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## An Outsider's Perspective: Walter Benjamin's Vision of Philosophy

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Bard

An Outsider's Perspective: Walter Benjamin's Vision of Philosophy

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by  
Bethany Zulick

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
May 2016



In memory of my grandfather, John Zulick

*I have inherited your love of wisdom*



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“Does that mean,” I said in some bewilderment, “that we must eat again of the Tree of Knowledge in order to return to the state of innocence?”

“Of course,” he said, “but that’s the final chapter in the history of the world.”

--- *Heinrich von Kleist, “On the Marionette Theatre”*





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## Introduction

Philosophy suffers from a long-term identity crisis. For as many philosophers as there are, it seems that there are equally many answers to the question, “What is philosophy?” Of course, philosophy is not alone in its perennial search for its identity. Each discipline must locate its boundaries and differentiate itself from other pursuits. The trouble with philosophy is its lack of grounding. Unlike the sciences, philosophy’s field of study lacks focus; unlike the arts, philosophy lacks material. That is not to say that there is no stable element at the heart of the discipline. Barry Stroud takes on this question of philosophy’s identity. He starts by saying, “Philosophy is thought... that is done purely for the sake of understanding something.... Philosophy as I see it is an activity, not a set of doctrines or truths at all” (Stroud 32). He draws on Wittgenstein to make his answer more specific, “What Wittgenstein writes... could be put something like this: ‘The philosopher treats a question; as an illness (is treated)’” (41). He continues:

These symptoms must then be diagnosed. What are they indications of? What lies behind them? How did things develop so that these symptoms show up in this form here and now? The time for therapy and cure can come only after these questions have been answered. The point is that treatment begins with identification and understanding, and an illness to be treated is understood in terms of its origins or causes (42).

Stroud conceives of philosophy in terms of the character of its thinking. On his account, philosophy’s way of thinking is essentially diagnostic and digs to the root cause of the matter at hand. With this definition, Stroud is able to pinpoint a commonality that exists across the discipline, bringing even apparently incongruous philosophers together. Though this discussion of Stroud’s ideas has been rather cursory, I accept the idea that this diagnostic way of thinking is a stable feature of philosophy’s identity. Stroud eventually concludes:

So to the completely general, detached question ‘What is philosophy?’ I say ‘Don’t ask;

don't tell.' It is a question to be treated, not answered. Trying to answer it in that general form gets you nowhere. You have to look at some particular bit of philosophy... and then ask yourself what is going on (45).

This passage is part of Stroud's larger argument to turn philosophy's diagnostic way of thinking on itself in order to discover its identity as a discipline. I agree with Stroud, aside from his distasteful joke about "Don't ask, don't tell," that in order to conceive of philosophy, cases must be examined individually. If philosophy is a kind of activity, then the conditions in which that activity occurs must be taken into consideration. The following three matters strike me to be the most pressing conditions at work in shaping the identity of philosophy: the matters that concern philosophy, the method by which those matters are addressed, and the purpose of the whole pursuit. While philosophers from all branches of the discipline may take part in Stroud's diagnostic thinking, their views on the three conditions just proposed would vary. For example, Hume and Marx would likely disagree about philosophy's main concerns, methods, and purpose. The face of philosophy changes when it is seen from a Humean perspective as opposed to a Marxist one. Thus, each case demands its own answer to the question "What is philosophy?"

So, let us address one such individual case: Walter Benjamin. The question is, "What is philosophy for Walter Benjamin?" It may seem strange to ask such a question of Benjamin, because his status as a philosopher is debatable. Benjamin's biographers capture the ambiguity of Benjamin's identity as a philosopher by calling his work "a philosophically oriented criticism of works of art – or rather a philosophy made to arise from the interpretation of literary works..." (Eiland and Jennings 119). Many characterizations of Benjamin classify him as either a literary or cultural critic. Benjamin was something of a philosophical outsider; despite his best efforts, he never managed to obtain a position in academia. Much of Benjamin's work was composed piecemeal, as he found opportunities as a freelance writer. To be sure, much of his writing does fall

broadly into the categories of literary or cultural criticism. Other pieces of his work, such as “The Arcades Project” are highly interdisciplinary; others, such as *Berlin Childhood around 1900* are simply works of prose. However, in his early period, Benjamin’s writing is recognizably philosophical in its tone and often deals with philosophy and philosophical problems directly, though often in concert with literature, the arts, and to a lesser extent religion. Walter Benjamin’s early work is preoccupied with language. Even fragmentary works that went unpublished in his lifetime attempt to make sense of the nature of meaning in language and why language is significant for human thinkers. In a piece called “The Object: Triangle” – which is really little more than a fragmentary note – Benjamin tries to work through the hierarchical layers of meaning in a word binding the word “triangle” to the object called by that name.

Benjamin develops his understanding of philosophy around his theory of language. From the outset, we must understand that, for Benjamin, truth is essentially linguistic (Eiland and Jennings 160). In a letter to Hugo von Hofmannsthal sent in 1924, Benjamin wrote, “every truth has its house, its ancestral place in language” (151). In the same letter, Benjamin claimed that of all the disciplines, philosophy alone can uncover these ancestral truths (151). Thus, we can see Benjamin’s conditions for philosophy begin to take shape: it is interested in the truth and its path toward the truth is language. Benjamin’s program for philosophy can be summarized in the following way: philosophy must “restore pure language” (Britt 57). Benjamin formulates this thesis in his study of the Trauerspiel. The nature of the pure language will be explored at length in what follows. For now, suffice it to say that the pure language is an ideal language – a common trope in philosophy.

Benjamin’s 1916 essay “On Language as Such and the Language of Man” and the preface to his translation of Baudelaire in 1921, “The Task of the Translator,” will be the focal

points of this project.<sup>1</sup> Though written several years apart, the interconnection of these essays is irrefutable, which will be demonstrated in what follows. Taken together, these essays present a cohesive account of Benjamin's theory of language. In "On Language," we find Benjamin's most complete statement of his philosophy of language, including his theory of the pure language sought by philosophers. In "The Task," Benjamin proposes a theory of translation that acts as a practical application of his theory of language. In addition to formulating a cogent account of Benjamin's theory of language, "On Language" and "The Task" hold the key to understanding Benjamin's vision of philosophy. In order to understand Benjamin's vision of philosophy, we must investigate the underpinnings of his claim that philosophy's task is to restore the pure language. We must determine what Benjamin takes the nature of language to be and how it is possible that language has a "pure" state to which it must be restored. To that end, the first chapter will interpret "On Language" to reveal Benjamin's theory of language, establishing the nature of the pure language and the role language plays in philosophy more generally. Chapter two will consider the method by which Benjamin thinks the restoration of pure language ought to be achieved through an explication of the theory of translation Benjamin proposes in "The Task." The final question we must consider is the purpose of philosophy according to Benjamin's program. The third chapter will not simply show what philosophy stands to gain from completing its task to restore the pure language, but will interrogate what motive impels philosophy to pursue its task.

What results is a model of philosophy that challenges the conventions of the discipline. The theory of language around which Benjamin orients his view of philosophy is unorthodox. "On Language" presents his theory of language using Genesis as its guide, giving Benjamin's

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<sup>1</sup> Henceforth referred to as "On Language" and "The Task"

theory of language a distinctly theological overtone. In “On Language” he speaks of the magic and infinity of language, while “The Task” invokes ideas taken from Jewish mysticism (Eiland and Jennings 160). Despite the atypical constitution of Benjamin’s theory, his conclusions about language and its relation to knowledge and truth are comparable to those of mainline philosophy. These conclusions will be illuminated throughout the first and second chapters. The truly radical element of Benjamin’s philosophical program will surface in chapters two and three, which address Benjamin’s conception of philosophy directly. Benjamin’s model of philosophy will introduce a new kind of philosopher and push the limit of what counts as philosophy. Ultimately, Benjamin’s program will bring philosophy to the brink of its own obsolescence.

## Chapter One

### *The matter of philosophy*

In their reading of “On Language as Such and the Language of Man”, Benjamin’s biographers, Eiland and Jennings, describe Benjamin’s philosophy of language in his early period in the following way:

... like Heidegger after him, he considers the primary linguistic datum to be neither the individual speech act nor the structure of signification but the existence (*Dasein*) of language, the word, as an incommensurable qualitative totality... For us, there is no outside of language” (Eiland and Jennings 88).

Or, as Benjamin puts it, “... all language contains its own incommensurable, uniquely constituted infinity” (Benjamin 64). For Benjamin, language seems to be a kind of universe. Indeed, other philosophers have made similar statements about language. Take, for example Wittgenstein’s iconic statement, “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.” Or, Heidegger’s claim, “Man acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man.” I give these examples not to start a dialogue with either thinker, but to show the attitude that some philosophers take toward language. Along with Wittgenstein and Heidegger, Benjamin makes language seem like the edge of the Earth, a cage that encloses us all, or an oppressive ruler. Eiland and Jennings’ closing remark seems rather grave; they seem troubled by the enormity of language and our place inside it. If there is something outside of language, humans could never know it, because for us the very concept of the outside does not exist. This grave tone is reflected in Benjamin’s own writing. In “On Language as Such and the Language of Man” and in “The Task of the Translator” he claims that the study of language and translation both hang over an abyss. Presumably, this abyss is the unknown and unknowable outside of language, which humans were never meant to access. So now, we must ask: How and why does language enclose us?



This chapter seeks to outline Benjamin's theory of language proposed in his 1916 essay "On Language as Such and the Language of Man". This essay takes the creation story from Genesis as its model to construct a genealogy of language. It begins in Eden, proposing a tripartite ideal language, which represents the pure language sought by philosophers. In keeping with the myth, Benjamin also puts forth a theory of language after the fall from grace. Discussion of this aspect of Benjamin's theory of language will be reserved until chapter three. This chapter will only concern itself with the languages of paradise. The three languages of paradise work in concert and create a kind of language-world. This language-world constitutes the pure language. This chapter will examine Benjamin's overall conception of language and then take up each of the languages of paradise in turn. In the end, this chapter will show why the restoration of the pure language is a philosophical imperative.

### **Benjamin's View of Language**

In order to understand the pure language, we must first understand Benjamin's conception of language in general. Benjamin's theory is radical and challenges the traditional understanding of what constitutes language. We must reject the notion that language is limited to words. The following is the opening of "On Language as Such",

Every expression of human mental life can be understood as a kind of language, and this understanding, in the manner of a true method, everywhere raises new questions. It is possible to talk about a language of music and of sculpture, about a language of justice that has nothing directly to do with those in which German or English legal judgments are couched, about a language of technology that is not the specialized language of technicians.... To sum up: all communication of the contents of the mind is language, communication in words being only a particular case of human language and of the justice, poetry, or whatever underlying it or founded on it. The existence of language, however, is coextensive not only with all the areas of human mental expression... but with absolutely everything. There is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate

nature that does not in some way partake of language, for it is in the nature of each one to communicate its mental contents (OLS 62).<sup>2</sup>

Thus, Benjamin greatly expands the scope of human language to include wordless forms of expression. Human words do constitute a special kind of language, the reason for which will be explained below. Despite their status among other kinds of language, words are not the basis for Benjamin's understanding of what language is and what language does. Instead, Benjamin conceives of language in terms of a more basic act: the expression of the contents of the mind. An act, he claims, that is "in the nature" of everything in existence. By attributing language to everything in existence, Benjamin makes his investigation of language a deeper inquiry into the nature of the world. Let us suspend any misgivings about the idea that there are so-called contents of the mind. Benjamin is not a philosopher of mind and is not concerned about the problems such a picture of the mind may pose. And, moreover, what he means by this term is not the same as the "mind" that is the subject of the philosophy of mind.

But how can Benjamin justify expanding language – even just human language – to such an extent? Art is perhaps the easiest example to understand. The visual artist has an idea, which he communicates wordlessly in the form of some medium. Similarly, language is commonly understood to be that which a speaker uses to express a thought or feeling – in a sense, to give shape to that thought or feeling. Language and art both allow movement from an inner source (the mind) to an outer source (artistic media or language). However, it is still difficult to stomach the idea that language exists in forms of expression apart from words. Art is an easier example because it is an expressive discipline, which easily follows Benjamin's claim that the foundation of language is the expression of the contents of the mind – and, indeed, one could argue that art

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<sup>2</sup> In the interest of clarity, all citations of "On Language as Such and the Language of Man" will be denoted by "OLS" and all citations of "The Task of the Translator" will be denoted by "TTT."

and language share other similarities beyond this principle. However, the other examples Benjamin provides (justice, technology, and religion) are not commonly thought to be expressive and, with the exception of technology, they do not have the same material or tangible aspect that art and language do. Justice, unlike art, has no singular, tangible medium in which the contents of the mind could be expressed. Yet, Benjamin claims that justice, apart from the words of a given legal system, is a kind of language.

Take, for example, a primitive man (who does not communicate in words) physically attacking his counterpart who stole his food. Though wordless, this action expresses the impulse to assign blame to a perceived wrongdoer – although no such word as “blame” or “wrongdoer” is in play. What makes justice language in Benjamin’s sense of the word, i.e. expression of the contents of the mind, is that it manifests an impulse in a public forum, such that other members of the community can bear witness to the exchange and understand its cause (the stealing), its effect (the violence), and also understand something of the mind of the man who was robbed. Namely that he will not tolerate such actions, that such actions anger him, or simply that he is feeling vengeful right now. Much in the same way, art realizes an artistic impulse in a physical medium in the public sphere where others can partake as an audience member or viewer – though the insights of art are markedly different from those of justice. By defining language in terms of expression, especially wordless expression, Benjamin sets forth a view of language whose most basic principle is expression in a public forum. For Benjamin, language is the theater in which the “contents of the mind” erupt into public existence; the liminal zone between speakers of a common tongue.

