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Philosophy and Ambiguity in Benjamin's Kafka

> We are sinful, not only because we have eaten of the Tree of Knowledge, but also because we have not yet eaten of the Tree of Life.
> – Franz Kafka, *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*[1]

For Walter Benjamin, there is a complementary relationship of art and philosophy. Philosophy exercises a persistence of discourse against any ostensibly concluded gesture of an artwork. Philosophy is not a fragment to be treated as inviolably apart; nor can it treat anything else – including the artwork – as inviolably apart. There is no final gesture. The gestural element remains, nonetheless, integral to philosophy; the gestural element openly performs beyond the discursive – beyond the denotative (and any connoted denotations). In the encounter with artworks, philosophy is kept attentive to the resistance of particularity to discursive rendering. Such unyielding is the philosophic element in the artwork. Attentiveness to this element of the artwork is integral to the possibility of criticism being philosophy. The alliance with literature is distinct from any view of philosophy as that which ultimately overcomes the particularity conveyed by literature. As a discourse about truth, philosophy is indeed distinct from the emphatic particularity of literature. Yet the artwork, in conveying particularity as inexpungible from life, offers philosophy a truth that the latter might be inclined to disregard. This attentiveness to particularity can be more philosophic than can a "philosophy" devoted to eliminating particularity.[2]

For Benjamin, the philosophic – whether it happens in an exercise of philosophy per se, in an artwork, or somewhere else – is a disruption of closure. He characterizes closure as "myth" and develops the philosophic as an ongoing exercise of engaging life against discernibly mythic efforts to contain it.

It might seem to follow that the philosophic is an exercise of rendering closures ambiguous. This will indeed be a claim of the following essay; however,

1 Franz Kafka, *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*, ed. Max Brod, trans. Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins, Exact Change, Cambridge 2004, 37. The German reads: "Wir sind nicht nur deshalb sündig weil wir vom Baum der Erkenntnis gegessen haben, sondern auch deshalb weil wir vom Baum des Lebens noch nicht gegessen haben." See Franz Kafka, *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente II* [*Unpublished Writings and Fragments II*], ed. Jost Schillemeit, Fischer, Frankfurt/M. 1992, 72.
2 For more extensive discussion of this topic, see Brendan Moran, "An Inhumanly Wise Shame," in *Philosophy as a Literary Art*, ed. Costica Bradatan, Routledge, London 2014, 63–75.

this claim is made somewhat counter to Benjamin's tendency to present the philosophic as simply an exercise of creating paradox rather than ambiguity. Benjamin does not present a sustained treatment of philosophy as paradox, although he occasionally mentions the topic. Not far from Benjamin's outlook in this respect is Gilles Deleuze, who claims that philosophy "is revealed not by good sense but by paradox. Paradox is the pathos or the passion of philosophy." Philosophic paradox is opposed to the "complementary forms of orthodoxy – namely, good sense and common sense."[3] Karl Kraus remarks more broadly: "A paradox originates when a knowledge developed prematurely collides with the hogwash [Unsinn] of its time."[4] Benjamin is close to these conceptions of paradox, and he regards such paradoxes as specifically philosophic. The following essay will be an endeavour to indicate that ambiguity can be a *philosophical* element in paradox. Literature can, moreover, particularly accentuate this philosophic ambiguity, which is in turn articulated in philosophic criticism. This essay will provide an indication, principally on the basis of Benjamin's writings on Franz Kafka, of this dynamic of literature and philosophy. Towards the close of the essay, an outline will accordingly be provided of how ambiguity might be integral to Benjamin's own expressly Kafkan objection to Søren Kierkegaard's absolute paradox.

1 A Challenge

An obvious challenge faces this essay. At various points in his works, Benjamin associates, if not identifies, ambiguity with myth. Careful readers have sometimes followed him in this respect or even stated the association more emphatically. What is this ambiguity of myth? For Benjamin, it is above all that myth simultaneously has a claim or presumption to encompass or reassure but cannot actually fulfil this claim or presumption. A formulation of this ambiguity is given in Benjamin's *The Origin of the German Mourning Play* [*Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*] (rejected in 1925 as a habilitation thesis; published in 1928). The anti-mythic, philosophic tendency both recovered and exercised in the *Trauerspiel* book is to turn the ambiguity (Zweideutigkeit) into paradox – to show that the exercise of control by myth ("the demonic world-order") involves simulta-

3 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton, Columbia University Press, New York 1994, 227; Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et repetition*, Universitaires de France, Paris 1968, 293.
4 Karl Kraus, *Aphorismen* [*Aphorisms*], *Schriften* [*Writings*], Vol. 8, ed. Christian Wagenknecht, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M. 1986, 164. Cited (somewhat differently) in Paul North, *The Problem of Distraction*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2012, 144.

neously an experience of resistance to this control.[5] Benjamin's preference for "paradox" over ambiguity seems to arise from a sense that the word "paradox" better conveys contradiction to prevailing opinion (doxa); there is a *para-dox*.[6] The paradox is to transform the ambiguity – bring it "to decline [Absterben]" – so that there is something other than "fate" (Schicksal), something other than an alleged necessity requiring submission and "retribution" (Sühne). There can thus be a "sacrifice" (Opfer), which – while suffering defeat by the old order – also contributes, even if the sacrifice is fatal, to a "victory" of the residual, "historico-philosophic [geschichtsphilosophische] signature" that prophesies the decline of the order.[7] The historico-philosophic impetus, the impetus para-doxical rather than mythic in history, can contribute to the decline of an order that has only an ambiguous claim to commandeer history. The historico-philosophic impetus brings to decline the not entirely credible – and therefore ambiguous – claim or presumption of this order to control or reassure.

There are other such passages in Benjamin's writings, and some of these will be discussed below. Somewhat against the grain of such passages, however, an argument of this essay will be that the aforementioned historico-philosophic paradox always remains ambiguous, for it too arises from a condition in which any contradiction against myth will itself be imbued with mythic closures, conscious or not. The historico-philosophic paradox will, moreover, be an opening to another ambiguity, a philosophic ambiguity that must be respected in all philosophic momentum: this is the ambiguity that may summarily be characterized as "Mehrdeutigkeit," a condition open to various readings.

This opening beyond closed interpretation is a corrective to much that goes by the name "philosophy." Even traditional "philosophic" paradoxes are subject to this correction. No paradox eliminates ambiguity entirely. The correction can involve consideration of words not just in light of predicates associated with them

5 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne, Verso, London, 1977 (translation modified), 109; Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* [*Collected Writings*], Vol. I:1, eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M. 1974, 288.

