

Dramatic differences

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It is a privilege to read Asad Haider's critical response to my article, 'The Theatre of Economic Categories: Rediscovering *Capital* in the late 1960s' in *Radical Philosophy* 2.08).¹ His enthusiastic defence of Althusser's theoretical innovation allows one to witness the impact of *Reading Capital* on a disciple who takes its practical implications seriously. However, the central intention of my essay was to enumerate the dramatic differences between *Reading Capital* and *Capital* itself, and my convictions are only confirmed by Haider's lack of reference to any of Marx's writings beyond a solitary passing mention in a footnote. *Reading Capital* may be internally coherent and inspiring – Haider's arguments testify to this – but that alone does not make it a reading of *Capital*. In reply, I will offer a close analysis of some of Althusser's specific interpretations of Marx's writings which will allow the reader to appreciate the questionable theoretical foundations upon which Haider's energetic advocacy for Althusser's project ultimately rests.

But it is first necessary to briefly address two tangentially related arguments in Haider's response before turning to Marx. The first is his bombastic opening sally. He avers that my 'argument is undermined by a surprisingly chauvinistic insistence on the superiority of German over French thought'. Haider does not substantiate this damning thesis with any specific passages from my article, but he presumably has in mind my remark that French and English interpretations of Marx in the 1960s 'fail to appreciate the relation of freedom and necessity that is insisted upon in Marx's work', which is rooted in the 'German philosophical tradition' (19). Or perhaps he is thinking of my assertion that the 'German interpretation of Marx' – in the context of the article, the Frankfurt School – is more capable of understanding the links that bind Marx's work with 'the nation's philosophical history' (26). The point of these passing remarks is to underscore the fact that the philosophers trained in the specifically and profoundly German context of Marx's

works are better equipped to understand their theoretical orientation than a philosopher trained in an environment in which Hegel's writings were imported the day before yesterday and subjected to famously tendentious interpretations. Haider curiously suggests that such a claim 'clash[es] dramatically with the young Karl Marx' simply because in 1843 Marx wanted to publish French and German articles in the same journal.² More representative is Marx's famous 1858 letter to Ferdinand Lasalle, in which he describes his work as 'economics as a science [*Wissenschaft*] in the German sense of the word.'³ Like every other European philosopher of the nineteenth century, he took the distinction between French and German intellectual traditions for granted.

The second point concerns Haider's elaborate and distracting justification of the use of theatrical motifs in *Reading Capital*. As Haider observes, the focal point of my critique is Étienne Balibar's claim that Marx presents 'individuals' as '*nothing more than masks*'.⁴ I argued that this elides the systematic distinction that Marx makes between concrete individuals and forms of appearance, and thereby obfuscates the critical import of Marx's theatrical metaphor. When Marx uses the term 'character mask' in *Capital*, the distinction between the concrete human being and the mask that it bears is grammatically unambiguous: 'Humans confront each other ... *in character masks*'; 'The economic character masks cling to [*festhängen*] a human'; they 'stick to' [*ankleben*] their bearer.⁵ Marx even lampoons the narrow-mindedness of bourgeois ideologues who are unable to differentiate the character mask from its bearer.⁶ I therefore described Balibar's conflation of the concrete individual with its form of appearance as a misinterpretation, an error. Haider states that 'this is not an error but the point of Balibar's argument', and then shows how the identity of existence and appearance plays a fundamental role in Balibar's social theory. That may be so, but this claim appears as part of the general attempt in *Reading Capital*

to rescue Marx's writings from a century of misinterpretation. Unless it is textually substantiated, it deserves to be called an error.

