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“A Close Affinity with the Concept of the Dao”: Toward Walter Benjamin’s Idea of Revolution

Peter Fenves

Abstract: This paper takes its point of departure from an enigmatic concept Benjamin briefly discusses in one of the fragments he wrote in the early 1920s in conjunction with his search for an appropriate topic for a qualifying dissertation — the concept of action — or agent-determinative knowing, which, he suggests, may be comparable to the concept of the Dao.” After analyzing the fragment in question, the paper seeks to demonstrate that in the early 1930s Benjamin develops this Dao-like concept under the rubric of two terms drawn from the vocabulary of ancient Greek thought: “mimesis” is the name under which he develops the concept of agent-determinative knowing, while the “second technology” is his revised designation for action-determinative knowing. Taken together, these concepts lead him toward something like a Daoist-Marxist idea of revolution.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin; revolution; Dao; mimesis; Daoist-Marxist

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标 题: “适契于道”: 理解本雅明的革命理念

摘 要: 本雅明 1920 年代初在一个片段中简要讨论过一个谜语似的概念,当时他正在为资格论证论文寻找一个恰当主题,这就是行动的概念,或者说是“行为决定的知”。他觉得这种知“可以与道的概念相提并论”。本文以此为论述的出发点,基于对所述片段的分析,本文试图证明本雅明 1930 年代初期以古希腊思想词汇中的两个术语发展出了这一类似于道的概念: mimesis(摹仿)提供了一个名称,让他发展出“行为决定的知”这一概念,而“第二技术”则是他修正了的“行动决定的知”这一概念的指称。这些概念放在一起,使得他走向一种类似于道家马克思主义的革命观念。

关键词: 本雅明; 革命; 道; 摹仿; 道家马克思主义

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This small essay revolves around a brief remark Benjamin makes in one of the notes he drafted in conjunction with his attempt in the early 1920s to identify an appropriate theme for a qualifying dissertation: “action-determinative knowing may have a close affinity with the concept of the Dao”

(Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* 6: 48). About this tentative remark, only one thing is clear: Benjamin draws attention to the concept of the Dao in order to contrast it with the Socratic doctrine of virtue, which consists in the paradoxical dictum that no one can knowingly do any wrong. The critique of

the Socratic doctrine is dependent, however, on the elusive concept that generates Benjamin’s brief reflections: “the knowing that determines” (*das bestimmende Wissen*). In only one other fragment in all of his extant writings does Benjamin concern himself with “the knowing that determines,” and in this case, too, his remarks are highly schematic, as though he could only hint at what this formula contains. And as for the vast commentary on his work, there are only a very few that even mention it, and none, so far as I know, that pose such questions as: what, after all, is meant by “the knowing that determines,” and why does Benjamin associate it with the concept of the Dao?^①

Split into two parts, this essay seeks to make up for this lacuna — first by elucidating the aim of Benjamin’s concept of action- and agent-determinative knowing, then by showing how these complementary modes of knowing inform two of the major projects he undertakes in the 1930s. The larger aim of the essay — responsive to the theme of the “travels of critical theory” — can be best expressed through a hypothetical judgment: if the transition from Benjamin’s early thought to his later projects is one of the primary sources of the various lines of inquiry that formed under the rubric of “critical theory,” and if, furthermore, a concept closely affinitive with that of the Dao facilitates this transition, then a certain Daoism must be seen as hitherto invisible element of critical theory.

