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\*Corresponding author: Alison Ross,  
Department of Philosophy, Monash  
University, Clayton, Australia  
E-mail: [alison.ross@monash.edu](mailto:alison.ross@monash.edu)

Reviewing editors:  
Knox Peden, University of Melbourne,  
Australia; Glenn Roe, Australian National  
University, Australia

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## PHILOSOPHY & RELIGION | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Walter Benjamin's idea of revolution: The fulfilled wish in historical perspective

Alison Ross<sup>1\*</sup>

**Abstract:** This paper analyses the diverse references involved in Walter Benjamin's idea of revolution. Despite its significance for his philosophical outlook, the concept of revolution seems to receive no systematic or perhaps even consistent treatment in his heterogeneous writings. But what is clear is that, in contrast to the way the term is usually understood in political philosophy, Benjamin conceives of revolution primarily as a category of experience, a type of emphatic experience of meaning. The paper defends this interpretation against some of the recent treatments of Benjamin's notion of the dream and the wish. It shows that an adequate account of Benjamin's idea of revolution must grapple with his peculiar idea of an articulated wish that is fulfilled in history. And it defends the thesis that this idea of a fulfilled historical wish provides the most robust formulation of the different references involved in Benjamin's idea of revolutionary experience as well an instructive point of contrast between Benjamin's treatment of this idea and other well-known conceptions of revolution.

**Subjects:** Political History; Philosophy; Cultural Studies

**Keywords:** Walter Benjamin; revolution; fulfilment; wish; dream; history

### 1. Introduction: Fulfilment and alienation

One of the most striking and continuous preoccupations of Walter Benjamin's writing is to conceptualise the *fulfilling experience*. The notion of fulfilling experience is the touchstone for Benjamin's conception of revolution, and sets his treatment of this topic apart from any other. Transparency, in the sense of self-presence, characterises this type of experience. In other words, it takes place without reservation and ambiguity, and is imbued with a thorough awareness of itself as fulfilment of a wish. The notion underlines Benjamin's portraits of vivid experiences, especially those of childhood and, in some of his early essays, of "youth" or the "eros of creativity" (SW vol. 1, p. 43).<sup>1</sup> The transparency of the new glass and iron spaces of the "arcades" organises the *Arcades Project*. Benjamin had collected the material for this project between 1927 until his death in 1940. The extant project, published in its unfinished form, consists in a series of folders that include citations and commentary

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alison Ross teaches Philosophy at Monash University in Melbourne. Her recent work has examined the relation between action and meaning in complex environments. The present paper addresses this topic in relation to Walter Benjamin's writing on history and revolutions.

### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

One perennial question for research in history and the social sciences is how to define revolutions. The question has received renewed attention following recent waves of unrest against dictatorial regimes during the so-called "Arab Spring". This paper considers Walter Benjamin's unusual approach to the topic of revolution. In its evaluation of the connections he draws between history and the vocabulary of "fulfilment" and the "wish" the paper aims to give a fresh perspective on the topic of revolutions.

on material drawn from the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> It includes material on the steel and glass construction of the nineteenth-century Paris arcades; on distinctive types of modern conduct and experience, such as the gambler, *flâneur* and prostitute; and information on topics of past social history, such as the arrangement of merchandise in department stores and furnishings in domestic interiors. The structure and the material delineates through the spatio-architectural transparency the experience of being (at) home in public, albeit fleetingly, with all the contradictions that this experience brings into play.

One aspect of such an experience for Benjamin is, of course, the question of social alienation. Benjamin sees in the nineteenth century Paris arcades the distorted image of the promise of emancipation from want and hard labour made possible by the technical skill and mastery involved in their construction. The promise and the potential are displayed in the arcades, but in a distorted way. What is important for Benjamin is that in the arcades this promise becomes part of tangible experience, lived here and now. These nineteenth-century spaces present an “historical index” that points towards the fulfilment of the promise, like concrete signs or ciphers that become legible once and for all in the twentieth century. The idea of urban transparency had earlier been set out as a global feature of the city of Naples in the 1925 piece he co-authored with Asja Lacis. They refer glowingly in this essay to the porosity of the boundary between private life and public existence, which they liken to the collective existence in an African kraal. The seeming interpenetration of the festive and ordinary days receives particular attention (SW vol. 2, p. 417). In the same vein, in his essay on surrealism Benjamin comments on the revolutionary “virtue” of living in a glass house and praises the surrealists’ acuity in perceiving the revolutionary potential in the old and the discarded (SW vol. 2, pp. 209–210). The disregard for the ordering of time around prosaic activities, such that every day takes on the colour of a festival, and the disregard too for the hierarchical categorising of things according to their use and beauty, such that even or especially what falls into disuse and disrepair receives vivid, perceptible significance, belong to the optics of “transparency”.