The second, and much more radical claim, is that everything in existence (inanimate things, animals, humans, and even events) participates, to varying degrees, in language. The

basic tenet of Benjamin's philosophy of language is that language expresses the contents of the mind. In the case of a human it would seem that "contents of the mind" would refer to imaginings, ideas, or other processes usually ascribed to the mind. However, given Benjamin's use of the term, it does not seem that Benjamin means "mind" in a sense that would necessarily relate it to consciousness or brain states. "Contents of the mind" in the original German is *geistige Inhalte*. *Geistige*, of course, is a notoriously difficult word to translate from German, meaning something between the English words *mind* and *spirit*. Benjamin also says that language communicates *geistige Wesen*. In the English translation, this term is rendered sometimes as *mental being* and other times as *mental entity* – the alternation in terms is a poor translation choice, if you ask me.<sup>3</sup> Given that Benjamin states his definition of language using these terms interchangeably, and given the similarity of these terms, it seems that "contents of the mind" and "mental being/entity" are the same. The difference between them amounts only to Benjamin's imprecise philosophical style.

We must also remember the fluidity of the word *geistig* in the first place; these terms could equally have been translated as "contents of the spirit" or "spiritual being/entity", which would lend a wholly different tone to the text, as well as do away with any concerns over Benjamin's picture of the mind. My understanding of these terms errs on the side of "spiritual being". But still, even having narrowed three terms down to one, "spiritual being" does not have a readily accessible meaning. For clarification, consider Friedlander's analysis:

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<sup>3</sup> *Geistige Wesen* is a term that Benjamin uses consistently throughout the original. It is unclear what the translator's motivations for alternating were, but I would venture to guess that the choice was mostly stylistic so as to avoid repetition. However, this repetition is crucial to our understanding of the text and to whatever definition of this term Benjamin is trying to build over the course of the text. The alternation between *being* and *entity* undercuts Benjamin's effort to create a coherent vocabulary.

Assuming that Benjamin does not take an interest in the modes of communication of creatures (such as the signals of bees or the songs of whales), we should understand the essay to be concerned with the ways in which essential nature (or what he calls ‘spiritual being’ [*geistige Wesen*] is revealed (Friedlander 15).

Thus, Friedlander seems to define *geistige Wesen* as “essential nature”, which adds a distinctly metaphysical significance to Benjamin’s idea of language.

Benjamin brings up the metaphysical implications of his argument five separate times in “On Language”. When Benjamin speaks of different kinds of human languages, I am willing to include imaginings, judgments, ideas, and so forth, which comprise a uniquely human mind. But even then, it seems to me that Benjamin is far more concerned with what the language of a human or thing says about its essential nature, not what ideas it is capable of communicating. Take, for example, when he claims that the mental being of man is the name and says in the very next sentence, “Man is the namer; by this we recognize that through him pure language speaks” (OLS 65). Thus, the mental being of man comes to form his identity and define his role in the world of language Benjamin describes. The mental being that is expressed in language is constitutive of something like the essence or metaphysical identity of the speaker. Language is thus the public evidence, or performance, of the speaker or thing’s metaphysical essence.

That which in a mental entity is communicable *is* its language. On this ‘is’ (equivalent to ‘is immediately’) everything depends...this capacity for communication is language itself. Or: the language of a mental entity is directly that which is communicable in it. Whatever is communicable *of* a mental entity, *in* this it communicates itself. Which signifies that all language communicates itself. Or, more precisely, that all language communicates itself *in* itself; it is in the purest sense the ‘medium’ of the communication (64).

Here, Benjamin asserts that mental being does not simply correspond to language, it “is immediately” language. That is to say, language is the communicable mental sphere. There is no process of translation or transformation required in order for mental being to be expressed in language. Rather, whatever elements of mental being could be communicated express

themselves “in themselves”, i.e. in language. It would seem, then, that language is the organ or limb of mental being that reaches directly into public. Language is thus the tie that binds the mental, the spiritual – suffice it to say the inner – with the outer. And, more importantly, language is not a third party that binds the two, but rather a direct and natural extension of the inner into the outer or of metaphysical essence into the physical world. That is not to say, however, that language brings metaphysical essence into the world unhindered, however, these issues will be addressed below.

Benjamin sets his philosophy of language in opposition to the bourgeois theory of language, which he calls invalid and empty (65). Benjamin claims that such a view leads to an understanding of language as a means for factual communication with others (65). He differentiates the two theories by contrasting their modes of using language. Whereas his theory of language holds that mental being communicates itself *in* language, bourgeois language holds that something (not necessarily mental being) is communicated *by* language (64-65). The ultimate consequence of bourgeois language is to reduce the significance of words to the meaning they carry, as a ship carries cargo. That is, any given ship could be loaded with different cargo. It is not necessary that this particular ship contain cotton, as it could have carried grain just as easily. The use of a particular ship is arbitrary. While the ship is necessary for the transportation of its cargo across the sea, only the cargo is valuable in terms of the trade deal. Under such a conception of language, understanding a language would consist in unpacking meaning from the word. And, because the relationship between the word and the referent is arbitrary, the word itself is a meaningless husk, something to be gotten past in order to access its real meaningful content.

The objection Benjamin raises shows that certain views of word meaning are injurious to the study of language and its significance. The problem with a bourgeois view is that it devalues the word. On Benjamin's account, paradisiacal language expresses a kind of truth of which the bourgeois theory is incapable. Paradisiacal language is capable of directly expressing the metaphysical essence of the speaker. A bourgeois theorist would have it that language only refers indirectly and arbitrarily to real things. Benjamin grants language the immense privilege of being the medium in which essence is expressed and, therefore, the place where philosophers must look to answer questions of being.

### **The Language of God**

Following Genesis, Benjamin takes the Word of God to be the origin of the material world. He also takes the Word of God to be the basis of language in general, as it imbues all of God's creation with its residue, permitting language to exist in all things and beings (74). In addition to its creative capacities, God's language is privileged above all other forms of language due to its relationship to knowledge. Benjamin writes,

With the creative omnipotence of language [the creation of the world] begins, and at the end language, as it were, assimilates the created, names it.... The absolute relation of name to knowledge exists only in God; only there is name, because it is inwardly identical with the creative word, the pure medium of knowledge. This means that God made things knowable in their names. Man, however, names them according to knowledge (68).

This passage immediately follows Benjamin's description of the "rhythm" of creation: God calling the thing into existence (Let there be...), followed by what Benjamin calls "cognizing" (And he saw that it was good), and finally God naming the thing (He called the light Day...). The creation of the world is thus a three-part process that begins and ends in language, though God's language does take on two distinct forms at the beginning and at the end, first as creative word and last as name. However, though Benjamin acknowledges multiple forms of God's

language, he also claims that naming and the creative word are “inwardly identical”. That is, the two forms of God’s language may appear in different guises, but are, at base, the same – or are expressions of the same thing. Benjamin clarifies this claim, saying that naming is absolutely related to knowledge in God’s language and that the creative word is the pure medium of knowledge (68). It seems we could explain the inward identity he posits between naming and the creative word by their relations to knowledge: both forms of God’s language are meant to articulate knowledge.

God’s language is still beholden to Benjamin’s definition of language. Knowledge is expressed in God’s language, therefore, following the definition of language, knowledge must be an element of the contents of God’s mind – his essence or nature. To put this in theological terms, knowledge is the Godhead. And, as language is the direct expression of being in a public forum, the creative word must be the medium in which mental being communicates itself (63). The creative word creates the material world. Therefore, God’s knowledge, which is expressed in the creative word, is the source of the created world.

In this sense, the creative word is no medium at all, or at least not under any human conception of a medium. A medium is the material in which something is realized. In order for this to be possible, the medium must exist before whatever it is to articulate may be created. The creative word (the *pure* medium of knowledge) brings the world into existence. Before God “spoke” the creative word, there was nothing yet in existence other than God’s own knowledge to serve as the medium in which the world was created. Thus the *pure* medium of knowledge, the creative word, is no medium in the usual sense, but rather an extension of knowledge itself. For comparison, consider how the word medium functions in terms of human language. Earlier, art was posed as an example of a type of human language. Paint is one of many artistic media, but



certainly not the pure medium of all art. Nor could one say that paint is even the pure medium of painting, because there are so many varieties of paint – acrylic, watercolor, oil – which kind of paint could be called the purest? In the case of a particular painting, it could be said that the paint is the pure medium of that painting, in that the paint *is* the painting itself. But even then, it is totally by chance that the artist used whichever paint she did – not which type of paint, for such a choice is surely intentional, but this particular brand of paint and this particular tube. All of this is to say that paint could never be called a pure medium. In order for a pure medium to exist, all chance, all variation, and all material would have to be removed. The artist could no longer use paint, but would have to create pure color out of nothingness. As the pure medium of knowledge, the creative word generates the material world. This constitutes a special kind of language unique to God in which his mental contents (knowledge) and the material world are composed of the same substance.

Perhaps this will be easier to see by means of example. This example is not one of Benjamin's, but my own interpretation of Benjamin's definition of the word of God. Take, for example, the creation of light.

<sup>3</sup>And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.

<sup>4</sup>And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.

<sup>5</sup>And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day. (Genesis 1:1 KJV)

The construction of the first line is curious. Usually quotation marks would be used when attributing speech to separate the utterance from the surrounding words. However, in this case it is impossible, because the first line in no way represents language in the human sense of that word. The creative word, though it is classified as language, is not spoken language. In what follows, I will use words commonly associated with spoken language to refer to the creative word, but these are not meant to indicate speech. The beginning of God's linguistic act is

demarcated by the habitual construction “said,” followed by the capitalization of the “L” in “let.” Thus, despite the absence of quotation marks, the start of God’s speech is still discernable. However, the end is not well marked. One can imagine that God did not actually say the second half of the phrase after the colon. That is, God’s utterance would be limited to “Let there be light.” To conclude God’s utterance of the creative word before showing the physical emergence of light would place God’s Words and the creation of light in a causal relationship, in which the creative words are enacted and the light subsequently appears, as if the creative word were a magic spell. Due to the colon, God’s linguistic act and the eruption of light run together into a single sentence, with no differentiation in the text between the appearance of the word “light” before and after the colon. This suggests that the utterance of the creative Word and the emergence of light constitute a simultaneous event. God’s linguistic act “Let there be light”, insofar as it is absolutely simultaneous with the emergence of light, is effectively light itself.

The name, as it is inwardly identical with the creative Word, must express the same unity between God’s knowledge and the thing named as the creative Word expresses between God’s knowledge and the material existence of things. God’s naming, as inwardly identical with the creative word, is a creative act and is capable of making things knowable. As we will see below, that which is knowable in a thing is the communicable element of its mental being, which constitutes its language. Thus, in the world Benjamin builds, God’s language is the foundation of all matter, essence, and other kinds of language. As the foundation of all creation, God’s Word is the standard of truth in the world.

### **The Language of Things**

Things are not just the objects of human language, but possess a language of their own. Benjamin leaves some ambiguity surrounding the mechanism of the language of things, perhaps

because it is secondary to Benjamin's explanation of the operations of human language. Consider the following explanation of the language of things,

Language itself is not perfectly expressed in things themselves.... The languages of things are imperfect, and they are dumb. Things are denied the pure formal principle of language – namely sound. They can communicate to one another only through a more or less material community. This community is immediate and infinite, like every linguistic communication; it is magical (for there is also a magic of matter) (67).

Despite the imperfection and muteness of the language of things, it is equal to other forms of language in its infinity, immediateness, and its magic.<sup>4</sup> This justifies the inclusion of the language of things under the category language, for all of these characteristics are tied to the status of language as the medium of meaning, as the medium in mental being is communicated. This excerpt tells us how it is possible that things can partake in language: the language of things is expressed in their matter, in their very physical presence. It is unclear what it would mean for things to communicate with each other, as that would imply some kind of dialogue between things. However, it is clear that things participate in language by expressing their mental being in their material.

However, the language of things is imperfect and its capacity to fully express mental being in language is limited. Benjamin is rather unclear about this point, posing two rival theses about what, precisely, is communicated in the language of things. First, he writes,

Language communicates the linguistic being of things. The clearest manifestation of this being, however, is language itself. The answer to the question '*What* does language communicate?' is therefore 'All language communicates itself.' The language of this lamp, for example, communicates not the lamp (for the mental being of the lamp, insofar

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<sup>4</sup> "Mediation, which is the immediacy of all mental communication, is the fundamental problem of linguistic theory.... The primary problem of language is its magic. At the same time, the notion of the magic of language points to something less: its infiniteness. This is conditional on its immediacy. For precisely because nothing is communicated *through* language, what is communicated *in* language cannot be externally limited or measured, and therefore all language contains its own incommensurable, uniquely constituted infinity" (64).

as it is *communicable*, is by no means the lamp itself) but the language-lamp, the lamp in communication, the lamp in expression (63).