I. Action- and Agent-Determinative Knowing

In a note entitled “Modes of Knowing” (*Arten des Wissens*), probably written in around 1922, Benjamin identifies five modes of knowing, the fourth of which is particularly puzzling, for its grammatical object is unstable:

IV. Determinative Knowing [*Das bestimmende Wissen*]. This, namely action-determinative knowing, does exist.

It is, however, determinative not as “motive” but, rather, by virtue of its linguistic structure. The linguistic moment in morality is connected to knowing. It’s certain that this knowing, which determines action, leads to silence. It is therefore not teachable. This action-determinative knowing may have a close affinity with the concept of the Dao. By contrast, it is strictly opposed to knowing in the form of the Socratic doctrine of virtue. For the latter motivates the action; it does not determine the agent. (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* 6: 48 – 49)

Benjamin begins an elucidation of the determinative mode of knowing by presenting action as its object; in the course of its brief development, however, the object changes from action to agent. This alteration leads to the suspicion that action and agent cannot ultimately be distinguished from each other whenever there is such a thing as “determinative knowing.” The action of the relevant agents, in other words, lasts throughout their agency; conversely, the agents whose actions are determined by a certain mode of knowing never cease to act, even when they seem to be at rest. Benjamin nowhere says as much, and indeed, says almost nothing about this concept of action- or agent-determinative knowing in any of his other extant writings. An altogether different situation obtains with the first “mode of knowing,” whose grammatical object is truth. About this Benjamin is succinct and certain: “I. The knowing of truth [*Das Wissen der Wahrheit*]. This does not exist. For truth is the death of the *intentio*” (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* 6: 48). Benjamin transposes this claim into the one of the central lines of thought developed in the “Epistemo-Critical Preface” with which he begins the qualifying dissertation he eventually completed (see Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* 1: 216). In light of the manner in which Benjamin

developed his outline of the first mode of knowing, something can be said about the fourth mode of knowing as well: it was supposed to have served as the nucleus of a practico-critical counterpart to his epistemo-critical inquiry.^②

Whereas there is no knowledge of truth, there is action- or agent-determinative knowing. The existence of such knowing is akin to the non-existent knowledge of truth in at least one respect: it cannot be spoken. It is therefore something like the death of intentional discourse, for agents whose actions are determined by knowing cannot represent either themselves or their actions in terms of either motivations or goals; rather, they are themselves determined by a knowing that permeates their agency. Which is to say: both the action and the agent are always already at their end, hence altogether “perfect” in some as yet undefined manner. This suggests a paradox that is the inverse of the one Plato puts into the voice of Socrates in several dialogues, including *The Gorgias* and *The Protagoras*. If, as Socrates claims, no one can knowingly do wrong, then every agent is infallible, relative to his own agency.^③ The dominant response to this paradox from within the horizon of European philosophy derives from the seventh book of *The Nicomachean Ethics*, where Aristotle describes a condition he calls *akrasia*, which designates an inability to exercise control over oneself. It was generally translated into Latin as *incontinentia* and into English as “weakness of will.” Agents who are “incontinent” know perfectly well that their actions are wrong but do them anyway, for, while still in their “right mind,” they do not govern their actions.^④ The debate between Socrates and Aristotle is the setting for Benjamin’s construction of a concept of action- or agent-determinative knowing: the knowledge in question is co-equal with the agent, which means that it cannot be generalized into something like a “maxim” that would express its content. Each agent, in other words, is determined by a mode of knowing that is unique to the agent. Under this condition, not only is it impossible for

agents to say what they are doing; they are also unable to suffer a loss of will. It is for this reason, finally, that the only other passage where Benjamin discusses the fourth modes of knowing concerns the intentional structure of “conviction” (*Überzeugung*) — which is to say, an attitude or comportment in which “incontinence” is impossible, for any weakening of the will is incontrovertible proof that the agent in question lacks conviction.

Instead of further analyzing the concept of conviction in the fragment under consideration, Benjamin draws attention to the concept of the Dao, which would presumably circumscribe a sphere from which the debate between Socrates and Aristotle can be suspended and from which the concept of action- and agent-determinative knowing can be developed more freely. This, though, did not happen. Or it does not happen immediately. As Benjamin transforms his claim that “truth is the death of the *intentio*” into a cornerstone of the critique of cognition with which he prefaces the *Origin of the German Mourning Play*, he neglects its practico-critical counterpart. Until the early 1930s . . .