## 2. The revolutionary life

Despite the visual connotations, it would be wrong to assume that these references to transparency belong solely or primarily to the register of visual perception (Caygill, 1996). Indeed, one of the persistent theses across Benjamin’s corpus is the power of illumination found in language. Certain types of language are univocal, according to Benjamin, thanks to their epistemological basis. The paradisiacal “naming language” is treated in Benjamin’s early essay on language as a “cognizing language” (SW vol. 1, p. 71). It is, he writes, man’s “linguistic communion with God’s word” (SW vol. 1, p. 69); through it the essence of nature is grasped. This theme has a consistent presence throughout his corpus. In his celebrated essay on Goethe’s *Elective Affinities* Benjamin sets out the moral dimension of the theme. There are two fundamental types of life, diametrically opposed to one another: one shelters in the dim light of ambiguity, the other stands illuminated on “the ground of logos”, by which he means that the person can stand and “give an account of themselves” (SW vol. 1, pp. 326–327). Benjamin contrasts logos with the degraded use of language in chatter as well as the evasive ambiguity cultivated by silence. He contrasts the lucid perception of the ethical life of logos with the opacity of motive and understanding in the lives of the reticent and taciturn (SW vol. 1, p. 304; U, pp. 104–106).<sup>3</sup>

The idea of revolutionary life belongs in this constellation of themes: it has the character of moral and epistemological clarity, which is tied to the language of the name. It is opposed to “aesthetic” bourgeois life, which according to Benjamin is the life that is seduced and captured by the irreducible ambiguity of aesthetic form. Against the bourgeois life, Benjamin seems to give a paradigmatic status to the experience of the child at play, which in its different aspects forms a model for the lively, alert experiences of youth, or for the surrealists’ perception of the new in the old and the discarded. Children’s play “is everywhere permeated by mimetic modes of behavior”. Furthermore, their play is “by no means limited to what one person can imitate in another. The child plays at being not only a shopkeeper or teacher, but also a windmill and a train” (SW vol. 2, p. 720). The world of similitudes that the child inhabits unfolds beyond the prosaic life; and it does so, partly because it disregards the

conventional principles that confer value, such as “use” or “beauty”. Crucially, in its opposition to bourgeois life, revolutionary life is the type of life that is opposed in every respect to frailty of purpose and inaction; passivity in the face of prevailing circumstances goes under the banner of free “choice”. As Benjamin phrases the idea in his “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*” essay: the resolute “stride ... over the stage of choice to decision. Only the decision, not the choice, is inscribed in the book of life. For choice is natural and can even belong to the elements; decision is transcendent” (SW vol. 1, p. 346). The value of transparency may be measured by Benjamin’s pejorative references to the mythic life and bourgeois semblance, which are characterised by opacity and lead, not to action, but to the feelings of anxiety and guilt which overwhelm resolution of purpose.<sup>4</sup> Transparency is the hallmark not just of the decisive life, not just of the quality of the “knowledge” and the moral probity which it possesses, it also characterises the feeling of fulfilment uniquely available in the satisfaction of the childhood wish.

In a letter to his friend Wilhelm Fliess, Sigmund Freud remarked that “happiness comes only from the fulfilment of the childhood wish” (Freud, 1985, p. 353). Benjamin also associates the state of fulfilment with happiness or bliss. And in Benjamin, as well, such a feeling of fulfilment is anchored to the remembrance of an experience from the past. In his 1929 essay “The Image of Proust”, Benjamin argues that the French novelist’s “obsessive quest for happiness” is not hymnic, but elegiac (SW vol. 2, p. 239). Proust does not seek an unprecedented, unsurpassed experience; he wants to recapture the very first experience of happiness. It is the remembrance of the childhood wish that is the font of fulfilling experience. Bliss comes with the remembrance of the childhood moment. Fulfilling experience is *Erfahrung*, not *Erlebnis*. It involves the “chance” or “involuntary” encounter with the collective past [*Erfahrung*]; it cannot be captured in punctual, isolated, “lived” moments [*Erlebnisse*], nor through willed remembrance.

The satisfaction of the wish is a type of experience of timeless absorption in the moment, and is related therefore to Benjamin’s notion of the caesura, as the cessation of movement. Again, the relevant examples span a range of different contexts. The category of the expressionless [*Ausdruckslos*] that Benjamin elaborates in the 1924/5 essay on Goethe’s novel, cuts down the shimmering movement of semblance and reduces the potent signifying power of the symbol to “a torso” (SW vol. 1, p. 351). The expressionless thus annihilates the premise of the restless, anxious and guilt-ridden search for authoritative meaning in forms that do not in fact possess such meaning. In the framework of this essay, the expressionless is the counter to false authority and the emancipation as well from feelings of anxiety and guilt. Similarly, in his discussion in 1940 of the inadequacies of the Marxist concept of revolution, which he notes “has never failed to arrive”, he remarks that revolutions are not, as Marx thought, the locomotive of history, but the desire of the passengers on the train to pull the “emergency brake” (SW vol. 4, p. 402). The timeless quality of the satisfaction of the wish or the complete absorption in the moment that occurs in childhood play may be referred to here. The absorption in play and the satisfaction of the wish seem to be the “subjective” versions of the clarity that Benjamin associates with the existential state of fulfilment, which also has its place in his reflections on history.

The experience of fulfilment is totally self-involving; it claims the totality of the person.<sup>5</sup> So, too, is the experience of historical knowledge in the dialectical image, which is able to draw attention to what is pertinent in a situation and directly stoke the motivation to act. In an earlier version of this position in the 1914 essay “The Life of Students” Benjamin had called for an “unceasing” spiritual revolution (SW vol. 1, p. 43). The call he makes here fits with these other cases; like them it associates the heightened state of historical awareness that is directed to action with revolutionary experience. Revolutionary experience is comprehensive; it changes the meaning of everything. Benjamin’s late work adds to this idea of transformative experience a distinctive conception of the experience of the knowledge of history as a force of revolutionary motivation and existential clarity. The dialectical image, for instance, involves the idea that “history” is experience-able. Or, better, that knowledge of the meaning of history is experience-able in the moment of graphic perception (SW vol. 4, p. 402; A [N 1, 4], p. 457). Such “perception” is linguistic: it occurs in the reading of the citations collected in

the *Arcades Project*. Across the earlier and the later work is the idea that what is discarded and disused, once placed in a certain perspective or constellation, illuminates the moment and occasions the experience of emphatic, lucid meaning.

