Correspondence*, 377.
In this comparative reading of Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin, I have also maintained the goal of presenting at least the broad contours of a synthetic move. This synthesis does not negate the independence of trajectories of the thinkers on their own; the two thinkers are, addressed immanently, quite possibly incommensurable. But I would like to indicate the philosophy they can be seen to suggest. It would require another volume to fully argue this “image,” to use a popular word in the Al-e Ahmad’s and Benjamin’s shared lexicon, in terms of systematic philosophy. Having examined the intellectual historical foundations, socio-cultural conditions, and specific textual arguments that underlie the comparison, I believe I have established the justification for a discussion of the “family resemblance” of the two philosophies beyond the grounds of mere semblance.697 Indeed, the question at hand in the synthetic move is not that of semblance, as I have already established the grounds for meaningful comparison through philosophical interpolation at the key points I have identified. The synthetic move instead provokes the question: what is this “family”? What are its characteristics?

In addressing this question, I present a short argument that appears narratological; this should be understood as a limitation of the systematic philosophical presentation itself. Much of what I describe here should be understood in terms of simultaneity and furthermore – especially considering the authors in question – as in and having history. It is a trick of the presentation that history appears to enter in the middle and that there appears a transcendent subject only to be

697 Although it has been tempting, I have avoided using Benjamin’s own theories of semblance and correspondence to further justify this project. That said, for a perhaps seemingly improbable exploration of the affinities of Benjamin’s and Wittgenstein’s thought, please see Stanley Cavell’s “Benjamin and Wittgenstein: Signals and Affinities,” Critical Inquiry 25: 2 (1999). He proposes there that one such affinity is found, in terms of the authors’ engagement with “skepticism,” but in such a way that “recasts skepticism’s significance in order to throw light upon, let’s say, human finitude, above all, representing all, the human achievement of words.” I would like to note that this is remarkably similar to the recasting of skepticism in Al-e Ahmad’s Khassi dar Migat as well.
done away with. I also want to underscore the fact that this *sketch* is not necessarily “true,” but rather the kind of philosophical arguments we would have to take seriously if we address some of the most compelling claims that I have discussed from Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin at the same time.
Conclusion:

A Generalized Presentation of the Philosophical Conception of a “Religion of Doubt”

I am addressing a broadly Marxian\textsuperscript{698} discourse that views orthodox Marxism as a failed project. This failure is examined by both Benjamin and Al-e Ahmad in several key areas, nearly all of which are predicated on the problem of universalism and particularity within a Marxian framework. First, a critical under-examination, mischaracterization, or ignorance of the primacy of aesthetic thought and experience. This should be understood, as Buck-Morss suggests (via Eagleton) when discussing Benjamin, as closer to the original Greek αἰσθητικός \([aisthetikos, aesthetics]\), which already contains within it a connection between sense perception, embodiment, and consciousness. Marxism (and other modernist discourses) has inherited a Christian-Platonic transcendent subject and a Christian-Platonic epistemology. In turn, what I propose through the synthesis of Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin’s thought (as comparatively discussed in this dissertation) is a theory of immanent, culturally, historically, and even biologically limited embodied subjects and a concomitant recognition of universalistic human epistemological limitations. This theory already presupposes within it two seemingly contradictory impulses: (1) the necessity of counter-posing alternatives from within subjectively limited positions and (2) the continued necessity of universalism as the connective discourse that is dialectically interdependent on the already global condition of modernity. There should be a contingent, fluid, but ultimately insurmountable dialectical tension between the universalistic (understood as a discursive space where unmoored subjective concepts might be disputed,

\textsuperscript{698} I am using both “Marxian” and “Marxist” in this description. Although my use is standard I want to make it explicit here: “Marxist” should be understood as shorthand for explicitly self-identified and recognizable forms of Marxism; Marxian should be understood as a line of thought derived from the trajectory and impulses of Marx’s or Marxist thought but ultimately incommensurable with even a reformed/revised version of the Marxist project (à la Gramsci, Lukács, Lenin, Trotsky, Mao, Althusser, or to give a more recent example, Badiou).
exchanged, or tested) and the indissoluble particular, although neither should be viewed as fixed points. The instantiation of the universal as a socio-historical condition must be viewed in one of two ways: (a) indirectly emergent or (b) impossible. In the case of (a), unlike in Hegel or Marx, the reconciliation would have to account for a somehow genuinely heterogeneous condition, in which, however, contradictions that would result in continued history would be resolved, i.e. in fact, it would be transhistorical, outside or beyond history. In the case of (b), the impossibility is recognized because of the inconceivable nature of the conditions required to achieve (a). Perhaps even more centrally, given the primacy of aesthetic experience and thought and the recognized fact of human epistemological limitation, a very peculiar view of the phenomenal world is suggested: there is a mere physicalist (or biological) image of the world which is a reliable, powerful, but necessarily limited account. Though there are these epistemic limits in the physicalist image of the world (the scientifically verifiable and the completely irrational), given human epistemological limitations, there is a potentially infinite variety of meaning interpretable from or even in the phenomena themselves. This derives not only from the multiplicity of subjectivities discussed above but recognizing that, for example, potentially contradictory propositions arrived at through deductive and inductive reason can only be adjudicated positively, that is they can only be adjudicated when they make claims immediately in contradiction to verifiable, scientific claims or in contradiction to a series of conditions described below. But ultimately the irreducibility of potential description and meaning in

699 It is crucial here to understand transhistorical in the sense of that which is beyond history as a potentiality, not that which is “eternally true.”

700 For the sake of this thought experiment, I will stipulate Popper’s account of scientific inquiry with the rather stark addendum that, against strict philosophical naturalism, it is given in this system I am describing that “falsifiability” marks the limit not of knowledge but merely of scientific inquiry. I do not endorse Popper’s view nor do I want to be mistaken as claiming that this view would be imputable (rather improbably) to either Al-e Ahmad or Benjamin. It stands in here as a heuristically useful shorthand for this sketch.
phenomena produces a model for justice: that which preserves the multiple possibilities of meaning is just. This epistemic definition of justice can be amplified into a moral-political definition of justice (individual practices and the establishment of political-social institutions that encourage the flourishing of multiple subjectivities, i.e. multiple sense-perceiving-bodies). It should be noted that in the potentially infinite range of meaning between these limits exists a wide-variety of claims of minimal moral realism, notions of inherent meaning, and even messianic possibility amongst many others. This sub-range should be understood as the range of the non-rational.\(^{701}\) Within such a system, without adjudicating for the singularity of any of these possibilities, to merely observe their possibility is to command respect for that possibility. This provokes a loyalty or meaningful stance towards objects (and in particular sense-perceiving-bodies).

However, as important to this sense of justice is the critique of illusory phenomena; this must be understood both in the traditional scientific sense of demonstrating that the initially apparent can be deceptively untrue, as well as the Marxian sense that exposes obfuscated historical socio-economic relations that connect objects in the modern world as well as the discursive language in which subjects can speak about those relations. Hence, the particular interest in the problem of phantasmagoria, commodity fetishism, and false consciousness. But, echoing where I began this synthetic description, the necessity of a rigorous iconoclasm towards

\(^{701}\) The “non-rational” is, as noted, expansive; I am highlighting those qualities (for example messianic possibility) which most crucially relate to the Marxian dimensions of the “religion of doubt.” However, it should be understood as being inclusive (among, as stated, a nearly infinite range of possibility) of a wide range of speculative philosophy, concepts of affect, and even certain modes of existential reflection. Crucially, the “non-rational” in a sense animates the system for second order rational principles while maintaining the possibility for the actuality of the mere natural and the rejection of the irrational. Part of the rationale in my attempt to write this as such a general theory is that it could be unfolded so to speak, and different aspects of speculative philosophy, etc. could serve as the ground for the critique of the “historical materialist” project. When doing so the resulting systemic critiques (and subsequent constructions, for example, of alternative theories of historiography, of subjectivity, etc.) could be radically different even while broadly maintaining the basic commitments described herein. Thus, the strength of the philosophical ‘system’ of the “religion of doubt” is in its necessarily incomplete nature that demands such reevaluation.
mystified conditions and of traditional Marxian economic critique is predicated on the proposition that as part of alienation from self, or perhaps more boldly, as a better understanding of alienation from self, is bodily alienation, the numbing, blunting, dismemberment, or narcotizing of the senses and therein the possibility for consciousness. Indeed, especially without the mechanically deterministic version of Marxist history which I will come to shortly, this concern becomes the prime mover of the project itself.