Haider then provides an illuminating conceptual history of the 'mask'. There is much sleight of hand in this section of his argument. His intention is to establish the philological connection between 'person' and 'mask' in order to undermine my claim that 'there has to be an underlying person who wears a mask.' This would be persuasive if this were my claim. However, I state, 'it is as wearers of masks that *individuals* confront one another on a market, which suggests that *individuals* are not identical with these masks' (21; emphasis added). Crucially, my entire paper rests upon this distinction between the concrete individual and its mask, not the person and the mask, rendering much of Haider's argument irrelevant. Furthermore, his philological illustrations are oddly chosen. He notes, for example, that Thomas Hobbes developed a theory of the 'person' as a representative who acts on behalf of another. This, according to Haider, 'dismantles our common sense that empirical individuals adopt discrete masks ... our faces are already masks.' But Hobbes' point is precisely the opposite: his theory of representation is built upon the distinction between the 'natural person' – the empirical individual who is the author of their own words – and the 'artificial person', who represents others. Hobbes' social contract theory would not make any sense if it were not possible to distinguish between these two kinds of persons.

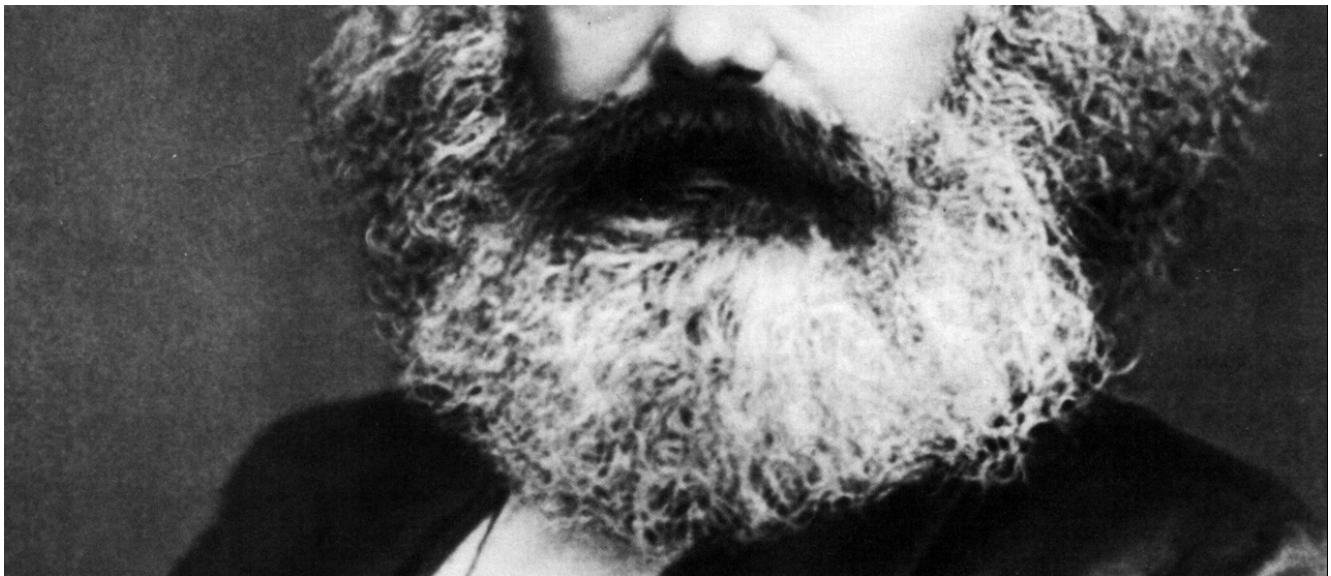
It is a mistake to try to map these early modern political categories onto Marx's work, since it encourages one to assume that the central question animating academic discussions of Marx today concerns whether or not individuals who carry out modern social processes are the 'authors' of the latter. No serious reader of Marx would argue this. The fact that individuals are *not* the authors of society, that modern society develops through what Marx calls natural-spontaneous [*naturwüchsige*] processes, was a methodological point of departure for the Frankfurt interpretation of Marx in the 1960s. As Marx makes clear in the *Grundrisse*, the capitalist social totality arises out of 'the mutual influence of conscious individuals on one another', and yet these interactions 'produce an *alien* social power standing above them, produce their mutual interaction as a process and power independent of them.'⁷ Bourgeois society as an organic totality has a life

of its own, as it were; it exercises explanatory priority over the individuals who paradoxically bring it into existence through their conscious practical activity. This distinction between the efficient and final causes of social action is already common in Scottish Enlightenment philosophy and Hegel's social theory.