II. Mimesis and Technology

Despite its apparent offhandedness and brevity, Benjamin’s claim that the concept of action- or agent-determinative knowing may correspond to the concept of the Dao represents the culmination of his studies of Chinese thought and literature. Probably first prompted by the educational theorist Gustav Wyneken, whom Benjamin identified as his “first teacher,” he intermittently pursued these studies from the early 1910s until early 1920s.^⑤ For Benjamin, Laozi served as a counter-Socrates, whose teachings he, like Nietzsche, found profoundly problematic.^⑥ Here is a small sample of the China-related book Benjamin read during this period: Richard Wilhelm’s translation of the *Daodejing*, which includes an extensive introduction and wide-ranging notes; a selection of Pu Songlin’s ghost stories, prefaced by Martin Buber; a collection

of a Ming-Dynasty stories, followed by Eduard Grisebach’s survey of classical Chinese literature; and a massive study of “Chinese religion” published by Dutch sinologist Jan Jakob Maria de Groot shortly before his death.^⑦ The reference to the concept of the Dao in “Modes of Knowing” is probably indebted to de Groot’s treatise, whose provocative exposition of Daoism under the title of “universism” may have prompted Benjamin to solicit an essay on “the spirit of Chinese language” from another Dutch sinologist, Henri Borel, for inclusion in a journal he hoped to edit (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe* 2: 191). Around the time in which plans for the journal collapsed due to the absence of financial support during the hyperinflation of 1923, Benjamin’s China studies also broke off.

In *One-Way Street* Benjamin proposes several “techniques” for literary productivity, one of which describes the relation between initial inkling and final product: “Keep your pen aloof from inspiration [*Eingebung*], and it will attract it with the force of magnets. The more calmly you delay writing down an initial thought, the riper will it be when it surrenders itself” (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe* 4: 106). A magnetization of this kind occurred for Benjamin in the early 1930s, when he discovered a way to develop the concept of action- or agent-determinative knowing by breaking it into its constitutive parts: agent-determinative knowing reappears under the rubric of “mimesis,” while action-determinative knowing gives shape to his inquiries into technology. The source of this terminological transformation can be briefly sketched in the following way. Mimesis is certainly not a mode of cognition, as Plato famously argues; yet it can nevertheless be called a “mode of knowing” in which agents become like what they “know” and demonstrate their “knowing” simply by being what they are like. As for technology, its etymon, *technē*, means a certain mode of knowing, specifically “know-how” as opposed to “knowledge-that,” for which the more appropriate ancient Greek term would be *epistemē*. In the early 1930s Benjamin

proposed a consequential distinction between a first and a second technology: whereas the first technology involves mastery of the relevant objects, its second-order counterpart consists in sheer “know-how,” which, developing from the sphere of play and play-acting, is concerned with neither the mastery of nature nor with self-mastery, nor even with a lack of self-mastery, which is to say, in ancient Greek, *akrasia*.

To the texts themselves — first, ever so briefly, those concerned with mimesis, then a few passages in which Benjamin sketches the concept of the second technology.

In 1919, Benjamin discovered in de Groot’s *Universism*, a concise depiction of the concept of the Dao: “Acting like the universe is adaptation to the universe [*Anpassung an das Weltall*], and since the universe is excellent in the highest degree, its imitation is virtue.... The ideal aim of human perfection is complete assimilation [*Angleichung*] to the Dao of heaven” (de Groot, 56 – 57). In response to this and similar passages in *Universism*, Benjamin wrote a letter to a close friend in which he acknowledges its author’s expertise but faults the treatise for its antiquated attitude and ahistorical methodology (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe* 2: 11). In the early 1930s, he begins a line of inquiry that has neither of these faults. Under the title “Moment of Birth,” he retrieves the core of de Groot’s concept of universism, viz. Daoism, and applies it to the way of the heavens: “Astrology is a late theory that stands askew to that early praxis whose data it arbitrarily and often erroneously interprets. It is not concerned with the influence of the stars or forces but, rather, with an archaic capacity of the human being to liken itself to the state of the stars at a certain hour; the hour of birth; in it, the first, incomparably wide-ranging act of adaptation may have happened: adaptation to the entire cosmos through assimilation to it [*die Anpassung an den gesamten Kosmos durch die Angleichung an ihn*]” (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe* 2: 976). Thus does de Groot’s treatment of the Dao become the nucleus

