Outwitting Enlightenment With Words: Philosophical Style, Critique and History in Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

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‘If you can't face Hiroshima in the theatre, you'll eventually end up in Hiroshima itself.’

–Edward Bond

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Abstract

To many of its most authoritative commentators, Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* cannot but entail a reductively negative, pessimistic philosophy of history that ties the historical progress of enlightenment rationality with regression and domination so tightly as to undermine its own critical intentions. My thesis contends that a text as self-reflective of its own form of presentation as the *Dialectic* obviously is could not be read so literally. To remedy this, I offer an interpretive reappraisal of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* , which places a methodological appreciation of the latter's distinct style and form of presentation at the centre of understanding its philosophical status and more specifically, its philosophical viability as a form of social critique. I argue that the *Dialectic* pursues, in the first place, the *negative, critical* aim of undermining the unreflective perceptions of history and progress through which present society constructs its own self-understanding, and does so not only on the level of philosophical content, but also on the level of linguistic form. The text performatively repeats the conventional tropes, narratives and genres in which the historical self-understanding of enlightenment is embodied, and enacts, on the level of linguistic expression itself, the failure of this self-understanding to deliver on its own promise. I argue that this form of critical textual composition simultaneously implicates its own audience and is aimed at their experience of the text. As such, it is concerned not simply with challenging their rational beliefs, but also and especially at undermining their affective investments to socially prevalent notions of history.

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Introduction

'What can it mean to say that the human race is making progress when millions are reduced to the level of objects?' Thus we find Theodor W. Adorno addressing a student audience in his *History and Freedom* lecture course of the 1960s.[1] The first half of the 20th century had witnessed the unfolding of unprecedented historical catastrophe, beginning with the degeneration of the socialist revolution under Stalinism amidst two world wars and culminating with the atrocities of fascism. In light of this, historical progress could no longer be taken for granted. Friedrich Engels had once postulated the well-known dialectical formula of the change of quantity into quality as an explanation for how continuous, evolutionary change in quantity ultimately results in a discontinuous, revolutionary change in quality.[2] In Engels's scientific rendering, water gradually heated increases in temperature, remaining fluid until it finally turns to gas at 100 degrees Celsius – as in nature, so in human history. Picking up on this, Adorno suggests that the course of events now pointed up the possibility that human history had indeed observed Engels's formula, but perversely, negatively: if history amounts to a continuous, incremental progression, the discontinuity it tends towards may turn out to be that of catastrophe, not the revolutionary leap forward. The situation of human history thus appears more akin to that of the proverbial frog that floats unsuspectingly in gradually heated water, only to ultimately let itself be boiled alive. As Adorno explains, the objective scale of the disaster forces us to raise the question of 'whether the view of history as a continuous progression towards higher forms of life does not include the catastrophes we are experiencing

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[1] Theodor W. Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964-1965*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 8. Henceforth cited as HF.

[2] Friedrich Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, *vol.25* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2010), 110-120.

today'.[3] And even if history thus conceived and objectively realised did not necessarily tend towards the camps or the gulags, the unfreedom and suffering experienced by human beings within capitalism itself was reason enough to subject the ideas of progress and of the affirmative, progressive philosophies of history inherited from the enlightenment tradition, to critical re-examination.

It transpires early on in Adorno's lectures that critical reflection on the idea of progress and on progressive philosophies of history does not entail taking *regression* for granted and elevating that into a general proposition, a totalising view of history as a whole, as in the negative, regressive philosophies of history advanced by the likes of Spengler, Toynbee and Frobenius. In spite of themselves, negative philosophies of history end up less on the side of critique than of conformism. By totalising pessimism in the view that any attempt to change the world as a whole is doomed, one ends up affirming the course of the world as it is – and so Spenglerism, Adorno argues, acquiesces in the destructiveness of history and leaps to its assistance.[4] It is worth noting that compared to many of his written texts, here, as in Adorno's spoken lectures more generally, we find Adorno the teacher, proceeding interrogatively, cautiously, with the scholarly conscience of the educator who does not wish to be misunderstood by his pupils, clarifying and qualifying himself at every step of the argument. Reading through the transcripts of Adorno's lecture course, one could hardly be mistaken about his intentions – the promise inherent in the ideas of progress and in progressive philosophies of history has not been redeemed, but the task of philosophy is not to give up these conceptions but to critically reflect on them, so that their inherent promise may *after all* be redeemed.

Dialectic of Enlightenment, the book Adorno co-wrote with Max Horkheimer some 20 years earlier, is animated by the same critical concerns. The task of the work, as defined by its

[3] HF, 8.
[4] HF, 8.

authors in the Preface, is the attempt to 'explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism'.[5] Similarly, the goal is not to renounce the ideal of progress, of 'liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters', embodied here in the self-conception of what the authors call enlightenment, 'progressing' or 'advancing' thought [*fortschreitenden Denkens*].[6] The ultimate aim of Adorno and Horkheimer's critique rather, is the genuine realisation of that ideal – 'What is at stake … is the fulfilment of past hopes', lest humanity be 'totally betrayed'.[7] In a 1942 memorandum outlining a programme of work for what would eventually turn out to be *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* the authors maintained that '[t]he liberating elements in enlightenment … are to be brought out just as much as the repressive ones … For the work as a whole aims to overcome political stagnation'.[8] And though the final version of the text retained mention of at least some of these 'liberating' moments, including the notion of enlightenment's 'antiauthoritarian tendency'[9] and the 'secret utopia harboured within the concept of reason',[10] overwhelming emphasis was laid on enlightenment's negative, repressive tendencies – indeed, the authors claim in the Preface that they were tasked primarily with investigating the aporia of the 'self-destruction of enlightenment' and the 'destructive side of progress'.[11] Any ambivalence in the treatment of the concept of enlightenment appears, at least at first glance, to have been drowned out by a (purportedly) totalising negativism. This is not only a matter of

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[5] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), xiv. Henceforth cited as DE. Where indicated, I also refer to the 1972 translation by John Cumming and the German original.

