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psychiatry in philosophy

Fulfilling experience: Walter Benjamin

George Ikkos 

A member of the early 20th-century European modernist avant-garde, German Jewish Marxist Walter Benjamin is widely considered the foremost German-language cultural theorist of that century. Engagingly clear in his radio broadcasts and newspaper reviews, he was famously difficult to read in more theoretical writings and failed his 'habilitation' in philosophy at Frankfurt University. Success would have allowed him to teach in German universities, but the examiners confessed that they did not understand his thesis, this in no small part because of its transdisciplinary nature.

Benjamin kept detailed notes on his son growing up, collected children's books, broadcast to children on radio and engaged with children's theatre. His empathic imagination led him to formulate the concept of 'absorbing experience'. For example, this can be observed when children abandon themselves in play, so much so that they even imagine themselves as inanimate objects such as windmills and trains. These experiences, he argues, are dependent on their abilities to perceive 'non-sensuous similarities' and engage in 'mimetic play'. Beyond simple perception and cognition, during mimetic play the ego is immersed in the object's 'truth', yet the child has a thorough awareness of the experience as fulfilment of a (past) wish. Thus, the child is transformed into an empowered 'dictator', even as this play may also serve as means of socialisation. Benjamin contrasted the creativity of children enjoying the least likely objects in play with the stifling nature of lavish reproduction toy gifts, the later representing adult perceptions, and values, and imposing expectations on the child.

It is during absorbing experiences that wishes are formed, many of which sink beneath the level of consciousness as the child grows. Yet, as if lost in sleep, they persist as dreams. Such dreams are not available to voluntary recall but when action and circumstances bring them forth (*à la* Marcel Proust's '*mémoire involontaire*') and fulfilment of the wish, they carry an aura, including a sense of historical experience and the encompassed time. In such 'fulfilling experiences' we find happiness, Benjamin says, yet our psychiatric phenomenology is not interested in them.

There is affinity with Freud, who argued that money does not bring happiness because: 'Happiness is the belated fulfilment of a prehistoric wish [...] Money was not a childhood wish'. The difference is that for Benjamin the fulfilment is not narrowly libidinal but more fundamentally social, coloured by concrete childhood experiences, processes of loss of experience and recovery of memory in time, and the significance of social history and ritual. It is this difference as well as similarity with Freud that makes Benjamin not only complimentary to phenomenological and psychoanalytic psychopathology but also a challenging and elusive resource in understanding the social in the biopsychosocial.

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