Neither the critique of the historically and culturally specific characteristics of Marxist discourse specifically and all modernist discourse more broadly nor the presentation of alternative particularistic concepts, viewpoints, and practices is predicated on identitarian grounds. Here, even while being so purposefully general, I can be quite specific. The critique of Christianity is not because it is particularistic but because those aspects of it which have been taken into Marxism through Hegel – and which are readily apparent in most modern systems of thought – are adjudicated as limiting potential meaning without good cause. Furthermore, the particular concepts generally in question (faith, theodicy, the transcendental subject, the existence of a contemporaneous other-world, and telelogical progress) are viewed as (a) instrumental in the actual failure of the Marxist project and other modernist projects and (b) as purely obfuscating concepts. The dialectical relationship between the universal and the particular is most evident here in that qualities of concepts thus critiqued are reflexively critiqued within the particular Weltanschauung on the basis of those qualities, so that truly alternative propositions from particularistic spaces may be proposed for universalistic discourse. However, this is not merely the globalization of Hegelian reconciliation; there are a wide variety of differences that are irreconcilable in the Hegelian sense. They are only reconcilable in the conditions described above in terms of the instantiation of the universal. Thus within a
historically bound universalistic discourse (not the instantiation of the universal), new
particularistic concepts are advanced without ontological exclusivity, i.e. not as mystified
imperceptible concepts dependent on a particular internal set of unknowable qualities, but as
subject to the same dialectical process.

Before I list all of the key ways in which this alters Marxian theory, it must be noted that
even this irreconcilable dialectical process is not considered as directly contributing to the
instantiation (if possible) of the universal as a socio-transhistorical condition. In a “religion of
doubt,” the positive proposition of definite qualities of the instantiation of the universal as a
socio-transhistorical condition (the “messianic condition” from here on) would be to propose the
very kind of transcendent principle that prevents the emergence (if possible) of just such a
condition. At best the activities associated with the irreconcilable dialectic process must be
understood as perpendicular to the undefined emergent vector of the “messianic condition”; that
is, these activities all operate to transform socio-historical conditions in present time that
facilitate greater aesthetic perception and consciousness, in addition to promoting conditions in
present time that expand possibility for meaningful speculation, scientific inquiry, and aesthetic-
historical/historical-aesthetic production. On grounds of the critique of utopianism, the critique
of theodicy, and, above all, the critique of faith (against the evidence of the senses), the qualities
and conditions of the “messianic condition” are not even inarticulable but the questions
concerning it are necessarily completely unknown, as all sense-perceiving-bodies are historically
circumscribed agents and the “messianic condition” is a transhistorical condition (if possible at

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702 This instantiation of the universal as a socio-transhistorical condition should be understood as follows: (a)
“instantiation” refers to the emergence of an actual, material condition; (b) “the universal” refers to the
reconciliation in difference discussed in the previous paragraph; (c) “socio-transhistorical” refers to the condition as
an arrangement of social relations that would be beyond history, not in the sense of the “eternally true” but in the
sense of a condition in which historical contradictions – given (a) and (b) – no longer pertain: i.e. the “messianic
condition.”
all). Marxist thought is critiqued on the following additional grounds: it takes over from Hegelian Idealism the theory of historical progress and, even while claiming anti-utopianism on its scientific basis, posits a historical utopia based on a transcendental subject actualizing itself universally in history. Furthermore, all of these factors produce, in different ways, theodicy, which is rejected in the loyalty discussed earlier. Thus, Marxist historiography is challenged with different potential ways of understanding time and history (as the representation of time). Additionally, its theory of politics (and understanding of the bourgeois state) are also challenged. The vector of Marxian politics must be understood as described above: perpendicular to the emergent “messianic condition,” not as leading toward it. Further, the content of that politics must be defined in relation to the present needs of sense-perceiving-bodies, in concrete economic terms, and in relation to the conditions for expanded possibility of consciousness discussed above.

What, then, remains in a “religion of doubt” that is distinctly Marxian? First, “historical materialism,” which always allowed for a dimension beyond the reductively naturalistic within a still materialist framework, is preserved. In the critique of Christianity – as described above – the necessarily supernatural is explicitly rejected. In this sense, the philosophy is naturalist; it simply insists, in embracing its more modest epistemology, that there is more to the natural world than that which can be described by the natural sciences. Furthermore, despite challenging the Marxist concept of the progress of history, the philosophy embraces the Marxian notion that economic and social conditions as well as the concepts that describe them are historically conditioned; indeed, it wants to view phenomena themselves as having both mere natural and historical accretion in addition to potential speculative meaning. The critique of the unexamined universalism at the heart of the Marxist project is demanded by the Marxian commitment to
thorough historical materialist critique. Similarly, its subsequent turn to the re-evaluation of previously conceived peripheral or minor cultural practices and concepts, particularly those dismissed on grounds of an ahistorical and unexamined concept of “religion,” is predicated on the reexamination of potentialities in said practices and concepts and, especially, in consideration of the possibility for further materialist commitment in exploring practices that reinforce the a non-dualistic, fully embodied account of subjects. Finally, in the dialectical engagement with existing material conditions – including and especially considered in light of the discussion of αἰσθητικός – there remains the necessity of understanding the project as one of emancipation which must contend with, in addition to historical-material conditions as elaborated here, discordance between ontologically exclusive but inaccurate conceptions of reality, i.e. some notion of false consciousness. However, this emancipation must be reconsidered within the strictly indirect (in telos and in technique) conditions discussed above and this false consciousness must contend not with adherence to the stricture of the necessarily incomplete system of the “religion of doubt” as a pseudo-totality, but rather with synthetic conscious frameworks which are either (a) dependent on the inflating the truth value of a merely physicalist account, i.e. a scientistic account;\(^{703}\) (b) adhere to an explicitly irrational account, e.g. faith (as defined as belief against the evidence of the senses); (c) or the privileging of a specific non-rational account which acts against the perpendicular conditions for the possibilities of perpendicular emancipation (on the aesthetic or socio-historical level discussed above), e.g. subjectivism, radical skepticism, anti-realism, etc.

\(^{703}\) For a very good account of why all strict naturalistic accounts violate the natural fallacy, please see Chapter 5 of Bilgrami, Self-Knowledge and Resentment (2006). This account is not embedded in the kind of openly value laden project that I am outlining here but rather is an immanent account presented in terms of the propositions of naturalistic analytic philosophy.
The last quality I wish to elaborate in a generalized presentation of a “religion of doubt” is this necessary embrace of some set of practices – that are externally conditioned\textsuperscript{704} – and have no rational or irrational premise to (a) reinforce the historically, organically, and culturally embodied situation of a theorist within the philosophical system; (b) to perform, via the non-rational, the general limitations of human epistemology and therein, through performance, reproduce that understanding; and (c) in doing so, engender the elusive capacity for dialectical self-critique.