[6] DE, 1.

[7] DE, xvii.

[8] Max Horkheimer and (?) Theodor W. Adorno, '*Memorandum über Teile des Los Angeles Arbeitsprogramms, die von den Philosophen nicht durchgeführt werden können*' (1942), quoted in Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School, Its History, Theories and Political Significance,* trans. Michael Robertson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 315. As Wiggershaus puts it, the very formulation 'dialectic of enlightenment' gave away 'that Horkheimer and Adorno did not want to throw the baby out with the bathwater, that they only wanted to demonstrate the ambiguity of the idea of enlightenment' (Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, 327).

[9] DE, 73.

[10] DE, 66, 73.

[11] DE, xvi.

a shift in argumentative content, but also, and especially, in form. The overall tone of the *Dialectic* is, in contradistinction to Adorno's spoken lectures on history, *anything but* cautious and interrogative. Instead, this is a text written in a dramatic, apodictic, fearsomely judgmental spirit. 'The curse of irresistible progress is irresistible regression', 'the history of civilisation is the history of the introversion of sacrifice', 'Enlightenment is totalitarian' – to sample just some of the (by now well known) invective characteristic of the book's style.

The dramatic form in which the book's critical claims are presented has led many of its foremost commentators to conclude that Adorno and Horkheimer have undermined their own avowed critical intentions and landed in a position of totalising pessimism. This includes Adorno and Horkheimer's most prominent student, Jürgen Habermas.[12] For these readers, and for Habermas in particular, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* represents a form of totalising social critique that fatally undermines the discursive validity of its own argument and thereby renders itself impossible as critique. On this (now) standard reading, what Adorno and Horkheimer call 'enlightenment' amounts to the world-historical process of reason's progressive formalisation and instrumentalisation in the service of human self-preservation. This ultimately leads to (enlightenment) reason's self-destruction, i.e. reason's self-renunciation of its claim to truth (and validity more generally) in favour of its functional role in the human domination over nature, instinct and other human beings (the functional imperatives of self-preservation). This purportedly totalising critique is understood to entail, or be grounded in, a negative philosophy

[12] See Jürgen Habermas, 'The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno', in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 106-130, and Jürgen Habermas, 'The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Re-Reading Dialectic of Enlightenment', *New German Critique,* no. 26, Critical Theory and Modernity (Spring - Summer 1982): 13-30 (these two essays have effectively the same content, with slight textual variations – I will also refer to this latter 1982 version where indicated). In what follows, I will chiefly focus on this version of Habermas's critique because it emphasises the Nietzschean influence on *Dialectic of Enlightenment* - an influence which my Thesis vindicates, against Habermas, through a re-reading of Nietzsche. I will occasionally also refer to other versions of Habermas's critique of Adorno and Horkheimer, including Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action. Volume 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984) and Jürgen Habermas, 'Conceptions of Modernity: A Look Back at Two Traditions', in *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays,* trans. and ed. Max Pensky (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2001), 130-156.

of history, which articulates the (teleological) principle driving the historical process – the principle of self-preservation, internal to the conceptual structure of reason and rational thinking as such. As a consequence of this, reason is said to undermine itself *necessarily* in the course of its historical development, since its own conceptual structure entails that it progressively turn into formalised or 'instrumental' reason. In Habermas's now well-known charge, by constructing their argument in this way, Adorno and Horkheimer have thereby landed themselves into a performative contradiction – their 'description of the self-destruction of the critical capacity is paradoxical, because in the moment of description it still has to make use of the critique that has been declared dead'.[13] If they are claiming that modern, socially dominant reason has completely been incorporated into the limited horizon of self-preservation, relinquishing its validity claim and thereby the critical capacity to distinguish between valid and invalid propositions, then they cannot possibly account for the discursive validity of their own critique.[14]

Habermas's reading has been particularly influential and set a trend in the reception of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and other distinguished scholars like Albrecht Wellmer, Herbert Schnädelbach, Martin Jay, and John Abromeit, have followed in Habermas's wake.[15] *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is still widely read and understood through the interpretive lens put in place by Habermas: as a totalising (hence, self-undermining) critique entailing or being grounded in a negative, regressive philosophy of history,[16] something much closer to the totalising historical pessimism of a Spengler than one would expect from a text that still lays a claim to being

[13] Habermas, 'Entwinement', 119.
[14] As Habermas puts it, if Adorno and Horkheimer 'still want to continue with critique, they will have to leave at least one rational criterion intact for their explanation of the corruption of all rational criteria' (Habermas, 'Entwinement', 127).
[15] Though I will mainly focus on Habermas's reading in this Introduction – given its influence for the reception of the *Dialectic* and the early Frankfurt School in general – I will also address some of these other readings throughout this Thesis.
[16] As one more sympathetic commentator has observed, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is 'still too often received as though it were a work of speculative universal history' (Simon Jarvis, 'General Introduction', in Theodor Adorno: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory, ed. Simon Jarvis (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2007), 2.

