The Knight of Infinity and the Angel of History: A Reading of Kierkegaard and Benjamin

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Inception

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Abstract

This essay offers a brief comparative reading of Walter Benjamin and Søren Kierkegaard. The paper, with the use of the images of the "Angel of History" in Benjamin, and Kierkegaard's "knight(s) of infinity," investigates both philosophers' theological interpretations of: the world, a hidden God, and the now-time or the instant of revelation. The essay explores how God's hiddenness in Jewish mysticism as it appears in Benjamin is substantively different from the Negative theology of the "deus absconditus" that makes an appearance in Kierkegaard, and discusses the ethical/political/social implications of their theological-political positions.

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There is an unlikely resonance of creative thought between Søren Kierkegaard and Walter Benjamin. Both philosophers understand the world to be dominated by mass injustice; the God they describe is one who is hidden from this world, and the two thinkers meet in the apocalyptic character in their conceptions of the now-time or the instant of revelation, which interrupts steadfast linear temporality.

And yet, their theoretical discrepancies are significant. Their different theological frameworks result in critically distinct ethical modes and movements. Benjamin, as will be explored, understands the world's corruption as primarily political and is not particularly focused on the single souls of individuals in despair as Kierkegaard is. Further, the "God of Sabbath," or "God of Life,"[1] as found in the Jewish mystical tradition can be distinguished from the remote *Deus Absconditus* of the Protestant-Reformed tradition. Benjamin, moreover, holds a horizontal dimension to his understanding of revelation that does not appear in Kierkegaard's vertical instant of faith. Finally, the ethics which emerge throughout their various currents of thought range widely from Kierkegaard's intensely individual, passionate crisis, which is only secondarily ethical (and with limited scope) to Benjamin's intrinsically material, and inextricably political-theological ethics.

This essay is a comparative reading of the two thinkers, with an eye for their commonalities and critical divergences in their theological and political conceptions of 1) the world, 2) the hidden God, and 3) the nature of revelation, while touching on the ethical consequences of their differing positions. There is no simple discourse of comparison and contrast for Kierkegaard and Benjamin though, and the dialogue will slip in and out of the binaries of a vertically-oriented Protestant theology, and a horizontally-oriented Jewish theology of the material, at times complicating them. For Kierkegaard maintains some fruitful space for the "God of the Sabbath" to emerge and Benjamin does not only think horizontally, but also ruptures time. Their differences, however, are substantial, ultimately embodied, and ethically crucial.

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[1] Agata Bielik-Robson, "Mysteries of the Promise: Negative Theology in Benjamin and Scholem," ed. Michael Fagenblat, *Jewish Modernity as Negative Theology*, 2017, doi:10.2307/j.ctt1zxx, 6.

The World

Both thinkers are highly critical of their social surroundings and the injustice and cruelty of the worlds in which they are situated. Additionally, they are both sceptical about the possibility of institutionalized truth. The two, in divergent ways, present a figure, or collection of figures, who challenge this domination. However, the evils they see proliferating in the social structures around them are substantially different. Kierkegaard's attack on bourgeois Christendom centres primarily around the corruption of Christianity and the resulting crisis of souls. Benjamin, on the other hand, is concerned with the material and spiritual suffering (the two always immanent and inseparable) that exists throughout the violent flow of history and is markedly political in his thought.

The Church of Denmark received many a condemnation from Kierkegaard who accused the institution of having lost the apostolic gospel and being non-representative of Christ's love. By claiming the faith while draining it of its passion, the Church as an institution is "playing Christianity":

> Is not 'Christendom' the most colossal attempt at serving God, not by following Christ, as He required, and suffering for the doctrine, but instead of that, by 'building the sepulchers of the prophets and garnishing the tombs of the righteous.'...it is playing Christianity... The teacher is a royal functionary. ... he teaches all that about despising worldly titles and rank, but he himself is making a career. ... Christ calls it (O give heed!), He calls it 'hypocrisy.'... this guilt of hypocrisy is as great, precisely as great a crime as that of killing the prophets.[2]