6 Although it does not refer to relevant texts by Benjamin, a helpful account of this notion of paradox (from Heraclitus to the twentieth century) is David Schur, *The Way of Oblivion. Heraclitus and Kafka*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1998.

7 Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, 109 (translation modified); Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. I:1, 288. For justification of the usage of the term "myth" here, where it is not actually used by Benjamin, see the description of death in the *Trauerspiel* as, in contrast with death in tragedy, signifying historically "the end of myth" (Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, 135; Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. I:1, 315).

but also in concern for the *linguistic* element that is independent of predication. Benjamin thus criticizes Bertrand Russell for determining paradox entirely on the basis of predicates for the words used. For Benjamin, Russell neglects that words have "meaning" (Bedeutung) and give "indication" (Bezeichnung) in ways that are not identifiable as predicates.[8] With regard to the so-called Cretan paradox (Epimenides the Cretan says all Cretans are liars), Benjamin insists that the statement be taken beyond the logic in which its paradox is obvious (if Epimenides is being truthful, he is lying; if he is lying, he is being truthful). On an "ontological" level, the statement might not be "meaningless [unsinnig] or nonsensical [widersinnig] in itself. This outlook frees up the paradox from its logical contradiction." For instance, the statement is contradictory if uttered by the person to whom it applies. Yet if it is said of anyone else that every judgement made by the latter person predicates the opposite of truth, the statement does not have "contradictory results." Accordingly, the statement "is not a contradiction in *every* sense." In "metaphysics," it is recognized that the logical contradiction of the Cretan's statement is dependent on the "I-form of the judgment." "Its logical semblance is constituted in its subjectivity," which creates the "anti-logical" condition of the proposition. In Benjamin's view, a metaphysical rather than strictly logical approach is thus needed to examine the paradox. In short, "[m]etaphysics" is needed to "ground" (begründen) the statement.[9] With regard to Benjamin's discussion, it has been noted that the Cretan paradox has an untidiness by virtue of the commencement of the paradox by a specific figure – in this case, Epimenides. Unlike W.V. Quine and others, who restate the paradox in less personal terms ("I am lying" or, even more impersonally, "This sentence is false"), Benjamin does not seek to eradicate this untidiness. He brings the untidy condition to the fore.[10] In one of his texts dealing with Russell, Benjamin suggests that confinement of meaning to logical tidiness neglects the "linguistic" element in which words are beyond such confinement.[11]

8 Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. VI, eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M. 1985, 9–11. For criticism of Benjamin's reading of Russell, see Alexei Procyshyn, "Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of Language," in *Philosophy Compass* 9.6 (2014), 368–381.

9 Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913–1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1996, 210–212 (translation modified); Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. VI, 57–59.

10 James F. McFarland, *Constellation. Friedrich Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin in the Now-Time of History*, Fordham University Press, New York 2013, 103–107. See W.V. Quine, *The Ways of Paradox and Other Essays*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1976 [revised edition], 6–7.

11 Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. VI, 10–11.

Benjamin stresses this in his 1916 essay on language (as well as elsewhere). Linguistic being cannot be reduced to spiritual being (meaning circumscribed by humans). Nonetheless, "the deep and incomparable paradox" of identifying spiritual being and linguistic being has an important and warranted application. This paradox and its justifiable application is expressed in "the ambiguity [Doppelsinn]," the *double meaning*, "of the word 'logos.'" The word "logos" serves to keep spiritual being and linguistic being from conflation into one another, and yet also presupposes their contact (admittedly, an indeterminate contact) with one another. The paradox of the contact – the paradox of the identity – of spiritual being and linguistic being is a solution in "the centre" of linguistic theory but "remains a paradox, and insoluble, if placed at the beginning."[12] To begin with the distinction of spiritual being and linguistic being – the distinction making philosophical method an exercise of always beginning anew – is to emphasize that there is communication *in*, not *through*, language. It is to emphasize that linguistic being does not let itself be used exhaustively by humanly conceived meaning. The spiritual being communicated is neither demarcation nor delimitation of linguistic being. "Spiritual being communicates itself in a language and not through a language – that is to say: it is not outwardly [von aussen] identical with linguistic being."[13] Into the paradox of identifying spiritual being and linguistic being, there comes the ambiguity, the *Doppelsinn*, of logos that keeps language free from complete identification with spiritual being and yet maintains their fluctuating contact with one another.

This ambiguity entails an independence of words from meanings given to them; it also entails a constant contact of words and such meanings. Ambiguity ensues for paradoxes, perhaps in a jarring way for paradoxes dependent on highly insistent conceptions of meaning in them. It would be unphilosophic, a denial of logos and its dynamic of language and meaning, if the ambiguity in the contact of language and meaning were unacknowledged. In the aforementioned myth (discussed in the *Trauerspiel* book), the ambiguity – the lack of control or certainty accompanying any notion of control – is actually denied, disregarded, or suppressed. This denial, disregard, or suppression is pierced by the philosophic motion that exposes the ambiguity. Along with this first philosophic

12 Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 1*, 63; Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II:1, eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M. 1977, 141–142.

13 Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 1*, 63 (translation modified); Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II:1, 142. Also see: under "Fortsetzungsnotizen zu Arbeit über die Sprache" ("Follow-up Notes to Work on Language"), in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. VII:2, eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M. 1989, 786–788.

movement that does not quite let myth deny, disregard, or suppress the ambiguity (its claim or presumption versus its lack of credibility), there is a second correlative philosophic ambiguity that is (in German) "Mehrdeutigkeit," which has also long been lexically established as one meaning of the previously noted term "Zweideutigkeit" (ambiguity) and which obviously pertains to a possibility for multiple interpretations.

2 Mythic Ambiguity and Philosophic Ambiguity

Benjamin's writings on Kafka include motifs in which the two aforementioned ambiguities come into mutual play. The first ambiguity may be called mythic ambiguity. It arises when there is a claim to control or to encompass that can be shown to be fraudulent. The work of the philosophic in Kafka's literature, and in Benjamin's criticism, is to show this ambiguity that is otherwise denied by its perpetrators. Philosophy thereby becomes a momentum of paradox in the sense outlined at the outset of this essay: it opposes *doxa* that claims to be truth. The philosophic momentum of paradox is not, however, entirely independent of ambiguity. First of all, it emerges from contexts that are themselves always imbued with mythic ambiguity (devices and orders exercised as though they are true); it does not completely transcend all such contexts, even if it is impelled by an impetus to do so. Second, the philosophic momentum opens to another ambiguity, the one inherent in the contact of language and meaning; this is the ambiguity referred to previously as "Mehrdeutigkeit." Kafka's literature keeps Benjamin's philosophic criticism attentive to all these fluctuations of ambiguity; Benjamin's criticism responds accordingly. As a discourse about truth, philosophy distinguishes itself from the accent placed by literature on particularity. The philosophic in literature, and in turn in criticism, prevents literature from simply absolutizing – mythifying – its particularities, as perhaps do some versions of religion. In conveying ambiguous particularity as inexpungible from life, the artwork is philosophic in presenting to philosophy a pervasive ambiguity (in all the foregoing senses of "ambiguity") that philosophic discourse may otherwise be inclined to disregard. This attentiveness to ambiguity can be more philosophic than is a "philosophy" claiming to eliminate ambiguity entirely. The latter claim exposes itself to the risk of becoming myth in denial of ambiguity.