This section is almost immediately followed by Benjamin's defense of language as the medium of communication, which was quoted in the first section of the chapter. Language, he claims, is "that which within a mental entity is communicable". "Communicable", by Benjamin's definition, is equated with the term "linguistic" (66). That is, something "communicable" is in the sphere of language – something that communicates itself directly and immediately in public. The problem with things is that their mental beings may not be wholly linguistic. He writes, "By virtue of its communicating nature, its universality, language is incomplete wherever the mental entity that speaks from it is not in its whole structure linguistic – that is, communicable" (66). In a situation where the mental being of a thing is not wholly linguistic, there is no hope that it could be fully expressed in language. Instead, only a small region of the things essence would be expressed in language, leaving much of its essence in silence. As we will see in the next section, the silent regions of the things essence would be permanently outside the realm of human knowledge. Things communicate themselves, i.e. their mental beings, to man in their mute material language and man names them according to that communication (64). The relation between human knowledge and naming will be clarified in the next section, but for now, suffice it to say that knowledge makes naming possible.

Then, just a few pages later, Benjamin presents a conflicting thesis.

Language is thus the mental being of things. Mental being is therefore postulated at the outset as communicable, or, rather it is situated within the communicable, and the thesis that the linguistic being of things is identical with the mental, insofar as the latter is communicable, becomes in its 'insofar' a tautology (66).

Whereas in the first thesis, the realm of the mental was larger than that of the communicable, in this statement, the mental is subsumed in the communicable . It seems that Benjamin rejects the

first picture he proposed, which held that some regions of the mental being of a thing are incommunicable. Here, Benjamin posits the complete identity of language with the mental being of things: “Language is the mental being of things”. In the first thesis, the problem was that the communicable portion of the lamp’s mental being could not account for the “thing itself”. In the second statement, Benjamin says the mental being of things is fully expressible in its language. Any question about whether mental being is communicable is tautological, for it would mean asking whether language, which is communicable as such, is communicable. It would seem, then, that the full mental being of the thing is expressed in its language. With no silent elements of its mental being, it would seem that the problem of whether the thing itself comes into expression is a nonissue – for where, then, could the thing itself be hidden?

My argument is undercut when Benjamin draws a distinction between the language of things and the language of man. He claims that the mental being of man “alone among mental entities” is “communicable without residue” because “*language as such* is the mental being of man” (65). The mental being of things, though wholly communicable, i.e. wholly linguistic, is still not “communicable without residue”, because the mental being of things is not “language as such”. Benjamin never says exactly what the mental being of things consists in; he only gives it a negative definition, leading us to believe that, whatever the mental being of things may be, it is not like the mental being of man. Benjamin may attribute language to all of existence, and those languages may even have the same basic capacity to express mental being, but he is no egalitarian. In addition to the character of their respective mental beings, the languages of man and thing are divided by another factor: sound. Benjamin writes,

Things are denied the pure formal principle of language – namely, sound....The incomparable feature of human language is that its magical community with things is immaterial and purely mental... The Bible expresses this symbolic fact when it says that God breathes his breath into man: this is at once life and mind and language (67).

Thus, Benjamin makes a distinction between the kind of mental sphere possessed by men and things. This excerpt seems to marry man's consciousness to his language. So, it seems that what is lacking from the mental being of things is the will to express that comes with consciousness. The language of things is accidental; it arises out of the things' simple material presence. To speak, however, as men do, requires agency. As Benjamin puts it, the language of things is dumb. However, this does not undermine Benjamin's conclusion that the mental being of things is wholly communicable in their language, albeit a limited kind of language. Things may not have the full power for expression that men do, but their mental beings are still, by their very nature, communicable.

Dumb though it may be, the language of things draws the parameters of what is knowable for human beings. The mechanics of human knowledge and language will be explained in the next section. For now, the only detail necessary is that man's knowledge of the world is acquired through the material language of things. Thus, whatever is communicated in the language of things is a possible object of knowledge for man. If there were some silent region of the thing's mental being, as Benjamin first suggested, then human knowledge would be in crisis. There would be a whole sphere of unknowable essences. Luckily, Benjamin leaves this scenario behind. The fact that the language of things is dumb, though not as problematic as the previous scenario, still poses a problem for human knowledge. In their dumb language, things cannot speak for themselves; they depend on man to give voice to their essences. The language of things establishes what could be known in the world. It is man's task to acquire knowledge of it and express his knowledge in language.

## **The Language of Man**

The task of man in paradise is to name the world (70). The name God gives to creation does not absolve man of his name-giving task (70). Though the language of God is omnipotent and creative, Benjamin insists on the power of the language of man and his study of language focuses on the operations of human language and its significance. Although there are many kinds of human language, which the first section enumerated, this section will only regard human language as it occurs in words. According to Benjamin, names are the only place language is expressed purely (65). God has a way of naming, too, but Benjamin is speaking specifically of the man's way of naming. The language of man is not more powerful than the language of God, for this is impossible. The weight Benjamin attributes to the language of man is born of its place in the tripartite pure language.

Unlike the rest of creation, man was created in God's image. When God gave the creative word to man, it lost its divine power to create and became man's capacity to know instead (68). Benjamin writes, "Man is the knower in the same language in which God is the creator.... In the word, creation took place, and God's linguistic being is the word. All human language is only the reflection of the word in the name" (68). Thus, man's language comes with a certain responsibility, though this responsibility is tempered by inadequacy. Benjamin continues, "The name is no closer to the word than knowledge is to creation. The infinity of all human language always remains limited and analytic in nature, in comparison to the absolutely unlimited and creative infinity of the divine word" (68). Even though the language of man is infinite (as all languages are), its infinity is still limited in comparison to the language of God. Despite its inadequacy, the language of man has the responsibility to reflect the language of God in the name it bestows upon a thing. This responsibility is precisely what differentiates human language

from all other kinds of language. Human language is capable of apprehending and expressing the latent word of God that rests in all things by conferring a name (69). "...it [the pure language] aims to give birth to the language of things themselves, from which in turn, soundlessly, in the mute magic of nature, the word of God shines forth" (69). Thus, through his knowledge of the world, man is able to give voice to the language of God in his own tongue.

The task of human language is to complete God's creation and man accomplishes it through his unique capacity to know and to give names<sup>5</sup> (70). Whereas God makes things "knowable in their names", man baptizes a thing with a name according to his knowledge of it (68). Thus, when man assigns a name to a thing, he performs the operation of creation in reverse: whereas God began with nothing but knowledge and created all things in the world in the Word, man begins with the world, attains knowledge of it, and ordains his knowledge in the name. The language and knowledge of man stand at the point between world and God, keeping the two in harmony. The name man speaks embodies his knowledge in the medium of language. Since the name occupies a position of such importance, we must discover how man comes to bestow a name upon a thing. Put simply, man names by translating the language of things into the language of man (70). Furthermore, this translation from language to things into name is guaranteed to be true by the word of God (70).

The receptive and expressive qualities of the language of man make it possible for this translation to take place. Benjamin writes,

... in name appears the essential law of language, according to which to express oneself and to address everything else amount to the same thing.... So in name culminate both the intensive totality of language, as the absolutely communicable mental entity, and the

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<sup>5</sup> "But obviously [God's] naming is only an expression of the identity of the creative word and the cognizing name in God, not the prior solution of the task that god expressly assigns to man himself: that of naming things. In receiving the unspoken nameless language of things and converting it by name into sounds, man performs this task" (70).



extensive totality of language, as the universally communicating (naming) entity.... *Man alone has a language that is complete both in its universality and its intensiveness* (65-66)

To clarify, just before this passage Benjamin claims that the linguistic being of man (in Eden) is the name (64). The “intensive totality” is common to the languages of things and of man; it is the capacity to fully express one’s mental being. What differentiates man’s language is his capacity to “address everything else”, that is its “extensive totality”. Which is to say, that man’s language is also capable of expressing the linguistic being of things. The final line of the excerpt suggests that even God does not have this capacity. Benjamin writes,

... the thing itself has no word, being created from God’s word and known in its name by a human word. This knowledge of the thing, however, is not spontaneous creation; it does not emerge from language in the absolutely unlimited and infinite manner of creation. Rather, the name that man gives to language depends on how language is communicated to him. In name, the word of God has not remained creative; it has become in one part receptive, even if receptive to language. Thus fertilized, it aims to give birth to the language of things themselves, from which in turn, soundlessly, in the mute magic of nature, the word of God shines forth (69).

According to this model of naming, man receives the language of things, i.e. the expression of their being, and according to what man “hears” he confers a name upon the thing. Thus, it would seem that the name comes to embody man’s understanding of the language of things, that is, the name embodies his knowledge of things. The name is not that through which man attains knowledge, as man gains knowledge of things through their linguistic being, but the way in which man declares his knowledge. The fact that, in the language of man, the name is a response to the language of things differentiates it from naming in the language of God.

Benjamin has already shown that the linguistic being of things is their materiality, which can only be accessed through the senses. Thus, to understand the language of things is to experience all of the sensory information that a thing has to offer. The senses are a legitimate source of knowledge and, moreover, are a linguistic mechanism, because they allow man to

receive communication from all other things. Thus, we see that language is not only a direct path from the inner mental being to outer public expression. In fact, language also brings the outer into the inner. This is precisely what is so privileged about human language. Language forms a unique two-way connection between man and world, in which man can comprehend the language of things in the world and give voice to his knowledge in language, the truth of which is guaranteed by the language of God. Now the thrust of Benjamin's philosophy of language comes to light: Man's language affords him access to the metaphysical realms of essence and truth, the foundation of which is laid by the languages of God and things. Simultaneously, the language of man expresses his own identity as the namer. Thus, language brings man's very being into relation with the metaphysical realm.

The world Benjamin creates in "On Language" illustrates an ideal picture of human life and language. The three types of language he imagines (of God, man, and thing) describe the metaphysical nature of the world. The language of God demarcates the realm of absolute truth. The language of things expresses the realm of metaphysical essences, which was first generated by the absolute truth of God's Word. Human knowledge exists between these metaphysical spheres. Like that language of things and all things in existence, the language of man depends upon the language of God for its existence. The essence of the material world offers itself up in the language of things, which man is capable of understanding. The dual nature of the language of man (its intensive and extensive capacity) enables him to translate the language of thing into his own language, thereby giving the thing a name. The common source of the language of things and of man – i.e. the language of God – guarantees the truth of man's knowledge of things. Thus man's capacity to know and name, which are always intertwined, is mediated entirely by language. On this picture, language seems to be the storehouse of knowledge, in that

man's knowledge comes to be embodied in the names he gives to things. Furthermore, language is man's only recourse to the metaphysical realms of truth and essence. Whatever he knows of these realms must come through language, for they are essentially linguistic. Man's language affords him access to the truth of God's Word and the essences of the language of things.

Again, I do not think Benjamin actually believes that any such thing as the language of God or the language of things exists. Rather, this picture shows us a theory of the pure language. For Benjamin, truth, knowledge, and essence are all within language in paradise. Of course, there is an element of both truth and essence that exists apart from its expression in language: the incommunicable thing-in-itself and the silent knowledge of God that must have preceded the creation of the world. Thus, we should rather say that for human beings, truth, knowledge, and essence, are all contained in language.

None of the languages of paradise can function in isolation. The language of God creates both other languages. From their very inception, the languages of God, man, and thing are joined. The language of things is the direct result of the creative Word of God; the essence it expresses was instantiated by God's name for the thing. The language of man depends on the languages of God and thing equally in order for it to function: the language of things is the subject of its knowledge and the language of God guarantees the truth of that knowledge. Furthermore, the language of man fulfills the task of naming God assigned to man and thereby completes God's original creative act (65). Though each has its own role, these three languages function as a whole. We can conclude that Benjamin aims to present a picture of one language, not of three individual ones. In the middle of the tripartite pure language we find the human speaker – the "us" for whom there is no outside of language. Adam and Eve are always stuck inside this sphere, unable to get past the upper bound of language, for it constitutes the

boundaries of possible knowledge, and unable to get beneath language, for it contains its own grounding in the truth.

Although “On Language” does not mention philosophy directly, it seems to me that it invites us to think of the relation between philosophy and language. If philosophy wants to ask questions about the nature of truth or the essence of things, as it is wont to do, and if we take Benjamin’s account of language to be true, then answers to those questions must be sought in language. Yet, language also marks of the limit of what is possible for human knowledge and, therefore, what is possible for philosophy. Language is at once the gateway to the knowable and the gatekeeper of the unknowable. In paradise, where certainty is ensured, the boundaries of language are tolerable, because the sphere of possible knowledge it demarcates is guaranteed to be true. However, this certainty will be lost in the fall from grace, jeopardizing the integrity of human knowledge expressed in language. The details of the fall will be expounded in the following chapters. Thus, the philosopher’s pursuit of the pure language is driven by his desire for certainty.

Benjamin’s view of the language of man is undeniably related to Johann Hamann. Hamann also offered an allegorical account of language using Genesis, which Benjamin quotes directly in “On Language.” Thus, Benjamin draws an unmistakable connection between Hamann’s thought and his own. Hamann’s philosophy of language was in conflict with the Enlightenment. Hamann criticizes the Kantian purism of reason, which, he claims, abstracted reason from its “embodiment in language, tradition, and experience” (39). Hamann is the “first to see the problematic nature of Kant’s dualism; and he is the first to insist that we must grasp man’s faculties as a whole if we are to explain the possibility of knowledge” (Beiser 43). To that

end, Hamann develops his own philosophy of language, arguing that language is “the visible element of reason” and “the true aesthetic element of all human knowledge” (40).

