

November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2019

Dear Students,

I commend you on your decision to pursue your studies in philosophy. Regardless of whether you go on to do a PhD, or to have a professional career as a philosopher, your engagement with philosophy will change the way you look at the world and your place in it; it has certainly done so for me! I look forward to meeting you, working with you, and to our mutual exchange of ideas.

I want to take this opportunity to introduce myself and to say a bit about my research and teaching interests. I am open to supervising MA projects in continental social and political philosophy, early modern political philosophy, critical theory, historical justice, and modern Jewish thought.

I see my work as situated at the intersection of the History of Philosophy, Social and Political Thought, and Philosophy of Religion. My main areas of specialization are critical theory, broadly construed, and modern Jewish thought. Thematically, I have worked on theories of sovereignty and political theologies. I have also worked on conceptions of historical time: how the past persists in the present, and how the past bears within itself possibilities for alternative futures, which have been occluded by narratives of progress. Reflecting my ideas about the alternative futures that are latent within the historical past, my work aims to retrieve neglected possibilities in the history of (modern) philosophy, and to think through their critical potential.

Methodologically, my work is informed by critical theory's trans-disciplinarity: in addition to philosophy, I have drawn on theories of history and critiques of historical positivism, transitional and historical justice, sociology of knowledge, and political theory. My training in Jewish Studies has prompted me to look at authors and questions that have typically been excluded from the canon of Western philosophy. I have devoted much of my scholarship to authors who are emphatically doing philosophy, but who have remained marginal figures (i.e., Hermann Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig, Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem). I have also aimed to enrich the canon by translating their works, making these available to an Anglophone readership.

I am currently at work on two book manuscripts. The first, entitled The Political Metaphysics of Sovereignty in Carl Schmitt and Walter Benjamin: 'The Prince is the Cartesian God.' looks at the concept of sovereign power in two twentieth-century thinkers, Carl Schmitt and Walter Benjamin. Schmitt is one of the most controversial figures in continental political thought, largely due to his affiliation with the Nazi party. Benjamin, a left-wing German-Jewish philosopher and eventual victim of Nazism, was both fascinated and repelled by Schmitt's ideas. My book argues that Schmitt and Benjamin offer strikingly different conceptions of sovereignty, and that these differences are illuminated when we understand their divergent ways of interpreting early modern philosophers. I look at their respective readings of Bodin, Descartes, Hobbes and the Neostoics, among others.

For a taste of what I am doing in this book, you can look at my forthcoming chapter, “Sovereign/ Creature: Neostoicism in Benjamin’s *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* and his response to Carl Schmitt’s *Political Theology*,” which will be coming out in German Stoicisms (Eds. Kurt Lampe and Andrew Benjamin, Bloomsbury, 2020). A pre-publication draft of this chapter is available on my academia.edu page.

My second book project, Walter Benjamin’s Monadology: The Idea of Art, Expression, and Historical Time, looks at Walter Benjamin’s entire corpus through the lens of his reception of Leibniz. At the center of Leibniz’s philosophy is a neo-Platonic idea of expression, according to which God expresses himself in creating the world, and each individual substance, or monad, reciprocally expresses God from its own point-of-view. I argue that Benjamin develops an implicit philosophy of expression, which grounds and unifies the apparently disparate motifs in his thought. Beyond the importance of this discovery for Benjamin studies, I argue that Benjamin’s appropriation of Leibnizian expression offers an alternative understanding of the relationship between human minds and the natural world: one in which nature is conceptualized linguistically, rather than in terms of the mathematical and physical sciences. While expressionism seems to be a pre-modern remnant in Leibniz’s thought, I regard it as a missed possibility, and as one that has a vital future for thinking beyond the limitations of the mathematical-scientific approach to nature. What could it mean to allow and enable nature to express itself and its inherent possibilities, rather than to approach nature as the object of the mathematical sciences—i.e., as an object to be cognized and ultimately mastered through technology?

Benjamin also invokes Leibnizian expression in his engagement with Marx and historical materialism. He argues that Marx’s epigones went astray in interpreting the relationship between the base (i.e., economic conditions of production and exchange) and the superstructure (i.e., ideology and culture) in causal terms. Instead of a causal relationship, which is drawn from the natural sciences, Benjamin argues for an expressive understanding of the relationship between base and superstructure: economic facts have their expression in cultural ideas. Accordingly, instead of a reductive analysis of ideology, which regards it as the unreal effect of economic reality, Benjamin’s approach treats the various strata of cultural expression as a form of language to be hermeneutically interpreted. In his notoriously difficult and unfinished *Arcades Project*, Benjamin attempts to *read* the phenomena of capitalist modernity. I find this approach important for re-thinking Marx’s historical materialism (expression being a significant, yet under-appreciated idea in Marx’s own work), as well as productive for various disciplines in the humanities, including critical theory and cultural studies.