**Hermeneutic Capture and Some Interventions Identified**

The preceding description does not fully capture either Al-e Ahmad or Benjamin’s thought, nor is it intended to do so. In fact, many of their most provocative insights, propositions, and concepts – as I have been describing them throughout this dissertation – seem only partially represented or, in some cases, potentially omitted. But this is a potential and not a necessary omission, which is a function of the attempt at presenting this theory as a generalized synthetic description. What justifies even this potential hermeneutic violence? Firstly, I do not intend for the reader to ignore the specific positions argued by Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin or raised in critical comparison between Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin that I have been discussing hereto; any number of positions (Benjamin’s messianic conception of history, Al-e Ahmad’s gharbzadegi, Benjamin’s hermeneutic stance towards objects, what I have called Al-e Ahmad’s ‘theory of critical ritual action’, etc.) are worthy of philosophical consideration beyond such a

\textsuperscript{704} When I say “externally conditioned,” I mean dependent on a sense-perceiving-body’s (i.e. a subject’s) reception of these practices (perhaps critically, perhaps not, etc.) from “tradition,” writ broadly (i.e., traditional practices, not as ‘static’ practices received on authority, but as historically and culturally transmitted bodies of performance information; this would of course encompass both what I have been discussing in this chapter as “ritual” performance, but could also as easily involve any number of embodied performance “traditions” in the arts, even, read extremely broadly, athletics and so on. That is not to say such practices are equal; in each case, a theory of the relation of their performance to critical thought would be necessary.)
framework. Secondly, the framework is deliberately noted as incomplete. This “incompleteness” is a necessary property of the ‘system’ in its own terms: it allows for a potentially infinite range of speculative philosophy and the broadest possible range of ‘variables,’ if you will, that can radically alter or shift the framework without losing (or without losing for good reason) the basic focal precepts of the framework as described above. Thus, I am not merely making the case that Benjamin and Al-e Ahmad offer challenging arguments which philosophers should contend with but that they suggest, at least as broadly and rudimentarily sketched here, a new framework for thinking about philosophy.

Obviously, having drawn the framework from my comparison of Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin I find a “religion of doubt” a particularly suitable framework for capturing what I propose are many of their most salient contributions to philosophy. Indeed, I believe there are several necessary interventions that can be drawn from the “religion of doubt” framework that arises from my comparison of Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin’s respective projects. Put into terms of contemporary philosophical debates, several of these interventions can be described as suggesting the possibility for: (a) providing a framework for where post-structuralist speculation and hermeneutics can be understood as complimentary and synergistic with rigorous scientific inquiry; (b) demonstrating the error in both materialist and moral terms of strict philosophical naturalism; (c) providing a cautious and rational framework for the reevaluation of concepts and practices that have been dismissed on spurious theoretical or ontological grounds without reverting into extolling the irrational; (d) demanding an engagement with philosophy as

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705 There is nothing even in the generalized framework of a “religion of doubt” that promises that previous concepts must be overturned. I think many of these stand tout court but it is far beyond the scope of this project to demonstrate such.

706 This should not be confused with the specifically mathematical principle in Gödel.
embodied practice by individuals or groups that have circumscribed cultural, biological, and historical frames; (e) demonstrating how a de-centered and de-centering philosophy without any notion of a fixed or singular subject at its center can still speak in a universal register; and (f) suggesting how all the activities discussed in (a)-(e) can be performed within a broadly moral framework while retaining self-guided autonomy.  

Epilogue: Is this Religion?

It is helpful to recall Edward Said’s definition of “theological criticism” and “religion” as “shutting off human investigation,” “deference to the authority of the more-than-human, the

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707 There are obvious deep resonances between this framework and the original critical theoretical project as outlined by Horkheimer in 1931 – a renewal of dialectical social philosophy as part of an interdisciplinary scientific and social scientific project – and the later Dialectic of Enlightenment position of both Horkheimer and Adorno that in rescuing reason from its own myth, that which has been dismissed as myth must be re-examined. However, the former project never really came to fruition, and the latter was always considered impossible. In looking to the comparison of Al-e Ahmad with Benjamin, we see how the latter could be entertained (and not necessarily only for practices and concepts associated with Shiism and Judaism but, without reproducing the spurious contours of the universal category of “religion,” for practices and concepts from other traditions even Christianity (but rather dialectically transformed). In the Dialectic of Enlightenment, Adorno and Horkheimer specifically single out Judaism by writing, “The disenchanted world of Judaism propitiated magic by negating it in the idea of God. The Jewish religion brooks no word which might bring solace to the despair of all mortality. It places all hope in the prohibition on invoking falsity as God, the finite as the infinite, the lie as truth. The pledge of salvation lies in the rejection of any faith which claims to depict it, knowledge in the denunciation of illusion.” (Adorno and Horkheimer, Dialectic of Enlightenment, 17) They go on to specifically excoriate Buddhism for its anti-realism and nihilism. Towards the end of the book, they actually alight upon “Christianity,” decades before Asad, Masuzawa, or Anidjar, as “a religion, and in a sense, the only one: an intellectual link to something intellectually suspect, a special sphere of culture.” (Adorno and Horkheimer, Dialectic of Enlightenment, 146) The “intellectually suspect” is the return of “magic,” in the form of “the humanization of God through Christ,” (A&H, DoE, 145) and subsequently, “relegated devalued life to the sphere of the profane: it abolished the law of Moses but rendered what was theirs unto both God and Caesar.” Christianity is marked as the religion which in spurious “love,” “nature and the supernatural are reconciled. Therein lies its untruth: in the fraudulently affirmative interpretation of self-forgetting.” (A&H, DoE, 146) Christianity is the religion which creates the category of religion, specifically as “a special sphere of culture” that must be overturned. This move in many ways – at least in this part of the book – is the crucial foundation for the victory of Reason’s Myth over reason itself. However, even with all that said, Adorno and Horkheimer propose on the very next page that Christian thinkers like Pascal, Lessing, Kierkegaard, and Barth had all come to some level of realization of this and were thus “not only the radical Christians but the tolerant ones.” However, as I noted, Adorno and Horkheimer never themselves come to a proposition about how to dialectically reexamine what has been overcome as myth. If we use the framework of the “religion of doubt,” however, we can imagine such a possibility: but within that framework there is no assumed equality of truth value in different traditions as in a liberal conception. One can only imagine what a thus dialectically transformed Christianity might even look like, although it is worthwhile to note how much of Judaism and even more so of Shiism is explicitly rejected within the thought of Benjamin or Al-e Ahmad even before they are put into comparative conversation.
supernatural, the other-worldly.”\textsuperscript{708} If this is the definition of religion, then what I have demonstrated in my readings of Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin, their comparison, and my subsequent theorization of a unique philosophical framework and trajectory that emerges from that comparison is emphatically not religion. Both authors’ theories are about opening up human investigation and removing deference to supernatural, other-worldly (and perhaps more primarily, illegitimate worldly) authority. In such light, by calling their projects “religions of doubt,” I have fundamentally misidentified their projects, individually, comparatively, and synthetically; they are forms of philosophy, plain and simple.