of an inquiry into the “doctrine of the similar” and a corresponding exposition of the “mimetic capacity.” Unlike de Groot’s study, Benjamin’s investigations are thoroughly historical, beginning with the opening reflections in “On the Doctrine of the Similar”: “the circle of life that formerly seemed to be governed by the law of similarity was much larger. It was the microcosm and the macrocosm, to name only one version of many that the experience of similarity found in the course of history” (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* 2: 205). The contraction of the “circle of life” leaves traces of its movement, including — as he notes at the beginning of “On the Mimetic Capacity” — a certain “gift for seeing similarity,” which, as he conjectures, is “nothing but a rudiment of the once powerful compulsion to become like and conduct oneself alike. The human being perhaps possesses no higher function that is not co-determined by the mimetic capacity. This capacity, however, has a history in the phylogenetic and ontogenetic sense” (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* 2: 210).

So much for mimesis, now onto technology. In some notes toward on the foundation of morality Benjamin probably wrote in 1915 or 1916, he makes a hitherto overlooked distinction between the first and second intention of an action: the first intention is circumscribed by the motives and goal of the relevant action, whereas the second intention intensifies the expression of the first intention to a point where it is “absolute,” which results in the “falling away” of the “intended correlate” (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* 6: 54). This distinction between first and second intention probably informs Benjamin’s concept of action-determinative knowing, for only a second intention could be ascribed to the action in question; if, by contrast, the action had a first intention, it would not be determined by knowing but, on the contrary, by certain motivations and corresponding goals. By the early 1930s, Benjamin largely dropped the phenomenological vocabulary, including the description of intentional structures; but the

distinction between first and second intention, transposed from its original function in moral theory, re-emerges as a distinction between first and second technology: the first is concerned with achieving something, namely the mastery of nature, whereas the second intensifies the expression of this intention to a point where the initial goal “falls away.”

Such is the direction of the argument Benjamin pursues in some of the central sections of “The Artwork in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility.” The transformation of the first technology into the second is a matter of “play” or “games” (*Spiel*), which has no goal beyond its enactment and no motivation beyond its continuation or further transformation: “The origin of the second technology lies in the point where, by an unconscious ruse, human beings first began to distance themselves from nature. It lies, in other words, in play” (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* 7: 359). The intentional structure of the second technology follows directly from this distance: “It should be noted that ‘master over nature’ can be designated as the goal of the second technology only in the most questionable way; it is so designated only from the standpoint of the first technology. The intention of the first technology really is directed at the mastery of nature; the intention of the second, by contrast, is directed at the interplay [*Zwischenspiel*] between nature and humanity” (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* 7: 359). A particularly apposite case in point, so Benjamin argues, appears in the context of the filmic apparatus, which provides a largely neglected lesson for filmmakers, film actors, and film-audiences alike. What all of them come to know is not *that* such-and-such is the case; rather, they get to know the conditions under which a second-order technology will finally free them from the first. They acquire a certain know-how, in other words, specifically how the first-order intention of technology falls away: “Acquaintance with this [the filmic] apparatus teaches human beings that subjugation in service of the apparatus will cede a

place for liberation through the apparatus only when the constitution of humanity has adapted itself to the new productive forces that the second technology disclosed” (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* 7: 360). Benjamin saves the most significant consequence of this complicated claim for a footnote attached to the word *disclosed*: “It is the goal of revolutions to accelerate this adaptation” (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* 7: 360).