I have published several articles and chapters on Benjamin and Leibniz, including “Intensive Infinity: Walter Benjamin’s Reception of Leibniz and its Sources” in *Modern Language Notes*, 2012; “Monad and Time: Reading Leibniz with Heidegger and Benjamin” in “Sparks will Fly”: Martin Heidegger and Walter Benjamin, Eds. Andrew Benjamin and Dimitris Vardoulakis (SUNY University Press, 2015); and “Constellation and Expression in Leibniz and Benjamin” in Thinking in Constellations: Walter Benjamin and the Humanities,

Eds. Caroline Sauter and Nassima Sahraoui (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018). Copies of these articles and chapters may be found on my academia.edu page.

Intersecting with my work on Walter Benjamin, I have significant research interests in modern Jewish thought. I am interested in the light that Jewish thought sheds on the other traditions of European philosophy. The Western philosophical tradition has generally put itself forward as ‘universal’—a presupposition that is itself embedded in a particular cultural and religious project (the very idea of ‘universality’ has Christian roots). Modern Jewish thought has questioned the meaning of philosophical universality, and has reflected on the particularity inherent to the Western philosophical tradition. The alternatives to philosophical universality offered by Modern Jewish thought—sensitive to the particularities of tradition, language and culture—have offered compelling themes and methodologies for my research. Cohen, Rosenzweig, and Scholem share the conviction that thinking is not without presuppositions, but starts from a historical given—for instance, a textual tradition, or a historical context.

The idea of philosophizing from within a textual tradition has shaped my work, first and foremost in that I see philosophy as an expression of a particular historical-linguistic context, and I eschew the idea of philosophical truth as ‘pure.’ This conviction is reflected in my method, which involves close textual analysis, work with sources in their original languages, and attention to the historical, cultural, and material contexts that condition any philosophical expression. Thematically, the idea of a textual tradition is also worked out in my publications. For instance, my book chapter, “The Tradition in Ruins: Gershom Scholem and Walter Benjamin on Lament and Language” (in Lament in Jewish Thought: Philosophical, Theological and Literary Perspectives, Eds. Ilit Ferber and Paula Schwebel) explores the idea of the transmissibility of a textual tradition as a way of thinking about historical time otherwise than in terms of a chronology of empirical events.

Because I understand philosophy as embedded in a textual tradition, I have also devoted a lot of thought to questions about the transmissibility of ideas in language, and, accordingly, to questions of translation. The etymology of the word ‘tradition’ reveals its conceptual dependence on an idea of transmissibility (the Latin word ‘*tradere*’ means to transmit). Inherent in any language is the possibility and the limits of its transmissibility. This suggests that language is not made up of stable, self-identical meanings, but involves its continual transformation as it enters new contexts. Moreover, as the link between tradition and transmission suggests, there can be no stable, self-identical tradition; the elements of a tradition are always in a process of being transformed as they are transmitted into different contexts.

Nourishing my philosophical reflection on translation and transmissibility, I have done considerable work as a translator (from German into English). I have focused on ‘hybrid’ texts at the borders between philosophy, literature, and religion. My recent translations include a series of texts by Gershom Scholem on Lamentations (in Lament in Jewish Thought: Philosophical, Theological and Literary Perspectives, Eds. Ilit Ferber and Paula Schwebel), and the seminal Correspondence of Theodor Adorno and Gershom Scholem: 1939-1969 (with Sebastian Truskolaski), forthcoming with Polity Press.

In terms of my teaching at the graduate level, I have taught a general introduction to the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. I have also recently become interested in the intersections between questions of justice and the philosophy of history. The fields of historical and transitional justice explore the practical implications of history in societies in transition, for instance, in the use of truth and reconciliation commissions, which seek to record the past as a means for moving forward. But truth and reconciliation processes make certain assumptions about what it means to 'move on,' and about which elements of society stand to benefit from establishing the historicity of what happened (as opposed to the ongoing, open-ended presence of an injustice). I regularly teach a graduate seminar on historical justice and critical theory, in which we revisit our assumptions about historical time in light of the traumatic persistence of the past in the present, and the desire to have a genuinely just response to past violence. I also supervise graduate students in this area.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you are interested in any of the areas in which I work. I look forward to meeting you and learning about your ideas!

Paula Schwebel