Under Kant and other Enlightenment thinkers, reason marked the upper bound of what was thinkable or knowable for human beings. But under Hamann, language is the “the very ‘instrument and criterion of reason’” (40). Language defines reason and, as its instrument, is that which allows reason to function. Hamann argued that the idea of thought or reasoning that exist independently in the mind “free from images, sounds, visual data, is a meaningless illusion” (Berlin 315). Berlin concludes, “Language is what we think with, not translate into...” (316). For Hamann, it seems that language contains reason. It seems reasonable to conclude that Hamann redefines language as the upper bound of the knowable realm, not reason. Hamann’s view of language requires a new method of philosophizing, “If we are to have a critique of reason, as Kant enjoins us, then we ought to have a critique of language... It is indeed ‘the center point of reason’s misunderstanding of itself’ (Beiser 40). Berlin comes to the same conclusion, but he poses it in terms of a redefinition of what philosophy is, not of what philosophy must do. He writes, “...philosophy, which pretends to be the critique of things...is in fact a critique of our use of language or symbols” (Berlin 320).

Benjamin’s essay “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy”, which was written in 1918 and went unpublished in Benjamin’s lifetime, aims “to recognize and sort out which elements of the Kantian philosophy should be adopted and cultivated, which should be reworked, and which should be rejected” (Benjamin 102). Benjamin argues that philosophy must “find for knowledge the sphere of total neutrality in regard to the concepts of both subject and object... in which this concept in no way continues to designate the relation between two metaphysical entities” (104). Along with this new concept of knowledge, Benjamin argues for a new concept

of experience that would “provide a logical place for metaphysics” (106). Benjamin argues that these changes can be achieved “only by relating knowledge to language, as was attempted by Hamann during Kant’s lifetime” (108). Benjamin’s vision for the future of philosophy is founded on Hamann’s theory of language. If Benjamin wants to use Hamann’s theory of language to realize his vision for philosophy, then it is reasonable to assume that Benjamin’s vision of philosophy echoes that of Hamann. Recall Hamann’s assertion that philosophy should be a critique of language; this assertion is born of Hamann’s philosophy of language, which locates reason and knowledge in language. Thus, in using Hamann’s theory of language as the basis of his own program for philosophy, Benjamin seems to commit himself to a kind of philosophy that is a critique of language. The next chapter will illuminate one example of such a philosophy.

## Chapter Two

### *A new philosophical method*

Curiously, in “The Task,” Benjamin sets translation the same task as he sets philosophy: to restore the pure language. More curiously still, it seems that translation may be better suited to this task than philosophy. Consider this excerpt from “The Task”:

If there is such a thing as a language of truth, a tensionless and even silent depository of the ultimate secrets for which all thought strives, then this language of truth is – the true language. And this very language, in whose divination and description lies the only perfection for which a philosopher can hope, is concealed in concentrated fashions in translation (TTT 259).<sup>6</sup>

This excerpt rests on Benjamin’s presupposition that language has access to truth and, consequently, that the language of truth is the best answer to philosophy’s questions. However, this passage also poses enormous problems for Benjamin’s own claim, challenging our usual idea of the truth. Notice how Benjamin hedges as he makes his claim that unites language and truth; the whole claim rests on a hypothetical “if, then” statement. He says, “If there is such a thing,” which calls the existence of the language of truth into question. Assuming that the language of truth does exist, Benjamin further complicates his own argument, presenting the language of truth as hidden and only indirectly accessible through “divination and description.” Even with all its uncertainties, translation is still the philosopher’s best hope. Why would Benjamin set philosophy and translation to the same task? More pressingly, what does it mean to say that translation is philosophy’s best hope?

There seem to be three possible explanations: Perhaps Benjamin’s task for philosophers is distinct from translation. In that case, his remark that makes translation the hope of philosophy

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<sup>6</sup> A brief note on terminology: this is the only time in “The Task” where Benjamin uses the term “true language” or “language of truth.” In every other instance, he uses the term “pure language” to denote that which is revealed in translation. For this reason, I understand “true language” to be equivalent to “pure language.”

should be taken as an aside. However, it is hard to believe it is a coincidence that Benjamin sets philosophy and translation to the same task. The second possibility is that translation is a superior discipline and that Benjamin proposes it to replace philosophy. Admittedly, there is something antagonistic about the way Benjamin contrasts philosophy and translation. The above passage seems to contain a tacit judgment of the philosopher who, were it not for translation, would be hopelessly unable to complete his task. Even if translation will not replace philosophy, Benjamin grants translation a patent advantage over philosophy. The third, and to my mind most likely, possibility is that Benjamin wants to install translation as a mode of philosophy. By setting translation and philosophy to the same task, Benjamin unites them under a common goal. Yet, it is clear that translation wields greater power. The implication of this is that if philosophy wants to reach its goal, it will need the help of translation, its ally in the fight to restore the pure language.

The first chapter showed that, for Benjamin, language is the primary concern of philosophy. In its pure form, language opens the realm of metaphysical being and truth to human thinkers and circumscribes the sphere of possible knowledge. The first chapter concluded that Benjamin echoes Hamann by suggesting that philosophy should be a critique of language. If language is the home of truth, knowledge, and being, as “On Language” asserts, then philosophy needs a way to get inside language – that is, philosophy needs a method for conducting its critique of language. For Benjamin, it now seems, this method cannot be found within the realm of philosophy proper. I intend to show that Benjamin’s theory of translation functions as a critique of language, thus becoming the arm of philosophy required to achieve Benjamin’s program. Benjaminian translation, as it is proposed in “The Task of the Translator,” seems to be more aesthetical than philosophical. Translation works by showing, rather than telling. It relies



on a creative use of language as an expressive medium. If we take Benjamin's vision of translation seriously, we will have to rethink what counts as philosophy.

### **The Task of the Translator and the Possibilities of Translation**

Let us look at exactly what Benjamin says about translation. He writes, "...to turn the symbolizing into the symbolized itself, to regain pure language fully formed from the linguistic flux, is the tremendous and only capacity of translation" (TTT 261). A grand purpose such as this stands in contrast to other theories of translation that Benjamin criticizes at the start of the essay. Translations that seek to communicate information, as well as those that seek to transmit "that which lies beyond communication in a literary work" (what Benjamin calls "the poetic") are both inferior forms of translation (253). He writes

... what does a literary work 'say'? What does it communicate? It 'tells' very little to those who understand it. Its essential quality is not communication or the imparting of information. Yet any translation that intends to perform a transmitting function cannot transmit anything but communication – hence, something inessential. This is the hallmark of bad translations.... Whenever a translation undertakes to serve the reader, it demonstrates this (253).

In this passage Benjamin also calls the "poetic" inessential. If the "poetic" and information are both inessential, then we are led to presume that Benjamin's method of translation attends to the essential features of the work – though exactly what those essential features may be is left unsaid. Benjamin is concerned with the translation of literary texts, but literature is not Benjamin's concern.<sup>7</sup> Benjaminian translation takes literature "as a point of departure" and aims to "[integrate] many tongues into one true language" (259). While literature is crucial to

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<sup>7</sup> To be sure, literature does serve a purpose in the philosophical aspect of translation. Benjamin writes, "Whereas in the various tongues that ultimate essence, the pure language, is tied only to linguistic elements and their changes, in linguistic creations it is weighted with a heavy, alien meaning. To relieve it of this... to regain pure language fully formed from the linguistic flux, is the tremendous and only capacity of translation" (261). This passage suggests that pure language exists in a concentrated form in "linguistic creations" – which I take to mean works of literature. Translation has the capacity to unleash the pure language from within the work.

Benjamin's project (for reasons that will be clarified below), it is not the purpose of translation in his view. That is not to say that Benjaminian translation does not have any consequences for literature. It does, for example, mark the passage of a work into its afterlife, however this is a separate question. What is essential for Benjaminian translation is its mission to reveal the pure language.

Benjamin defines the task of the translator two more times. In addition to restating the purpose of translation, these appeals to translators illuminate something of the translator's relationship to language. First, he writes,

The task of the translator consists in finding the particular intention toward the target language which produces in that language the echo of the original. . . . Translation basically finds itself not in the center of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in an alien one (259).

Then, a few pages later, he adds,

It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is exiled among alien tongues, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work. For the sake of the pure language, he breaks through the decayed barriers of his own language (261).

These definitions of the task of the translator go much further than we are yet able to go. So we must set aside certain elements of each. From the first, we leave aside the notion of intention; from the second, the suggestion that the translator's task is destructive and entails breaking into or breaking through language. We will also defer the explanation of the mechanics of translation.

The translator's task requires him to take two very different tactics, one peaceable and one violent. On one hand, he calls out to language and waits to hear a reverberation; on the other, he breaks into the original language in order to liberate the pure language and then breaks down his own language. Despite the difference in tone, both excerpts place the translator in a similar relationship to language. In the first, language exists as a forest, an entity unto itself, and the

translator stands outside of it. Language has a similar quality in the second, where it seems to be a kind of structure that the translator deconstructs. The original author stands inside the language forest (258). Whereas the translator sees and works with language as a whole, the original author is overcome and surrounded by language. Benjamin does not indicate where a philosopher stands in relation to language, but I would conjecture that a philosopher, one who does not engage in a critique of language, stands with the original author inside the forest of language. From the outside, the translator is able to call into language, to break into language, and to break through the barriers of language. The translator has dominion over language in a way that an author does not.

In the first chapter, we discussed Eiland and Jennings's description of Benjamin's philosophy of language in their remark: "For us there is no outside of language." Of course, the "outside" of language we discussed in the last chapter has to do with the limits of human knowledge. The idea that language has an "inside" and "outside" takes on new meaning in "The Task." Benjamin positions the translator, quite literally, outside of language. There is not enough detail in Benjamin's description to say for sure, but it does seem that the translator stands alone on the outside of the "language forest." I want to suggest that his position outside language and his capacity to reveal the pure language are linked. From the outside, looking upon language as a whole, the translator is in a position to appreciate language in a way that is impossible for original authors (and, perhaps, for some philosophers). The translator defies the boundaries Benjamin set for mankind in "On Language" by stepping outside of the "language forest." That is not to say that the translator is able to uncover metaphysical being or truth in their pure, nonlinguistic forms; rather, looking on from the outside, the translator is in a position to

understand the size, terrain, and boundaries of language – to know the conditions of his own knowledge.

### **The Pure Language and the Kinship of Languages**

To know what translation accomplishes, it is necessary to determine what Benjamin means by “the pure language.” He writes,

As for the posited innermost kinship of languages, it is marked by a peculiar convergence. This special kinship holds because languages are not strangers to one another, but are, a priori and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they want to express (255).

Instead of historical development, Benjamin looks to something more abstract to demonstrate the kinship of languages: “what they want to express.” Whatever it is that “languages want to express” is the ahistorical foundation of all languages. It is interesting that Benjamin speaks of “want” in this context, because it suggests that the foundation of all language is partially composed of a desire for expression. The foundation of language is, therefore, not a static thing, but is a drive that all language contains. Two pages later, Benjamin continues to define the kinship of languages: “Rather, all suprahistorical kinship consists in this: in every one of them as a whole, one and the same thing is meant. Yet this one thing is achievable not by any single language but only by the totality of their intentions supplementing one another: the pure language” (257). This “one thing” is a restatement of his earlier formulation: “what languages want to express.” Later in the essay, Benjamin will say that the pure language is “that which is meant in all languages” (261). It is settled, then, that the “one thing” meant by each language as a whole is the pure language. We can assume that what languages “want to express” is also the pure language. We could then combine these terms and say: the kinship of all languages is founded on their basic will to express the pure language. Still, this definition does not tell us what the pure language is. It simply locates the pure language in the suprahistorical kinship of

languages. Benjamin does provide one hint: “In this pure language – which no longer means or expresses anything but is, as expressionless and creative Word, that which is meant in all languages...” (261). In this description of the pure language, Benjamin clearly refers to his 1916 essay, “On Language as Such and the Language of Man.”

In “On Language,” Benjamin sets up the relationship between language and knowledge makes it impossible to separate the two. In the paradisiacal state, man knows the linguistic being of the thing and expresses that knowledge in the name. Being is subsumed by knowledge as that which is known. I say this not to denigrate the presence of being in language, but to show that knowledge is the dominant feature of human language. Remember that Benjamin posits many forms of language in “On Language”: the language of God, the material language of things, and all the languages of man. Knowledge does not dominate all the forms of language Benjamin mentions in the essay; it is the special mark of the paradisiacal language of man, the language of “perfect knowledge” (OLS 71). It is the unique and principal capacity of human language as it occurs in words to express knowledge of the world.<sup>8</sup> In paradise, the knowledge man expresses in name is guaranteed to be true by the Word of God; the language of things demarcates the sphere of what he may know. Although Benjamin speaks of three distinct languages, the languages of paradise actually form a cohesive whole: the pure language. For the language of man, the state of pure language makes certain knowledge possible.

Brian Britt’s reading of the pure language differs from mine, but only slightly. He and I are in agreement that the ideal state of language in paradise, as Benjamin describes it in “On Language,” is meant to illustrate the pure language. Britt writes, “Instead of symbolizing something else, language expresses itself, and instead of linking word and object, ‘naming’ links

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<sup>8</sup> This, as opposed to the human languages of art or justice that were described in chapter one.

God and humanity. This ‘pure language’ of naming has nothing to do with meanings; it communicates only itself” (Britt 37). Later, he will say that the pure language is the “perfect linguistic harmony between word and truth” (55).

While Britt is right to locate the pure language in Benjamin’s vision of paradise, his understanding of the pure language is too simplistic. I object to Britt’s claim that the pure language is the same as the paradisiacal language of man. The pure language is much larger than the paradisiacal language of man. Benjamin never calls the paradisiacal language of man “the pure language.” Benjamin only speaks of the pure language once in “On Language.” He writes, “Man is the namer; by this we recognize that through him pure language speaks. All nature, insofar as it communicates itself, communicates itself in language, and so finally in man” (OLS 65). Thus, we see that the pure language is not identical with the language of man, as Britt seems to claim, but rather that man is the conduit of pure language. Benjamin writes,

Language only expresses itself purely where it speaks in name – that is, in its universal naming. So in name culminate both the intensive totality of language, as the absolutely communicable mental entity, and the extensive totality of language, as the universally communicating (naming) entity (65).