The question that distinguishes the Frankfurt and Parisian interpretations of Marx is whether a society that unfolds independently of individuals, who are conditioned by society to recognise themselves as the cause of their actions, should be seen as an immanent contradiction or an insoluble disparity between 'the imaginary' and 'the real'. This is a dramatic difference, and Marx's own position is unambiguous. He describes bourgeois society as 'a social formation in which the process of production has mastery over men, instead of the opposite.'⁸ The 'alien and independent character' that society assumes in relation to individuals proves that they 'are still engaged in the creation of the conditions of their social life' and have thus 'not yet begun ... to live it.'⁹ Marx laments that the 'point of departure' in modern society is a 'power over the individuals which has become autonomous' instead of the 'free social individual'.¹⁰ When the latter is the point of departure, 'the shape of the social labour process casts off its mystical veil of fog.' The relations between individuals become 'transparent in their simplicity'.¹¹

Althusser consistently rejects these remarks found on every other page of the mature Marx as naïve, ideological, unscientific. In Haider's words, these remarks endorse a 'fantasy of the transparency of social relations', or a 'pre-Hegelian, quasi-Rousseauian notion'. On the contrary, this recurrent tension between the social structure and the broken promise it conditions is what constitutes Marx's critique of political economy as an 'immanent critique', whose formula, as Rahel Jaeggi explicates it in her recent work, 'takes as its starting point the claims and conditions posited together with a form of life; it responds to the problems and crises that arise in this context, and it derives from this in particular the transformative potential that goes beyond the practices in question and seeks to transform them.'¹²

The transformative potential in Marx's work consists in the fact that it treats the 'alien social power' that confronts the individuals in bourgeois society as something that is both conditioned by the forms of interaction



within this society – namely, a society organised around free commodity exchange – *as well as* an impediment to the realisation of the robust criterion of freedom with which this society justifies its own existence. When freedom as a norm in bourgeois society is confronted with the illumination its own structural impossibility, the attendant dissatisfaction becomes a potential ferment of social transformation.

Haider is right to draw attention to Althusser's novel conception of historical time and structural causality, which are not given careful consideration in my essay, for this is where the chasm that separates *Reading Capital* from Marx's writings is most obvious. Althusser substantiates these ideas with the assistance of quotations from Marx's introduction to the *Grundrisse*, and it is thus worth examining these passages in detail in order to further determine why the 'idiosyncratic understanding of Hegel' that I attribute to the Frankfurt School 'should be accepted as more legitimate than Althusser's far more delimited reading.'

In the section of this introduction titled 'The Method

of Political Economy', Marx addresses the distinction between the scientific investigation of economic categories [*Forschung*] and the logical presentation of the latter [*Darstellung*]. The import of this distinction arises from the fact that the complex categories that the researcher encounters at the end of a process of progressive conceptual abstraction are in fact logical presuppositions of the seemingly more basic categories encountered at the outset of research. The result of this process, the 'thought-totality' [*Gedankentotalität*], or the intellectual grasp of the whole of society, 'appears in the process of thinking, therefore, as a process of concentration, as a result, not as a point of departure, even though it is the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure for observation and conception.'¹³ This entire section of the *Grundrisse* is clearly modelled on the introduction to Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, in which Hegel justifies his phenomenological presentation of categories: 'What is actual, the shape which the concept assumes, is ... from our point of view only the subsequent and further stage, even if it should itself come first in actuality.'¹⁴ For Marx

as for Hegel, the goal is to understand all of the ‘inner connections’ of the social organism so that it ‘appears as if we have before us an *a priori* construction’.¹⁵ Despite this affinity, Marx criticises Hegel’s overestimation of thought as such – hyperbolically, but that is neither here nor there – and emphasises that in his own method, ‘the real subject [*das reale Subjekt*], namely society as self-developing organic whole, ‘retains its autonomous existence outside the head just as before’, and ‘must be kept in mind as a presupposition’.¹⁶