There is a political takeaway here, but for Kierkegaard Christendom is evil primarily because it is not aligned with God's love for the

[2] Søren Kierkegaard, *Attack Upon Christendom*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968), 121.

individual (albeit this includes *every* individual). The figure who stands outside it is the lone self before God, humbled, separated from the supposed comfort of the crowd, and in God's love. From here the individual continues on in the world wherein the encounter with God does show up materially, with potential political dimensions. But primarily the true Christian is an individual involved in a vertical relation with the hidden God, and whose primary task as a "knight of faith" is "to express the sublime in the pedestrian... the one and only prodigy."[3]

The Hidden God

"In the beginning" was Ein Soph, the Divine, the self-existent infinite begin, without likeness or reflection, the incomprehensible, the unknowable."[4] Agata Bielek-Robson makes the argument that the negative theologies found in Protestant Christian streams are in fact an appropriated and distorted version of the tradition of "the Jewish negative."[5] Bielek-Robson analyzes the two major variations on the nature of God's hiddenness or negativity in Kabbalah doctrines of creation. The significant difference is further explained by Gershom Scholem: for Luria's school, *Tsimtsum* (God's self-contraction in creation), does not mean the "concentration of God at a point, but his retreat away from a point."[6] God's act of creation is a loving withdrawal so as to make space for being. Bielek-Robson responds to the accusation by Moshe Idel that Benjamin, Scholem, and other German Jews were under a Kierkegaardian-Barthian influence in

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[3]Soren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaards Writings, Vi, Volume 6: Fear and Trembling/repetition*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 41.

[4] Nurho De Manhar and John H. Drais, *Zohar: Bereshith, Genesis: An Expository Translation from Hebrew* (San Diego: Wizards Bookshelf, 1995), 85.

[5] Bielik-Robson, 2.

[6] Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1995), 204.

their understanding of the negativity of God.[7] She works to disentangle Jewish negativity, the hidden "God of Sabbath," from the angry "abyss of transcendence," in the *Deus Absconditus*, the absent God and unique negative theology of Reformed Christianity.[8]

The God of Sabbath is "a still hidden and unrealized possibility of the divine itself."[9] This divine negativity is characterized by what Benjamin might call "happiness." Nature is "Messianic by reason of its total and eternal passing away."[10] This happiness is not grasped in trying to save the world. The messianic cannot be ushered in. Rather, it flashes up amidst the passing away of all things: "Happiness is to be geared toward the 'order of the profane.'"[11] The coherence of this with the "God of Sabbath" is heard in Taubes' reading of Benjamin, in which he states that the "conception of happiness... resonates irremediably with that of resurrection theology: as weak, messianic power. The 'proof' is no theologoumenon, rather (it consists in) references to our natural life; in happiness, in women's breathing." The hidden God is hiding throughout the material where "a frill shines through."[12]

Bielek-Robson looks to Benjamin and Scholem's discussion over Kafka to represent the differences between them, but also to highlight their shared belief in the historically, and culturally specific "messianic." Benjamin and Scholem both understood that Kafka belongs to the messianic sensibility, though they debated the way

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[7] Bielek-Robson, 1.
[8] Ibid, 6.
[9] Ibid, 6.
[10] Walter Benjamin, "Theological-Political Fragment," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz (Schoken, 1986), 212.
[11] Jacob Taubes, "Seminar Notes on Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History"," in *Walter Benjamin and Theology*, 1st ed., Perspectives in Continental Philosophy (Fordham University Press, 2016), 186.
[12] Taubes, *Seminar Notes*, 186.

this messianic took form.[13] For both truth in the text is "embedded in commentary… hidden or dispersed in the prosaic stream of language," and "emerges as 'divine sparks' or emanations, often where least expected." The contrast is that where for Scholem tradition is rooted in "the esoteric tradition of commentary which both restores and transforms its meaning,"[14] for Benjamin the exile from truth is more extreme. For Scholem God is hidden in the tradition, but in the sense that he has gone into hiding and his felt absence is always in relation to his revelation which can emerge again.[15] For Benjamin, too, God has been revealed in tradition, but this revelation was distorted throughout its expression and we have come to the dissolution of the Law and the dispersion of the revelation so that it arises now as the "weak messianic" in the most unlikely of places, and only as an index of truth. There is "a collective exile from the sources of knowledge and truth, from the doctrine or teaching, which is of course synonymous with the tradition itself" and, in Kafka, Benjamin sees an exile that has "gained control" of the author.[16] In this space we are left only with "echoes," the "weak messianic," and an index to feel our way around the darkness.