Recall that the intensive totality of language is common to the languages of man and things alike. It allows them to express their own mental being in language. The extensive totality of language is unique to the language of man. It allows man to express his knowledge of the world in language by naming things. Thus, Britt is right to say that the pure language is realized in paradisiacal human language. Man alone has the capacity to know the linguistic being of things and to express his knowledge of that being in the name. However, the language of man is only possible because of the other two languages of paradise: God’s Word and the language of things. The languages of God, man, and thing act in concert to produce an expression of human knowledge in a name, as chapter one demonstrated. The pure language is not a single language,

but a state of the world in which all the ineffable truth of God's Word underpins the essence of things and ensures the validity of man's knowledge.

Furthermore, I disagree with Britt's idea that a name does not link the word with the object. Britt may be drawing a distinction between Benjamin's theory of language and the bourgeois theory of language. In that case, he means to say that the word is not arbitrarily connected to the object and that the value of the word is not rooted in the thing it designates. However, it seems that Britt is entirely disregarding the epistemological aspect of the pure language. In paradise, man's knowledge of the world binds the name to the thing. In the paradisiacal language of man, knowledge always precedes the name; that knowledge is acquired when man intuits the language of things. When man names a thing, the name is supported by the knowledge he has of it. Knowledge is the liaison between the material language of things and the names man bestows upon things, forging a link between word and object.

Let us return, then, to the relation between the pure language and the existing languages of the world. According to Benjamin, the pure language is what all languages want to express, forming the suprahistorical kinship of languages. However, Benjamin's claim becomes confused in light of the fact that the pure language is the paradisiacal state of the world. Perhaps considering the relation between the pure language and the paradisiacal language of man can alleviate this confusion. The state of pure language enables man to express certain knowledge in his language. It would seem, then, that existing languages want to return to the state of pure language so that they, too, may express certain knowledge of the world.

However, the fall from grace has made certain knowledge impossible.

The language of things can pass into the language of knowledge and name only through translation – so many translations, so many languages – once man has fallen from the paradisiacal state that knew only one language.... The paradisiacal language of man must

have been one of perfect knowledge, whereas later all knowledge is again infinitely differentiated in the multiplicity of languages... (71).

Whereas there was only one human language in paradise, language fractures after the fall from grace. Translation, in this case, refers to the translation that takes place when human beings bestow a name on a thing. Even after the fall from grace, all languages have the capacity to name objects. This passage indicates that all the languages of the world express knowledge, but that they accomplish that expression in distinctive ways. The difference in expression exists because they have each translated the language of things into human language in their own way. This means that knowledge is expressed differently in each language. By saying that all languages want to express the pure language, Benjamin suggests that all languages long to reenter paradise and, once again, become a singular language capable of expressing certain knowledge.

### **The Translator's View of Language**

If translation is the best hope of reaching the pure language, we must understand how Benjaminian translation works. To begin, let us consider the translator's view of language. Benjamin requires the translator to disregard the referent of a word and even the sense of a sentence. In effect, he requires the translator to put language in a vacuum. That is, the translator must be interested not in *what* language means, but in *how* meaning comes to be constructed in language. As we will soon see, this *how* of meaning differs from language to language. This shift in perspective from *what* to *how* is required in order to perform the great philosophical task of restoring the pure language, because it acknowledges that language, not some other object, is the location of meaning. Translation elevates language from its usual status as a tool for communication or reference and tries to adduce the operations of language alone. In this manner, translation aims to unfold the capacity of each language to express knowledge so as to reintegrate the fractured languages of the world into one.



Intention is a critical term in Benjamin's theory of translation, because it defines the way a language makes meaning, i.e. the *how*. He writes,

...we must draw a distinction, in the concept of 'intention,' between what is meant and the way of meaning it. In the words *Brot* and *pain*, what is meant is the same, but the way of meaning it is not (TTT 257).

Intention requires us to forget the object named, in this case the object we call "bread," and concentrate on the *way* each language talks about that object. The intention of a language is its unique expressive capacity. This unique expressivity or way of meaning makes languages "strive to exclude" one another and "permits the word *Brot* to mean something other to a German than what the word *pain* means to a Frenchman" (257). I take this to mean that the intention, or way of meaning, of a particular language is the unique "Germanness" or "Frenchness" of a word. That is, the way of meaning in an individual word ties this word to the whole language of which it is a part. On the level of a single word, the difference may seem negligible. Benjamin would strongly disagree. From his perspective, "words rather than sentences [are] the primary element of the translator" (260). This is so, because in order to reproduce the way of meaning in the original, the translator must perform a word-by-word, literal rendering of the text. On Benjamin's account the translator should not attempt to translate the whole idea of a sentence, but should attend to meaning on the level of individual words. This will be explained in greater detail below.

Benjamin espouses a holistic view of word meaning. That is, a single word can never be understood in isolation, but requires the support of a network of words. Or, to put it another way, to understand a word, one must understand the whole language from which it comes. Benjamin sets up such a theory of word meaning in various ways throughout "The Task." The most obvious suggestion of this theory is his description of the pure language, where he claims that

each language, as a whole, wants to express the same thing: the pure language. Thus, Benjamin introduces the idea that word meaning operates beyond a basic, referential level. Though he does not argue for this at length, he seems to understand language to be a system of meaning that works together toward a common goal. The systemic nature of Benjamin's thinking on language is also exemplified by his conception of the pure language, which depends on all three languages of paradise. The pure language can only exist in the world that the languages of God, man, and thing create. In this way, Benjamin seems to suggest that language depends on the world in which it exists for its operation.

If we do not suspend the object named, the significance of the difference between *Brot* and *pain* is too easily reduced to accident and therefore disregarded. To some philosophers, it would seem that because each word names the same object, the words are simply equivalent. On such an account, translation poses only a mechanical inconvenience and simply requires the translator to have a factual understanding of how the words in one language can be correctly replaced by words from another. In such a case as this, where the word being translated names such a simple object, it would seem that translation really is as easy as replacing one word by another. This approach is not unreasonable, especially if the translation is concerned with communicating information. For example, if the text being translated were a recipe for bread, then translating German to French, or vice versa, really is a matter of a mechanical change between languages. So long as bread is still produced by the German and the French baker, the translation will have done its job. This, however, is not the kind of translation that interests Benjamin, because it cannot tell us the first thing about how language works. All it is capable of is telling us is how to produce bread. Benjamin eliminates the object named and sense in order to

change the purpose of translation from one of communication to one of discovering the *how* of language, which had heretofore been obscured by its communicative aspect: the *what*.

Here we should be reminded of Benjamin's argument against the bourgeois theory of language from "On Language." An information transmission model of translation succumbs to the mistaken belief of bourgeois theory that language is meaningful because of some separate object. Benjamin's own theory of language and his method of translation are both geared toward disproving this mistaken idea and showing that language is internally meaningful as an expressive medium, irrespective of an object named. That is not to say that a Benjaminian translator would translate the word *Brot* into French differently than a bourgeois translator would – they would both be forced to say *pain*, because at the end of it, *pain* is the word the situation demands. Nor is Benjamin saying that the words *Brot* and *pain* do not refer to the object we call "bread." They certainly do and this why the words must be translated this way. Benjamin's point is that reference to an object is not *why* these words are meaningful and that our understanding of word meaning must not end there.

Getting rid of objects and sense allows Benjamin to isolate language as a system and focus on the *how* of a language, that is, its intention. I would argue that the *how* of language or its way of meaning is a qualitative, aesthetical property. On a quantitative, factual level, *Brot* and *pain* refer to the same object. However, this level of meaning is not of interest to Benjamin; indeed, by disregarding referents and sense, Benjamin cuts off the quantitative sphere entirely. Benjamin is interested in showing that each language is a uniquely expressive medium that constructs meaning and expresses knowledge in its own way. His question is not, "What is the meaning of this sentence?" or even "What is the meaning of this word?" Rather, Benjamin's question arises from the plurality of languages and from his idea that language is a medium in

which knowledge and being are expressed. He wants to know how the intention, the way of meaning, the expressive character of a language enters the meaning it communicates. The difference in each language's way of meaning could be likened to the difference between oil paints and watercolors. The same image may be depicted in each painting, but the qualities of those images and the suggestions each medium makes about the landscape are incomparable. That task of a Benjaminian translator is to bring these incomparable ways of meaning as close together as possible, so as to move toward the reunification of all languages.

The translator occupies a singularly powerful position that allows him to deconstruct language. Bettine Menke writes,

In translating, the relationship between the 'way of meaning' and 'what is meant'... is ripped open, so that one's 'own' language itself appears alien in the face of all meaning... Translation tears apart the 'way of meaning' and 'that which is meant'... precisely in that it draws attention to their mutual dependency... The dependency of 'what is meant' on the 'way of meaning' reveals itself in translation precisely at the site of their disunity, at the point where the 'way of meaning' turns away from 'what is meant' and becomes noticeable as such... (Menke 90).

Much of this passage is a recapitulation of my own analysis of the *what* versus the *how* of language. However, Menke underlines the deconstructive power of translation to decouple referent and intention, which normally form a bonded pair. Earlier, I suggested that the communicative aspect of language, the *what*, obscures the intention. Menke echoes my suggestion and says that by separating intention and referent, intention is able to appear independently. Menke suggests that the way of meaning is the dominant component of language, as that which dictates what is meant. Translation has the power to isolate and reveal the chief creator of meaning in language.

Later, Menke goes on to say,

Translation, like 'criticism,' is the mortifying (mode of) 'afterlife' of that which remains ruined, dead, and disintegrated: the afterlife traverses – and ruins – the 'bodies', and in

such a way ‘speaks’ for that which, in the context of the work and in the closure of its form, had to be excluded (voiceless, mute) (96).

Menke takes the idea that translation is a form of criticism directly from “The Task.” This idea could be understood in two ways. The first is that translation is a form of literary criticism, bringing works of literature into their afterlife (TTT 258). This is certainly one aspect of translation’s critical function. As I stated earlier, while Benjamin’s theory of translation must take literature as the starting point of its work, translation departs from literature to pursue its task. Translation’s task to restore the pure language is a matter that concerns the integrity of human language and knowledge. Thus, translation’s scope is much broader and, indeed, more philosophical than its capacity to critique works of literature. The second way of reading the above passage is that translation functions as a critique of language. Translation “mortifies” language, rending *what* is meant from the language’s way of meaning. Through this mortification, translation reveals the intention that had been “voiceless” and “mute” in language. That is to say, in decoupling the *how* of language from the *what*, and in the breakdown of sense that ensues, translation brings the unseen intention of language to the surface. Through this process of mortification or critique, translation exposes the apparatus that produces sense in language, making the inner workings of language known.

### **The Method**

For all the talk of translation’s capacities, we have yet to see how it actually works. Translators alter the intention of their native languages. They are not interested in communicating the sense of the original, only in reproducing its intention.<sup>9</sup> They “[find] the

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<sup>9</sup> “For this very reason translation must in large measure refrain from wanting to communicate something, from rendering the sense, and in this the original is important to it only insofar as it has already relieved the translator and his translation of the effort to assembling and expressing what is to be conveyed.... As regards the meaning, the language of a translation can... let itself

particular intention toward the target language which produces in that language the echo of the original..." (259). The "target language" is the language into which one translates. Translation, thus, creates a situation in which languages can "supplement one another in their intentions" (257). The final result of the supplementation of language, which I take to mean a kind of cross-pollination between languages, is the emergence of the pure language "from the harmony of all the various ways of meaning" (257). Intention is the way a particular language constructs meaning. However, Benjamin seems to be using his own term somewhat differently in this instance. Intention means two things: the characteristic way a particular language has of making sense and the intention engineered by a translator toward a language, allowing the language to construct sense in a new way. Let us call the first kind the natural intention and call the second kind the manmade intention. With manmade intention, the translator can act upon language and change the way it constructs meaning.

Benjamin supports my reading that translation is a transfiguration of language elsewhere in the essay. He includes an extended citation of Rudolf Pannwitz, of which I quote this portion:

Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a mistaken premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English.... [The translator] must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language (262).

Granted, these are not Benjamin's own words, but they provide a straightforward statement of his program. The fact that Benjamin quotes Pannwitz at such length (the full passage takes up roughly one third of a page) is indicative of the weight Benjamin places on Pannwitz's analysis. On Pannwitz's account, translation is not simply concerned with communicating the sense of the original text in the translation. Like Benjamin, Pannwitz focuses on the capacity of translation to

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go, so that it gives 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*" (260).

transform language. He is very specific about the direction in which this transformation is to take place: the target language must become like the original, not the other way around. For Pannwitz, the original language “expands and deepens” the target language overall, thus changing the target language permanently. This passage appears on the second to last page of Benjamin’s essay as part of his conclusion and immediately precedes Benjamin’s only examples of what he would consider good translation. He writes, “Hölderlin’s translations from Sophocles were his last work; in them meaning plunges from abyss to abyss until it threatens to become lost in the bottomless depths of language” (262). Hölderlin’s translations proceed according to a “literal rendering of the syntax” (260). That is, they translate Sophocles word by word and retain the original structure of the Greek as best they can. This is what Pannwitz seems to have in mind when he says that a translator ought to transform German into Hindi, Greek, or English. The translator fundamentally alters the way his native language puts together meaning in order to reflect the intention of the original. The translator uses German words, but the intention of the German – *how* it constructs meaning – is other than ordinary German.