Although the association of ambiguity with philosophy may seem unique, there have been other attempts to relate ambiguity with the philosophic. Maurice Merleau-Ponty bases the phenomenology of perception significantly on "ambig-

uous life" (la vie ambiguë).[14] Simone de Beauvoir offers an ethics (morale) of ambiguity, in which she indicts the tendency of most "philosophers" to mask the ambiguity of the human condition.[15] As intimated already, moreover, the etymology of "Zweideutigkeit" is not entirely unfavourable to an association of ambiguity and the philosophic.

The term *zweideutig* (ambiguous) developed in the seventeenth century as a translation of the Latin *aequivocus*, meaning *doppelsinnig* (ambiguous) or *mehrdeutig* (ambiguous, equivocal, conducive to a plurality of interpretations). In the eighteenth century, however, *zweideutig* indeed came to mean *absichtlich unklar* (purposely unclear), which pertains of course to the mythic ambiguity that Benjamin has been shown above to describe. Even so, this "purposely unclear" could refer to a denial, disregard, or suppression of *Doppelsinnigkeit* or *Mehrdeutigkeit*. At the very least, the (admittedly quite incomplete) etymology given here suggests that the term *zweideutig* is *mehrdeutig*.[16] This *Mehrdeutigkeit* – indeed, any *Mehrdeutigkeit* – is, moreover, not necessarily indicative of a mythic swindle, a wilful or semi-conscious unclarity that serves a dominating purpose.[17]

14 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes, Routledge, London 2013, 382; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, Paris 1945, 418.

15 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman, The Citadel Press, New York 1964, 7; Simone de Beauvoir, *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté*, Gallimard, Paris 1947, 12.

16 For very succinctly given detail on *zweideutig*, see under "deuten" in *Das Herkunftswörterbuch*, *Etymologie der deutschen Sprache* [*The Dictionary of Provenance: Etymology of the German Language*], Dudenverlag, Mannheim 2001, 142. The Grimm brothers more elaborately address "zwiedeutig" and "Zweideutigkeit" in a quite similar way, but many of the meanings given are the mentioned or other pejorative senses. Exceptions are the first recorded meanings of "zweideutig" and "Zweideutigkeit," which are somewhat more neutral, pertaining to the simple possibility that words or sense-contexts may have double, often antagonistic, meanings. Such notions of "zweideutig" and "Zweideutigkeit" do, nonetheless, persist. Also noteworthy is that under "Zweideutigkeit" the Grimm brothers include reference to "the undecided double possibility" to which "philosophic language" might refer (see Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, reworked by Gustav Rosenhagen and others, *Deutsches Wörterbuch* [*German Dictionary*], Vol. 16, Verlag von S. Hirzel, Leipzig 1954, 984–988).

17 There are, of course, other meanings of "zweideutig" and "Zweideutigkeit," that could very well seem relevant to Kafka's writings and Benjamin's reading of them. These include the characterizations *schlüpfrig* (slippery, suggestive, lewd, risqué) or *zotig* (dirty, filthy, smutty) (*Das Herkunftswörterbuch*, 142; *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, Vol. 16, 985, 987) – meanings that could easily be used to characterize some of what Benjamin detects in writings by Kafka, although it might not always be clear whether the lewdness and smuttiness is reinforcing the mythic or pointing to deviance from it.

Nevertheless, careful readers have contended that ambiguity is strictly opposed in Benjamin's readings of Kafka.[18] This claim may seem to find corroboration in Benjamin's Kafka essay, as well as in an earlier, related passage of his "Towards the Critique of Violence" ("Zur Kritik der Gewalt"). In the latter essay, which appeared in 1921, Benjamin discusses the ancient notion of a "retribution" that is provoked by an offense against "unwritten and unknown [unbekannten] law." He explains that the occurrence of such retribution is – "in the sense of the law" (im Sinne des Rechts) – "not coincidence, but fate [Schicksal] showing itself once again in its *deliberate ambiguity* [seiner *planvollen Zweideutigkeit*]."[19] In his Kafka essay of 1934, Benjamin writes something quite similar, albeit with reference to unwritten and unknown laws in Kafka's works: he notes that the human being can "unsuspectingly transgress" those laws and "thus become subject to retribution. But no matter how hard the retribution may hit the unsuspecting, the retribution in the sense of the law is not coincidence but fate that presents itself here in its ambiguity [Zweideutigkeit]."[20]

Noteworthy right away is that Benjamin is referring in these passages to "its" ambiguity – the ambiguity of fateful necessity in law. In other words, there could conceivably be other kinds of ambiguity. This will be discussed shortly.

What is the fateful ambiguity that is mentioned in both the essay on violence and the essay on Kafka? In the former essay, Benjamin – using terminology close to the previously mentioned passage from the *Trauerspiel* book – comments on the "demonic-ambiguous way [dämonisch-zweideutige Weise]" in which all are treated as "'equal'" before the law, so that, for instance, poor and rich alike are prohibited from sleeping under bridges. He surmises that such "mythic ambiguity of laws [...] may not be 'infringed' [übertreten]."[21] It may not be *broken* or *violated*

18 Rodolphe Gasché, "Kafka's Law: In the Field of Forces Between Judaism and Hellenism," in *The Stelliferous Fold. Toward a Virtual Law of Literature's Self-Formation*, 269–297, 279; and Dimitris Vardoulakis, *The Doppelgänger: Literature's Philosophy*, Fordham University Press, New York 2011, 209.

19 Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 1*, 249 (translation modified); Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II:1, 199. Italics added.

20 Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1931–1934*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1999, 797 (translation modified); Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II:2, 412.

21 Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 1*, 249; Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II:1, 198. Benjamin's example is borrowed from Anatole France's *Le Lys rouge* [*The Red Lily*], in which a character remarks on how the poor must "support and [...] conserve the rich in their power and their idleness. They must work [...] before the majestic equality of the law that prohibits rich and poor alike from sleeping under bridges, begging in the streets, and stealing bread" (Anatole France, *Le Lys rouge*, Éditions Gallimard, Paris 1992, 129).