Benjamin looks for the hidden God backwards to the past which carries the "secret index with it, by which it is referred to its resurrection."[17] He hears in "the voices to which we lend our ears today" the articulations of the silenced.[18] Although the revelation of the tradition is dissolved throughout all of nature, he is in line with Scholem in his understanding of the rightness of the Jews being

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[13] Anson Rabinbach, Walter Benjamin, and Gershom Gerhard Scholem, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), xxix.

[14] Ibid, xxxi.

[15] Bielek-Robson, 11.

[16] Ibid, xxx.

[17] Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History* (Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016), 2.

[18] Ibid, 2.

"forbidden to look into the future."[19] God is not, for Benjamin, the *Deus Absconditus* angrily apart from the world, but rather he whose undistorted nature is Sabbath, and who is in the material past and present.

In contrast, within Protestant tradition, *tsimtsum* "is imagined not as a gentle self-withdrawal, a loving act of giving space for creation," but rather as an 'angry' (zornig) self-condensation which gives the hidden God his solid dark ground of existence and constitutes the sombre origin of his inscrutability."[20] The Protestant "deactivated" God is "hidden and distant"[21] and incarnated only in his crossing of the divide by the coming of Christ, who serves to materialize the distant, sovereign father. This God the Father is prominent in Kierkegaard's work. The God of Luther, "God in Himself, God beyond Christ... a terrible and terrifying God"[22] has a hold over Kierkegaard's imagination (as reflected, for instance, in the titles of his works: "The Concept of Anxiety," "Fear and Trembling," "The Sickness Unto Death," "The Concept of Dread," etc.).

Amidst Kierkegaard's trembling, the God of Sabbath does indeed seem distant, as when he suggests that the way an individual "gains courage" is "when he fears a greater danger," explaining "when he is exceedingly afraid of one danger, it is as if the others did not exist at all."[23] This is the Father's sovereignty at work in a holy terror which compels one to submit and then to act. For Kierkegaard this is a grace and the knight of faith is the man who "exercises such a power over himself that he can will what is not pleasant to him... hold that it is the truth precisely because it does not please him, and then,

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[19] Ibid.

[20] Bielik-Robson, *Mysteries*, 4.

[21] Ibid, 3.

[22] Ibid, 4.

[23] Soren Kiekegaard, The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening, ed. Howard V. Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), 9.

nevertheless, in spite of the fact that it does not please him, can commit himself to it."[24]

We see the father figure reflected in Kierkegaard's contemplation of Abraham when he is addressed by the hidden God who demands the sacrifice of his son Isaac. Abraham has no means with which to determine the nature or purpose of this will, and Kierkegaard wants to call up within the reader the horror of the apparently arbitrary demand for slaughter. He asks us, alongside his various posited Abrahams, to be darkened by the thought of a God who could order such a thing be done"[25] and he wants too, ultimately, the critically important wrestling to arrive at the faith of submission to the All-powerful, Unknowable whose will and ways are indiscernible to us.

This transcendent *Deus Absconditus* should remain in awareness for unpacking Kierkegaard's understanding of revelation and the ethical stance taken in the wake of it. But I want too to complicate this singular reading of Kierkegaard's negative theology. There is something also in Kierkegaard of the God who lovingly withdraws in order for creation to swell before them. It is worthwhile to compare briefly the "angry father" with the mother-God alluded to in "Fear and Trembling."[26] Though the former is perhaps the dominant image in Kierkegaard's works, the latter is potentially the most significant as the site of joy and breath alongside the fear of the Father. His theology is one that, it may be said in Catherine Keller's words, "has not kept itself altogether decent"[27]:

> When the child is to be weaned, the mother blackens her breast. It would be hard for the breast to look inviting when

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[24] Kierkegaard, *Christendom*, 151-152.