critical and therefore presupposes, however minimally, the possibility that what is being criticised could be otherwise. As a result, although widely acclaimed as a cornerstone in the development of the Frankfurt School, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* continues to occupy a rather uncomfortable position in the reception of the 'first generation' of critical social theory. It has provided theorists in the Habermasian tradition, beginning with Habermas himself, with ample ammunition for rejecting some of the core tenets of the first generation's version of critical social theory and defend a much more politically conciliatory communicative-theoretical alternative. But even many of those broadly sympathetic to the Frankfurt School old guard are stumped by the *Dialectic*[18] and, being at a loss as to what to make of it, yet still interested in the broader theoretical framework, choose to dismiss it either wholly or partially, or avoid dealing with it altogether.[19]

The scope of the influence Habermas has exerted on the reception of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and the early Frankfurt School more generally calls for a more detailed engagement with his reading. As a way of laying out some of the stakes for the central argument of my Thesis, I wish to provide such a reading here and situate it briefly within the context of Habermas's own project. This latter is especially pertinent because, as I argue below, it is possible not only to vindicate Adorno and Horkheimer's text against Habermas's objections, but to do so on Habermas's own linguistic-philosophical terms, and without some of the question-begging assumptions associated with Habermas's version of critical theory (particularly, his reliance on a progressive philosophy of history and quasi-transcendental argumentation).

[18] Henceforth, I will often refer to the text simply as '(the) *Dialectic*'.

[19] Just one recent example of such a reading is that of John Abromeit, who rejects the book's 'genealogical' conception of enlightenment – which he regards as reductively transhistorical – while wishing to hold on to the traces of a 'critical historicist', historically specific conception of enlightenment he discerns in Adorno and Horkheimer's work. See John Abromeit, 'Genealogy and Critical Historicism: Two Models of Enlightenment in Horkheimer and Adorno's Writings', *Critical Historical Studies* (Fall 2016): 283-308. See also Chapter 1, Section 4.

1. Habermas on the *Dialectic*, rationality and modernity

In Habermas's reconstruction, the 1930s saw critical theory attempt to think through the failure of proletarian revolution in the advanced capitalist core and the subsequent popular turn towards fascism whilst retaining 'a portion of the trust (grounded in a philosophy of history) in the rational potential of bourgeois culture that was supposed to be released under the pressure of developed forces of production'.[20] As this fund of confidence in the potentiality of reason captured in bourgeois ideals and objectively embodied in existing social institutions was exhausted by the 1940s, critical theory could no longer make use of Marxian ideology critique (in its classical form, at least), as it saw no extant pieces of socially operative reason to which it could appeal. Hence, Habermas argues, Adorno and Horkheimer are pushed into a purportedly totalising form of (ideology) critique that is turned 'not only against the irrational function of bourgeois ideals, but against the rational potential of bourgeois culture itself,[21] and the process of enlightenment as a whole. Habermas seems to show appreciation for how the shift of Adorno and Horkheimer's theoretical outlook was shaped by the experience of the most calamitous years of the Second World War during which the book was written,[22] and agrees that a revision of the basic assumptions of critical theory was indeed necessary in light of that experience,[23] but that nevertheless, Adorno and Horkheimer have went too far and ended up throwing the baby of enlightenment's rational content with the bathwater of its critique. Accordingly, he accuses the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* of offering an oversimplified presentation that 'does not do justice to the rational content of cultural modernity that was

[20] Habermas, 'Entwinement', 118.
[21] Ibid., 119.
[22] Ibid., 116-117.
[23] Ibid., 129: 'To be sure, the theory upon which they had earlier based themselves and their procedure of ideology critique was no longer viable - because the forces of production no longer developed any explosive force; because crises and class conflicts promoted not a revolutionary, or even a unified consciousness, but a fragmentary one instead; finally, because bourgeois ideals began to retire, or at least to assume forms that eluded the cutting edge of an immanent critique.'

captured in bourgeois ideals (and also instrumentalised along with them)'.[24]

In his 1980s essays on *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,[25] Habermas argues that 'the great model' for Adorno and Horkheimer's purportedly totalising critique is Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality*, where the concept of genealogy is 'supposed to enable the paradoxical structure of totalising critique'.[26] Genealogy is articulated from what Habermas refers to as an 'aesthetic horizon of experience', characterised by an 'ahistorical mode of perception' in which 'particular epochs lose their own profile'[27] in favour of an affinity with the most remote and the most primitive, and where what is earlier and more primordial is considered more worthy of honour. As Habermas reads Nietzsche, genealogy amounts to an anti-utopian story of decline from some ideal origin, and hence the horizon of the totalising critique enabled by such a genealogy can only envision social transformation in the anti-utopian form of 'comeback and return'.[28] Insofar as Adorno and Horkheimer have drawn inspiration from Nietzsche in formulating their critique, they also stand accused of bringing grist to the mill of counter-enlightenment.[29]

For Habermas, there *is* a way out of the performative contradiction which Adorno and Horkheimer refuse to let go of – it is possible to salvage the project of enlightenment by revising the critical theoretical project. In order to avoid the conceptual aporia in which reason vanishes without a trace into instrumental reason, Habermas articulates an expanded, two-track conception of rationality. Alongside its instrumentalising function of 'purposive-rational' mastery of nature, reason contains the non-instrumentalising dimension of 'communicative

[24] Ibid., 113.
[25] See footnote 12 above.
[26] Ibid., 120.
[27] Ibid., 125.
[28] Ibid., 125.
[29] It must be noted that Habermas is writing the *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* in the intellectual climate of the 80s where post-structuralism, vitalised by new readings of Nietzsche, still holds a powerful sway – Habermas's text has to be understood as an intervention in this intellectual context. It is not far-fetched to claim that his fervent critical opposition to post-structuralism may have fed into the uncharitable spirit of his reading of Adorno and Horkheimer.