Furthermore, as I argued at the end of chapter 1, the current theoretical critiques of “religion” as a category suggest the dissolution of this category altogether, alongside the rejection of the universal in general. In this sense, then, I have also fundamentally misidentified the projects of Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin as “religious” when I should have rather reasserted their incommensurate particularity as resistance to discursive universalism. And yet, this critique of “religion”\textsuperscript{709} is inadequate to the project at hand in several ways. While it successfully identifies the Christian identity that is obfuscated, historically and theoretically, in theories of “secularism,” it does not adequately address the Christianity of the category of “religion” itself. It is, put bluntly, a half-critique. In suggesting the dissolution of the category of “religion,” I have argued that this critique of “religion” not only reproduces an even more obfuscated Christianity as the static, ahistorical norm for understanding those discourses that have come to be called “religions” but furthermore, in trying to ‘provincialize’ Christianity, it actually forever ‘provincializes’ “religions.” This, to me, seems to simply reproduce the original problem in an

\textsuperscript{708} Said, \textit{The World, the Text, and the Critic}, 290.

\textsuperscript{709} Again, please refer back to my chapter 1 section, “Religion and Religious: The Critique of Secularism and Religion as Polemic” for my full treatment of this subject in theoretical terms.
even more exacerbated form. Furthermore, it fails to account for precisely the kind of philosophies that Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin propose.

As I have demonstrated, these philosophies clearly recognize that part of the failure of the utopian projects of modernity (particularly Marxism) is their obfuscated Christian dimensions. However, Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin produce philosophies that not only identify the hidden Christian dimensions in supposedly universalistic thought but, in actually critiquing these dimensions, they critically negate those particular elements of Christianity in universalistic thought that they view as philosophically untenable and historically catastrophic. In these critiques, Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin advance specific elements from within Shiism and Judaism, respectively, which they view as possible correctives to these particular philosophically untenable and historically catastrophic dimensions. They do so not on grounds of ontological exclusivity but on grounds of epistemological proposition. To understand these critiques requires philosophically addressing a wide array of concepts and practices that are dismissed, on ontological grounds, as religion, but may have nothing to do with the Christian category of religion that justifies that dismissal. Here, then, we see the first ground of what I call religion as polemic: both Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin draw on traditions which do not comport themselves to the definition of “religion” as conjured by Christian-modernity and furthermore are not based on concepts and practices that are marked, as Adorno suggests, as ‘intellectually suspicious’ on grounds of association not argumentation. The entire discursive sets of practices, concepts, stances, etc. that have been deemed irrelevant by the category of “religion” can only be recovered for reconsideration through dialectical engagement with that category. Indeed, carried out to its logical conclusion the post-structuralist dissolution impulse (both towards “religion” and universalism) would mark Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin’s thought – at least the aspects I have
discussed here – as philosophically irrelevant on the grounds of their dialectical modernism.

*Religion as polemic* in this sense is another critique of religion.

But this is not the only failure of the post-structuralist critique of “religion”; it also fails to account for changing historical conditions, particularly in relation to philosophy. That is to say, it fails to take into account the rise of what I have been calling strict philosophical naturalism throughout this dissertation. Akeel Bilgrami provides a helpfully succinct definition: “My talk of naturalism and naturalist here and throughout the book is intended only to mark out a doctrine and a philosopher who thinks that all the facts or properties there are, are the facts that are countenanced by the natural sciences.” In his preface, Bilgrami provides both an expansion of the stakes and an acknowledgment of the prevalence of the position:

> These are the themes of agency and the first person point of view, the irreducible nature of value, the irreducible nature of intentionality, and the special character of self-knowledge. All of these themes might and often have been presented as problems in philosophy; sometimes, if one is given

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710 This failure is because it is purely an identitarian criticism of Christianity, not also a functional critique of Christianity. The former is interested in Christian concepts because they are Christian and the latter is interested in Christian concepts because of what they do. Most of what I have addressed in Al-e Ahmad’s and Benjamin’s philosophies focuses on the latter. It is not because it is Christian that they critique the Christian conception of faith, it is because it unjustifiably mystifies material conditions. Similarly, the critique of theodicy is made on grounds of how it presents existing socio-historical conditions as static, immutable facts of cosmological order instead of as dynamic, contingent relations subject to change and transformation.

711 I have been using this unwieldy phrase as “naturalism,” in its many forms, proves a rather ambiguous phrase. The sketch I have given, in fact, is broadly naturalistic, but foregrounds a moral outlook in the face of uncertain epistemic horizons. Even within self-ascribed philosophical naturalism and metaphysical naturalism, questions of emergence and supervenience could theoretically allow a wide variety of phenomena that are not fully reducible. I am using “strict philosophical naturalism” in the sense described by Bilgrami in the main text and in the following footnote by Danto.

712 Bilgrami, *Self-Knowledge and Resentment*, 86. Bilgrami is a critic, but compare to Arthur Danto’s entry in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: “Naturalism, in recent usage, is a species of philosophical monism according to which whatever exists or happens is natural in the sense of being susceptible to explanation through methods which, although paradigmatically exemplified in the natural sciences, are continuous from domain to domain of objects and events. Hence, naturalism is polemically defined as repudiating the view that there exists or could exist any entities or events which lie, in principle, beyond the scope of scientific explanation.” (Danto, *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 448)
to a certain prevalent form of naturalism, they have even been presented as mysteries to be solved or removed.\textsuperscript{713}

The list of “problems” to be either “solved” through the natural sciences (i.e. decided or reduced) or “removed” extends to norms, qualia, minds, and even consciousness itself. Even to affirm the potential irreducibility of aspects of phenomena, is, in some sense for the strict philosophical naturalist, to acknowledge the supernatural. There is no question then, in a philosophy which is strictly naturalistic in this sense, that if I ask again whether or not the philosophies of Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin should be presented as religions, the answer would be: yes. It is here that we can begin to understand religion as polemic as a historical intervention.\textsuperscript{714}

If, in its seemingly unexamined circularity, the conception of strict philosophical naturalism seems to beg the question, that is because it does. Openly so. As Daniel Dennett, one of the most prominent proponents of strict philosophical naturalism puts it:

\textit{I begin, then, with a tactical choice. I declare my starting point to be the objective, materialistic, third-person world of the physical sciences. This is the orthodox choice today in the English-speaking philosophical world, but it has its detractors, most notably Nagel who has devoted a book, The View from Nowhere (1986), to deploring the effects of this tactical choice... Nagel is the most eloquent contemporary defender of the mysteries.}\textsuperscript{715}

As Dennett continues, “Since Nagel and I start from different perspectives, his arguments begs the question against a position like mine, what counts for him as flat obvious, and in no need of further support often fails to impress me... the feeling then is mutual, we beg the question

\textsuperscript{713} Bilgrami, \textit{Self-Knowledge and Resentement}, ix, emphasis in original. It should be noted that Bilgrami is not endorsing ‘mysteriousness.’ In a clarifying endnote to this sentence, Bilgrami distinguishes between endorsing mystery and demystifying irreducibility.

\textsuperscript{714} I want to emphasize that I do not mean this historical intervention as an apologia for the philosophies of Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin as I have presented them here. Rather, I see that their philosophies help clarify the absurdity in some of the assumptions in strict philosophical naturalism and that their philosophies help demonstrate the socio-historical ramifications of strict philosophical naturalism.

\textsuperscript{715} Dennett, \textit{The Intentional Stance}, 5-6.
against each other.”

Indeed, Dennett even helpfully identifies (although unhelpfully truncates) a passage in Nagel’s *The View from Nowhere* that presents Nagel’s opposing view:

> The limit of objectivity with which I shall be concerned is one that follows directly from the process of gradual detachment by which objectivity is achieved. An objective standpoint is created by leaving a more subjective, individual, or even just human perspective behind; but there are things about the world and life and ourselves that cannot be adequately understood from a maximally objective standpoint, however much it may extend our understanding beyond the point from which we started. A great deal is essentially connected to a particular point of view, of type of point of view, and the attempt to give a complete account of the world in objective terms detached from these perspectives inevitably leads to false reductions or to outright denial that certain patently real phenomena exist at all.