(übertreten). The mythic ambiguity is that the law must be heeded as though it is necessity itself and equal for all, even though it is not fate and patently involves inequality: the rich are less likely than the poor to need shelter under bridges.

Even for these passages from the essay on Kafka and the essay on violence, however, the ambiguity exists in myth and yet is basically ignored or denied by myth. If the ambiguity were instead explored, it could become a variation of the historico-philosophic paradox mentioned in the *Trauerspiel* book: an ambiguity in which domination or indeed justice is presumed or claimed but *demonstrably* unaccomplished. The paradox and detection of ambiguity are complementary rather than opposed. Recognition of the ambiguity leads the ambiguity into a paradox – a scene of conflict rather than complacency and denial.

Such ambiguity recurs (and is never transcended entirely by paradox), however, for mythic closure does not desist even if a specific mythic closure is overcome. No specific exercise of the philosophic rises above all mythic ambiguity; it too emerges from life that is inundated by such taken-for-granted closures. In his essay on violence, Benjamin – in a paraphrasing of Georges Sorel – remarks that the prerogative of the mighty ensures, for instance, the following: any offer of rights accorded in law by the mighty will simply ensure – "in a demonically ambiguous way" – that these "'equal' rights" are mythic.[22] More broadly, mythic ambiguity will persist as long as there is no entirely open-ended exploration of it. It is difficult to imagine that a human life could sustain such exploration; survival alone depends on living with certain closures in and about life, and, indeed, living them as though they are true, which – philosophically considered – they are not. Beyond the imperative of survival, moreover, all sorts of expediencies require that the ambiguities in our lived truths not be addressed as such.

Pressure for the open-ended exploration is, nonetheless, the conceivably ongoing motion of, and for, philosophic acknowledgement of mythic ambiguity. The expressly philosophic in Benjamin's readings of Kafka accordingly includes presentations of ambiguity that myth – closure – ignores. Despite their starkly contradictory statements about the *Vorwelt* (statements that have been examined in detail elsewhere), Benjamin's analyses of Kafka include remarks for which the *Vorwelt* (literally, "pre-world," often translated as "prehistory") is a realm withstanding myth, a realm always preceding and disturbing mythic containment.[23]

22 Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 1*, 249; Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II:1, 198.

23 A rudimentary analysis may be found in Brendan Moran, "The 'Forgotten' as Epic *Vorwelt*," in *Layering: Rethinking Contact, Historicity and Critique Across the Humanities*, eds. Maria Margaroni, Apostolos Lampropoulos, and Christos Hadjichristos, Lexington Books, Lanham forthcoming. This essay was written several years ago, and has been extensively revised and corrected as

The containment is ambiguous; its claims may be exposed by philosophic scrutiny to be belied by history that does not let itself be contained. The *Vorwelt* is, therefore, "Kafka's secret present [geheime Gegenwart]" that – as "historico-philosophical index [der geschichtsphilosophische Index]" – facilitates shame, for instance, about any measures indicating presumption somehow to overcome entirely the *Vorwelt*.[24] This emergence of the philosophic presents an ambiguity – that the claim to containment is belied by uncontainable history. This is an ambiguity that myth perpetrates, or simply embodies, but does not acknowledge.

This initial conflict of philosophic impetus and mythic closure exemplifies the first of the two kinds of ambiguity mentioned earlier. In notes towards a revision of the 1934 essay on Kafka (and touching on this first ambiguity), Benjamin refers to how Kafka's gestures are affected by tendencies towards both liberation and subordination. Benjamin claims: "There is no gesture in Kafka's works that is not affected [betroffen] by this ambiguity [Zweideutigkeit] before [moral-legal] decision."[25] "The gesture thereby acquires something enormously dramatic."[26] In the 1934 essay, Benjamin states: "Each gesture is an event – one might even say a drama – in itself."[27] If there is no gesture unaffected by this drama of ambiguity (this drama of liberation and subordination in the face of moral-legal decision), the historico-philosophic gesture of shame about myth – the gesture that Benjamin considers prevalent in Kafka's work – is not independent of the drama.[28] This gesture is simply integral to the ambiguity becoming philosophically dramatic. It shows the ambiguity in which there is a claim to closure and the closure is not

chapter 13 of Brendan Moran, *Philosophy as Renegade. Benjamin's "Kafkan" Politics* (forthcoming).

24 Walter Benjamin, letter of 11 August 1934, in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, eds. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1994, 453; Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe* [*Collected Letters*], Vol. IV, eds. Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M. 1998, 478. To get a sense of the variegated references by Benjamin to "Vorwelt," see Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 2*, 797, 807, 809; Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II:2, 412, 426–427, 429; Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935–1938*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2002, 326; Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, Vol. VI, eds. Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M. 2000, 112; Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II:3, 1165, 1213, 1246.

25 Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* Vol. II:3, 1261, 1263.

26 Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II:3, 1263.

27 Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 2*, 802; Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II:2, 419.

28 Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 2*, 808–815; Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II:2, 428–437; Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, 453; Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, Vol. IV, 478.

complete. The gesture could conceivably break complacency about any claim or presumption to dominate or contain. It can do this, however, by underscoring ambiguity, not by claiming to transcend or escape it entirely. In an apparent objection to the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Blanchot remarks on the ambiguity that is accompanied by a "subterfuge" seizing "the shifting, changing truth."[29] In elaborating on Kafka, Blanchot states that "Literature is language turning into ambiguity [ambiguïté]."[30] For Benjamin, it seems the ambiguity of literature – the ambiguity of Kafka's literature – arises so that what myth conceals may be exposed: myth conceals its ambiguity; literature – in its philosophic impetus – exposes the ambiguity in order to exercise the paradox, the conflict between the philosophic and the mythic. Philosophic criticism makes explicit both this exposure of ambiguity and the ensuing paradox.

Unlike Sartre and Beauvoir (as Blanchot depicts them), Benjamin's Kafka usually does not claim to seize truth, though his characters sometimes do. Benjamin's Kafka is concerned above all with the failure of such seizing.[31] In this Kafka, the drama of ambiguity – the drama of liberatory and submissive tendencies – is mostly inherent in the philosophic gesture. Even if the philosophic impetus opposes a specific ambiguity by letting a liberatory element prevail against a subordinate one, there will be no shortage of further such ambiguities that permeate our mythic lives. The Kafkan drama is indeed the *para-doxical* confrontation of philosophic impulse and mythic life, but precisely the philosophic must admit the continued ambiguity of liberation: it must acknowledge the ambiguities – not always conscious – whereby we live our lives according to semblances of truth that are, after all, no more than semblances. Any specific philosophic liberation does not annul all such ambiguities, even if Benjamin's writings – including his writings on Kafka – involve a messianism that might seem oriented to eventual elimination of such ambiguities.[32]

29 Maurice Blanchot, "Reading Kafka," in *The Work of Fire*, trans. Charlotte Mandell, Stanford University Press, 1995, 1–11, 5; Maurice Blanchot, "La lecture de Kafka," in *La Part du Feu*, Gallimard, Paris 1949, 9–19, 13.