action'. The unfinished project of modernity can be taken up again within the framework of this wider understanding of rationality, which requires one to be sensitive to the 'traces of communicative rationality' that counteract the instrumentalisation of reason.[30]

This two-track conception of rationality enables Habermas to reconceptualise and expand upon Adorno and Horkheimer's 'one-sided' theory of modernity as one in which the progressive tendency towards the instrumentalisation of reason and the incorporation of all questions of validity into the limited horizon of purposive-rational imperatives of self-preservation (as described by Adorno and Horkheimer) is counteracted by progressive rationalisation in the 'moral-practical' domain of communicative action, or as he also puts it, the communicative rationalisation of the 'lifeworld', the realm of socialisation in which individuals enter into intersubjective, norm-governed relations with each other and coordinate their actions. Through this process, modern societies become progressively differentiated into separate value spheres governed by their own autonomous logics and claims to validity (science, morality and art), enabling a process of learning based on the rational adjudication of validity claims in theoretical and practical discourse. This world-historical learning process competes with, and pushes beyond, forms of knowledge constrained within the limited horizon of the instrumental mastery of nature – it leads to the separation of law and morality and the universalisation of both within an institutional framework; it increases individual self-reflexivity and autonomy; and finally, it fuels the productivity of aesthetic experiences that 'decenter' subjectivity from the imperatives of instrumental action, as presented in works of avant-garde art.[31]

Habermas is commonly taken to have offered a justificatory grounding for this theory of modernity (and the claims of progress and social evolution it contains) by performing a

[30] See Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action, vol.1*.
[31] Habermas, 'Entwinement', 113.

‘linguistic turn’ in critical theory – turning towards an analysis of linguistic practices and what Habermas regards as the unavoidable validity presuppositions implicit in communicative speech.[32] According to this account, utterances in everyday linguistic practice raise various sorts of intersubjectively criticisable validity claims - to truth, normative rightness and sincerity. In order to engage in communicative interaction with others at all, competent speakers must be able to distinguish between these distinct types of validity claim and if called upon to do so, produce reasons in defence of the validity claims implicitly raised in any given communicative utterance (indeed, in order to understand an utterance at all, a competent speaker must already take a yes/no stance towards the reasons that may be supplied in defence of the validity claim raised in an utterance). This serves as the basis for Habermas’ argument that linguistic understanding is inherently oriented to the idea of an intersubjective consensus, a genuine agreement with others with respect to the validity of any disputed claim. Such consensus is rarely realised, but its analysis yields an important normative dimension formalised by Habermas with the concept of the ‘ideal speech situation’ – an idealised space of free and undistorted communication – which he argues is a necessary presupposition of communicative discourse and provides the ultimate criterion for adjudicating validity claims raised in communicative utterances. Participants in argumentative disputes over any given validity claim deemed problematic ‘always have to suppose that only the unforced force of the better argument comes into play under the unavoidable presuppositions of argumentative discourse’[33] such that ‘a rationally motivated agreement could in principle be achieved’.[34] Through this analysis – of what Habermas calls ‘universal pragmatics’ – which Habermas arrives at by rationally reconstructing the communicative competence of speakers, critical

[32] Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, *vol. 1*., see esp. Ch. 3.
[33] Habermas, ‘Entwinement’, 130. Discourse participants recognise this presupposition is made from within an ‘impure’ communicative situation in which the validity of arguments is interwoven with power claims.
[34] Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action,* 42.

theory obtains a normative standard grounded in the very structure of communicative action and speech. Thus, Habermas's 'linguistic turn' allows him to rearticulate the critical theory of society on a (purportedly) stable, independent normative foundation, and within the framework of which the critique of society and ideology can be formulated in terms of systematically distorted communication. The pathologies of modern society can be grasped as situations of systematically distorted communication, i.e., situations in which acceptance is established under coercion or relations of force. Progress can thereby be understood as, and measured against, the idea of progressively overcoming such coercion or relations of force that systematically distort communication.

This is not the place to comment comprehensively on the merits of Habermas's communicative-theoretical revision of critical theory, but for the purposes of evaluating his critical reception of Adorno and Horkheimer's project, and his reading of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in particular, it is important to take note of one important aspect – namely, the sense in which Habermas's 'linguistic turn' and his 'universal pragmatics', commonly taken to provide an independent justificatory basis for Habermas's theory of modernity and his claims about historical progress, *itself* presupposes and strongly relies on a progressive reading of history. As Amy Allen has recently argued,[35] although Habermas's universal pragmatics is supposed to uncover the normative potentials (as formalised in the notion of the ideal speech situation) that are *necessarily* and *universally* built into language insofar as it functions as a communicative medium, his analysis is based on the reconstruction of the communicative competences of a very *specific* group of speakers – 'competent members of modern societies'.[36] These are the 'subjects who are deemed competent insofar as they have mastered

[35] Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonising the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), ch.2.
[36] Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 383.

the specific use of language required by modernity',[37] in other words – insofar as they have learned to differentiate between distinct types of validity claims (plus the distinct types of world-relations associated with them), and in cases of disputes over specific claims, that they are capable of switching to the more demanding level of argumentative (theoretical or practical) discourse where the validity of claims is established solely on the assumption of the ideal speech situation. In discourse – including philosophical argumentation – communicatively competent speakers must be capable of being impelled solely by the 'unforced force of the better argument' in advancing or accepting lines of reasoning with regard to specific claims.