As Susan Bernofsky puts it, “The literalness – in the sense of verbatim, word-for-word translation that mimics the syntax of the original – is so extreme that it sometimes gives the impression that Hölderlin was attempting to transplant these texts whole into his own language, rewriting the Greek poems with German words” (Bernofsky 93-94). Bernofsky’s claim about Hölderlin is emblematic of Pannwitz’s assertion that translation ought to turn the target language into the original. This is also what Benjamin implies when he says,

... translation, instead of imitating the sense of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s way of meaning, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel (TTT 260).

Presumably, this greater vessel or language depicts the idea of the fundamental unity of all languages, the pure language. The translator creates a way of meaning that is foreign to the target language, yet still not the same as the original – a kind of language that does not truly belong to either language, but exists between them as their harmony. Remember, this synthesis does not grow out of the common information that each language conveys, but, rather, on the way of meaning in each language. It seems that the fact that such a synthesis is possible – a synthesis of language alone, irrespective of objects and sense – proves that the wealth of languages and their many ways of constructing sense are bound by something common; it alludes to something that underlies all languages – to use Benjamin’s words, it indicates the kinship of languages.

Translation is not without danger or consequences. Changing language in such a fundamental way is threatening to language.<sup>10</sup> Recall the violent language in Benjamin’s second statement of the task of the translator. The translator must “liberate the language imprisoned in a work” and must, “for the sake of the pure language... [break] through the decayed barriers of his own language” (261). The translator is, as in the Italian saying, *traduttore, traditore*, a traitor to language. Take Benjamin’s second example of ideal translation: the interlinear translation of the Bible. In the appendix I include an example of this kind of translation. There are several things you’ll notice. The English moves right to left, following the natural movement of Hebrew. The words are clustered together, rather than put in an orderly line. The English sentences also have a strange word order, which reflects the word order in the Hebrew. Aside from the individual words and their spelling, these sentences do not follow the rules of English, nor does it sound like English any ordinary person would speak. Yet, even without looking to the marginal

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<sup>10</sup> Benjamin himself admits of the destructive nature of translation, saying, “...the enormous danger inherent in all translations: the gates of language thus expanded and modified may slam shut and enclose the translator in silence.... In them meaning plunges from abyss to abyss until it threatens to become lost in the bottomless depths of language” (262).



passages from the English Bible, it is possible to understand the Hebraized English. By changing the way of meaning in English, the interlinear Bible shows us something that we may find disturbing: the plasticity of our own language. Translation brings a kind of English other than our own into existence; a kind of English that, as Pannwitz would put it, has been expanded and deepened by Hebrew. The interlinear translation causes sense to emerge in a new way, through a new intention, showing that language is a dynamic medium responsible for the construction of meaning. The greatest insight of the interlinear translation is that such a transformation of English is possible. Benjamin claims that translation moves the plurality of languages toward a state of unity. This unity exists on a small scale in a translation such as this or Hölderlin's. Translation demonstrates that despite differences in way of meaning, languages are capable of reaching across the boundaries of time and culture. In this way, translation indicates the will to express a universal meaning that is at the heart of all languages.

At this point, we must pause. It seems to me that there is a certain danger in translation that we will imagine a *something* that passes from one language to another. That is, that there exists some concrete meaning that is transplanted from the first text into the translation. If we ascribe to such an idea, we may be led on a wild chase, trying to apprehend this allusive, hidden meaning in languages; this view leads us to believe that there is something solid inside language that we must access. Such a notion may lead philosophers into a wrong-headed view of language and lead them, once again, to do away with the words we speak in the search for something else. Benjamin does place some strictures on what this *something* may be – it is not, for example, the referent or information. The idea that there is something hidden in language ought to strike us as strange, especially coming from Benjamin, since he argues against such a conception of language in “On Language.” Yet, his idea of a pure language that underlies all other languages

does seem to open on to the same kinds of problems that bourgeois theory does, in that the languages we speak could be seen as coverings over the pure language. Recall the definition of the pure language: the state of language in which expression of knowledge is guaranteed to be true, which is typified by the paradisiacal language of man. It would seem, then, that Benjamin does not seek an illusory *something* in language, but a state of knowledge and language. Further, Benjamin's method does not ascribe to a bourgeois theoretical picture, because he does not try to get past language. For him, the pure language is accessed within existing languages.

The appearance of the pure language in existing languages is only possible because translation uses language as an expressive medium. Again, the translator's aim is to create a harmony of intentions that will point the way to the pure language. To that end, he must manipulate his own language in order to incorporate the intention of the original. The translator

...must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's way of meaning, thus making the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel (260).

Rather than trying to extract the pure language directly, the translator uses his own language so as to best depict the character and way of meaning in the original and, thereby, to make the pure language "recognizable." To do so, the translator uses language creatively, turning the language into "a royal robe with ample folds" (258).<sup>11</sup> This description of translation stands in opposition to the description of the original, in which Benjamin likens content and language to "a fruit and its skin" (258).

Far from exposing the pure language, which, we must remember, is devoid of information, intention, and sense, translation envelops the pure language in cascading, velvety, and heavy robes. Translation, in fact, exaggerates the presence of language, accessing the pure

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<sup>11</sup> "Whereas content and language form a certain unity in the original, like a fruit and its skin, the language of the translation envelops its content like a royal robe with ample folds" (258).

language indirectly by means of the artifice of language it creates. Consider the following quotation of Benjamin, which Britt has annotated with the original German words:

It [translation] cannot possibly reveal (*offenbaren*) or establish (*herstellen*) this hidden relationship itself; but it can represent (*darstellen*) it by realizing it in embryonic or intensive form (Britt 53).

*Darstellen* is a rather difficult German word to translate. Representation makes perfect sense, but it would be prudent to add other possible translations in order to flesh out our understanding of the concept: to portray, to depict, to stand for, to interpret, to play a role (PONS Online-Wörterbuch de.pons.com). Synonyms include, *nachbilden*, *vorstellen*, *wiedergeben*, and *zeigen*, which mean “to reproduce,” “to imagine,” “to convey,” and “to show,” respectively. Translation is not capable of showing us the pure language directly; rather, it must do so by means of imagination, reproduction, depiction, etc. It seems, then, that translation functions in the same way that much art does, insofar as art, too, shows us something in portrayal, depiction, or performance. Translation is an aesthetical process that uses language as its medium to portray, depict, or perform the pure language.

### **Translation as Philosophy**

Let us return to the problem that began this chapter: the status of translation as an arm of philosophy. Having seen the details of Benjamin’s method of translation, do we think translation is a viable avenue for philosophy? If so, what does translation do that philosophy cannot? Are the results of translation satisfactory?

We should be suspicious about Benjaminian translation. He writes,

This, to be sure, is to admit that all translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages. An instant and final rather than a temporary and provisional solution to this foreignness remains out of the reach of mankind; at any rate, it eludes any direct attempt. . . . Yet in a singularly impressive manner, it [translation] at least points the way to this region: the predestined, hitherto inaccessible realm of reconciliation and fulfillment of languages (257).

This passage seems to undercut the argument that philosophy must take on translation as a possible method. In order for translation to work as a mode of philosophizing, we must first believe Benjamin's claim about its capacity to represent the pure language. Still, translation will never be able to fully uncover the pure language. It will only point the way toward pure language through "divination and description," which suggests an indirect, perhaps even blind, approach to pure language. If translation cannot accomplish what it set out to do – to reclaim the pure language – what is the point? Is this good enough for philosophy? Isn't philosophy a discipline interested in conclusions?<sup>12</sup>

Whether we accept translation as a mode of philosophy will depend largely on what we expect from philosophy as a discipline. As philosophers, are we more interested in reaching accurate conclusions or in the process of thinking? If the first, translation is hopelessly unphilosophical, by reason of its inability to reveal the pure language fully. If the second, however, there seems to be room in philosophy for translation. Given that translation has no foreseeable end or tangible conclusion, its philosophical worth must lie in its way of thinking through questions about language. In "On Language" and "The Task" Benjamin proposes a theory about the nature of language and its significance. However, at this point his argument ends and translation takes over. Translation thus does not seek to replace philosophy, but serves as a practical application that will allow this way of thinking to be implemented until the "messianic end" of the history of languages (257).

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<sup>12</sup> The apparent failure of translation is actually a product of the movement of language through history. Translation is beholden to the history of languages and literature; it does not drive history, but is the way we can see the progress of history in the present – translation "puts the hallowed growth of languages to the test" as they make their way to the "messianic end of their history" (257). So it would seem unfair to fault translation for its inability to reveal the pure language fully, as the history of language is not under its control.

Recall the image of the translator that Benjamin provides: the translator stands on a ridge outside the forest of language and calls into the forest, awaiting the echo that will allow him to realize the intention of the original in his own language. The translator's work exists in dialogue with language: the translator speaks and the forest of language responds. The translator-philosopher begins the dialogue by calling out to language, but ultimately the echoing response of language enables him to translate a text. As much as the translator stands in dominion over language, looking upon it from the outside, the translator ultimately allows language to speak for itself. Here, we should recall the earlier conclusion that translation functions as a critique of language, deconstructing the production of meaning. In addition to its critical function, translation would fundamentally change the philosopher's use of language. Consider the following remark:

... language is an *organon* a tool, a means of communication, and languages, as Socrates says in the *Cratylus*, mere costumes of the idea. This is why we must start from things, from what is, and not from words. From this perspective, to translate is to communicate as quickly as possible the thing underlying the words, to reveal the unity of being under the difference of languages, to reduce multiplicity to the singular<sup>13</sup>: translation is then what Schleiermacher calls *dolmetschen*, interpretation, 'go-between.'

...Language is and is only the difference between languages... understanding that different languages produce different worlds, making these worlds communicate and enabling languages to trouble each other in such a way that the reader's language reaches out to the writer's language; our common world is at most a regulating principle, an aim, and not a starting point (Cassin 248-249).

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<sup>13</sup> It is true that Benjamin ultimately seeks to reduce the multiplicity of languages to a singular pure language. However, he knows this to be impossible. Far from reducing language, the method that Benjamin prescribes would, in fact, multiply existing languages many times over, by creating syntheses or harmonies between languages, such as the Hebraic English in the interlinear Bible. All the same, it may well be a worthy criticism that the goal of translation for Benjamin is to reduce language. Perhaps he, too, cannot resist the trap of an instrumental view of language. Or, at the very least, he cannot resist the idea that there is something else to be found within language.

These excerpts are taken from Cassin's chapter entitled "Philosophizing in Tongues." By her own admission, Cassin's thinking is deeply influenced by Heidegger. I do not mean to invoke a Heideggerian view of language here. I quote Cassin in order to voice something that Benjamin does not say directly, but is a sentiment present throughout "On Language" and "The Task." It is the idea that language does not only reflect the world, but that language is constitutive of our world. Or, to put it in less Heideggerian terms: language is the medium in which we learn, act, and live among others. For those reasons, language – along with a confluence of other factors – helps to constitute our place in and view of the world. Benjamin does not speak of the production of a world, but soon his solidarity with Cassin will be undeniable.

The first excerpt describes an instrumental view of language. The idea that language is a "mere costume" has consequences for translation and philosophy alike. Just as in the much-maligned bourgeois theory, language is presented as that which must be discarded in order to apprehend the idea that lies beneath, i.e. the meaningful content of the word. Such a perspective on language would lead to the kind of ineffective translation and faulty theory of word meaning that Benjamin criticizes. This inferior kind of translation is simply mechanical and aims to communicate as effectively as possible, changing the words on the surface, but maintaining the sense or the object named. Translation is, then, nothing more than a costume change and language is nothing more than an impediment to the truth. Here we should be reminded of the description of bourgeois theory from chapter one, which described this theory of language in terms of ships carrying cargo. The ship, like the costume, is devalued as a empty covering of the true meaning. If the philosopher holds, as Socrates apparently did, that words are mere costumes or mere signs – as opposed to the very location of meaning – then language becomes the philosopher's enemy. The philosopher must fight against language, which he believes obscures

or costumes the ‘real’ idea being presented. For this sort of philosopher, language is an impediment to meaning; an interloper, standing between the philosopher and the truth. One can only imagine the disaster that would result when a philosopher with such a bias began to think about the nature of language. He would be awash in confusion, looking for something within or behind language to justify its meaning.

For Cassin, language exists in flux, with nothing to anchor it. It is not clear whether Cassin would share Benjamin’s assertion that all languages share a foundation in the pure language. For Benjamin, languages are in flux over time as they make their way to the messianic end of their history. It almost goes without saying that Benjamin is interested in the differences between languages, for they are what make translation worthwhile. The difference is that Benjamin holds to the idea of a foundation of language, the components of which he develops in “On Language.” The pure language will only fully emerge at the “messianic end of their history” (TTT 257). Here, “their” refers to existing languages. Whatever foundation Benjamin may posit, it seems that the foundation exists in a realm other than our own. Aside from the messianic end of history, the only other time in which the pure language exists is in Eden, a realm of mythic prehistory. Thus, the pure language lies outside history, making it inaccessible to our languages, which all exist in history. The inaccessibility of the foundation of languages seems to temper Benjamin’s stance and make it more amenable to Cassin’s. Translation provides indirect access to the foundation, but always within the existing languages of the world. Thus, Benjamin and Cassin both take human language as their starting points.