### 3. Revolutionary experience

The conception is undeniably singular: it has no ready connections with institutional and historical perspectives on revolution. For how does the idea of the demonic power of sensible forms (“semblance”), or of the decisive action required to annihilate aesthetic power, or the notion that revolution is the cessation of incessant movement, fit with the familiar historical accounts of revolution, for example, in Eric Hobsbawm’s account of the nineteenth century as “The Age of Revolution”? (Hobsbawm, 1962). Unlike Benjamin, these accounts define revolutions as momentous and violent political and social upheavals, which culminate in fundamental institutional changes. In his ambitious conception of the experience of “timeless fulfilment”, Benjamin also effectively disregards familiar ideas in political–theoretical works, such as Hannah Arendt’s conception that revolutionary acts are motivated by the great conflict between freedom and tyranny (Arendt, 2006, p. 48). Revolutionary acts, after all, are conscripted in Benjamin’s writing to destroy the “stage of free choice”, and the grand narrative of historical conflict invoked in Arendt must be seen from this perspective as impoverished, if not fatally limited as a conception of revolution (Arendt, 2006, p. 42).<sup>6</sup> Benjamin adds to those narratives centred on the experience of emancipation or those directed towards the satisfaction of needs, a conception of happiness that completely changes their meaning.

Similarly, Benjamin’s association of existential fulfilment and epistemological and ethical clarity with revolutionary action does not easily fit in the Marxist or messianic traditions with which his name is usually associated. The Marxist perspective on history relies on ideas of technological progress and class struggle, which Benjamin criticises. Further, Benjamin’s idea of revolution involves a more fundamental idea of emancipation than the liberation from want or the shedding of oppressive social relations. At its core, Benjamin’s idea of revolution is a conception of the fulfilling experience of emphatic meaning. It draws on the experience of the child absorbed in her play and a number of quasi-literary motifs such as the surrealist “profane illumination”.

Michael Löwy has persuasively argued that Benjamin arrived at his unique perspective as a result of his combination of the different movements that influenced his writing. He calls the “alchemical fusion”, Benjamin forges between messianic, libertarian, anarchist, romantic and Marxist elements, “philosopher’s gold” (Löwy, 1988, pp. 95–97). The argument of influence is without the evidence that the influence in many of these cases is a sustained one (e.g. romanticism), or that even in those that endure the commitment to the doctrinal element was there in the first place. To be sure, there is an interest in messianic and kabbalistic traditions in Benjamin. But, like the Marxist “influence” the knowledge of the relevant sources is often second hand, and at that, often rendered unrecognisable in Benjamin’s hands. We would be warranted, then, in viewing with scepticism the choice of the word “influence” to describe the dynamic at issue. It seems to me that there are certain pulses in Benjamin’s thinking which precede the movements that Löwy cites as sources of influence. These include Benjamin’s drive to escape from forces of totalisation, including the idea of the inescapability of the meaning communicated in material forms, and it is these pulses that underpin his understanding of the revolutionary life.<sup>7</sup>

We can take the example of the Jewish idea of redemption, for instance, which is understood, among others, as a matter of experiencing things differently, seeing things with a different eye. In his apocryphal version of the Hasidic tale in the 1929 essay “In the Sun”, just a “little difference” in the perception of the world is required: “The room we have now will be just the same in the world to come; where our child lies sleeping, it will sleep in the world to come. The clothes we are wearing we shall also wear in the next world. Everything will be the same as here—only a little bit different. Thus it is with imagination. It merely draws a veil over the distance. Everything remains just as it is, but the veil flutters and everything changes imperceptibly beneath it” (SW vol. 2, p. 664). Although he refers to the source of the tale as a Hasidic rabbi, its real source is an exchange with his friend

Gershom Scholem. The “authority” of the Hasidim is thus used as cover for the Benjaminian idea of the significance of a “little” change in perception. If we step away from the paradigm of influence, or even from the problem of the genesis of this idea in these friends’ correspondence,<sup>8</sup> we can see that the tale Benjamin relates raises serious questions for his idea of revolution. This “little difference” means a reconfiguration of the experience of the world; an escape from totalising forces. And what happens to the world? How does the “little difference” register itself at the collective level? Does the perspective on revolution as an experience of meaning connect at all with the requirements of collective action?