These positions clearly do “beg the question against each other.” Nagel presupposes that as “an objective standpoint is created by leaving a more subjective, individual, or even just human perspective behind,” there will be, “things about the world and life and ourselves that cannot be adequately understood.” And, unsurprisingly, his philosophy encourages this position. Precisely in reverse, Dennett presupposes that, “the best way to come to understand the situation,” is to start “from the third-person, materialistic perspective of contemporary science” and, equally unsurprisingly, his philosophy ends up encouraging this very position.

My point is certainly not to endorse Nagel’s position over Dennett’s. It fails on many of the grounds that I identified as salutary in my comparison of Al-e Ahmad and Benjamin. But, rather, it is to see how Dennett, even though he knows he is question-begging, justifies this approach as so absolutely and exclusively “best.” In *The Intentional Stance*, Dennett’s key claim

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719 Furthermore, Nagel’s ahistorical, teleological rationalism is easily as unjustifiable as Dennett’s scientism. Indeed, I find many of Dennett’s positions at least more consistent and self-justified than Nagel’s. However, Dennett’s is simply the historically ascendant position and has the additional rhetorical weight of presenting itself as the “scientific” philosophical position. Additionally, as I discuss here, Nagel has had particular insight into strict philosophical naturalism and its relationship to “religion.”
towards this justification is a “certain predictive strategy,”\textsuperscript{720} that is to say, he wishes for his philosophy to produce outcomes that will be measured by how well they predict future behavior. In order to achieve this kind of outcome he suggests one adopt a series of “stances.” The most obvious, to Dennett, is the “physical stance; if you want to predict the behavior of a system down, determine its physical constitution (perhaps all the way down to the microphysical level) and the physical nature of the impingements upon it, and use your knowledge of the laws of physic to predict the outcome for any input.”\textsuperscript{721} Dennett notes, however, that this “strategy is not always practically available,” and that sometimes “it is more effective to switch from the physical stance to what I call the design stance.”\textsuperscript{722} The “design stance” is appropriate for an object where “the assumption that it has a certain design” can be made and “predicts that,” this object “will behave as it is designed to behave under various circumstances.”\textsuperscript{723} Dennett has in mind “not just artifacts but also many biological objects (plants and animals, kidneys and hearts, stamens and pistils),” because they “behave in ways that can be predicted from the design stance.”\textsuperscript{724} Of course, sometimes, as with the physical stance, “even the design stance is practically inaccessible, and then there is yet another stance of strategy one can adopt: the intentional stance.” This is how Dennett describes the “intentional stance”:

\textsuperscript{720} Dennett, \textit{The Intentional Stance}, 15.

\textsuperscript{721} Ibid., 16.

\textsuperscript{722} Ibid. In this same section, Dennett adds parenthetically, “I ignore the minor complications raised by the subatomic indeterminacies of quantum mechanics.” Dennett does not ignore these “minor complications” because of Heisenberg and Bohr’s so-called “Copenhagen Interpretation” which holds that quantum mechanics, for Bohr, at the very least poses a serious limitation on theories of causality in physics or, for Heisenberg, more poetically, “it [quantum mechanics] introduced something in between possibility and reality.”(Selleri, \textit{Quantum Paradoxes and Physical Reality}, 20-21) While this would seem to be a challenge to some versions of strict philosophical naturalism, it actually aids Dennett’s particular iteration which is based primarily on evolutionary biology. (Dennett, \textit{Freedom Evolves}, 38-39) There can be sectarianism even in strict philosophical naturalism.

\textsuperscript{723} Dennett, \textit{The Intentional Stance}, 17.

\textsuperscript{724} Ibid., 18.
Here is how it [the intentional stance] works: first you decide to treat the object whose behavior is to be predicted as a rational agent; then you figure out what beliefs that agent ought to have, given its place in the world and its purpose. Then you figure out what desires it ought to have, on the same considerations, and finally you predict that this rational agent will act to further its goals in the light of its beliefs.  

One of the reasons this presentation of Dennett’s view is so fascinating is that the “intentional stance,” at first glance, appears remarkably similar to Al-e Ahmad’s vacillations in *Khassi dar Miqat* and Benjamin’s “stance of the materialist,” which “seems scientifically and humanely more productive in everything that moves us.” Indeed, the entirety of *Khassi dar Miqat* could, in some sense, read as this kind of thought experiment. Benjamin writes in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”: “Experience of the aura thus arises from the fact that a response characteristic of human relationships is transposed to the relationship between humans and inanimate objects… To experience the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look back at us.”

However, in *Khassi dar Miqat*, this notion of an “intentional stance” would have to be called a “meaningful stance” or, closer to Al-e Ahmad’s terminology, a meaningful “situation” describing the fullest range of meanings that are possible between an exclamation like “this assembly must have some [higher] meaning!” and the mere physicality of “molded reinforced concrete structures.” In Benjamin’s 1931 letter to Rychner this notion of an “intentional stance” would have to be understood as the “stance of the materialist” which not

725 Ibid.
726 Benjamin, *Correspondence*, 372. I discussed this letter to Rychner in some depth in the section “Taubes and the Letter” in chapter 3.
728 Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Lost in the Crowd*, 61.
729 Ibid., 74.
only “seems scientifically and humanely more productive in everything that moves us,” but also understands a methodology in “research,” which is “in accord with the Talmudic teaching about the forty-nine levels of meaning in every passage of Torah.” This too would be, for lack of a better phrase, a “meaningful stance.” As I have argued, neither Al-e Ahmad nor Benjamin viewed these positions as necessarily supernatural. However, the question raised by apparent similarity between the view I have synthetically described as a “religion of doubt” and Dennett’s “intentional stance” is whether Dennett’s theoretical imbuing of “intentionality” is truly any more justifiably naturalistic than the theoretical imbuing of possible “meaningfulness” in a “religion of doubt.” In answering this question, I can explain how Dennett justifies his question begging vis-à-vis Nagel and identify the final grounds for my argument of religion as polemic. The crucial distinction is to be found between Dennett’s premises and arguments for the “intentional stance” and Benjamin’s premises and arguments for his claim in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” quoted above, as, even more so than the vacillation in Khassi dar Miqat and Benjamin’s 1931 letter to Rychner, this passage seems to mirror Dennett’s in proposing “to invest” both “humans and inanimate objects” with a capacity like intentionality.

**The Intentional Stance and the Astrological Stance**

In Dennett’s argument, there is a prior “strategy” before the physical, design, and intentional stances in Dennett’s argument. Dennett proposes it as a negative example but it actually provides him with crucial insight. He calls this strategy “the astrological strategy,” which he explains as follows:

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730 Benjamin, *Correspondence*, 372.

731 Ibid.
Here is a strategy for instance, for predicting the future behavior of a person: determine the date and hour of the person’s birth and then feed this modest datum into one or another astrological algorithm for generating predictions of the person’s prospects. This strategy is deplorably popular. Its popularity is deplorable because we have such good reasons for believing that it does not work (pace Feyerabend 1978.)