But this obviously presupposes that members of modern societies have successfully acquired these specific linguistic competences. In that sense, if Habermas's 'linguistic turn' is supposed to provide an independent justificatory ground for his critical theory and his claims about historical progress, it is puzzling that it already *presupposes* a certain conception of historical progress – namely, one that situates 'modernity' as the end product of progressive rationalisation in the domain not only of instrumental, but also of non-instrumental, communicative action which has successfully increased humanity's stock of moral-practical insight and equipped individuals with the requisite capacities for mastering argumentative discourse. Yet it is precisely this assumption of progress, on the social as well as on the individual level, that is subjected to critical examination in *Dialectic of Enlightenment.* From the perspective of this text, one cannot simply take the fact of historical progress for granted. In this context, and going back to his reading of the *Dialectic*, it is particularly telling to consider Habermas' claim that the reader of Adorno and Horkheimer's text ought to be someone

> who resists being overwhelmed by the rhetoric of the *Dialectic of*

[37] Allen, *The End of Progress*, 52.

> *Enlightenment,* who steps back and takes seriously the thoroughly philosophic claim of the text.[38]

In other words, the reader of the *Dialectic* should adopt a particular strategy for reading and interpreting the text – one in which they are to focus on the propositional content of the text, and not on its form of presentation, style and rhetoric. Habermas does not offer an explicit justification for this reading strategy, despite the fact that it has far-reaching consequences for his interpretation. However, it is not difficult fill in the blanks: the 'overwhelming' effect of the text's rhetoric is a force to be resisted, since we are here on the terrain of *serious philosophical discourse*, where the only force to be reckoned with is the unforced force of the better argument. But as we have just seen, the assumption that modern subjects have successfully acquired the competences requisite for mastering argumentative discourse is itself dependent on the type of progressive reading of history that is submitted to critical scrutiny in the *Dialectic*.[40] So, what if one can't simply help themselves to either of those assumptions, at least from the standpoint offered in the *Dialectic*? What if the very stories of progress implicit in enlightenment's self-conception, embodied in social institutions and public discourse, stand in the way of obtaining fuller grasp of its regressive, destructive tendencies – such that it would take *more than* the unforced force of the better argument to come to terms with the scope and nature of the predicament? And what if as a consequence, (most) individuals are *not* sufficiently rational and lack the capacities for mastering argumentative discourse?[41] What if, instead of being capable of weighing the merits and demerits of arguments impartially, moved only by the unforced force of the better argument, (most) individuals are beholden to enlightenment's

[38] Habermas, 'Entwinement', 110. I am thankful to Fabian Freyenhagen for drawing my attention to this remark at the early stages of this project. Many of the ideas presented here arose in the course of our discussions. In what follows, there is overlap with Fabian Freyenhagen, 'Why Professor Habermas would fail a class on *Dialectic of Enlightenment'* (Forthcoming)

[40] Even if Habermas's version of it differs from some of the standard accounts, such as those of Kant, Hegel and Marx, in important ways. See Allen, *The end of Progress*, Ch.2.

[41] Freyenhagen, 'Why Professor Habermas would fail a class on *Dialectic of Enlightenment'* (Forthcoming).

ideology not only in their rational beliefs, but also in their innermost affects?[42] This, then, would imply that the addressees of philosophical texts (or at any rate, of the *Dialectic*) are these real, living, feeling human beings of today, much frailer in their capacities, much more flawed and self-contradictory than the sufficiently enlightened discourse participants who almost seem to already inhabit the ideal speech situation that Habermas' alternative presupposes.

But wouldn't all this have significant consequences for *how* one writes philosophical texts – at least in certain contexts, but especially in the case of a text like the *Dialectic*? Contrary to Habermas's reading strategy for the latter, mightn't rhetoric assume a much more philosophically significant role than one of being (potentially, only) a force of distorting or obfuscating the unforced force of the better argument and the truth reached by discursive means alone? Is philosophical rhetoric only a perfunctory linguistic vehicle for some underlying, pre-established propositional content, or mightn't it take 'the side of content', as Adorno would later put it?[43] And mightn't questions of presentation [*Darstellung*] and style more generally need to be re-evaluated as 'not an external matter of indifference to [philosophy] but immanent to its idea'?[45]

My Thesis answers these questions in the affirmative. It proceeds from the Adornian premise that philosophy is 'constitutively bound up with its mode of presentation', and insofar as the *Dialectic* can be conceived in this way, its philosophical aim cannot simply be 'the communication of a fixed and finished content'.[46] Habermas' choice to put the rhetorical presentation of the *Dialectic* aside is not without philosophical consequence, but leads to a

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[42] Habermas was keenly aware of the socio-psychological dimension to Adorno and Horkheimer's version of critical theory, or as he puts it, 'the socio-psychological aspects of a deformation that penetrates into the deepest regions of subjectivity and takes hold of the motivational foundations of the personality'. Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, *Volume 1*, 368-369. I am suggesting – see the next paragraph – is that he did not consider how this aspect of their theory may motivate a search for different forms of philosophical expression.
[43] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), 56. Henceforth cited as ND. For an illuminating discussion of Adorno's conception of rhetoric and its relation to his concept of philosophical truth, see also Owen Hulatt, *Adorno's Theory of Philosophical and Aesthetic Truth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).
[45] ND, 18.
[46] Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction to Dialectics* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2017), 211.

decisive misrepresentation of Adorno and Horkheimer's intentions and the philosophical function(s) of their text – that is, what sorts of things their text *does* as distinct from simply what it *says*.