#### 4. The dream and the problem of collective perception

This brief outline of the different reference points involved may be taken to show that Benjamin’s chosen vocabulary for describing revolutionary experience—such as perception, memory, the wish and fulfilment—is unsuited to the task. It might be raised as an objection that, after all, his conception of revolutionary experience brings into play the individualising (and even isolating) modern experience [*Erlebnis*] that is otherwise critically treated by Benjamin himself. Where, we might ask, are the exigencies of collective revolutionary action to be met? How do the references to historical knowledge, which presumably has an “objective” claim, at least as the compelling grounds for collective action, relate to the intensity of the figures of individual perception and memory? Benjamin, a sympathetic critic might respond, is crucially aware of the problem and devotes considerable ingenuity to the task of solving it. He outlines in the *Arcades Project* how the dream state instilled in the stroll through the arcades transports individuals to the forgotten reservoir of collective experience, which, they discover in their distracted state, had been there all along. The general idea is implied in the order of the Convolutes. Benjamin moves from two dossiers on the dream—Convolute K: “Dream City and Dream House, Dreams of the Future, ... Jung” and L: “Dream House, Museum, Spa”—to the folder devoted to the figure of “The Flâneur”. This M Convolute precedes the convolute beloved of the philosophers, “N: On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress”. The sequence thus moves from the experience of (collective) absorption in the dream, through the (individual) figure of the *flâneur*, to the awakening that occurs in the experience of the dialectical image as the truth of history. Amongst other things, the movement through the Convolutes is one that intends to show how the collective truth of history is experience-able.

Whatever the peculiarities involved in its execution, it should be acknowledged that Benjamin’s idea of revolution is inherently practical; it is no exaggeration to state that it is based in a conception of action. Benjamin thinks that the emphatic experience of lucid meaning encourages action. Just as his early writing praises instances of resolute action, so too his late writing is interested in exploring those contexts in which certain kinds of experience might stimulate motivation. His early writing analyses the consequences of the modern decline of tradition in bourgeois life. Human beings are ill-suited to an environment without a determined context for action; they founder in anxiety and guilt when left to “freely choose” their course. His late writing is specifically interested in identifying contexts for simultaneous, collective experience that short circuit the pernicious effects of “choice”. He wants this type of collective experience to be “meaningful” in the precise sense that it binds its recipients in a direct and immediate way. The immediacy involved in this collective experience echoes the calibre of the resolute decision that “strides across the stage of choice” praised in his early writing. He looks for such collective experience in intentionless or involuntary states. And he finds the acme of this experience in the shedding of purposive schemas in the state of awakening from the dream. The collective presence of elements of the urban environment is crucial for this account since it provides a basis for the collective material for the dream.

Although there are suggestive references to the dream in his early writing,<sup>9</sup> we first encounter Benjamin’s specific approach to the dream in his discussion of the French novelist Marcel Proust’s conception of involuntary memory in the 1929 essay “The Image of Proust”. It is subsequently used in an altered form as a model of the “collective dream” in the K convolute of his *Arcades Project*. The later alterations to the Proustian model incorporate aspects of his treatment of the collective experience of architecture and film in the different versions of his essay from the 1930s, “The Artwork in

the Age of its Technological Reproducibility". Crucially, the significance Benjamin ascribes to the state of the "collective dream" draws substantially on his idiosyncratic definition of truth in the Epistemo-Critical Preface to his 1925 book on the German mourning play, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Here, he states that: "Truth is an intention-less state of being, made up of ideas. The proper approach to it is not therefore one of intention and knowledge, but rather a total immersion and absorption in it. Truth is the death of intention" (U, p. 36). The notion of truth as "total immersion and absorption" underscores what Benjamin wants from the vocabulary of the dream: namely, a totalising experience of the (forgotten) revolutionary promise of the nineteenth century. Benjamin's idea that the historical significance of the nineteenth century may be collectively experienced and thus binding in the twentieth is premised on the credibility of the transfer of features of the individual state in Proustian involuntary memory to the collective level. Can a collective have a more or less singular historical "experience" in the (emphatic) sense of a concrete illumination of meaning? The transfer specifically aims to exceed the limitations of merely personal memory to forge an experience of collective motivation. This case, however, is not adequately made. Nor, I think, given the parameters of Benjamin's approach to modern experience, can it be.<sup>10</sup>

In Benjamin's earlier writing, which rests on the absolute opposition between the perspectives of theology and myth, the question of collective perception does not really arise, since collective experience seems to be implicit in the idea of the paradisiacal state and in the language of the name. In paradise, the transparent quality of heightened, lucid experience is secured by the transcendent figure of God and his "creative word". Thus, if you like, intersubjective experience is grounded in the objective reality. The parameters of such collective forms of experience, however, are not found in post-lapsarian contexts. Nonetheless, Benjamin's attempt at an explanation of collective experience in the figure of the dream is read very generously by a number of commentators (Gelley, 2014).<sup>11</sup> They allow that Benjamin has established the link he wanted to forge, and some set out to explicate its mechanisms and reasoning (Friedlander, 2012, pp. 90–112). Others, in contrast, had focused from the beginning on the difficulties involved in this use of the dream, which they consider to be vulnerable to the charge of arbitrariness.<sup>12</sup> It is true, Benjamin's position reverses the conventional meaning assigned to the dream. On his account, waking life is a pattern of individualising experience and the dream, in contrast, is the site and the opportunity for an exit from its strictures. Benjamin's logic inverts the Freudian idea that the meaning assigned to the dream images in analysis marks the shift away from the idiosyncratic psychic life of the analyse and in which these images first become meaningful. Analysis shifts them onto a communicative, shared register, which might dispel their (pathological) hold. However, Benjamin's idea that the dream opens the pathway to collective significance, must be seen only as a striking semantic inversion, not as the resolution for the historical problem of revolutionary consciousness. And, we must be cognisant as well of the signs that Benjamin thought the terminology might be deficient, even if we acknowledge that he used it to get a grip on how the peculiarities of the historical moment of early commodity capitalism might be registered in perceptual experience (Lindner, 1986, pp. 25–46).<sup>13</sup> The aims, in other words, are clear, even if Benjamin's expressed aspiration for an account of the motives for collective action in the experience of the dream should not be thought to amount to a competent theory of such motivation.