30 Maurice Blanchot, "Literature and the Right to Death," trans. Lydia Davis, in *The Work of Fire*, 300–344, 341; Maurice Blanchot, "La littérature et le droit à la mort," in *La Part du Feu*, 291–331, 328. Blanchot refers to "an ultimate ambiguity whose strange effect is to attract literature to an unstable point where it can indiscriminately change both its meaning and its sign" (342/329).

31 Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 2*, 804, 808; Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II:2, 422, 427–428; Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II:3, 1249; letter of 12 November 1934 to Werner Kraft, in Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, 463; Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, Vol. IV, 525–526.

32 Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 2*, 811; Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II:2, 432.

This brings us again to the second ambiguity, the philosophic ambiguity as distinct from the mythic ambiguity that is exposed by the philosophic impetus in art and by philosophic criticism. The second ambiguity, the strictly philosophic ambiguity, is that to which the philosophic opens (at least until the Messiah comes). This philosophic ambiguity is the ambiguity that is *Mehrdeutigkeit*. It is not, however, a celebration of all uncertainty of interpretation. In his essay on violence, Benjamin refers to the condition, particularly prevalent in "democracies," whereby policing is facilitated not simply as an exercise in application of the law but as an exploitation of a power that enables police authorities to administer even where there is no clear guideline. Benjamin suggests that this is especially a problem in democracies, for the leeway given to police to exploit such "formless [gestaltlos]," ungraspable, yet pervasive power is greater in democracies than in states where absolute monarchy unites legislative and executive supremacy in the ruler.[33] The ambiguity in "democratic" police power is mythic ambiguity, for the police exercise power that is (falsely) treated as though it is sanctioned legally. Philosophic scrutiny can show this ambiguity in policing. Philosophy also opens, however, the second ambiguity – the philosophic ambiguity of *Mehrdeutigkeit*. It does so, for instance, against the policing that would assert its interpretation against any possibility for *Mehrdeutigkeit*.

In Benjamin's writings on Kafka (as in his reflections on violence), the ambiguity as *Mehrdeutigkeit* is already suggested by the historico-philosophic or critical approach to an ultimate lack in myth of a certain kind of *Mehrdeutigkeit*. Perhaps particularly the latter ambiguity, which prevents mythic identifications, makes questionable the view that ambiguity is fairly straightforwardly supposed to be overcome or transcended (not simply by the Messiah but already) by Benjamin's philosophic critique.[34] In his writings and notes on Kafka, he refers to an unlocking of the ambiguity that is *Mehrdeutigkeit* – in Benjamin's words, a "folie d'interpretation,"[35] a potential for "reflections [Überlegungen] that reach no

33 Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume* 1, 242–243; Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II:1,189–190.

34 For this view that Benjamin conceives of philosophy as transcending ambiguity, see Eli Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin: A Philosophical Portrait*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2012, 21–22, 117–120. As noted above, Benjamin sometimes encourages this view of philosophy; even so, it seems a confusion to consider all multiplicity of meaning as something that Benjamin always identifies with mythic ambiguity. See Friedlander, but also Alison Ross, "The Distinction between Mythic Violence and Divine Violence: Walter Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' from the Perspective of 'Goethe's *Elective Affinities*,'" in *New German Critique* 41.1 (2014): 93–120, 112, 113, 118, 120.

35 Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II:3, 1229 Ms. 297,

end."[36] In a preparatory note towards his Kafka essay, Benjamin writes in point form: "The gestural/ambiguity [Vieldeutigkeit]/renunciation of rationalizability."[37] For instance, when he considers shame to be the prevailing historico-philosophic gesture of Kafka's writings, it is shame about myth and its would-be resolutions – rationalizations – of life. The latter sort of resolution is conveyed in the *Elective Affinities* essay, which includes not just reference to ambiguity (Doppelsinn, Zweideutigkeit) that mythically seals against philosophic investigation,[38] but also an identification of the mythic spell as panarchic – as a claim to all-encompassing authority.[39] Philosophic ambiguity renders such panarchism questionable, and Benjamin's Kafka presents such potential for questioning, as does in turn Benjamin's criticism.

In this context, Kafka's "ambiguity" (Zweideutigkeit) of gesture becomes important, as Theodor Adorno recognizes in his first response to Benjamin's Kafka essay of 1934. For Adorno, the "ambiguity" (Zweideutigkeit) is between, on one hand, "sinking into muteness" and, on the other, sound – "music." Kafka's expression does not rise entirely above the sinking into muteness that indicates "the destruction of language" in modernity.[40] Adorno's terminology is not entirely Benjaminian, and it is concerned simply with the tension of an antithetically twofold pressure (the conflict of muteness and sound), but it might also indicate Adorno's sense that ambiguity of a sort is central to Benjamin's reading of Kafka and to Kafka's writings themselves. This ambiguity – this conflict of muteness and the will to expression – is not simply mythic. The mythic would end or somehow cloak the conflict; to emphasize the ambiguous conflict would be philosophic.

At least for those aspects of Benjamin's work that have been stressed here, to claim to accomplish something entirely beyond ambiguity would be a forced closure; it would be mythic. As indicated in the previous remarks on mythic ambiguity, the latter serves to cloak or to assert dominance. There is the first kind of ambiguity mentioned previously: a myth seeks to enclose but cannot; it may even, in specific cases, find itself well opposed by philosophic momentum. Inte-

36 Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 2*, 802 (translation modified); Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II:2, 420.

37 Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II:3, 1207.

38 Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 1*, 314, 335; Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. I:1, 147, 174–175.

39 Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 1*, 317; Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II:1, 151.

40 Theodor W. Adorno, letter of 17 December 1934, in Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence 1928–1940*, trans. Nicholas Walker, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1999, 70; Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *Briefwechsel 1928–1940* [*Correspondence 1928–1940*], ed. Henri Lonitz, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M. 1994, 95.

gral to this historico-philosophic – anti-mythic – momentum must be, however, that it not presume to transcend all ambiguity. To do so would be to succumb to the kind of resolution that Benjamin identifies as mythic. It would be to succumb to the kind of resolution that Benjamin criticizes in certain "'theological'" outlooks, such as Max Brod's, regarding Kafka's writings: outlooks in which Kafka is portrayed as terribly certain, to the point that Benjamin refers to the attempt to cast Kafka's works into a "Weltanschauung."[41] The philosophic is no *Weltanschauung*. Part of the ongoing crisis of philosophy is the ongoing ambiguity of life – including the *Mehrdeutigkeit* of life – in its confrontation with the *court* that would deny, disregard, or suppress such ambiguity.