Cassin proposes what seems to be a theory of language that could replace the instrumentalist view. This model would reverse the relationship between language and world, giving primacy to language. At this point, we should remember what the example of interlinear

translation showed us about language. Namely, that language does not afford us a transparent view of the world, but always an interpretation, an ordering, of the world. This, I think, is what Cassin means when she says that the world must be taken as a regulative principle and not a starting point. Certainly, there are certain regulating principles between the Hebrew and the interlinear English translation. The events in the story remain the same; we know who is going where with whom and for what reason. Despite the discernible plot line, the English has been made very strange in this translation. As Menke would have it, the interlinear translation has broken down English in order to bring intention to the surface – not the intention of English, for this is lost as English assumes the intention of Hebrew, but the power of intention more generally. The interlinear translation shows that the intention of language is the lens through which – or the medium in which – the referents and information of the text appear.

The actual pure language, an expression of knowledge that is guaranteed to be true, cannot emerge from translation. Through its critical function, Benjaminian translation shows that language is always present in the construction of meaning. Thus, any expression of knowledge is bound to be impure, because it must be expressed in the medium of a particular language. Taken as philosophical praxis, translation would allow the philosopher to overcome the impurity of language by showing the unity that lies at the heart of language. Further, translation would enable philosophers to encounter the pure language in an aesthetic, representational way. Benjamin is not willing to say outright that philosophy must give way to art, as other philosophers do. However, his method of translation suggests an avenue by which philosophy may begin to think and work outside of ordinary discourse, pushing philosophy closer to art.



### **Chapter Three** *The purpose of philosophy*

The answer to the question, “What is the purpose of philosophy?” will provide what is, perhaps, the most intimate description of the discipline, for this answer says something about the people conducting philosophy. The last chapter began to elucidate the purpose of philosophy, as Benjamin understands it, by setting up philosophy’s task. Simply put, the goal of philosophy is to restore the pure language. Chapter two argued that translation should be counted as a mode of philosophy, atypical as that may be. The aim of this chapter is not to determine the purpose of philosophy in general, but to uncover the purpose of translation as Benjamin conceives of it.

Up to now, the allegorical aspect of Benjamin’s essays has been glossed over. However, the allegory plays a pivotal role in Benjamin’s argument. The purpose of philosophy lies in the subtext of the biblical allegory, which sets the tone for Benjamin’s vision of translation. The allegory’s role in the argument is in part practical, providing Benjamin’s system of languages with its underlying structure. The allegory also plays a more dynamic role, adding implications to Benjamin’s argument. Angus Fletcher writes, “Allegories are based on parallels between two levels of being that correspond to each other, the one supposed by the reader, the other literally presented in the fable” (Fletcher 113). The purpose of this chapter is to interrogate the double meanings of the allegory, exposing the subtext and structures that shape Benjamin’s philosophy of language and his accompanying vision of philosophy. This chapter will show that “The Task” is a necessary extension of “On Language.” While “The Task” is not overtly allegorical, when it is read as a continuation of “On Language” its allegorical character comes to light, giving new meaning to the theory of translation it presents. The allegory portrays translation as a messiah figure, granting the purpose of translation a spiritual significance.

## The Argumentative Function of Allegory

In order to see how allegory contributes to Benjamin's argument, we must understand how allegory works. Admittedly, the use of allegory as an argumentative tool poses serious problems for philosophy. Philosophy strives for clarity and focus, which allegory is unable to provide, given that it requires interpretation by nature. I will argue that allegory is not opposed to the goals of philosophy and, moreover, that allegory can play an active and critical role in philosophical thinking. Still, I must acknowledge that allegory invites a level of ambiguity that is, perhaps, a hindrance to the philosophical process – or at least a hindrance to linear progress. In fact, the ambiguity inherent in allegory serves as part of Benjamin's argument.

In his analysis of allegory, Angus Fletcher pays special attention to the term *kosmos*, which he defines as “the essential type of an allegorical image” (109) and later “the most useful term for naming the elements of any symbolism, such as allegory, that establishes a hierarchy of more and less powerful agents and images” (113). In Greek, *kosmos* has two meanings: the world or the order of things in the universe and also ornament or adornment. Fletcher writes:

It signifies (1) a universe, and (2) a symbol that implies a rank in a hierarchy.... The classic example of a *kosmos* is the jewelry worn by a lady to show her social status, or any other such sartorial emblems of position.... It could be used of any decoration or ornament of dress... particularly denoting status (Fletcher 110-111).

The universe of Benjamin's allegory is that of the Judeo-Christian creation story, beginning with God's creation of the world and ending in the fall from grace. Thus, Benjamin's philosophy of language and its accompanying program for philosophy are framed in terms of the origin and fate of mankind. Thus, Benjamin uses the allegory to elevate language and philosophy to matters of sacred import.

Fletcher also claims that allegory is a tool that creates internal order and expresses that order in ornamentation. It seems that the hierarchy expressed by the woman's jewelry is tied up

with her social world. The woman sporting the jewelry would certainly express her status in a variety of ways, of which the jewelry is but one. One could even argue that other expressions of the woman's social status, such as her manner of speaking or her position at the table, are stronger demonstrations of her status than the jewelry. The jewelry, I would argue, concentrates the circumstances of the social hierarchy into a single object. That is, the jewelry can be seen as a representation of all the other ways in which the woman's status is expressed. A queen, for example, has a great many ways to express her power. Of course, there are practical ways, such as issuing a decree. There are also social indications, such as the size of her retinue and her place next to the king. Her crown, however, is the emblem of her power. The importance of the crown as a symbol of power is indicated by elaborate coronation ceremonies. One of Fletcher's examples of ornamentation is military uniforms.<sup>14</sup> If you were familiar with the particular decorations that a given branch of the military uses to show rank, you would be able to look at a group of service people and, just by looking at their decorations, be able to identify the rank to which each individual belongs. Like the queen's crown, the power of a general is symbolized in the quantity and coloration of his decorations.

Fletcher focuses on the function of images in allegory, but Benjamin's allegory is more conceptual than imagistic. That is to say, Benjamin's allegory does not seem to use "jewelry" in the sense Fletcher describes. Instead, Benjamin associates his hierarchy of language with Judeo-Christian concepts of God, man, and world. However, I would argue that Benjamin does not bind the pieces of his allegory to particular images because he does not need to. Using the Judeo-Christian narrative (creation, fall, redemption) for the framework of his allegory enables

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<sup>14</sup> Fletcher uses military uniforms and church vestments as examples: "...their own proper ornaments, the signs that go with them systematically, as the vestments of the priest go with the Mass, or the insignia of his uniform go with the military dictator or the five-star general" (Fletcher 120)

Benjamin to call upon the enormous and already existing visual culture of Christian iconography. When Benjamin invokes highly charged religious ideas, such as God, Eden, damnation, or the messiah a wealth of images is called forth.<sup>15</sup> This abundance of imagery is composed of centuries of artistic representations of biblical scenes, of church architecture, and of iconography is the “jewelry” with which Benjamin adorns his theory of language and vision of philosophy.

In Benjamin’s case, the ideas of God the Father, or Eden, or the fall from grace act as the identifying marks of the element to which they are attached. Though not visual ornamentation, these ideas are so rich with divine significance that they are capable of exalting or demeaning the element they describe. The fact that Benjamin describes one type of language as the language of God is certainly a way of adorning this type of language with cosmic significance and, I would argue, a kind of divine beauty. Invoking an idea like God the Father necessarily stimulates the imagination and makes a suggestion about the character of the language in question. The same could be said of Eden or the fall from grace. These concepts attach an atmosphere of meaning to the type of language they describe, which enables Benjamin to construct his system of languages.

The allegory in “On Language” expresses several hierarchies, which constitute Benjamin’s system of languages. The most general hierarchy is the types of language, which seems to be based on value. The Word of God occupies the top rank, followed by the paradisiacal language of man, then by the fallen language of man, and, finally, by the language of things. This hierarchy is natural to the Judeo-Christian tradition. Even without understanding

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<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting that, if I am correct, Benjamin’s allegory then depends on certain cultural factors of his audience. I hope it is not too speculative to say that Benjamin’s allegory would carry the most weight with an audience steeped in Judeo-Christian art and iconography – like twentieth century Germans. That is, Benjamin’s allegory depends on what seems to be another kind of language, in that it draws upon established imagery. I mean to say that the imagery associated with the Judeo-Christian motifs that Benjamin invokes occupy a distinct place and carry a powerful meaning in Western culture.

each type of language, the names alone and our familiarity with Genesis would inform us of the structure of the hierarchy. Thus, the allegory conveys the hierarchy even before Benjamin explains it through his theory of language. Benjamin uses the same framework to systematize the types of language in terms of their knowledge and their capacity for expression.

Let us begin with the hierarchy of knowledge. The station of each form of language within the allegory indicates the degree and power of the knowledge expressed in it. At the very top of this hierarchy we find the language of God: the pure medium of knowledge. The knowledge expressed in the Word is purest because it alone precedes the material world, as chapter one explained. On the second tier of the hierarchy we find the paradisiacal language of man, which is “one of perfect knowledge” (OLS 71). The paradisiacal language of man has direct knowledge of the material world, which is guaranteed to be true by the divine Word. Thus, the paradisiacal language of man is “one of perfect knowledge” because it is grounded in ineffable truth. Then, we have the knowledge of the fallen language, which has direct knowledge of good and evil. Benjamin claims the fallen language is still equal in its “magic” to the name language of paradise. “Magic”, in the way Benjamin uses it, refers to the immediacy of language (64). Thus, fallen language is not less powerful than paradisiacal language. However the knowledge communicated in fallen language does seem to be inferior to that of the paradisiacal language. Benjamin claims that knowledge of good and evil is “in the profound sense in which Kierkegaard uses the word, ‘prattle’” and “vain in the deepest sense” (71). Finally, at the lowest position in the hierarchy we find the mute, material language of things, which can be known by man, but cannot express knowledge.

A very similar hierarchy could be set up along the same scheme regarding the capacity of each language for expression. God’s Word still stands at the very top of the hierarchy. The

expression of the Word of God is unlike any other form of linguistic expression, because it is realized in the creation of matter and even language. The paradisiacal language of man has the capacity for intensive and extensive expression. That is, it expresses the spiritual being of man and names all other things. Benjamin suggests that this capacity is unique to the language of man and that not even God can perform this linguistic act.<sup>16</sup> While the language of man does have a special kind of power, it would be illogical to rank the language of man above the language of God. The expression of the language of God is, in a sense, more direct and original than the language of man. The language of things is, once again, last in the order because it only has the power for intensive expression, i.e. expression of its spiritual being.

The languages of man have their own order of rank, within the larger scheme of the allegory. The paradisiacal language of man is the purest form of human language. It seems a bit unnecessary to say so, but the position of the paradisiacal language within the allegory is immensely privileged. Eden represents something even greater than the afterlife. Whereas in the afterlife all sins have been forgiven, Eden represents a world in which the concept of sin, indeed, even the concepts of good and evil, did not yet exist. Adam and Eve are the only human beings to ever experience a state of true innocence. The paradisiacal language of man must be equally blameless and pure. The fall from grace occupies an equally, though conversely, charged position. Language after the fall from grace is marked by sin and, presumably, would be subject to God's wrath as Adam and Eve were in the original story. However, it has a unique power that enables humans a new kind of knowledge and a new power to express judgment.

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<sup>16</sup> *Man alone has a language that is complete both in its universality and its intensiveness* (OLS 65-66)

The benefit of using allegory as a part of his argument is that the ornaments in play could always be interpreted in a different way. To some philosophers, such ambiguity may be intolerable. Benjamin seems to be interested by the polysemy offered by ornament. His use of allegory in “On Language” plays with the capacity of ornamentation of the allegory to create an atmosphere of meaning, out of which new meanings will always arise. Just now, I have performed a rather straightforward and cursory reading of the allegory, simply describing the obvious implications of the ornaments at play. However, one could certainly perform a much more detailed reading. One could, for example, read the fall from grace as an illustration of the origin of philosophy. After eating from the Tree of Knowledge, Adam and Eve were awakened to moral questions because the boundaries of their knowledge and language were extended to include knowledge of good and evil. They were also confronted by questions of truth because their language was transformed into a system of mere signs, thus divesting them of the certain truth they enjoyed in paradise. That is to say, after the fall from grace, Adam and Eve are forced to start philosophizing. This example is only meant to show one direction in which the allegory could be taken, but which is not part of my own reading. Using allegory allows Benjamin to add many implications to his argument, some of which he may intend and others he may not. Thus the ornamentation of the allegory allows Benjamin to create a much deeper conception of language and philosophy than would have been possible in an ordinary argument.

Benjamin also uses the allegory to express value judgments about on the figurative plane of the allegory, without drawing the distinctions of rank by his own hand. Benjamin does not have to tell us outright that knowledge expressed in the language of God is superior to that of human language, because their position in the hierarchy reveals it. In some cases these value judgments take on a moral character, as in the differentiation between the pure language and

language after the fall from grace. Thus, the allegory adds an ethical dimension to Benjamin's philosophy of language. The pure language is not imply an ideal language capable of expressing certain knowledge that stands in contrast to ordinary language, which is incapable of expressing such certainty. The allegory makes the pure language morally superior to its postlapsarian counterpart. This ethical dimension implied by the allegory ought to make us rethink the task of philosophy and translation to restore the pure language. It would seem that the task of translation and philosophy shares this ethical dimension. The restoration of the pure language is not simply motivated by philosophy's desire for certain truth; it is an ethical imperative.