2. The Regression of Language and the Search for Style

In fact, the 1944/1947 Preface to the *Dialectic* provides some pretty conspicuous clues indicative of a shift in how Adorno and Horkheimer see their task as *writers* of philosophical or critical-theoretical texts. There, we read that

> [i]f public life has reached a state in which thought is being turned inescapably into a commodity and language into celebration of the commodity, the attempt to trace the sources of this degradation must refuse obedience to the current linguistic and intellectual demands before it is rendered entirely futile by the consequence of those demands for world history … In reflecting on its own guilt, therefore, thought finds itself deprived not only of the affirmative reference to science and everyday phenomena but also of the conceptual language of opposition. No terms are available which do not tend toward complicity with the prevailing intellectual trends, and what threadbare language cannot achieve on its own is precisely made good by the social machinery.[48]

What Adorno and Horkheimer are suggesting, in speaking of thought being turned into a commodity and language into 'a celebration of the commodity' is that our very language and conceptual means for making sense of the world have become compromised in ways that prevent us from coming to terms with the true nature of our predicament (including this degradation of our language and thinking itself), which calls for a need to 'refuse obedience to

[48] DE, xv.

current linguistic and intellectual demands'. What specific linguistic and intellectual demands do Adorno and Horkheimer have in mind, specifically? The abovementioned 'affirmative reference to science and everyday phenomena' and the 'conceptual language of opposition' is clarified in the passage below:

> The loyal son of modern civilization's fear of departing from the facts, which even in their perception are turned into clichés by the prevailing usages in science, business, and politics, is exactly the same as the fear of social deviation. Those usages also define the concept of clarity in language and thought to which art, literature, and philosophy must conform today. By tabooing any thought which sets out negatively from the facts and from the prevailing modes of thought as obscure, convoluted, and preferably foreign, that concept holds mind captive in ever deeper blindness. It is in the nature of the calamitous situation existing today that even the most honorable reformer who recommends renewal in threadbare language reinforces the existing order he seeks to break by taking over its worn-out categorial apparatus and the pernicious power-philosophy lying behind it. False clarity is only another name for myth. Myth was always obscure and luminous at once.[49]

One aspect of the 'current linguistic and intellectual demands' that this passage picks out is the 'taboo' on departing from 'the facts', which can be understood with reference to the strictures of modern scientific discourse (including the social sciences) and finding philosophical articulation – in Adorno and Horkheimer's time, at least – in logical positivism. Adorno and Horkheimer are suggesting that paradoxically, focussing exclusively on 'getting the facts right' paralyses our conceptual grasp of reality. Remember, in this context, Habermas's accusation

[49] DE, xvii-xviii.

that Adorno and Horkheimer have produced an oversimplified presentation of modernity that fails to do justice to its rational content. Yet perhaps, in light of the above, Adorno and Horkheimer found it necessary to depart from the facts – to commit an epistemic 'injustice' from a social-scientific point of view – in presenting their version of the story of modernity, and in order to bring out tendencies that would otherwise be attenuated or even screened out within the type of balanced, ambivalent, but ultimately progressive story that Habermas seems to require of them. It will be my contention in this Thesis that Adorno and Horkheimer deliberately choose to do the contrary – to emphasise the regressive elements of enlightenment and attenuate or screen out its progressive elements, and to do so not because they don't believe there *are* such elements, but because they think that the familiar progressive narrative is itself part of what is preventing a fuller grasp of social-historical reality. In another lecture he gave in 1959, Adorno makes the following telling comment:

> I have exaggerated the sombre side, following the maxim that only exaggeration per se today can be the medium of truth. Do not mistake my fragmentary and often rhapsodic remarks for Spenglerism; Spenglerism itself makes common cause with the catastrophe. My intention was to delineate a tendency concealed behind the smooth I of everyday life before it overflows the institutional dams that, for the time being, are erected against it.[50]

The fact that this remark was made in a different historical context than that in which *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was written does not do much to change its significance, and in any case the latter was already addressing itself to the post-war period, being written 'at a time when the end of the National Socialist terror was in sight'.[51] Adorno is here pointing to his philosophical

[50] Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Meaning of Working Through the Past', in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press), 99.
[51] DE, xi.

style – what he refers to as an 'exaggeration' on the 'sombre side', 'fragmentary and often rhapsodic remarks' – as an explicit clue for how to read and interpret the philosophical significance of his writing, namely *not* as a monologically negative philosophy of history à la Spengler. This is highly apposite for approaching *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, whose style is certainly captured, to a great degree, by its sometimes-overlooked original title and eventual subtitle, *Philosophical Fragments*.

To a great degree it is so captured, but not completely. This is obviously not a book of aphorisms in the style of Adorno's *Minima Moralia,* Horkheimer's *Dawn and Decline* or Benjamin's *One Way Street*, with the exception of its final section, the 'Notes and Sketches' that did not find their way into the main body of the text. The original manuscript underwent multiple revisions and was subjected to Adorno's 'heroic copy-editing' work, as James Schmidt notes.[52] As the work was prepared for publication, some of its less sombre notes were omitted – including references to work that promised to address 'the positive aspects of mass culture'.[53] In the final 1947 edition, a manuscript that had originally proclaimed its incompleteness openly and laid no claim to systematicity had emerged transformed into a rather different beast. In the words of Schmidt, the work 'now had a systematicity that was almost as relentless as the *Phenomenology of Spirit*'.[54] As the original title was relegated to subtitle and the *Fragments* became the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the work appeared as something very much *like* a comprehensive, systematic account of human reason, society and history. The *Dialectic is* fragmentary and discontinuous, constantly jumping back and forth between 'myth' and 'enlightenment', 'ancient' and 'modern', 'old' and 'new', it leaps and bounds together the most distant objects, events, figures and periods – magic with positivism, Odysseus with the

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[52] James Schmidt, 'Language, Mythology and Enlightenment: Historical Notes on Horkheimer and Adorno's "Dialectic of Enlightenment", in *Social Research*, vol. 65, no. 4 (Winter 1998), 811.
[53] DE, 254, n. [xix]. This was eventually published as 'The Schema of Mass Culture'. See Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Schema of Mass Culture', in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture,* ed. J. M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991), 61-98.
[54] Schmidt, 'Language, Mythology and Enlightenment', 833.

