

Invitation: Reading Morning

Reading Mornings are informal meetings taking place once or twice every month. Fellows and researchers will read and discuss primary texts.

Wed, 22/11/2023

09:30-11:00

**Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies
Jungiusstraße 11c
Seminar Room C319**

**Convenor:
Dr. Caterina Diotto**

Walter Benjamin, Theory of Experience

In the years between 1913 and 1916, Benjamin developed a first version of his theory of experience in close connection with his theory of language (*On the Language as Such and on the Language of Humans*, 1916), his aesthetic studies (*Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin*, 1915), and his political activism.

In 1912, Benjamin enrolled in the Freiburg University, in the Philology Department. There, he attended the lectures by the neo-Kantian philosopher Heinrich Rickert and was an activist in the German Youth Movement, in the group led by Gustav Wyneken. While various elements were included in the Youth Movement, ranging from pacifism and idealism to nationalism and anti-Semitic conservatism, Wyneken's group was a small, progressive, and idealist intellectual elite, with the main aim of reforming academia and bourgeois culture. According to Scholem, Benjamin was one of the group's intellectual leaders.

In the essay ironically called "Erfahrung", Benjamin criticizes the bourgeois concept of experience as a repetition of the same which has lost the authentic connection to the *Geist*. To this he opposes an idea of authentic experience, which is typical of youth and is linked to the possibility of true communication as well as to the origin of language (see *Metaphysics of Youth*, 1914).

This Reading Morning will be dedicated to exploring the opposition between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*, the dialectic between possibility and impossibility of experience and communication, the sceptical elements of Benjamin's theory, and its relations to some concepts from Jewish Mysticism – especially from Kabbalah.

Texts:

W. Benjamin, "Experience", 1913

W. Benjamin, *Metaphysics of Youth*, 1914