The “astrological strategy” fails because it does not accurately and consistently predict “the future behavior of a person.” As Dennett points out, “when astrological predictions come true this is sheer luck, or the result of such vagueness or ambiguity in the prophecy that almost any eventuality can be constructed to confirm it.” One would expect from this vaguely Popperian argument that Dennett would, like Popper, reject astrology wholesale. However, Popper’s philosophy of science is much too narrow for the argument Dennett is making. While Dennett’s original criterion of prediction is drawn from the natural sciences, he needs a much stronger philosophical instrument to make the case that the natural sciences should define the limits of philosophical inquiry. He finds this, I argue, in astrology:

But suppose the astrological strategy did in fact work well on some people. We would call those people astrological systems – systems whose behavior was, as a matter of fact, predictable by the

732 Dennett, The Intentional Stance, 16.

733 The “pace Feyerabend” (Paul Feyerabend, philosopher of science) citation should not be ignored. Dennett is aware that Feyerabend has a radically different rejection of astrology: namely, that it is a stagnant discipline that failed to develop past its “magical origin” to “proceed into new domains and to enlarge our knowledge.” (Paul Feyerabend, “The Strange Case of Astrology” in Philosophy of Science and the Occult, 26) Thus, its failure is on grounds of lack of new “research” and degeneration into “a reservoir of naïve rules and phrases suited to impress the ignorant,” not on the fact that it “does not work.”

734 Dennett, The Intentional Stance, 16.

735 “Astrology did not pass the test. Astrologers were greatly impressed, and misled, by what they believed to be confirming evidence – so much so that they were quite unimpressed by any unfavorable evidence. Moreover, by making their interpretations and prophecies sufficiently vague they were able to explain away anything that might have been a refutation of the theory had the theory and the prophecies been more precise. In order to escape falsification they destroyed the testability of their theory. It is a typical soothsayer’s trick to predict things so vaguely that the predictions can hardly fail: that they become irrefutable.” (Popper, Conjectures and Refutations, 38)

736 Popper, of course, did not embrace philosophical naturalism. Rather, he only accepted methodological naturalism within scientific discourses: “Thus I reject the naturalistic view. It is uncritical. Its upholders fail to notice that whenever they believe themselves to have discovered a fact, they have only proposed a convention. Hence the convention is liable to turn into a dogma. This criticism of the naturalistic view applies not only to its criterion of meaning, but also to its idea of science, and consequently to its idea of empirical method.” (Popper, The Logic of Scientific Discovery, 31)
Dennett contends that “the astrological strategy is interesting only as a social curiosity.”738 But he is neglecting the serious work that his section on astrology does and what he gains from it.

First, it confirms the “predictive strategy” as the measure of success in any given strategy or stance. Indeed, through his descriptions of the “not always practically available” predictive capacities in the physical and design stances, Dennett acknowledges how controversial it would be to claim predictive capacity as the sole measure of success in any one of these stances.739 Yet, the “astrological strategy” allows Dennett to smuggle the “predictive strategy” as the “only assessment of success of that strategy” from his assumptions into the “intentional stance” itself. The “astrological strategy” also introduces the precept that the strategies or stances will be “algorithmic” in this capacity. Again, Dennett knows that this is not self-evident, particularly at the “intentional stance” level. But most importantly of all, the “astrological strategy” introduces Dennett’s peculiar concept of systems: not as human systems of phenomenal description, explanation, understanding, or even prediction but as systems oriented towards or, indeed, constitutive of, “people.” The “astrological strategy” is not simply the conduit for controversial claims. Here is it is the conceptual structure of astrology itself that is crucial. Dennett may view astrology’s substance as “pure hokum,”740 but it is the very idea that the stars actively determine and define human beings – and that those human beings can only reactively address the

737 Dennett, The Intentional Stance, 16.

738 Ibid.

739 In other places Dennett acknowledges how radical a claim this is in physics (see my footnote on quantum mechanics above) and in “design.” (please see Dennett’s discussion of Skinner’s Behaviorism in Darwin’s Dangerous Idea, 402-403)

740 Dennett, The Intentional Stance, 16.
predicative capacity in the stars – that provides the structure of Dennett’s “objective”, third-person, strictly naturalistic philosophy. Ironically, it is not the natural sciences but a recognizable dialectical negation of astrology that undergirds Dennett’s systems with sufficient philosophical strength.741

As I demonstrated in chapter 3, Benjamin had little patience for theosophical, anthroposophical, neoplatonic, or other transcendental supernatural obscurantism. He associated them, in their positive formulations, with the Christian notion of faith, “betrayal” of the world, theodicy, mystified social conditions, and commodity fetishism. However, in the dialectical negation of such systems, he found one of the elements on which he could hang his Judeo-Marxian hermeneutic practice and his commitment to the messianic possibility. Here is how Benjamin presents the critique of astrology in “On Astrology” (1932):

An attempt to procure a view of astrology from which the doctrine of magical “influences,” of “radiant energies,” and so on has been excluded. Such an attempt may be provisional, if you like. It is important because it would purify the aura surrounding these investigations. And we necessarily come across such research if we inquire into the historical origins of the concepts of a scientific humanism.742

Both Dennett and Benjamin begin their respective critiques of astrology by stripping away its supernatural “doctrines.” But the critiques turn in radically different directions from there.

741 In this systemic form, Dennett’s use of astrology comes far closer to Kuhn’s critique of astrology than Popper’s outright rejection. Kuhn writes: “Nevertheless, astrology was not a science. Instead it was a craft, one of the practical arts, with close resemblances to engineering, meteorology, and medicine as these field were practiced until little more than a century ago. The parallels to an older medicine and to contemporary psychoanalysis are, I think, particularly close. In each of these fields shared theory was adequate only to establish the plausibility of the discipline and to provide a rationale for the various craft-rules which governed practice. These rules proved their use in the past, but no practitioner supposed they were sufficient to prevent recurrent failure. A more articulated theory and more powerful rules were desired, but it would have been absurd to abandon a plausible and badly needed discipline with a tradition of limited success simply because these desiderata were not yet at hand.” (Kuhn, “Logic of Discovery or Psychology of Research”, 8-9) However, neither Popper nor Kuhn’s philosophies of science are reconcilable with Dennett’s. Popper, as I discussed earlier, rejects philosophical naturalism on the grounds that it is insufficiently critical. Kuhn, partially in critiquing Popper’s view, embraces a form of naturalism that logically excludes Dennett’s reductionism. (Cf. Kuhn on limitations in “real” description and “incommensurability” in The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 198-210)

742 Benjamin, Selected Writings, Vol 2.2, 684.
Dennett, as I have shown, reproduces a systematic, transcendental structure that reduces human subjects to *objects* from the transcendent, deterministic cosmology of astrological systems. Benjamin, instead, in presenting this “complete prolegomenon of every rational astrology,”\(^743\) dissolves that transcendent cosmology altogether and presents an immanent aesthetic-historical structure of how human subjects viewed the relationship of the stars to each other (through “similarity,” then “resemblances,” and, finally, “constellations”) and reflexively back on human subjects (as understanding these “resemblances” as “imported into things by chance comparisons on our part,” but simultaneously as “the effects of an active, mimetic force working expressly inside things.”)\(^744\)

Although this is just one text among many in which Benjamin performs the “reversal” discussed in chapter 4, it is not difficult to see how these reflections on astrology fit into Benjamin’s overall Judeo-Marxian philosophy as I have described it in this dissertation. Additionally, concepts here help provide partial foundations for the quotation above from “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.” Astrological “resemblances” – in their dimension as “the effects of an active mimetic force working expressly inside people” – contribute to the understanding of “correspondences” as “the common property of mystics.”\(^745\) A ‘purified’ “aura,” one “from which magical ‘influences,’ of ‘radiant energies,’” have been “excluded,” becomes the *naturalized* “aura” we find in the quotation, now with materialist socio-economic ramifications and concomitant dimensions of historical memory. The “conception of nascent promises that lay in constellations of the stars,” becomes “a hidden constellation” within “which the poet, in the

\(^{743}\) Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Vol 2.2*, 685.