[25] Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, 112.

[26] I am reading these gendered titles as discursive categories here.

[27] Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2007), 23.

> the child must not have it... the mother—she is still the same.[28]
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> When the child is to grow bigger and is to be weaned, the mother virginally conceals her breast, and then the child no longer has a mother. How fortunate the child who has not lost his mother in some other way!"[29]
>
> When the child is to be weaned, the mother too, is not without sorrow… So they grieve together the brief sorrow.[30]

Here we have God presented as the mother who pulls away from the child, not as an angry contraction of care, but as a withdrawal, hopefully gentle, for the sake of love. The child, who can be read alternately as Isaac, Abraham, the individual, or all of creation, is intended to grow, to live, presumably not independent from the mother, but at rest in its own being immanent with her.

David Kangas argues for something like this reading of Kierkegaard's theology. He compares Kierkegaard's "Infinite redoubling" with Eckhart's "negation of negation" and the "doubling of affirmed being," and sees in the thinker's conception of infinite redoubling "the denial that God relates as a subject over against an object (a second negation)."[31]

Taking it further, Kangas argues that within Kierkegaard we can find a God who is "neither subject nor object, but a totality inclusive of both subjectivity and objectivity."[32] This is a God of "pure act" as is found in the Christian mystics and arguably in the Jewish negativity of the God of the Zohar: "Neither shape nor form has he, and no

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[28] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 11.
[29] Ibid, 12.
[30] Ibid, 13.
[31] David Kangas, "Kierkegaard, the Apophatic Theologian," *Enrahonar* 29 (1998), 120.
[32] Ibid, 120.

vessel exists to contain him, nor any means to apprehend him,"[33] In Kierkegaard's words, the eternal is "not a thing which can be had regardless of the way in which it is acquired; no, the eternal is not really a thing, but is the way in which it is acquired."[34] For Kierkegaard the grounding of the self is precisely in an inherent love: "As the calm lake stems from the deep spring that no eye saw, so too a person's love has a still deeper ground, in God's love... As the calm lake stems darkly from the deep spring, so a person's love originates mysteriously in God's."[35]

The person who is unaware of their self, is in fact unaware of eternal love, the wellspring of God from which their being flows forth. Ironically, this awareness of a self can be understood as the undoing of self in finding one's identity established in God's love. An individual self-aware of their existence in the eternal, but denying their existence as formed in, and immanent with the love of God (thereby keeping the conception of self as separated from all) is in fact in the worst form of despair.[36] The defining act of the soul that "will(s) to be itself" in the sense Kierkegaard arrives at is then to "rest transparently in the power that established it," to "rest transparently in the power that supports you."[37]

Revelation and Ethics

Now we come to the nature of revelation in Kierkegaard's theology. For Kierkegaard this revelation is primarily a vertical interaction between the individual and God and only secondarily takes on a horizontal dimension in the ethical. It may reveal a groundedness in

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[33] *Zohar. The Book of Splendour*, trans. and ed. by Gershom Scholem, New York: Schocken Books, 1995, p. 54.
[34] Kierkegaard, *Christendom,* 100.
[35] Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love* (New York: Perennial, 2009), 235.
[36] Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, 77.
[37] Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, 151.

God's being, but this groundedness is only through the religious, the name given by Kierkegaard to mean "the referral of the subject to, and its holding itself open for the infinite beginning, the instant of coming-into-existence which it can neither posit nor recollect."[38] There is no recollection here, only the "instant of coming-into-existence," not a thing to look back on and no embodied voices of the past that are echoed in the present.