The ambiguity is twofold, and philosophy is an exercise in showing this. First, there is the ambiguity of myth: myth asserts control, or all-encompassing truth, but this assertion is more ambiguous than is admitted. Philosophy exposes this ambiguity of myth; it makes clear that myth's self-acclamations are practices of concealment. Second, there is the ambiguity that is philosophic: the "Mehrdeutigkeit" that myth discounts or denies. The philosophic impetus demonstrates that myth is not all-encompassing (this is the first presented ambiguity); the impetus thereby opens the situation to *Mehrdeutigkeit* (the second ambiguity). Although Benjamin does not always concede this, the second ambiguity persists even where – in the name of philosophy or something else – it is thought that a paradox, a straightforward opposition to the mythic, has been attained. In his writings on Kafka, Benjamin seems close to admitting the intrusion of ambiguity upon paradox.

3 Ambiguity Intrudes upon Absolute Paradox

There are many different kinds of paradox, and it may not be claimed that ambiguity in paradox always works in the manner stated here. In Benjamin's work, however, at least some paradoxes are addressed along these lines. In the *Trauerspiel* book, he discusses the theological "paradox" of the "unity of the sensory

41 Walter Benjamin, review of Brod's *Franz Kafka*, in Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 3*, 317–319; Walter Benjamin, *Kritiken und Rezensionen* [*Criticism and Reviews*], ed. Heinrich Kaulen, Volume 13 of *Werke und Nachlaß, Kritische Gesamtausgabe* [*Works and Posthumous Writings, Critical Edition*], eds. Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz with the Walter Benjamin Archive, Suhrkamp, Berlin 2011, 569–573. See too: letter of 12 June 1938 to Scholem, in Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, 560–566; Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, Vol. VI, 106–114.

and the supersensory object,"[42] but even this unity entails ambiguity. Whereas Hermann Cohen is scandalized by ambiguity (*Zweideutigkeit* and *Mehrdeutigkeit* alike) in baroque allegory, Benjamin opposes Cohen's expectation of "'purity and unity of meaning.'"[43] In Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* book and other writings, there are other references to paradox, which likely have many different implications. These references cannot all be addressed here. No paradox figures, however, as explicitly in Benjamin's material on Kafka as does Kierkegaard's absolute paradox. Thus, at least aspects of the topic of ambiguity in paradox may perhaps be illustrated by discussing some of Benjamin's reservations about Kierkegaard's absolute paradox.

The confluence of the absolute (God) and the particular is an absolute paradox for Kierkegaard. If one "is to receive any true knowledge about the Unknown (the God)," Kierkegaard claims, one "must be made to know that it is unlike" oneself, "absolutely unlike" oneself. True knowledge requires knowing the Unknown as absolutely different from anything one knows.[44] The paradox is that "the individual as particular can," nonetheless, "stand in an absolute relation to the absolute."[45]

In response, one version of Benjamin's Kafka essay includes the claim that each of Kafka's novels and stories is "a victory over Kierkegaard's paradox."[46] In a draft, Benjamin refers simply to "[t]he victory over paradox."[47] In part this claim is based on Benjamin's Adorno-inspired rejection of the "mythological" substrates in Kierkegaard's paradox.[48] These substrates enable Kierkegaard to envision, and to urge, an unmediated relation with the absolute. Benjamin finds in Kafka's writings a tacit rebuttal of Kierkegaard's quest. Part of this rebuttal involves discussion of Abraham in much more profane terms than is proposed in

42 Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, 160 (translation modified); Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. I:1, 336.

43 Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, 176–177; Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. I:1, 353. Cf. Hermann Cohen, Ästhetik *des reinen Gefühls* [*Aesthetics of Pure Feeling*], Vol. 2, eds. Hermann-Cohen-Archiv under Helmut Holzhey, Georg Olms Verlag, Hildesheim 1982, 305.

44 Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments* [*Philosophiske Smuler eller En Smule Philosophi*], trans. David Swenson and Howard V. Hong, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1974, 57.

45 Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* [*Frygt og Bæven*], trans. Alastair Hannay, Penguin Books, London 1985, 137.

46 Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II:3, 1268.

47 Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II:3, 1210.

48 Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II:3, 1268.

the bible or by Kierkegaard.[49] An attempt has been made elsewhere to examine this.[50] The following discussion will therefore simply outline ways in which Benjamin's "Kafkan" critique of Kierkegaard's paradox takes impetus from Adorno but transforms this impetus into quite distinct conceptions of ambiguity and paradox, and thereby into quite distinct conceptions of literature and philosophy.

In Adorno's book on Kierkegaard (published in 1931), which influenced Benjamin's views on Kierkegaard, it is argued that Kierkegaard's paradox is "ambiguous" (zweideutig). Ambiguous nature is not redeemed or transcended but is always intruding.[51] Adorno adds that "truth becomes ambiguous [zweideutig] as the quintessence [Inbegriff] of the dialectical movement without becoming its measure [Maß]."[52] As is known, Adorno greatly wished that Benjamin would write in a more thoroughly dialectical way.[53] For some of Benjamin's writing, the absolute and the non-absolute exist, in relation to each other, in thorough ambiguity; this may render ambiguity even more a measure in philosophy than Adorno would concede.[54] For Benjamin, this possibility is conveyed in Kafka's literature and articulated in Benjamin's own philosophic criticism.

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49 Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II:3, 1268–1269; Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 2*, 807–808; Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II:2, 427. See Franz Kafka, *Briefe. 1902–1924* [*Letters. 1902–1924*], ed. Max Brod, Fischer, Frankfurt/M. 1983, 333–334.

50 For remarks on Abraham in relation to Kafka, Kierkegaard, and Benjamin, see Brendan Moran, "Anxiety and Attention," in *Philosophy and Kafka*, eds. Brendan Moran and Carlo Salzani, Lexington Books, Lanham 2013, 201–227, especially 208–213.

51 Theodor W. Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1989, 72–73; Theodor W. Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Konstruktion des Ästhetischen*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M. 1974, 130–133.

