



## Walter Benjamin: A Philosophical Portrait

By Eli Friedlander

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Walter Benjamin is often viewed as a cultural critic who produced a vast array of brilliant and idiosyncratic pieces of writing with little more to unify them than the feeling that they all bear the stamp of his "unclassifiable" genius. Eli Friedlander argues that Walter Benjamin's corpus of writings must be recognized as a unique configuration of philosophy with an overarching coherence and a deep-seated commitment to engage the philosophical tradition.

Friedlander finds in Benjamin's early works initial formulations of the different dimensions of his philosophical thinking. He leads through them to Benjamin's views on the dialectical image, the nature of language, the relation of beauty and truth, embodiment, dream and historical awakening, myth and history, as well as the afterlife and realization of meaning. Those notions are articulated both in themselves and in relation to central figures of the philosophical tradition. They are further viewed as leading to and coming together in *The Arcades Project*. Friedlander takes that incomplete work to be the central theater where these earlier philosophical preoccupations were to be played out. Benjamin envisaged in it the possibility of the highest order of thought taking the form of writing whose contents are the concrete time-bound particularities of human experience. Addressing the question of the possibility of such a presentation of philosophical truth provides the guiding thread for constellating the disparate moments of Benjamin's writings.

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## **Editorial Review**

### Review

Friedlander's new book provides a decisive clarification of some of the most vexing issues confronting us in the texts of Walter Benjamin: the nature of the dialectical image as force field, the meaning of historical awakening and historical afterlife, the monadological character of truth. Through penetrating and wide-ranging analyses, he demonstrates the consistency of Benjamin's thinking over the course of his career. It is a truly important contribution to Benjamin studies and an impressive piece of critical thinking. (Howard Eiland, Massachusetts Institute of Technology)

Drawing together Benjamin's responses to and revisions of Plato, Leibniz, and Kant, Friedlander shows how, for Benjamin, a historically situated glimpse of free and meaningful life is possible, without collapsing into either escapist fantasy or documentary despair. This is thus the first fully philosophical work on Benjamin, directed at a philosophical and human problem of the first importance. It will be unavoidable not only for Benjamin scholars, but also for anyone concerned with the critical understanding of human freedom in history. (Richard Eldridge, Swarthmore College)

Friedlander's pellucid exposition brings to light, for the first time, the systematic unity, depth, and originality of Benjamin's philosophical vision. The book will transform Benjamin studies. Perhaps more importantly, scholars for whom Benjamin's thought has become an indispensable guide in their own research will find here new sources of gripping inspiration. (David E. Wellbery, University of Chicago)

Friedlander believes the tendency to fetishize Benjamin's style has become an obstacle to grasping his philosophical rigor. In *Walter Benjamin: A Philosophical Portrait*, Friedlander attempts to remedy this misreading, portraying him not as a lone literary genius, but as part of a canon of post-Kantian philosophers...If this book loses touch with the ways in which Benjamin wasn't always rational or clear-cut, then it makes up for that by illuminating his thought in a new scholarly light. (David Winters *Bookforum* 2012-05-01)

This highly original study by Friedlander is a rare attempt to expose the philosophical infrastructure of the thought of Walter Benjamin. Rather than a collection of disjointed observations on culture, the Benjaminian corpus turns, on Friedlander's reading, into a singular testimony to the fragile and liminal possibility of philosophy that refuses to assimilate the singular under the umbrella of universal abstraction...Friedlander pays special attention to Benjamin's relation to Immanuel Kant and Karl Marx, accentuating the problems of temporality, historicity, and a philosophically robust materialism. A laudable achievement, this volume is an exquisite dialogue between philosophy and its others, between totality and constellation, and between the universal and the singular. (M. V. Marder *Choice* 2012-07-01)

Benjamin is not, for Friedlander, just a writer or a thinker, he is a philosopher of world-historical significance, and his work is a vessel of the highest truth. (Brian Hanrahan *Los Angeles Review of Books* 2012-07-26)

### About the Author

Eli Friedlander is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Tel Aviv University.

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