Kierkegaard does not end with the superseding of the ethical with the spiritual. As Annika Thiem writes, the interaction with God is in fact "a matter of being addressed and having to respond, even having to respond well."[39] The individual cannot remain in a fixed mode of fear and trembling. With action the individual is "always returned to the sphere of discourse, to the sphere of the "Ethical.""[40] The matter is to act, not out of avoidance of the self grounded in God, but with awareness. In ethics now "language must cease to be used to assertorically and become performative."[41]

For a succinct image of the different stances towards the world, the hidden God, revelation and the ethical, it will be helpful to compare Kierkegaard's narrative picture of "the knights of infinity" to Benjamin's painting by Klee of the *Angelus Novus*. Kierkegaard describes the individual who has received God's revelation and accepted himself within it thus:

Most people live dejectedly in worldly sorrow and joy; they are the ones who sit along the wall and do not join in the dance. The knights of infinity are dancers and possess elevation. They make the

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[38] David J. Kangas, *Kierkegaards Instant: On Beginnings* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 8.

[39]Annika Thiem, "Between Passion and Politics: Kierkegaard, Benjamin, and Religious Ethics," *International Studies in Philosophy* 39, no. 2 (2007): doi:10.5840/intstudphil20073927, 120.

[40] Ibid, 121.

[41] Kangas, *Kierkegaard, the Apophatic Theologian*, 122.

movements upward, and fall down again... whenever they fall down they are not able at once to assume the posture, they vacillate an instant, and this vacillation shows that after all they are strangers in the world... even the most artistic knights cannot altogether conceal this vacillation... only the instant they touch or have touched the ground–then one recognizes them. But to be able to fall down in such a way that the same second it looks as if one were standing and walking, to transform the leap of life into a walk, absolutely to express the sublime in the pedestrian–that only the knight of faith can do–and this is the one and only prodigy.[42]

We can gather a number of insights from this picture. The bobbing into and out of infinity alongside the stepping forward is an intensely individual passion, which is only recognized in the "instant they touch or have touched the ground" when the knights of infinity can be seen for what they are, "strangers in the world." This individualism is crucial for Kierkegaard, because it is the way in which the evil of the crowd and the monotony of everyday life which has become estranged from God is escaped. Because of this "the spiritual is 'able to endure isolation'"—and not only able but is called to—for the "rank of a spiritual person is proportionate to his strength for enduring isolation" in contrast to those who are "constantly in need of "the others," the herd... the Christianity of the New Testament is precisely related to the isolation of the spiritual man."[43]

The primacy of the individual's relationship before/within God, and the rejection of the crowd, leaves very little space for political ethics. Kierkegaard is concerned about the horizontal because he sees it as corrupt for being non-reflective of God's nature. This is in some ways more important than the actual nature of God's revelation. Kierkegaard, in fact, often sees suffering as the means to understanding the self's position in God, and therefore as grace.

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[42] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 28.
[43] Kierkegaard, *Christendom*, 163.

This theological point is influenced and exacerbated by Kierkegaard's economic standing. In a very short introduction to Adorno's book on Kierkegaard, Benjamin, echoing Adorno, correctly notes that Kierkegaard's "inward spirituality" has "a specific place in history and society" and that its model is in fact "bourgeois."[44] Kierkegaard's experience of suffering in the context of a bourgeois Christianity may have been crucial for personal insight and a more thorough-going peace for himself. But in his glorifying of it, Kierkegaard regularly ends up legitimizing misery across diverse political situations. At worst his transcendental and individualistic theology, which is also informed by class, ends up ignoring or else justifying material suffering.

We see the conceptual blinders of Kierkegaard's theology when he comments on the efforts of the poor against economic inequality: "Would to God that the poor person would really understand how the Gospel is much more kindly disposed to him... Truly, the Gospel does not let itself be deceived into taking sides with anyone against someone else... with someone who is poor against someone who is wealthy."[45]

Elsewhere Kierkegaard gripes over the struggle for women's rights: "What battles there have been to establish in a worldly way the woman in equal rights with the man—but Christianity makes only infinity's change and therefore quietly."[46]

Kierkegaard's ethical stance here is informed by his theology. Revelation is an intensely personal and therefore quiet thing, which