52 Adorno, *Kierkegaaard*, 73/132.

53 Adorno, letter of 17 December 1934, in *The Complete Correspondence*, 69; Adorno, *Briefwechsel*, 93. This is a variation of a criticism of Benjamin's writings that Adorno continued to make for decades after Benjamin's death. See: Theodor W. Adorno, "Introduction to Benjamin's *Schriften*," trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, in *On Walter Benjamin. Critical Essays and Recollections*, ed. Gary Smith, The MIT Press, Cambridge 1988, 7; Theodor W. Adorno, *Über Walter Benjamin*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M. 1990, 39. Also see Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton, Continuum, New York 1973, 53; Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M. 1966, 62.

54 Even Adorno remarks on the paradox of Benjamin's impossible quest to have enlightenment and mysticism entirely unite. This impossibility leads to an immersion in multiplicity: "It was nothing other than the explication and elucidation of this paradox, with the only means which philosophy has at its disposal, concepts, that drove Benjamin to immerse himself without reserve in multiplicity [ins Mannigfalte]" (Theodor W. Adorno, "A Portrait of Walter Benjamin" [1950], in *Prisms: Cultural Criticism and Society*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber, The MIT Press,

In his Kafka essay of 1934, Benjamin takes issue with various Kierkegaardian readings of Kafka. Willy Haas claims that "the upper power, the realm of grace" is depicted by Kafka in *The Castle* [*Das Schloss*], and that "the power below, the realm of the court and of damnation" is addressed in *The Trial*. In *Amerika* (now known as *The Missing Person*), Kafka tries to convey "[t]he earth between the two, [...] earthly fate and its arduous demands." Haas contends that Kafka's writings are fundamentally religious, and that works such as *The Castle* are concerned with God's "awful" playing with the human being. For Haas, the latter motif is a Kierkegaardian-Pascalian one in which the human is somehow generically "always wrong" before an ultimately benign "God."[55] Benjamin thinks Max Brod is the spur for such a reading. Also following this Brodian train of thought, he contends, is Bernard Rang, who refers to the Castle as "the seat of grace" making "the vain efforts and attempts mean, theologically speaking, that God's grace cannot be attained or forced by the human willfully and deliberately. Unrest and impatience only impede and confound the exalted stillness of the divine."[56] Expressly against Haas's theological reading, however, Benjamin stresses that *The Castle* provides no indication of a forgiving, omnipotent authority; rather, *The Castle* suggests the lack of such authority. "'For is an individual official capable of granting pardon?' we read in *The Castle*. 'At most this might be a matter for the administration as a whole, but even it can probably not grant forgiveness, but only judge.'"[57] These judgements are ambiguous in the mythic – the first – sense outlined above: their claims to all-encompassing authority are patently questionable. In the context of Kierkegaard's paradox, it might be said that the particulars do not imply a stillness of the divine to which the particulars can open. Permeating the paradox – permeating the opposition to the prevailing *doxa* – is, moreover, the second ambiguity, the *Mehrdeutigkeit*, that cannot be expunged from experience.

In a preparatory note, Benjamin writes that Kafka's "monstrosities" have their "origin" in "ambiguous [(z)weideutige] connections," which emerge in "the forgotten" (das Vergessene).[58] This "forgotten" is not simply something we forgot

Cambridge 1997, 227–241 241; Theodor W. Adorno, "Charakteristik Walter Benjamins," in *Prismen. Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M. 1987, 248–249).

55 Willy Haas, *Gestalten der Zeit* [*Figures of the Age*], Kiepenheuer, Berlin 1930, 175–177.

56 Bernard Rang, "Franz Kafka. Versuch eines Hinweises" ("Franz Kafka. Attempt at a Suggestion"), in *Die Schildgenossen* 12 (1932): 115–116, 107–119.

57 Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 2*, 806–807; Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II:1, 425–426. See Franz Kafka, *The Castle*, trans. Mark Harman, Schocken Books, New York 1998, 216; Franz Kafka, *Das Schloß*, ed. Malcolm Pasley, Fischer, Frankfurt/M. 2002, 339–340.

58 Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II:3, 1240.

and could conceivably remember; rather, it is above all something that can be remembered only as forgotten, as irretrievable for consciousness. This element in Benjamin's reading of Kafka has provoked many conflicting accounts, and (as noted) attempts have been made to elaborate why (notwithstanding Benjamin's own contradictory statements about it) there is at least occasional basis in Benjamin's writings on Kafka for reading "the forgotten" as an epic *Vorwelt* that pierces, prevails over, and remains unsubmissive to the world-encompassing claims of myth.[59] This *Vorwelt* is with us but eludes us; it offers no panarchy. It renders ambiguous everything we might perceive or conceive about anything. Kafka's monstrosities emerging from ambiguity are not anathema to the philosophic in literature; instead, they indicate what is essential for it. They demonstrate that myth is not all-encompassing (the first ambiguity), and they thereby open to *Mehrdeutigkeit* (the second ambiguity).

There is no opening by freedom to a divine Nothing (Kierkegaard's God). This element in Kierkegaard's absolute paradox is especially refused by Benjamin. In a note to the 1934 essay, he even claims that the word "God" does not appear in Kafka's writings[60] – an exaggeration, of course.[61] Benjamin does not consider anxiety in Kafka's texts to be the Kierkegaardian catalyst to fearless freedom for the divine. He acknowledges that Kafkan anxiety is not, like fear, simply "a reaction." He also refers, however, to the *Doppelgesichtigkeit*, the ambivalence or two-sidedness, of "the Kafkan anxiety." This might suggest that the Kafkan anxiety is not quite able to be transformed into Kierkegaardian anxiety, which potentially opens to resolute freedom from aesthetic-sensuous or moral constraints.[62] The two-sidedness of Kafkan anxiety seems to be that it may have moti-

59 See note 23 above.

60 Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II:3, 1214.

61 In "The Metamorphosis" ("Die Verwandlung"), for instance, Gregor's father greets the news that Gregor is dead with the remark: "Now [...] we can thank God" (Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*, trans. and ed. Stanley Corngold, Norton Critical Edition, Norton, New York 1996, 40; Franz Kafka, "Die Verwandlung," in *Drucke zu Lebzeiten* [*Works Published During His Lifetime*], eds. Wolf Kittler, Hans-Gerd Koch, and Gerhard Neumann, Fischer, Frankfurt/M. 2002, 113–200, 195). In the writings by Kafka that Benjamin had read, there are various such references to God.