The difficulty is that the dream founders as a vocabulary of revolution precisely because of its status as an intentionless experience. What the dream retrieves as forgotten collective experience it cannot easily convert into grounds for action. The pathway between the experience of collective meaning and action is obscure, as the obsessive, epigraphical use of "awakening" throughout the Project shows.

On the other hand, the difficulties that Benjamin's use of the vocabulary of the dream raises, are successfully treated in his idea of the fulfilled wish. The notion of the wish straddles one of the major fault-lines of the corpus, without needing the inversion of ordinary semantics required of the dream: in the vocabulary of the wish Benjamin's consecration of singular and extreme forms of experience and his determined aspiration that such experience be sustained and universal, i.e. that it be seen to

possess historical and not merely individually perceived significance, is met. What is distinctive about the wish, however, in comparison to the dream, is its quality of illuminating self-presence, which I think is the main characteristic of Benjamin's idea of revolutionary experience. The wish fulfilled has the status of existential clarity and absorption; it is also fulfilled in a distracted state. The price of the distraction associated with the dream, in contrast, is that it struggles to be compatible with any notion of "fulfilment". The idea of the fulfilled wish thus solves the thorny problem that hovers around discussions of Benjamin's use of the dream: it reconciles the idea of truth as intentionless, which seems to privilege subjectless experience, with the idea that it is existential lucidity that propels revolutionary action.

### 5. The fulfilled wish in history

When Benjamin writes about the fulfilment of the childhood wish his emphasis falls on the experience of completion. What could compare at the level of history to childhood experience? After all, when Benjamin refers to the trans-historical wish for emancipation, it is not fulfilment, but the wish that is vitiated in the historical failure of revolutionary action that is his focus. In fact, it is precisely the vitiated status of the wish that provides something of an analogue to the elegiac sense of the memory of (lost) childhood fulfilment. On the other hand, the figure of the child, aside from the bare fact of its state of absorption in play, is difficult to connect to the specifications of truth as Benjamin defines them. However, the relevant contrast for this epistemological requirement is not really the child at play, but the dream. And, unlike the case of the dream, the scruples involved in the absorption in the intentionless state of truth do not, in the case of the historical wish, undermine the cogency of action, they support it. The trans-historical wish requires the perspective of different generations to become legible; in this way it escapes the objection of partiality that is the ghost behind Benjamin's definition of truth as intention-less. The industrial innovations of the nineteenth century make it possible for the first time to concretely describe what is involved in human emancipation from want and hard labour. This wish for emancipation is articulated in the citations collected in Benjamin's *Arcades*. The trans-historical wish is registered uniquely in the "historical index" that points from the nineteenth century to its redemption in the twentieth. It seems as if it is the possibility of defining the wish in concrete terms that bestows on it something akin to the feeling of completion. This feeling cannot be the result of a cultivated disposition or inclination lest it appear capricious; it must be based in an experience of the truth of history. It is the nineteenth century as this is experienced in historical citation in the twentieth that presents such experience-able truth. In this respect, too, the factors involved in the perception of this articulated (vitiating) wish mirror those in play in Benjamin's early description of truth as a state of intentionless absorption. In Benjamin's writing on the *Trauerspiel* he had defended the view that it was the consideration of the extreme case that could uniquely provide penetrating knowledge of what pertains in general (U, p. 160). This view of knowledge is also represented in his claim that it is the twentieth century that sees the extremities of history laid bare in the nineteenth, and understands the significance of the unfulfilled wishes of this epoch. The vocabulary of the wish as it is used in the case of the generational (collective) context of nineteenth-century industrialisation is thus fused with a conception of historical truth and knowledge that alters what could be meant by "completion" or "fulfilment" of the wish. In its backward look on the past of the nineteenth century, can the revolutionary perception of lost possibilities attain the state of happiness described in Benjamin's essay on Proust as an elegiac or first happiness? Is the perception of the significance of this historical moment where the sense of completion of the wish lies? Like the childhood wish, the fulfilment of the trans-historical wish is an experience of timeless absorption in the moment whose signature is one of comprehensive alteration: it is the transformative experience involved in the perception of the dialectical image as this is outlined in his late theses "On the Concept of History", and it is also the ever so slight transformation of prosaic circumstances that changes everything, which Benjamin describes in the 1929 essay "In the Sun". The wish may be vitiated in the failure of the nineteenth century to realise it, but it also becomes legible and actionable for the first time in the perception of that century's significance in the twentieth century. In other words, the legibility of the wish occurs in the realisation that the wish is vitiated and this experience, crucially, propels the effort to restore its promise. In all of these respects, the meaning of history, i.e. its redemptive significance becomes transparent. The experience

of the wish renders the meaning of history luminous; it redeems history from the capricious confusion of a litany of suffering and oppression. The clarity involved in this experience acts as a prompt to action. Put this way, the concrete perception of the wish for emancipation may also be understood as a type of “realisation”. The historical point of the legibility of the wish, that is to say, is not the deferral of some nebulous project of addressing social alienation, it is itself a type of experience of completion as resolution, and one that therefore charges motivation for redressing specifiable wrongs. Echoing the terminology of his early essay on language as well as the Preface to his study of the German mourning play, Benjamin describes this state of the legibility of the wish in the vocabulary of “knowledge” and “fulfilment”. “[R]evolution”, he writes, is “the absolute precondition, if not indeed the absolute *fulfilment* and *completion* of theoretical knowledge” (Benjamin, 1972–1991, vol. 3, pp. 169–171).<sup>14</sup>