This point is banal. It was a commonplace in nineteenth-century German historiography to foreground the *hiatus irrationalis* that separates the historical entity as it is in-itself from the researcher’s conceptual reconstruction of the latter. One thinks of Max Weber’s later definition of an ‘ideal-type’ as a ‘thought construct’ [*Gedankenbild*] which ‘cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality’.¹⁷ But Althusser, interpreting this page of the *Grundrisse*, has hallucinations of Spinoza, and calls upon this vision as evidence for the lack of continuity between Hegel and Marx. ‘Spinoza warned us that the *object* of knowledge or essence was in itself absolutely distinct from the *real object*’, Althusser writes, astonishingly and inexplicably mistranslating Marx’s ‘the real subject’ as ‘the real object’ [*l’objet réel*] and thus misunderstanding the entire point of Marx’s critique of Hegel.¹⁸ Althusser continues: ‘for, to repeat [Spinoza’s] famous aphorism, the two objects must not be confused: the *idea* of a circle, which is the *object* of knowledge, must not be confused with the circle, which is the *real object*’.¹⁹ Althusser has in mind a scholium in the *Ethics* in which Spinoza develops his theory of attributes. It states:

Thinking substance and extended substance are one and the same substance, comprehended now under this attribute, now under that. ... For example, a circle existing in Nature and the idea of the existing circle—which is also in God—are one and the same thing, explicated through different attributes.²⁰

It appears that Althusser does not understand the basic principles of Spinoza’s metaphysics. Spinoza does not claim that things comprehended under the attribute of extension are more ‘real’ than things comprehended under the attribute of thought; the intention of his philosophical treatise is to show that thought and extension, which for Descartes were discrete substances, are in fact two ways of perceiving one and the same thing. But more

importantly, Marx’s conception of the capitalist totality as an organic whole – a ‘real subject’ encompassing a complex interconnection of political institutions, social relations and economic transactions – has nothing to do with what Spinoza intends by the attribute of ‘extension’. Althusser’s forced connection is like someone trying to explain climate change by arguing that the earth revolves around the sun.²¹

Marx’s other intention in this methodological section of the *Grundrisse* is to explain the counterintuitive relationship between the historical development of economic categories and the order of their logical priority in modern, bourgeois society. Marx notes, for example, that landed property is a feature of many different modes of production, and that this therefore seems like a reasonable starting point in elucidating the economic complexity of bourgeois society. However, the progression of modes of production do not follow in an accretive manner, such that a category like landed property would remain a bedrock of later modes, but rather the structure of the contemporary mode of production exercises logical priority over the economic categories handed down from earlier stages. This is what Marx means when he writes that the logical sequence of economic categories is ‘precisely the opposite’ of their historical emergence.²² Marx concludes this point by stating, ‘in all forms of society there is one specific kind of production which predominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the others. It is a general illumination which bathes all the other colours and modifies their particularity. It is a particular ether which determines the specific gravity of every being which has materialised within it.’²³

Althusser cites the first of these three sentences, with its reference to ‘rank and influence’, to justify his fanciful theory of a non-Hegelian whole: a ‘decentred’ structure with ‘levels’ or ‘regions’, each with its own ‘peculiar time’. Each of these levels, among which one finds ‘the political superstructure’, ‘philosophy’, ‘aesthetic productions’ and ‘scientific formations’, is ‘relatively autonomous’ and each thus contains its own ‘historical existence’ which is ‘punctuated with peculiar rhythms’. These different levels are related to each other according to ‘a certain type of articulation of the whole’ in its ‘articulated decentricity’.²⁴ These are the passages to which Haider refers when he endorses Althusser’s ‘theory of disloca-

tions between temporalities'. It is hard to know how to evaluate what is essentially a creative writing exercise. Nothing in Marx's text lends credence to this vision of intertwined spheres of cultural production with poly-rhythmic temporalities, and Haider follows Althusser's lead by enthusiastically repackaging these ideas without providing any evidentiary textual sources that would lend to support to this interpretation.