62 Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II:3, 1196. For this view of the two-sidedness of anxiety, Benjamin claims to be following Willy Haas's interpretation of the Kafkan anxiety. Benjamin wrote for *Die Literarische Welt*, which Haas edited, so perhaps he is referring to a conversation with Haas, whom he saw regularly in the late 1920s and early 1930s (Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin. A Critical Life*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2014, 323, 368). There is, however, no such characterization of Kafka's *Angst* in Haas's *Gestalten der Zeit*, which is the work by Haas mentioned in Benjamin's writings and notes on Kafka. See Haas, *Gestalten der Zeit*, 172–199, where Haas – as noted – interprets Kafka through Kierkegaard. The only

vation to such freedom yet simultaneously may be somewhat embroiled in fears associated with demands of the senses and of the moral order.[63] In Benjamin's Kafka, there tends indeed to be anxiety on behalf of the nothing that eludes but also constitutes all particulars; however, this anxiety is so intermingled with very particular fears that it remains insurmountably ambiguous. For instance, Kafka expresses the wish to unite mundane activity – such as hammering – with the nothing that is the possibility for something to be useful. This wish is portrayed by Kafka, and in turn by Benjamin, as "'only a defense, an embourgeoisement of the nothing, an air of cheerfulness [Munterkeit], that he wants to give the nothing.'"[64] For Kierkegaard, too, the "relation of anxiety to its object, to something that is nothing [...] is altogether ambiguous."[65] Anxiety does not, as unambiguous freedom might, entirely surmount pressures of physicality, customs, laws, and morals.[66] Yet this anxiety can, for Kierkegaard, awaken us to unambiguous freedom, to "freedom's possibility."[67] In contrast, Benjamin's Kafkan anxiety is so ambiguous that it does not open to freedom entirely transcending physicality or legal-moral influences.[68] The interpenetration of absolute and particular – the

other work by Haas mentioned in Benjamin's Kafka materials is a contribution to a *Festschrift* for Max Brod's fiftieth birthday; the contribution is a discussion of the friendship between Brod and Kafka, and does not address *Angst* (Willy Haas, "Auslegung eines Aktes der Freundschaft" ("Interpretation of an Act of Friendship"), in *Dichter, Denker, Helfer*: *Max Brod zum 50. Geburtstag* [*Poet, Thinker, Helper: On the Occasion of Max Brod's Fiftieth Birthday*], ed. Felix Weltsch, Verlag von Julius Kittls Nachfolger, Keller & Co., Mähr.-Ostrau 1934, 67–73). In a short "Bibliography on Kafka," Benjamin informally lists this essay by Haas (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II:3, 1247).

63 For elaboration, see Brendan Moran, "Anxiety and Attention," 201–227.

64 Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 2*, 813–814; Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II:2, 434–436; Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. II:3, 1243. Quoting Franz Kafka, *Tagebücher* [*Diaries*], eds. Hans-Gerd Koch, Michael Müller, and Malcolm Pasley, Fischer, Frankfurt/M. 1992, 855. Concerning the role of "the nothing" in Benjamin's Kafka writings, see the section on "Use of nothing" in Brendan Moran, "Foolish Wisdom in Benjamin's Kafka," in *Lachen – Ost und West / Laughter – Eastern and Western Philosophies*, eds. Hans-Georg Möller and Günter Wohlfart, Verlag Karl Alber, Freiburg and Munich 2010, 175–192, 183–187.

65 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety* [*Begrebet Angest*], trans. and ed. Reider Thomte with Albert B. Anderson, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1981, 42–43.

66 Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 109; Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death* [*Sygdommen til Døden*], trans. Alistair Hannay, Penguin Books, London 1989, 60.

67 Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 42–43.

68 For elaboration, see Moran, "Anxiety and Attention."

Nothing and the something – is such that Kafka enters into ambiguity that undermines the absolute paradox.[69]

This interpenetration is a philosophic movement of the two ambiguities: it shows mythic claims to transcendence to be ambiguous (in not accomplishing what they claim), and thereby unlocks ambiguity as *Mehrdeutigkeit*. In many respects, Benjamin's work is an effort to revitalize this philosophic motion, this complementarity of literature and philosophy. In this complementarity, literature provides openly singular cases that break through mythic denial of ambiguity. Literature shows myth unable to conceal the ambiguity whereby its claims to closure and resolution are rebuffed. With this rebuffing of closure and resolution comes an opening to another ambiguity: the *Mehrdeutigkeit* that figures so prominently in Kafka. In the reception of the literary work, philosophy revitalizes this two-fold engagement with ambiguity and is itself reminded of the inextinguishable singularity that literature brings to the fore.

4 Concluding Words

Against aspects of Benjamin's outlook, and in disagreement with some of his readers, this essay has drawn upon features of his work to note a distinct complementarity of ambiguity and the philosophic. As opposition to prevailing opinion (doxa), Benjaminian philosophic paradox involves at least two kinds of ambiguity: it points to life as embroiled in myths that have only ambiguous claims to closure or transcendence; and it opens to the ensuing ambiguity as *Mehrdeutigkeit* – the lack of a credibly all-encompassing interpretation. This two-fold ambiguity seems to be a basis for Benjamin's disagreement with Kierkegaard's absolute paradox. And this disagreement may extend further. Perhaps other kinds of paradox, including some of Benjamin's own, are permeated by the two kinds of ambiguity discussed in this essay. At least as the confrontation of the universal – that is, philosophic – impetus with myth itself, philosophy involves a paradox – a

69 Several decades ago, Heinz Politzer remarked that Kafka's works may be full of paradoxes of many sorts, but precisely these often depend on an "abundance" of ambiguities (Heinz Politzer, *Franz Kafka: Parable and Paradox*, Cornell University Press, Cornell 1966, 22). In an essay from the 1970s in *American Imago*, Stanley Hopper provides an assessment that might be even closer to Benjamin's: "Kierkegaard wants to re*solve* [...] ambiguity by way of [...] the Great *Contradiction*, or 'Paradox,'" "whereas Kafka leads us into the place where we see that everything that lies before us is ambiguous" (Stanley Romaine Hopper, "Kafka and Kierkegaard: The Function of Ambiguity," in *American Imago* 35:1/2 (1978): 92–105, 102).

para-dox – that, *on one hand*, reveals the ambiguity unacknowledged by myth: the ambiguity of a claim to all-encompassing truth, the ambiguity that shows this claim not to be all-encompassing. *On the other hand*, the paradox – as confrontation that would be an assertion of universality against mythic constraint – finds itself confronted with the second ambiguity: the *Mehrdeutigkeit* that cannot be entirely expunged from the attempt at paradox. In a way, the *Mehrdeutigkeit* recalls the oblique singularity that no claim to universality can entirely eradicate. Philosophy must acknowledge, and thereby recognize, its own literary character: the singularity that rebuffs mythic containment by recognizing the ambiguity of such containment, and that thereby conveys life as *mehrdeutig*.

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