\(^{744}\) Ibid., 685-686.

\(^{745}\) Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Vol. 4*, 333.
deserted streets, wrests poetic beauty." Indeed, as Benjamin wrote in the *Passagenwerk*: “That the stars do not appear in Baudelaire is the surest indicator of that tendency of his poetry to dissolve illusory appearances.”

Reading the original quotation from “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” again then, “experience of the aura thus arises from the fact that a response characteristic of human relationships is transposed to the relationship between humans and inanimate objects…To experience the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look back at us,” the radical *difference* with Dennett can be immediately perceived. Benjamin is ‘investing’ objects “with the ability to look back at us” in order to “experience” [*Erfahrung*] the now naturalized sense of “aura.” The “ability” that Benjamin actively invests in objects creates the possibility for a wide array of meanings. These “meanings” reflect back upon human beings in order that illusory conditions are demystified and hidden, real affinities, of socio-economic conditions and historical memory, are revealed into integrative, conscious experience [*Erfahrung*]. Broadly put in terms of the questions at hand, as part of a philosophical system that fully captures at least the Popperian and Kuhnian accounts of science discussed here, Benjamin imbues objects with meaning in order to explore a wide range of aesthetic, historical, and philosophical possibilities which do not conflict with those scientific accounts.

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747 Benjamin, *The Arcades Projects*, 334 [J85a,3].


749 In the very next line, Benjamin writes, “This ability corresponds to the data of *mémoire involontaire.*” In other words this investment is part of the indirect process of *mémoire involontaire* that is, as I argued in chapter 4, facilitating the indirect possibility of the messianic condition. However, for the moment, this is not relevant to the argument.
In fairly radical opposition, Dennett imbues objects with intentionality in order that people might recognize their fundamental third-person, “objective” nature. As Dennett writes in *Freedom Evolves*:

> The key to understanding the patterns these transformations follow is to treat all these robotic cells as tiny individual agents, as intentional systems, each with a smidgen of “rational” decision-power. Adopting the intentional stance, leaping up from the physical stance of component atoms, via the design stance of simple machines, to the intentional stance of simple agenthood, is a tactic that pays off handsomely but must be used with caution. It is all too easy to miss the fact that there are crucial moments in the careers of these various agents and semi-agents and hemi-semi-agents when opportunities to “decide” arise, and then pass.\(^{750}\)

This reads, even granted its ahistorical frame, like a framework for a scientifically plausible, if philosophically simplistic, account for an idea of emergent systems that eventually produce consciousness. Indeed, one of its cardinal virtues, according to Dennett, is that “it makes life blessedly easier.”\(^{751}\) But it is also easy to miss that when Dennett puts scare quotes around “rational” and “decide” he does not actually mean these concepts in any recognizable way but rather as reformulated through the “intentional stance.” When Dennett writes “treat all these robotic cells as tiny individual agents, as intentional systems” he is reflexively also talking about human beings who should also be thought of as “intentional systems.” And the key word is robotic. Earlier in *Freedom Evolves*, Dennett writes, “We are each made of mindless robots and nothing else, no non-physical, non-robotic ingredients at all.”\(^{752}\) What is the difference between this “non-physical” and the mere biological or the mere physical in Al-e Ahmad? Or for that matter the powerful but epistemically limited account of science captured in the “religion of doubt” framework?

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751 Ibid.

752 Ibid., 16.
It turns out to be not only the entire range of possible meanings in the world discussed in those philosophical systems but replacing recognizable concepts, like “consciousness,” with radically reduced counterparts. So when Dennett writes, for example, that “Each trillion-robot team is gathered in a breathtakingly efficient regime that has no dictator but manages to keep itself organized, to repel outsiders, banish the weak, enforce the iron rules of discipline – and serve as the headquarters of one conscious self, one mind,” these notions of “conscious,” “self,” and “mind” should not be misunderstood as any familiar versions of the concepts conscious, self, or mind. Nor should these new concepts be understood as recognizable critiques of mind/body dualism, the intersubjectivity or multiplicity of self, the connection or expansion of a theory of mind beyond the body, or questions of subjective, critical, or false consciousness. Rather they all comport themselves perfectly to the system of the “intentional stance.” Take, for example, what I will call, just for a moment, Dennett’s conscious. It is not in any form, at any level of complexity, a first-person, agential point of view; remember, there is no dictator among the robots. Rather it is precisely what can be explained from the view of third-person, “objective,” strict philosophical naturalism plus the tiny remainder left over at the end of the “intentional stance” argument. In that remainder is gathered everything of the subjective, first-person “you” and thus accounts for “your” persistence in protesting of “your” “conscious” existence. But that remainder is understood as theoretically inconsequential. “You” are “autonomous,” for example, in the same sense as “the Viking spacecraft” is under “a new program which removed it from their [NASA’s] remote control and put it under self-control.”

This leads to a quick blending of what one could try to indentify as the new conceptual

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753 Dennett, *Freedom Evolves*, 16.

formulations: “What you are is that agent whose life you can tell about.” It is helpful to rephrase this by way of the “intentional stance”: You are those predicted actions of a plausibly agential object which can be viewed from a third-person perspective. As for the remainder, this is one of Dennett’s most generous formulations of it: “A person has to be able to keep in contact with past and anticipated intentions, and one of the main roles of the brain’s user-illusion of itself, which I call the self as a center of narrative gravity, is to provide me with a means of interfacing with myself at other times.”

Parts of this seem frankly compelling: “the self as a center of narrative gravity,” maintaining a fictive stability to mediate with new situations “at other times.” But that interesting, contingent, potentially multiple self is completely effaced in recognizing that Dennett’s algorithmic input-output model is in effect. There are only objects in Dennett’s philosophy and “user-illusions.” Furthermore, this remainder, the “brain’s user-illusion,” is folded back into the complete philosophical system itself. It accounts for a tiny spectrum of random, unpredictable, and ultimately, meaningless knowledge within Dennett’s philosophy.

I am not trying to be injudicious to Dennett’s thought. In fact, I find it one of the most compelling and consistent accounts of strict philosophical naturalism, outside of the potential misunderstanding of the transcendental role astrology played in its formation discussed before. In addition to the productively provocative but ultimately illusory similarity between the gesture of the “intentional stance” and the gesture of meaning within the “religion of doubt” framework, Dennett is especially useful in understanding the final dimensions of religion as polemic as historical intervention. This usefulness is the result of Dennett understanding the philosophical

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756 Ibid., 252.
complexities engendered by any system of strict philosophical naturalism. Dennett knows that quite often this perspective will lead to question-beginning problems in what he calls “greedy reductionism” which run the gamut between “bland” (and philosophically untenable) unified field theories to “preposterous readings” where English literature is explained, for example, only through the movement of molecules and so on.  

But also, at least to a degree, the moral implications: thus his particularly intensive drive to build what he calls “cranes” that would “lift” a firm, morally recognizable concept of “responsibility,” for example, that is commensurate with his notions of “self-control.” It is in adjudicating the difference between these “cranes” and what Dennett calls “skyhooks” that Dennett answers the very first question I posed about how he justifies what he admits is a question-begging position.

It is the *transcendental* mechanism of the “intentional stance” that differentiates the empirically possible and rationally necessary “cranes” of Dennett’s philosophy and the irrational, impossible, or even rationally possible but empirically unverifiable “skyhooks.” Although, I identified this transcendental mechanism through Dennett’s (self-denied) dialectical negation of astrology, it is formally apparent to others as well. Patrick Frierson, for example, describes Dennett’s transcendental anthropology in contradistinction to Kant’s transcendental subjectivity: “While Dennett explains transcendental anthropology with an empirical account of its evolution, Kant explains empirical anthropology with a transcendental account of its justificatory basis.”