### **The Redemption of Language**

Having seen the mechanics of allegory and sketched its general implications, we can move on to the particular way in which the allegory presents translation. The most straightforward implication, which follows directly from the connection of "On Language" and "The Task," is that translation saves language from the fall from grace. "On Language" concludes in the fall from grace, leaving language fractured.<sup>17</sup> Following Genesis, Benjamin attributes the fall of language to knowledge of good and evil, which, he claims, is a nameless form of knowledge (OLS 71). To recapitulate, in paradise the name expressed human knowledge of the world in the 'magical immediacy' of language. The divine word guaranteed the truth of human knowledge and human language, which consisted only of names, enjoyed certain truth in paradise. As chapter one showed, the languages of God, man, and thing in paradise work in concert to create the state of pure language.

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<sup>17</sup> After the Fall, which, in making language mediate, laid the foundation for its multiplicity, linguistic confusion could be only a step away" (72).



In paradise, when language was singular, the name stood as the embodiment of human knowledge of that object in language. After the fall from grace, language abandons the name and is thus unhinged from the Word of God and the certain truth it promises. He writes:

...[the fallen language] is a knowledge from the outside, the uncreated imitation of the creative word... the Fall marks the birth of the *human word*, in which name no longer lives intact and which has stepped out of name-language, the language of knowledge... The word must communicate *something* (other than itself). In this fact lies the true Fall of the spirit of language (71).

The fallen language does not lack knowledge of things altogether; it can still lay claim to knowledge "according to God's pronouncement" (73), but the quality of the knowledge expressed in it has degraded. This is Benjamin's second charge against the fallen language. Although Benjamin does not use the term "knowledge from the inside", his expression "knowledge from the outside" is clear. The knowledge expressed in fallen language does not reflect the discovery of the linguistic being of the thing. In comparison to the paradisiacal language, the knowledge expressed in the fallen language seems to be more distant from the thing in question. Knowledge after the fall from grace does not bind the language of man and the language of things as it did in paradise. In paradise, Adam and Eve listened to the language of things and responded with the appropriate name founded on their knowledge of the thing, thereby reflecting the Word of God. Fallen language ceases to listen to the language of things and the Word of God latent in them. After the fall, man creates names for things that lay claim to knowledge, but are in fact arbitrary. Language after the fall from grace creates a tenuous, arbitrary link between man and world.

At this point, "On Language" ends and we must look to "The Task" for a solution. As chapter two demonstrated, Benjaminian translation proves Benjamin's idea that language is the medium in which meaning is expressed. Thus, translation is able to cast off fallen language, in

which words have only an arbitrary, instrumental value in their capacity to refer to an object, by restoring the value of language. Of course, translation cannot bring language back to the full glory of paradise, but it at least raises language from its status as a tool. Furthermore, translation addresses the plurality of languages that result from the fall from grace:

Rather, all suprahistorical kinship between languages consists in this: in every one of them as a whole, one and the same thing is meant. Yet this one thing is achievable not by any single language but only by the totality of their intentions supplementing one another: the pure language (TTT 257).

Benjaminian translation is aimed at attaining a higher state where all the languages of the world will have found harmony and fulfillment with each other; the place where the fractured plurality of languages that resulted from the fall from grace will be whole once again: the “hitherto inaccessible realm” of the “silent and tensionless” pure language, both descriptions of which seem to imply a certain heavenliness. Thus, like the messiah, Benjaminian translation washes away the “original sin” that tarnished language after the fall from grace and opens the possibility of eternal life in heaven.

### **The Redemption of Philosophy**

The foregoing analysis described only the surface level of the allegory’s meaning. Now, we must uncover the level of meaning that, as Fletcher says, is “supposed by the reader.” This section will interpret the subtext of the allegory, showing that translation redeems philosophy. The subtextual implications of the allegory are insinuated in “The Task” when Benjamin claims that translation holds the “only perfection for which a philosopher may hope.” This remark implies that translation rescues philosophy. Philosophy is in need of salvation because it has fundamentally misunderstood language. Bourgeois theory has poisoned philosophy’s view of language, leading philosophers to think of language as a covering over the truth – or, mere costumes of the idea, to recapitulate the conclusion of chapter two.

Let us reexamine bourgeois theory with the biblical allegory in mind. Overall, “On Language” is a critique of what Benjamin calls bourgeois linguistic theory. In the first half of “On Language,” Benjamin contrasts his model of language with its rival, the bourgeois theory of language, six separate times. He often stresses the crucial difference between communication *in* language (which reflects his theory of language as an expressive medium) as opposed to *through* it (which refers to the bourgeois theory of language). Benjamin’s point in making this repeated comparison is to show that language functions as a medium, not as a means. Finally, almost exactly in the middle of the essay, this comparison culminates in the following remark,

Anyone who believes that man communicates his spiritual being through names... can assume only that man is communicating something to other men, for that does happen through the word by which I designate a thing. *This view is the bourgeois conception of language, the empty and untenable character of which will become increasingly clear in what follows.* It says in effect: the means of communication is the word, its object the thing, and its addressee the human being. The other conception of language... knows no means, no object, and no addressee of communication (OLS 65).<sup>18</sup>

This passage could be seen as the thesis statement of “On Language.” Benjamin sets his mark on bourgeois theory, making it his mission to prove it false. It hardly seems coincidental, then, that Benjamin echoes his criticisms of the allegorical fallen language as he describes bourgeois theory. Under bourgeois theory, language becomes a brute means of communication and loses its value as the medium in which human beings connect themselves with the world. Bourgeois theory alienates language from the world because it conceives of language as a system of arbitrary signs. These are precisely the problems Benjamin attributes to language after the fall from grace. In both cases, language is an interloper that separates man from world, rather than establishing their harmony. Thus, Benjamin uses the allegory to make his critique of bourgeois language still more dramatic. By aligning bourgeois theory with the fall from grace, Benjamin

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<sup>18</sup> My italics.

attaches the weight of original sin to it. Bourgeois theory is, then, that which must be overcome if the pure language (the Promised Land) is ever to be reached.

Benjamin does not attribute a bourgeois theory of word meaning to any philosophers in particular. In another one of Benjamin's essays on language "Problems of the Sociology of Language", Benjamin directly criticizes positivistic theories of language, specifically those of Rudolf Carnap and Ferdinand de Saussure (Bock 34). De Saussure's view holds that the meaning of a word consists of an arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified (34). It would seem, then, that Benjamin's criticism of bourgeois theory might be a veiled criticism of positivistic theories of language. Alternatively, Cassin's commentary the Socratic view of language poses another possible target of Benjamin's critique. Even if we are unwilling to commit ourselves to the idea that Benjamin is launching such a pointed attack, it seems reasonable to say that Benjamin's critique of bourgeois language is meant to condemn an existing philosophy of language and, in so doing, to revolutionize philosophy's perspective on language. Insofar as translation rejects bourgeois theory and sets forth an alternative, it seems that translation is philosophy's salvation. Like the messiah, translation redeems language from the so-called "sin" of bourgeois theory that made philosophy ignorant of the true nature of language. We must recall, however, that translation is a branch of philosophy. Thus, translation does not redeem philosophy from the outside, but from within.

The allegory has some strange implications for the future of philosophy. Consider the following excerpt, in which Benjamin quotes Hamann's description of Eden:

Everything that man heard in the beginning, saw with his eyes, and felt with his hands was the living word; for God was the word. With this word in his mouth and in his heart, the origin of language was as natural, as close, and as easy as a child's game (OLS 70).

Take a moment to imagine the gravity such a world would hold for a philosopher. Benjamin's allegorical paradise would make a variety of philosophical problems disappear. Benjamin claims that the Word of God resides in the material world. This excerpt of Hamann's further emphasizes this point, bringing the significance of Benjamin's claim into focus. In Eden, the Word of God, the truth, can actually be touched. This is perhaps philosophy's ultimate longing: to possess the truth. It is hard to imagine how philosophy would even be necessary in a world where the truth can be touched directly and in which language affords mankind knowledge of metaphysical being. Thus, the allegory seems to suggest that in seeking to return to the state of grace, philosophy is trying to undo the questions that condition its own existence. However, we know that translation, despite its capacity to overthrow bourgeois theory, will never fully restore the pure language. Translation's redemption of philosophy is incomplete and impossible; translation is a false messiah. Thus, translation's redemptive task is interminable; it has no hope for completion, only the longing that one day the pure language will be revealed and it will be absolved of its task.

### Conclusion

Given all of the foregoing, let us return to the question that began this project: What is philosophy for Walter Benjamin? The scope of the answer to this question is dictated by the texts at hand. A much more extensive assessment of his work would be necessary to say how Benjamin conceives of philosophy overall. When taken together, “On Language as Such and the Language of Man” and “The Task of the Translator” propose a miniature answer to this much larger question. Within the confines of these texts, Benjamin conceives of philosophy as a critique of language; the task of this critique is to restore the pure language. Benjamin’s conditions for this task result in a model of philosophy that is at once aesthetical, spiritual, and rigorous.

Philosophy’s task to restore it is not simply a scholarly pursuit; it is an ethical and spiritual one. Benjamin employs a biblical allegory throughout “On Language” and continues it implicitly in “The Task.” The allegory elevates the task of philosophy to the level of a divine mission. The pure language is charged with ethical significance through its association with Eden – the only state of true innocence. Philosophy’s task to restore the pure language is imbued with an ethical dimension, as it seeks to return to the state of grace. Its association with Eden and with the messianic end of history also gives the pure language a spiritual significance, not only as the object of philosophy’s desire, but the object of its devotion. Benjamin underscores its spiritual significance when he says the pure language is “a tensionless and even silent depository of the ultimate secrets for which all thought strives” (TTT 259). Thus, the restoration of the pure language would not only result in answers to philosophy’s most persistent questions, it would bring human thinkers, which certainly includes more than just philosophers, respite from their striving. The restoration of the pure language would bring absolution to mankind and philosophy

alike. In this way, Benjamin makes the completion of philosophy's task a matter of spiritual consequence to each individual and instills philosophy with the longing for its own cessation.

Though couched in a biblical allegory, the pure language has substantial philosophical underpinnings. The term "pure language" is a bit of a misnomer, as it implies that there is a single language called by that name. In fact, the pure language Benjamin must be understood as a state of the world, represented by Eden in which the languages of God, man, and things converge. The pure language affords special privileges to mankind, which is the reason philosophy desires it. In paradise, truth, knowledge, and being were all fundamentally linguistic. The pure language allowed man to rest in blissful knowledge of the world; the possibilities of his knowledge and its certainty were already inscribed in the fabric of the pure language. Through language, man is able to attain certain knowledge of the world as well as commune with the metaphysical plane of being. Certain truth is one of philosophy's obsessions, as is the desire to commune with being. The state of pure language would also assure mankind of the existence of God, solving another one of philosophy's persistent questions. If philosophy succeeded in its task to restore the pure language, it would ascend to a realm in which philosophical striving is alleviated. In fulfilling its desire to possess the truth, philosophy would fulfill its deepest longing: to cease to be.

In the foregoing paragraphs, the term "philosophy" has been used, as if Benjamin's program remains within the realm of orthodox philosophy, but it does not. Benjamin's requirement for philosophy is that it should seek to restore the pure language. Translation proves itself most worthy of this task, and thus must be considered a mode of philosophy. This expansion of what counts as philosophy threatens philosophy – by which I mean mainline, discursive philosophy – with its obsolescence.

Benjamin's departure from ordinary philosophical discourse indicates his dissatisfaction with the discipline. In 1920, Benjamin wrote a letter to Ernst Schoen, saying:

I am very interested in the principle underlying the great work of literary criticism: the entire field between art and philosophy proper, by which I mean thinking that is at least virtually systematic. There must indeed be an absolutely fundamental [*ursprünglich*] principle of literary genre that encompasses such great works as Petrarch's dialogue on contempt for the world or Nietzsche's aphorisms or the works of Péguy... (Eiland and Jennings 119).

The phrase "the entire field between art and philosophy proper" suggests that art is, in a sense, "philosophy improper." That is, it suggests that art engages with philosophical content in a non-philosophical, unsystematic way. Eiland and Jennings add, "This conception of a philosophically oriented criticism of works of art – or rather a philosophy made to arise from the interpretation of literary works – is based on a very particular understanding of the artwork as a repository of essential truth" (119). Thus, for Benjamin, art is just as essential as language to philosophy's search for truth. However, Benjamin does not simply require philosophy to take artwork as a subject of study. Benjamin seems to think that philosophy's pursuit of truth is compatible with art. As Eiland and Jennings suggest, Benjamin may simply wish to include works of art as the subjects of philosophical inquiry. However, Benjaminian translation seems to suggest that Benjamin wants to include art – or at least something aesthetic – as a method in philosophy's rigorous pursuit of certainty.

Translation is not capable of fully restoring the pure language. Thus, "the only perfection for which a philosopher may hope" is still incapable of realizing the absolute philosophy craves. However, translation is not fruitless. It accomplishes a partial restoration of the pure language through its critical function. Translation elevates language from its instrumental status, which is characteristic of bourgeois theory and the fall from grace, and returns language to its rightful status as a medium of expression. In this way, translation is able to achieve individual



moments of purification, as it redeems language of its instrumentality and as it performs or depicts the pure language. It is translation's aesthetical capacities that enable it to approach the task of restoring the pure language, allowing it to succeed where ordinary philosophy has failed. *Darstellung*, representation, depiction, and performance are the new engines of philosophy, affording mankind its only possible access to the pure language. Benjaminian translation begins philosophy's undoing by pushing philosophy toward art. However, the collapse of philosophy in the face of art may be a necessary step in Benjamin's program, for it anticipates the Edenic state of pure language, in which philosophy will no longer be necessary.



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