modern capitalist, Kant with de Sade. However, these figures of discontinuity are 'welded' together in something that seems very much *like* a continuous trajectory springing from an origin and unfolding necessarily in accordance with an essential law or *telos* – the progressive domination of nature, the only dimension in which enlightenment conceives of and objectively realises (its own) historical progress, and by virtue of which enlightenment ends up, Adorno and Horkheimer maintain, destroying itself. This formal quality of the text corresponds to what Adorno was later to refer to as 'the unity of continuity and discontinuity' – 'the unity that cements the discontinuous, chaotically splintered moments and phases of history – the unity of the control of nature, progressing to rule over men, and finally to that over men's inner nature'.[55]

The suspicion that the *Dialectic* does amount to a negative universal history of some sort may be raised again at this point and have the critics asking for forbearance – perhaps they were onto something after all. For Adorno, however, universal history 'must be construed *and denied*'.[56] This remark is of paramount significance. It suggests that even if the *Dialectic* puts forward a negative universal history and an account of the essential self-destructiveness of enlightenment rationality as that history's *telos*, this need not – *must* not – have the final word. Yet, once again, why was Adorno able to explain this quite clearly in many of his later writings and in the lectures and did not do so in the *Dialectic*? It almost seems as if the authors of the latter were quite consciously running the risk of being misunderstood.

Yet, perhaps Adorno and Horkheimer's strategy is still more complicated. Recall the passage from the Preface of the *Dialectic* quoted above, in which it was said that the 'prevailing intellectual and linguistic demands' that the authors found necessary to defy were not only the

[55] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), 320. Henceforth cited as ND. Where indicated, I also refer to the alternative translation by Dennis Redmond and the German original.
[56] ND, 320, italics mine.

affirmative reference to science and the taboo on departing from the facts, but also 'the conceptual language of opposition'. What I take this to suggest is that Adorno and Horkheimer are not operating from a conceptual standpoint that is external to or outside the enlightenment ideology of history, progress and the linguistic forms in which this ideology is articulated. Rather, my Thesis argues that Adorno and Horkheimer advance the negative, critical aim of undermining this ideology *from within.* Their critique is immanent, and not simply on the level of intellectual *content*, but also on the level of intellectual, linguistic *form*. Adorno and Horkheimer seek to show not only that enlightenment's idea of progress as the progressive domination of nature undermines its own rational promise of 'liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters'[57] and produces its own opposite, regression. They also seek to *perform* this idea by lodging themselves into the intellectual forms, genres and texts in which enlightenment conventionally expresses its own historical self-understanding, and enacting, on the level of linguistic expression itself, the failures of this self-understanding to live up to its own promise. What Adorno says of the essay form applies no less to the *Dialectic* – it 'cunningly anchors itself in texts' – the basic texts, narratives, and genres around which enlightenment organises its own historical self-image – and seeks to confront them 'with their own emphatic concept, with the truth that each one intends, even if it does not want to intend it, and to move culture to become mindful of its own untruth'.[58]

Just as the essay seeks to have logic 'outwitted within its own forms by dint of incisive subjective expression',[59] so Adorno and Horkheimer anchor themselves in the intellectual forms of enlightenment and seek to outwit enlightenment with words in an exercise of linguistic cunning with critical, demystifying intent. As I will argue in the Thesis, and

[57] DE, 1.
[58] Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', in *Notes to Literature, Volume One*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 20.
[59] Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', 22.

particularly in Chapter Two, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* imitates, mimetically reprises the typical narrative through which enlightenment constructs its own progressive self-image, but exploits this narrative for the sake of *enacting* its failure to realise itself as a narrative of progress, and thereby exposes the basic contradiction inherent in the idea of progress that this narrative is invested with legitimising. Adorno and Horkheimer's critical strategy bears an analogy to the cunning of Odysseus who, when faced with the physically overpowering forces of mythical nature, can only outwit these forces by renouncing himself and imitating the rigidity of mythic convention.

Insofar as the *Dialectic* does put forward what seems to be a positive, descriptive account of history and of the essential self-destructiveness of the rationality driving this historical process, this is not to be understood as being *conclusively* positive, as would be the case when the *Dialectic* is understood as negative universal history *tout court* or an ontology of the immutable, essential characteristics of human rationality as such. Much as the apodictic tone of the *Dialectic* invites such interpretation of the text's claims, this would be a mistake. A negative universal history *must* be construed in this way for the sake of exposing its essentially self-destructive tendency and it also *must* be denied – that is, judged and condemned for all the suffering it inflicts on the human beings caught up in the historical process. And if there is anything like an 'ontology' of human rationality and sociality operative here, it would best be described as 'the ontology of the wrong state of things', as Adorno puts it in *Negative Dialectics*.[60] This, broadly, is what the aim of critical self-reflection amounts to in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* – that is, undermining the self-conception of enlightenment rationality in the present form of social organisation, and specifically its *historical* self-conception.

This critical self-reflection on and of enlightenment rationality is also, and at the same time, addressed to the specific type of human being that is formed as subject by this rationality,

[60] ND, 11.

the same subject that we may take to be the typical reader of the Adorno and Horkheimer's text. If the critical procedure of the *Dialectic* displays sensitivity to enlightenment as its critical *object* and implicates its own self-understanding in its very form of composition, it also thereby implicates a critical *subject*, the living human being that is formed as a subject in the functional social context of enlightenment rationality – it is, in the final instance, this subject's rationality and perception of history that are being criticised and undermined. My Thesis contends that the *Dialectic* implicates its own audience in its very form of composition and displays sensitivity, in particular, to their socio-psychological constitution.