## 6. Wish and intention in historical perspective

In Eli Friedlander’s fascinating philosophical portrait of Benjamin, he describes revolutionary experience as the conversion of the interior associations of the dream and memory into a collective register. The mechanisms of this transition are not described as such; they seem to be the work of the chosen vocabulary. He argues, for instance, that the dream space is constituted as a process of internalisation. The process involved, he writes, “might finally suggest why Benjamin would associate awakening with the ‘fresh air doctrine of revolutions’ [A, p. 422]. ‘Fresh air’ is the opening of the expanse of the dialectical image, from the interiority of the dream images” (Friedlander, 2012, p. 252, n. 11). Awakening involves a freeing from the “paralyzing hold of the wish images of the past” and “an energetic conversion” that opens up the panorama of history: “‘The ... leap in the open air of history is the dialectical leap Marx understood as revolution’ (SW vol., 4, p. 395)” (Friedlander, 2012, p. 252; n. 11). Notably, in his description of the shift from dream to awakening Friedlander re-states as if they were the points of transition the list of the oppositions that he argues Benjamin purposively altered “between inside and outside, subjective and objective, private and collective, image and concept” (Friedlander, 2012, p. 104).<sup>15</sup> The position is consistent with Friedlander’s presentation of Benjamin’s aspirations for a rigorous approach to historical truth; but it is also notably subjectless in its vocabulary and passive grammatical constructions. The point can be clearly seen in Friedlander’s account of the vocabulary of the “wish”.

In his references to the “paralyzing hold of the wish images of the past” Friedlander presumes an alliance between the vocabulary of the wish and its “material contents”. Benjamin, he argues, treats the wish from the perspective of the desirability of its dissolution (Friedlander, 2012, p. 109), and he takes such dissolution to be the basis for the experience of “fulfilment”. In relation to the dream, for instance, Friedlander argues that Benjamin sees awakening “as finding detours to avoid [the] fulfilment” of the wish. He cites Benjamin: “‘Only with cunning, not without it, can we work free of the realm of dream’ (A, p. 173)”. And he comments: “For Benjamin, cunning would consist in finding that fulfilment that takes the form of the *disappearance* of the wish. It is necessary to find a way to be spared fulfilment (or at least the kind of fulfilment that the wish images seem to demand)” (Friedlander, 2012, pp. 96–97; cf. p. 217). On his reading of Benjamin awakening is thus understood as a “way of dissolving the wish (showing it a way to come to nothing)” (Friedlander, 2012, p. 97). This allows the “energies of the dream” to be released “from their bond” and, more strongly still, from their “subjection” to “the wish images of the dream” (Friedlander, 2012, p. 97). The dissolution of “the fantasy” is thus the awakening to (historical) truth (Friedlander, 2012, p. 97). It is worth underlining here how in this analysis the fulfilment of the “wish images” becomes equivalent to “fantasy” and distinguished in this way from both the emancipatory “energies of the dream” and historical truth.

The difficulties with this presentation of the issues may be formulated in relation to the important theme of the intentionless nature of truth. The treatment of the topic of intentionality is a crucial marker of positions in Benjamin reception. Benjamin’s early criticisms of intentionality as mere partiality can result in interpretations that err on the side of agentless constructions, which are difficult to reconcile with the revolutionary overtones of his writing. Benjamin’s defence of the idea of truth

as the death of intention (U, p. 36; A [N3, 1], pp. 462–463) requires clarification in the context of other prominent themes in his writing, otherwise there is no easy path from the panoramic, intentionless view of history in the dream, to the gripping experience of the meaning of history that Benjamin's revolutionary epistemology requires.