Marx's simple but profound point suggests the opposite: 'capital is the all-dominating economic power of bourgeois society', and therefore all other economic categories in modern society must be subsumed under its logic.²⁵ Indeed, how does Althusser account for Marx's evocative description of the capitalist mode of production as an 'ether' which 'determines the specific gravity of every being which has materialised within it'? This would seem to deprive 'scientific formations', 'aesthetic productions' and whatever else might be considered of their relatively autonomous rhythm; it would seem to suggest nothing other than an 'expressive totality'. Althusser responds by lamenting that Marx was not able to complete his scientific achievement 'without completely avoiding a relapse into earlier schemata'.²⁶ Althusser's reading of Marx proudly endorses one sentence for every two sentences that are deemed anachronistic because they do not conform to the Parisian scientific paradigm of the 1960s.

A necessary consequence of this rejection of 'expressive causality' is Althusser's inability to relate the dramatic texture of modern life to the economic structure of the whole. Adorno was attracted to the concept of the 'character mask' because it grounds the universality of being-for-another – the performative character of modern life – in the universality of commodity exchange.²⁷ Althusser and his collaborators, in their attempt to extract a general scientific theory from *Capital*, sacrifice this historically contingent nature of Marx's critical concepts in order to make transhistorical claims about existence and appearance. What then is the point of reading Marx? Haider aspires to something like a Marxian cultural criticism when he writes: 'As an already existing person, I put a mask endowed with its own autonomous existence on my already existing face, to work, purchase commodities, or perform in a play.' But this still lags considerably behind the calibre of analysis that is possible when one seriously examines Marx's development

of capitalist forms of appearance.

When I go to 'purchase commodities', for example, at a grocery store, I appear to the personification of capital – the hierarchy of managers employed in the capitalist's stead – as the bearer of money. This causes all of the higher-level employees at the store to eye me with an artificially obsequious gaze, which reciprocally colours my self-understanding with entitlement. I do not appear as the bearer of money to the checkout operator – it is her boss to whom she sells her services – but in the mask of surveillance, indirectly connected to her employer through the feedback channels available to me if I choose to vent my dissatisfaction with her performance. The mediation of our social interaction by the logic of the modern capitalist enterprise is legible in her tone; it is why she says 'hello' with an adept synthesis of fear and gracious servility. It is also why, when I show up in her lane towards the end of her shift, she masks her frustration with a grimace of hospitality in the form of a cryptic and tight-lipped 'find everything okay?' to which I respond with a terse and apologetic 'yes, thanks', pained by her dissimulated expression and wondering whether I still have time to choose another lane without arousing her supervisor's suspicion.

Society is nearly at the point of collapsing under the weight of anxiety concentrated in such moments of our lives. The aim of Critical Theory is to give society a push, or in the words of Marx, to 'shorten and lessen the birth-pangs', to assist this ailing mode of production in its ever-miscarried generation of a new form of life. When Haider claims that 'an unsettling aspect of our "lived experience" is shock or disgust at the sight of a human face', he pulls from the playbook of mid-century existentialist kitsch in order to transfigure these birth-pangs into a transhistorical feature of the *conditio humana*.

It is time to give *Capital* another chance. This does not require that one harbour illusions about the capacity for individuals to spontaneously act; individuals who appear on the stage of modern history should still be treated as personifications of economic categories. But there is no reason that this treatment should fall short of the dynamic complexity that one finds in the description of characters who appear on the pages of a Virginia Woolf novel. Critical Theory begins in the checkout lane.