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[44] Walter Benjamin et al., "Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. I (1913-1926)," *The Antioch Review* 56, no. 1 (1998): doi:10.2307/4613641, 704.
[45] Søren Kierkegaard, Howard Vincent Hong, and Edna Hatlestad Hong, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 180.
[46] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 139.

overcomes the world. And although he advocates for loving kindness on the level of the individual, he does not see the need for analyzing political structures, indeed "outwardly the old more or less remains."[47]

At best Kierkegaard is unwittingly political, as in this passage:

> Truth always rests with the minority, and the minority is always stronger than the majority, because the minority is generally formed by those who really have an opinion, while the strength of a majority is illusory, formed by the gangs who have no opinion—and who, therefore, in the next instant… assume its opinion, which then becomes that of the majority...[48]

Of course the problem here is that Kierkegaard sees it as necessary to remain in the minority (and what could be more a minority than the individual) so as to remain with truth. He does not pursue any real struggle on behalf of the minority. Still, the truth alongside the minority as well as the capacity to be called to higher truths when the ethical world has gone awry has proved fruitful to various political co-opters of Kierkegaard. His works have played a surprising role in feminist thought[49] with a notable appreciator being Simone de Beauvoir. And has found an even more unlikely place amongst various Leftist thinkers, such as Asper Jorn (though he also thoroughly criticized Kierkegaard) and the anti-authoritarian Marxism of the Situationists.[50]

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[47] Ibid, 138.

[48] Søren Kierkegaard, Gerda M. Andersen, and Peter P. Rohde, *Diary*. (New York: Philosophical Library, 1960), 106.

[49] *Feminist Interpretations of Søren Kierkegaard*. Edited by Céline Léon and Sylvia Walsh. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997.

[50] McKenzie Wark, "Kierkegaard's Frenemies: From Adorno to Zizek," *Public Seminar*, May 22, 2018, accessed December 10, 2018, http://www.publicseminar.org/2013/12/kierkagaards-frenemies-from-adorno-to-zizek/.

Contrarily, Kierkegaard's work has also found a place, surprising to many though not to some, amongst fascist thought.[51] Though Kierkegaard would never support the fascist political imagination, there is some sense to the alignment of these groups with his thought. For in Kierkegaard we find that the God who is understood as "hid(ing) in the mist of unapproachability as an uneasy remnant of the Old Testament" is at once acknowledged and also "superseded by the New Covenant."[52] Revelation for Kierkegaard, despite the current of an Eckhardt-like negativity in his work, is ultimately an act of supersession of the world, of material, and (as is shown in his blatantly anti-Semitic remarks) of the Jew, with whom those Christians in denial of the eternal are compared.[53]

Walter Benjamin's conception of revelation is expectedly and significantly different from that of Kierkegaard's and is through and through an ethical call. First though, it is worth commenting that there is something shared between Kierkegaard's instant and Benjamin's now-time. For Benjamin, there is not a "progression through a homogenous and empty time"[54] and it would be a mistake to read his looking backwards as a simplistic remembering of events or tradition. There is something messianic and indescribable in "the extreme case. That which shows itself in danger, shows itself without foresight, non predicting, without being influenced by theory; it breaks something open, something that is lost from sight in the theory of historical objectivity."[55] The hidden God revealed here is not just the God of Sabbath, Messiah comes "not merely as the

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[51] Peter Tudvad, and M.G. Piety, "Part I of the Preface to Tudvad's Book Stadier Paa Antisemitismens Vej," *Piety on Kierkegaard*, December 26, 2011, accessed December 10, 2018, https://pietyonkierkegaard.com/category/kierkegaard-and-the-jews/.

[52] Bielek-Robson, 3.

[53]Piety and Tudvad.

[54] Benjamin, *History*, 8.

[55] Taubes, *Lectures*, 200.