Hence, the articulated wish of past generations for a life without bone crushing labour should not be interpreted in the dismissive frames of either the partiality of intention, or the idea of the wish images as a paralysing chimera. The experience of the articulated wish is not external to truth, in the way the pejorative vocabulary of “intentionality” assumes: it is the source of motivated action in Benjamin. An intention may be consistent with Benjamin's definition of truth so long as it is not partial: such intentions include the trans-historical wish for emancipation, which cuts across discrete historical moments, or the orientating role of creative intention in the Language essay, which is also used in the 1924–1925 “Goethe's Elective Affinities” essay to unlock the totalising grasp of the “chaos of symbols” in nature (SW vol. 1, p. 315). Without the trans-historical wish, we are left with a chaotic collection of citations from history, and no principle for the composition of the image that in Friedlander's account, prefigures the whole. The intentionless experience of truth he depicts seems to leave out what in this *Gestalt* vision of the panoramic image of history motivates action. The different aspects of Benjamin's approach to epistemology are brought together in his account of the trans-historical wish: it is an extreme moment that tells us about the ordinary, in this case the nineteenth century tells us about human history; and instead of “partial” knowledge, there is the presentation of the truth of human history on account of the presence in the arcades of the “wish”, which unlocks the bare materiality of the commodities and displays their meaning. Finally, there is an historical index that points towards the redemption of the nineteenth century in the twentieth and provides an escape from the mere accumulation of “facts” about the past. The account gives emphasis to specific points in history. The specific references Benjamin makes in his K convolute to the nineteenth century as the extreme moment of history and of awakening as the awakening to the significance of this fact are noticeably absent in Friedlander's treatment of the dream (A [K1a, 6], p. 39). Despite these specific points of disagreement, Friedlander's account of the dissolution of the temporal structure of the wish may be viewed more positively as another way of formulating a state of absorption in the moment. This is evidently the basis of his complaint about the temporal dissonance the wish images of the past introduce. To my mind, the fulfilment of the wish, outlined in the K convolute, is such a state of absorption; this is the reason it is associated in Benjamin with happiness. These states of absorption underpin my account of Benjamin's idea of revolution as occurring in conditions of existential clarity. The significance of Benjamin's references to the child at play, and of his description of both religious experience and aesthetic reception in the vocabulary of “being alone with one's God” (SW vol. 4, p. 281, n. 40) is that they are states that exclude reticence. Arguably, the significance for Benjamin of the dream also lies in the notion that the dream involves an intense state in which a refreshed perception of the (collective) context becomes possible. Nothing is withheld in the dream state; like the child at play the dream has an effect of integration over elements in an environment, which are thus re-calibrated for participatory meaning.

Benjamin indeed describes the effect of intensive “concentration” and “integration” over the diffusion of time and space in the experience of the dream (A, p. 392 [K2, 3]). A similar effect is praised in Benjamin's treatment of tradition as having an integrative force over a social body, in his Storyteller essay (SW vol. 3, p. 157), or in his citation model of history in which “every moment” of history becomes citable (SW vol. 4, p. 390). The same rhythm of “belonging” as an effect of integration also surfaces in his descriptions of the “warmth” of the kitsch (A, “Materials for the Exposé of 1935”, p. 909). “The masses”, he writes, “positively require from the work of art (which, for them, has its place in the circle of consumer items) something that is warming” (A, [K3a, 1], p. 395). This rhythm also characterises the role he gives to language in the experience of similitude in his essays on language and the mimetic faculty from the mid 1930's (SW vol. 2, p. 718).

Against the widespread, but lazy view that takes Benjamin's singular voice as an indication of the absence of any rigour in his position, I have argued here that the most systematic account of the

diverse elements involved in his idea of revolution, and the only one able to explain the revolutionary perspective of the agent, is Benjamin's notion of the trans-historical wish. Revolutionary experience is a type of happiness: the one which fulfils the articulated wish of past generations.

### 7. Conclusion: On the conceptual value of Benjamin's writing

What happens, however, when we step back from the technical issues involved in establishing the theory's internal coherence? Does the conception have any relevance beyond its stakes for "insider" debates about Benjamin's ideas? Axel Honneth claims that despite the intensity of the scholarly debate over the meaning of his texts, Benjamin's writing is largely irrelevant for contemporary philosophical research. The writing, in Honneth's words, strongly "resists theory formation" (Honneth, 1993, p. 83). The debate it engenders is thus akin to a stake-less dispute over the literary interpretation of a text and it is of possible interest and consequence only to its immediate participants. In my view, Benjamin's writing escapes this severe judgement. To be sure, his general position needs to be analysed at the level of its conceptual constituents rather than as a literary commentary on "fragments". Honneth's complaint is improperly directed towards Benjamin's admittedly difficult corpus, when it should target instead the impressionistic style of some Benjamin scholarship; approached in conceptual terms the corpus can sustain conceptual formulation and critical evaluation. It is another matter entirely, of course, that the theoretical position is at odds with the verities of the later generations of Frankfurt school luminaries and seemingly difficult for some of them to reconstruct and engage with at the level of its argumentation.<sup>16</sup> I have argued here that when it is distilled for its core commitments and compared with other conceptions of revolution, the singularity of Benjamin's conception stands out. In fact, crucial elements in this conception are owed more than the epithet of "singularity"; considered in their implications, they call into question the terms of the generally accepted characterisation of modern revolution as fundamental, collective transformation. Benjamin's notion of the fulfilled historical wish has little connection to the study of institutional transformations. Such transformations have a power of collective inauguration; they highlight the capacity of human beings to install new institutions and practices. As Arendt noted in her study of revolution: there is a pathos associated with the awareness of historical contingency that stems from such far-reaching and "complete" institutional change (Arendt, 2006, p. 28). She claims the feeling of pathos is the consequence of the human capacity to inaugurate, which stimulates an awareness of the (historical) frailty of what exists, since it can be superseded. In the age of modern revolutions this capacity of inauguration is raised to an unprecedented degree. In contrast, the pathos of history has a different, even counter-rationale in Benjamin. He is sensitive to the erosion of (collective) tradition that occurs in modernity, which he thinks irreparably damages our capacity for (collective) experience (*Erfahrung*). The insight troubles the idea of a modern collective, which cannot be answered from the top down, i.e. at the level of institutional practices, or those who design them. On the other hand, it is precisely because he defines revolution in terms of (individual) experience that his conception refuses to consign revolutionary aspirations to history. Some have criticised Benjamin for his allegedly purist attitude. Critics claim that by placing revolutionary motivation in a lost, unrecoverable collective past, Benjamin indefinitely defers revolutionary actualisation (Ranci re, 1996). For Benjamin, however, the framing of revolution in terms of the fulfilled wish does not give an analogy for an idea otherwise unreachable, but frames an experience that would otherwise be inaccessible. Crucially, the idea that the past may be made accessible to experience in the form of a fulfilled wish brings into focus the gap between an individual experience and the (past) of collective experience. Viewed this way, one of the implications of Benjamin's position is its identification of the anachronistic audacity involved in the assumption of a collective revolutionary will.<sup>17</sup> Despite his best efforts, Benjamin's insightful conception of revolutionary experience was not able to solve the historical puzzle of a new form of collective experience. But, for this very reason his way of placing revolution in the context of the seemingly irreversible shift away from collective tradition to individual experience retains its perspicacity today.