This description maps neatly onto the negation of the “astrological strategy.” What it means, in effect though, is that Dennett gets out of his question-begging assumption of “the third-person, materialistic perspective of contemporary science” by utilizing a transcendentally rational third-

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757 Dennett, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*, 81.

758 Frierson, *What is the Human Being?*, 179; another account is in David Carr, *The Paradox of Subjectivity*, 124.
person perspective. However, his transcendental mechanism is very specifically designed to allow the least possible meaningful space between the ‘miraculous’ “skyhooks” and the properly reductionist “cranes” that can still describe a complete, strict philosophical naturalist description of the world while giving an adequate – but still radically reductionist – account of seemingly incommensurate but necessary conditions like “subjectivity” and “moral realism.” The category of “skyhooks” is so capacious that it includes such everyday phenomena as colors and such complex theoretical scientific propositions as quantum gravity. The category of “cranes” is so reductionist as to produce accounts of “consciousness” and “autonomy” as limited and, essentially, meaningless as the ones I just examined. Indeed, as Dennett writes, “the difference, in the context of Darwin’s theory, is simple: greedy reductionists think that everything can be explained without cranes; good reductionists think that everything can be explained without skyhooks.”759

Of course, there is a common quality here which is the insistence that “everything can be explained.” Dennett brushes off any objection to this aspect of his project by positing that “it is simply the commitment to non-question-begging science without any cheating by embracing mysteries or miracles at the outset.”760 Which is to say, specifically, that everything can or will be explained eventually through the natural sciences. This is a commitment shared amongst all schools of strict philosophical naturalism and it clearly constitutes the grounds on which Dennett thinks his philosophical system is justified as “best.”

759 Dennett, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*, 82.

760 Ibid.
Naturalism and “Religions of Doubt”

It is here that Nagel’s intuition about philosophical naturalism is so crucial. Nagel calls this intuition the “fear of religion” and writes:

In speaking of the fear of religion, I don’t mean to refer to the entirely reasonable hostility toward certain established religions and religious institutions, in virtue of their objectionable moral doctrines, social policies, and political influence. Nor am I referring to the association of many religious beliefs with superstitions and the acceptance of evident empirical falsehoods. I am talking about something much deeper – namely, the fear of religion itself. I speak from experience, being strongly subject to this fear myself: I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn’t just that I don’t believe in God and, naturally, hope that I’m right in my belief. It’s that I hope there is no God! I don’t want there to be a God; I don’t want the universe to be like that.\textsuperscript{761}

Nagel finishes the thought in the next paragraph, “my guess is that this cosmic authority problem is not a rare condition and that it is responsible for much of the scientism and reductionism in our time.”\textsuperscript{762} There is much to quibble with in Nagel’s intuition as he spells it out here but the points relevant to my discussion are (a) the idea of “the fear of religion,” beyond the question of “superstitions and the acceptance of evident falsehoods”; (b) the “much deeper” “fear of religion itself” that stems from not wanting “there to be a God,” and not wanting “the universe to be like that”; and (c) the “guess,” “that this cosmic authority problem… is responsible for much of the scientism and reductionism in our time.” Among these points, my guess is that Nagel’s intuition is largely right, but he has misidentified the “cosmic authority problem” and not understood the connections between (a) and religions and (b) and religion. Nagel seems to have a much more significant “cosmic authority problem” than the scientistic thinkers that he is discussing. That is to say, Nagel clearly (as understood in light of any of the critiques of religion discussed in this dissertation) thinks of “atheism,” secularism, and “religion” in terms of Christianity without understanding why this is the case historically. But he is also a committed unbeliever. As such he

\textsuperscript{761} Nagel, The Last Word, 130.

\textsuperscript{762} Ibid., 131.
sees that there is no necessary reason for a scientistic philosophy in which “everything can be explained.” But because his “much deeper” “fear of religion itself” is actually a crisis of faith within Christianity he misses that there is no similar crisis of faith in “blessedly easy” strict philosophical naturalism.

As Dennett explains:

*If the scientists’ *sumnum bonum *or highest good is truth, if scientists make truth their God, as some have claimed, is this not just as *parochial *an attitude as the worship of Jahweh, or Mohammed, or the Angel Moroni? No, our faith in the truth is, truly, our faith in the truth—a faith that is shared by all members of our species, even if there is great divergence in approved methods for obtaining it. The asymmetry noted above is real: faith in the truth has a priority claim that sets it apart from all other faiths.*

First a rather major, if obvious point: Dennett is rhetorically eliding *methodological* naturalism, perfectly appropriate to the natural sciences, with *philosophical* naturalism. But, even if Dennett does not accept a Nietzschean critique of ‘faith in truth,’ it is here that we can begin to disentangle Nagel’s argument about “the fear of religion.” Indeed, it is not a lack of “cosmic authority” that undergirds “much of the scientism and reductionism in our time,” but an abundance of the one true faith, ahistorical and universal, the faith that is not “parochial,” that has a “prior claim that sets it apart from all other faiths.” Dennett *formally* (if almost certainly not consciously) distills Christianity down to precisely its purest component part. It is not actual scientific truths that prove the limits of Dennett’s philosophical system, but a reconciliation of those truths with *faith.* Thus, the “scientism and reductionism in our time” is not based on “the fear of religion”; it is based on the fear of *religions,* the persistence of which disturb the one true faith in ways that have nothing to do with “superstitions and the acceptance of evident falsehoods.” These “religions” are not limited, of course, to the discourses historically understood as “religions” but are now spread to *any* discourses or even *phenomena* which disturb

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763 Dennett, “Faith in the Truth,” 1, emphasis in original.
the prior supremacy of the one true faith, even when those discourses or phenomena accord with the evidence of the sense.

It is here that the final dimension of *religion as polemic* becomes clear, because this faith, fully naturalized, is the perfect theodicy.\(^{764}\) And if the critique of religion is, as I suggested in my first chapter, predicated on a critique of injustice in the confluence of Empire and Capital, then there is no better ideology for that confluence than strict philosophical naturalism’s theodicy. And furthermore, if this critique wants to be worldly and historically attentive, it must attend to this philosophy’s ascendance in the literal spatial and temporal centers of Empire and Capital. One of the most crucial components in Al-e Ahmad’s and Benjamin’s philosophy is this critique of the way this faith and its theodicy turn attention, indeed consciousness, away from understanding injustice. As I have argued, there is nothing *supernatural* per se in Al-e Ahmad’s and Benjamin’s philosophies, nor in the “religion of doubt” synthetic philosophical framework. Furthermore, these philosophies and this framework not only capture the scientific image of the world, they *require* it. They are, then, naturalistic. However, in addressing real historical injustice and doubt in fully realizable truth, they foreground the widest possible range of speculative meaning and possibility in their philosophies. In contrast, in the name of “faith in the truth,” in there being one true faith, Dennett foregrounds scientific inquiry as the only true inquiry, as the last line of defense against even rational and non-rational but scientifically inaccessible elements, one might say *foreign* elements, both internal and external, that disturb the supreme *comfort* of this faith. Which is the better naturalism? Perhaps, a better question is: is strict philosophical naturalism a bit *gharbzadeh*?

\(^{764}\) Dennett even recognizes this as such and argues a defense of Leibniz’s theodicy. (Dennett, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*, 238-240)
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