Redeemer" but also "as the vanquisher of the Antichrist."[56] Contrary though to Kierkegaard, the Messiah has a side to take, and Benjamin is direct when he states that the "consciousness of exploding the continuum of history is peculiar to the revolutionary classes in the moment of their action."[57]

This exploding of the continuum of history in the now-time though, is also the emergence of the voices of the past, time is nonlinear here, overlapping, with the currents of the past rising up unanticipated in the "weak messianic" of the zero hour. And it is the "remembrance" seen throughout tradition, the complicating of the tide, that ensures that the future does not "turn into a homogenous and empty time." For in every moment of the future is the potential for the messianic, the weak messianic, of the voices of the past to enter through.[58]

Benjamin's Jewish mystical influences here are enriched by his Marxist influences, and vice versa. Though Scholem will claim the primacy of Benjamin's theological thought, puzzling at the "peculiar self-willedness of Benjamin's materialism" and claiming it arises from "the discrepancy between his real mode of thought and the materialist one he has ostensibly adopted,"[59] and Taubes will be willing to contend with the idea that Benjamin has Marcionite tendencies, Benjamin has no "real mode" of thought, but is rather constructively oscillating between varying influences and seeing them intrinsically at play in one another. More conservatively, Scholem will question Benjamin for his perceived rejection of the tradition of Torah, and indeed it would be too simple, as Taubes says, to pose Benjamin as "seamlessly Jewish." But it is also too simple and dangerously stereotypical to divide up the Jewish as the

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[56] Benjamin, *History*, 4.
[57] Ibid, 9.
[58] Ibid, 11.
[59] Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin* (New York: Leo Baeck Institute, 1965), 186.

particular, and the Christian as idealistic and universal.[60] Rather "as a mystical Marxist," Benjamin, "bears traits of which one hardly would have dreamt in cases such as Marxism and Jewish messianism."[61]

And so, when Scholem challenges Benjamin on his "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,"asking him how what Scholem understands as the "purely metaphysical" conceptions of the first half of the work, which he recognizes as directly "taken over from the mystical tradition" are to philosophically cohere with the "enchantingly wrongheaded" Marxist hypothesizing about film that appears in the second portion of the book, Benjamin quips: "The missing philosophic link between the two parts of my essay, about which you complain, will be supplied more effectively by the Revolution than by me."[62] Scholem takes this as a "naïve" answer. But perhaps Benjamin's Jewish mystical influences are more coherent with his Marxist political stance than Scholem would like to believe.

After all, as Taubes draws out, revelation and revolution do not mean for Benjamin "a final revolution at the end of history," instead the "messianic is distributed across history and the generations."[63] This is as much a challenge to a Marxist progressive and teleological account of history[64] as it is an objection to truth as uncomplicatedly bounded within a community; Benjamin "does not want to describe a determinate course or process of history."[65]

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[60] Jacob Taubes, "Walter Benjamin— A Modern Marcionite?: Scholem's Benjamin Interpretation Reexamined," in *Walter Benjamin and Theology* (Fordham University Press, 2016), 167.
[61] Ibid, 175.
[62] Scholem, *Benjamin*, 186
[63] Taubes, *Lectures*, 186.
[64] Thiem, 123.
[65] Taubes, *Lectures*, 198.

For Scholem then, God has gone into hiding, but still resides with the Jewish people and their revelation, and for Benjamin, this revelation has been lost but for an index which rises up again in various forms, but is specifically marked in the "extreme case" and in "the revolutionary classes in their moment of action,"[66] but for both the revelation is the same, of the hidden God of Sabbath and with a politically particular content. We can firmly contrast this horizontally concerned messianic with the strictly vertical intervention of the transcending Protestant God in the work of Kierkegaard.

Benjamin's Angel of History can then be our final image to place alongside Kierkegaard's "knights of infinity."

> The Angel of History must look just so. His face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so fair, to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is this storm.[67]

The messianic here is not primarily concerned with the singular, loving individual but with the multitudes of the oppressed. The motion is not a bobbing up and down, a dance with infinity, but the eye turned back while the angel is ceaselessly pushed on. And the work is not to supercede the material in representing the divine in the pedestrian with one's loving countenance, but far more apocalyptically "to awaken the dead and to piece together what has

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[66] Benjamin, *History*, 9.
[67] Ibid, 6.

been smashed” even as mournfully driven “irresistibly into the future” by the storm of history.

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