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### Author details

Alison Ross<sup>1</sup>  
E-mail: [alison.ross@monash.edu](mailto:alison.ross@monash.edu)  
ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5142-0695>  
<sup>1</sup> Department of Philosophy, Monash University, Clayton, Australia.

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### Notes

1. Benjamin (1996–2003). Cited in parentheses in the text as SW, followed by the volume number and page. Knox Peden, Glenn Roe and an anonymous reviewer provided helpful comments on an earlier version of the paper. The participants at the “History and Authority” conference provided a stimulating first outing for the ideas explored here.
2. Benjamin (1999). Cited in parentheses in the text as A, followed by the convolute reference and page.
3. Benjamin (1998). Cited in the text as U, followed by the page number.
4. I discuss Benjamin's association of opacity with the mythic life and each of these with the existential states of guilt and anxiety in Ross (2015).
5. Cf. Goffman's (1956). For Benjamin, there is no reserve “backstage” in revolutionary experience; no role is being played, revolutionary experience is anti-theatrical.
6. According to Arendt revolutions differ from insurrections because the actors seek change at the level of institutional formation. Here too, her perspective contrasts with Benjamin's which seems to be indifferent to such topics. I will return to this point of comparison in my concluding remarks.
7. Michael Löwy states that Benjamin's Theses “On the Concept of History” “is perhaps the most important revolutionary document since Marx's ‘Theses on Feuerbach’”. I admire Löwy's account, but differ with him regarding the sources relevant to understanding what Benjamin means by revolution. The late Theses do not have a broad enough basis in the corpus to tackle this question. Although Löwy adds to the Theses references from the early essays on youth and Benjamin's essay on Bachofen, he seeks in these evidence of the influence of anarchism and romanticism. He does not question the salience of the postulation of influence as a way of interpreting Benjamin's writing on the topic (Löwy, 2005, p. 4). I discuss in detail these difficulties with Löwy's position in a forthcoming book, Alison Ross, *Revolution and History in Walter Benjamin: A Conceptual Analysis*.
8. I discuss this genesis in Ross (2015, p. 58, n. 13). The reference to Scholem as the “great rabbi” occurs in his essay on Kafka, SW vol. 2, p. 811.
9. In “The Metaphysics of Youth” he writes: “Sometimes, on awakening, we recall a dream. In this way rare shafts of insight illuminate the ruins of our energies that time has passed by” (SW vol. 1, p. 6). And later in the same essay: “Here we wake up and partake of the morning repast of youth. Things perceive us; their gaze propels us into the future, since we do not respond to them but instead step among them” (SW vol. 1, p. 13).
10. Benjamin thinks that the historical experience of the significance of the nineteenth century is collective by virtue of one's absorption within a shared urban environment. But the process involved in the heightened perception of the significance of this environment—

the meaning that makes this experience collectively binding—requires a better account than the use of the dream metaphor provides. Benjamin has eloquently built the case for the individualism of modernity. By the same token, individual experience cannot become “collective” through the liberal use of the suggestive vocabulary of dreaming and awakening.

11. Gelley, it seems to me, reaches a bit too far in the direction of deconstructive idioms when he describes the collective reference of the dream as “the collective to come” (p. 189).
12. See the exchange between Benjamin and Theodor Adorno on the topic (SW vol. 4, pp. 99–115 and 200–213).
13. Linder points out that the use of the dream in the later 1939 Exposé of the project is dropped. He challenges the idea that this was due to pressure from Adorno after the 1935 Exposé and thinks it more likely an indication that Benjamin saw difficulties with the terminology (pp. 41–42).
14. Emphasis added. I have followed here Chris Turner's translation of this passage in Michael Löwy's *Fire Alarm*, 8. However, it should be noted that the rendering of “*absoluten Vollzug und das letzte Wort*” as “fulfilment” and “completion” may need qualification. In particular, “realisation” may be better for “*absoluten Vollzug*” and the use of “completion” for “*das letzte Wort*” is a liberal translation. I would like to thank Samuel Cuff Snow for discussing with me some of the technical issues raised by this passage.
15. Friedlander also treats the theme of the collective body in the case of revolutionary action (2012, pp. 74–90).
16. Habermas uses the notion of “rescuing critique” to systematise the corpus, although he also foreshadows Honneth's complaint about the resistance of the writing to systematisation in his insistence that Benjamin is one of “those thinkers on whom it is not possible to gain a purchase” (1991, p. 92).
17. Peter Hallward's essay in this issue of *Humanities Research* is thus a potential conversation partner for this aspect of Benjamin's position.

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