A question arises in relation to the claim above, when it is combined with the concept of action- and agent-determinative knowing, insofar as it is indeed affinitive with the concept of the Dao: Can the theory of revolution Benjamin sketches in “The Artwork in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility” be characterized as Daoist — or perhaps more exactly, as Marxist-Daoist? The answer is doubtless “no” if it is stipulated in advance that the proponent of the theory must have studied the classics of Chinese thought with the same degree of thoroughness and directness as he studied the classics of Marxism. Such a stipulation, though, may be shortsighted. Some of the notes with which Benjamin pursued the theory of revolution developed in the “Artwork” essay suggest in any case that he was working with a concept of agent-determinative knowing under the rubric of mimesis, understood as “the ur-phenomenon of artistic activity” (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* 7: 666).^⑧ After crossing out some notes in which he claims that “the imitator makes apparent the thing at hand [*Der Nachahmende macht eine Sache scheinbar*]” by “playing” this thing (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* 7: 666), he replaces them with a draft of the aforementioned footnote: “It is the goal of the revolutions to accelerate this. The living body liberated through the liquidation of the first technology [*Es ist das Ziel der Revolutionen, dies zu beschleunigen. Der durch die Liquidation der ersten Technik befreite Leib*]” (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* 7: 666) — where “this” refers either to adaptation to new forces of production or to emancipation of the body. There is no referential

ambiguity, however, for the concerns action-determinative knowing, while the second is a description of its agent-determinative counterpart. Freed from the first technology, which is always only concerned with mastery of nature and a corresponding illusion of self-mastery, agents learn how to adapt themselves to the entirety of the cosmos in its physical-technological form.

Notes

① For a productive engagement with the fourth “mode of knowing,” see Nägele, 32; for an unproductive discussion, see Brodersen, 100 – 101.

② The only other passage in Benjamin’s extant writings where he uses the concept of action-determinative knowing appears in a note associated with his 1921 essay, “Toward the Critique of Violence,” under the title “Notes on ‘Objective Mendacity’” (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* 6: 61 – 62).

③ See, for example, Plato, *Gorgias* 509d-e and *The Republic*, 382a-c, 412e – 413a, and 589c. Socrates’ dictum functions as the final fulcrum of Benjamin’s argument in the *Origin of the German Mourning Play* (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* 1: 402), which again indicates that “Modes of Knowing” was an essential element of its composition.

④ In the seventh book of *The Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle seeks to resolve the apparent paradox of *akrasia* by distinguishing among two uses of the verb “to know” (*episthasthai*); see 1146b.

⑤ For the biographical and bibliographical support of this and the following few sentences, see Fenves.

⑥ See especially Benjamin’s brief polemic, “Socrates” (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* 2: 129 – 32); Laozi is quoted in the “Metaphysics of Youth” in Richard Wilhelm’s translation of the *Daodejing* (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* 2: 96).

⑦ “Universism” is de Groot’s idiosyncratic translation of “Daoism” (see de Groot, 5; for further references, see Fenves, esp. 41 – 48).

⑧ The quotation is modified in accordance with my reading of the original note, as it is reproduced in Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk* 148. These notes on mimesis were displaced to another footnote in later versions of the essay; see Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* 7: 368.

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· 书讯 ·

《中国现代美学思潮史》

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《中国现代美学思潮史》把美学思潮作为美学史的元单元,突破了按照物理时间顺序构史的写作范式,把19世纪迄今的中国美学理论与美学家纳入到现代性思潮的整体明晰框架之中,比如启蒙主义美学(早期以梁启超、蔡元培等;新时期有李泽厚的“实践美学”、高尔泰的“主体自由论美学”;后新时期朱立元的“新实践美学”等)、现代主义美学(早期有王国维、朱光潜等;当代有杨春时、潘知常等)、客观论美学(金公亮、蔡仪、早期李泽厚等)新古典主义美学(早期有王国维、宗白华等,新时期以来有李泽厚的“情本体美学”、叶朗和朱志荣的“意象论”美学等)后现代主义美学(生态美学、生活美学、解构主义美学、身体美学等),揭示了现代性与美学思潮、美学思潮与美学史之间深刻联系。