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Notes

1. Asad Haider, 'The Human Mask', *Radical Philosophy* 2.10 (Summer 2021); Kyle Baasch, 'The Theatre Of Economic Categories: Rediscovering *Capital* in the Late 1960s', *Radical Philosophy* 2.08 (Autumn 2020), 18–32. Subsequent references to the latter given as page numbers in the text.
2. Incidentally, this obscure letter from Marx to Feuerbach cited by Haider teems with 'historicist' distinctions between German and French intellectual culture.
3. Karl Marx, 'Marx to Ferdinand Lasalle. 12 November 1858', in *Marx and Engels Collected Works: Volume 40* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1983), 355. Compare Marx's comment with a remark on Althusser by Iring Fetscher, the organiser of the Frankfurt colloquium attended by Nicos Poulantzas in 1967. 'I think [Althusser] wished to make Marx into a real scientific theory, in the sense of traditional French concepts of science. That seemed to me to make no sense because Marx's theory is something different, and that of course had something to do with his German background', quoted in Kevin Anderson, 'On Marx, Hegel, and Critical Theory in Postwar Germany: A Conversation with Iring Fetscher', *Studies in Eastern European Thought* 50 (1998), 8. I recognise that these kinds of generalisations, which Haider calls 'national stereotypes', assault the radical nominalism that grounds contemporary standards of political correctness.
4. Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1970), 300. Italics in original.
5. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1976), 170, 711, 757. Translations amended. Incidentally, Michael Heinrich notes that 'not only does Marx see concrete humans behind the character mask, he also emphasises their capacity for reflection on their own action, the possibility of subjectively "lifting" themselves above social relations.' Michael Heinrich, 'Individuum, Personifikation und unpersönliche Herrschaft in Marx' Kritik der politischen Ökonomie', in *Anonyme Herrschaft: Zur Struktur moderner Machtverhältnisse* (Münster: Westphalisches Dampfboot, 2012), 19.
6. Marx, *Capital*, 757.
7. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1993), 197. Italics in original.
8. Marx, *Capital*, 175.
9. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 162.
10. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 197.
11. Marx, *Capital*, 172–173. Translation amended.
12. Rahel Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 174.
13. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 101.
14. G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen Wood, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 62.
15. Marx, *Capital*, 102.
16. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 102.
17. Max Weber, 'The "Objectivity" of Knowledge in Social Science and Social Policy', in *Max Weber: Collected Methodological Writings*, eds. Hans Henrik Bruun and Sam Whimster, trans. Hans Henrik Bruun (London: Routledge, 2012), 125. For a comprehensive account of attempts to solve this particular problem of historical knowledge in German theories of historiography, see Frederick C. Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011), especially the chapters on Heinrich Rickert, Emil Lask, Georg Simmel and Weber.
18. Althusser repeats this erroneous use of 'the real object' in over 60 instances in this opening section of *Reading Capital*. It is perhaps his most famous term that masquerades as Marxist when it is not.
19. *Reading Capital*, 43.
20. This is presumably what Haider has in mind when he stresses the importance of Spinoza's 'conception of a substance which exists only in its attributes.' It would be more precise to say that the attributes are 'that which the intellect *perceives* of substance as constituting its essence', for substance, the inspiration for the German Idealist conception of the 'absolute', does not rely on anything for its existence. Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, in *The Essential Spinoza*, ed. Michael L. Morgan, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), 4. Italics added. Furthermore, this eminently metaphysical concept has nothing to do with the 'substantialist theory of value', a bogus economic doctrine which asserts that the value of a commodity is equivalent to a definite expenditure of human muscles and nerves stored up in the object.
21. Spinoza functions as a *deus ex machina* for Haider as much as for Althusser. Haider notes that 'Spinoza's entire exposition is directed towards human freedom'; this much is true, and this is why Spinoza is the single most important philosophical figure in any account of the development of German Idealism. Haider then elaborates a homeopathic version of Spinoza's conception of freedom as the ability to 'organise our relations to increase our powers of acting.' Actually, Spinoza's conception of human freedom entails the consciousness of the divine as the cause of our actions, which Spinoza describes as an 'intellectual love of God', or 'blessedness'. Spinoza does not believe that humans can voluntarily decide how to organise their social relations; that would be castigated as an anthropocentric delusion. It is this attempt to supplement Spinoza's compatibilism with a transformative politics without having recourse to Hegel's humanistic teleology that embroils Haider in a performative contradiction.
22. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 107. Haider notes that Althusser 'rejects this view', without noting that 'this view' is a quotation from the *Grundrisse*.
23. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 106–7.
24. *Reading Capital*, 109–111.
25. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 107.
26. *Reading Capital*, 207.
27. Theodor W. Adorno, 'Society', trans. Fredric Jameson, in *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 147–8.