3. Objective Possibilities, Productive Forces

Earlier, I took issue with the question-begging presuppositions that inform Habermas's criticisms, clearing important ground for my interpretive reappraisal of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* which I wish to offer in this Thesis – as well as providing some important pointers as to the central features of this reappraisal. Nevertheless, Habermas's key critical claim still stands unaddressed – that Adorno and Horkheimer's purportedly totalising critique makes itself impossible because it cannot account for any socially operative tendencies intrinsic to reason that run counter to its instrumentalisation. At most, Habermas claims, Adorno and Horkheimer can nominate the capacity of *mimesis* as a placeholder for a more emphatic, non-instrumentalising idea of reason expressing the notion of a reconciliation of universal and particular, spirit and nature.[63] Given that this emphatic notion of reason has been purportedly rendered socially inoperative by the triumph of instrumental reason, it can only find oblique expression in the mimetic powers of modern art.[64] This does little to solve the aporia into which Adorno and Horkheimer have allegedly driven critical theory– since the idea that all reason has become instrumentalised prohibits articulating a theoretical account of the more emphatic

[63] Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action: Volume One*, 382-383.
[64] Habermas, ibid., 382, and Habermas, 'Conceptions of Modernity', 141.

concept of reason and the notion of universal reconciliation as intimated in the mimetic procedures of modern art.[65] Adorno's later work in particular, Habermas claims, refuses to overcome the aporia and 'seals the surrender of all cognitive competence to art in which the mimetic competence gains objective shape'.[67] In light of this, philosophy 'intentionally retrogresses to gesticulation'.[68] This has been a longstanding interpretive trope in the secondary literature – Adorno's suspected reliance on an 'aestheticised' notion of reason is seen as only the necessary correlate to the aporetic failure of his critical theory to account for its own normative standpoint (and by extension, of the early Frankfurt School more generally). Even more sympathetic critics such as Albrecht Wellmer have argued that for Adorno, the aesthetic rationality of the work of art is 'the only possible model for an alternative form of rationality'.[69] I would argue, however, that this view rests on a misunderstanding. Whilst this Thesis will indeed mobilise Adorno's aesthetic theory to make a case for there being a homology between the critical procedures of modern art and Adorno and Horkheimer's critical procedure in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (in Chapter 4), this homology is only methodological and need not commit my interpretation of the latter as implicitly relying on an 'aestheticised' notion of reason – and in a sense, the very terms around which this objection is frequently construed betray a fundamental misunderstanding of both what Adorno means by 'mimesis' (which is not wholly separate from rationality but a species of it) as well as of rationality (which, equally, is not wholly separate from mimesis, and is itself, on Adorno and Horkheimer's view, a species of mimesis).[70]

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[65] Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action: Volume One*, 382. Adorno's later work is seen in particular as bearing testimony to the failure to overcome the performative contradiction – his negative dialectics can at most demonstrate the constitutively aporetic character of conceptual thinking, whilst his aesthetic theory 'seals the surrender of all cognitive competence to art in which the mimetic capacity gains objective shape' (ibid., 384).
[67] Ibid., 384.
[68] Ibid., 385.
[69] Albrecht Wellmer, 'Reason, Utopia, and the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*', in *Habermas and Modernity*, ed. Richard J. Bernstein (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1985), 49.
[70] See DE, 44: 'The reason that represses mimesis is not merely its opposite. It is itself mimesis: of death.'

To outline a positive answer to this objection, it is helpful to begin with the more obvious aspects of Adorno and Horkheimer's outlook. The two do not waver in their commitment to the Marxist idea that the growth of productive forces has brought into existence the objective conditions for a free, reconciled society – rather than this being a mere abstract ideal with no objective footing in existing society at an institutional level. The end of the first chapter of the *Dialectic* provides a basic statement of this idea – that with the development of productive forces today, 'the livelihood of those still needed to operate the machines can be provided with a minimal part of the working time which the masters of society have at their disposal'.[71] In other words, the level to which productive forces have been developed allows reproducing the lives of human beings with a minimal amount of labour – thus largely liberating them from the necessity of engaging in material production to satisfy their basic needs, and opening up the space for achieving genuine freedom.[72] Another seldom quoted but notable passage reads:

> Domination, in becoming reified as law and organisation, first when humans formed settlements and later in the commodity economy, has had to limit itself … The instruments of power – language, weapons and finally machines – which are intended to hold everyone in their grasp, must in turn be grasped by everyone. In this way, the moment of rationality in domination also asserts itself as something different from it. The thing-like quality of the means, which makes

[71] DE, 30. As Adorno puts it elsewhere, 'It is undeniable that with the increasing satisfaction of material needs, despite their deformation by the apparatus, a life without deprivation has become incomparably more attainable. Even in the poorest countries no one need go hungry any longer.'. Theodor W. Adorno, 'Late Capitalism or Industrial Society', in *Can One Live After Auschwitz: A Philosophical Reader*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 118.

[72] See ND, 204-207 (Redmond translation): 'The vanishing-point of historical materialism would be its own sublation, the emancipation of the Spirit from the primacy of material needs in the condition of their fulfilment. Only with the satiation of the bodily urge would the Spirit be reconciled to itself, becoming that which it only promises, so long as the bane of material conditions refuses to let it satisfy material needs.' See also ND, 218; ND 398.

> the means universally available, its 'objective validity' for everyone, itself implies a criticism of the domination from which thought has arisen as its means. On the way from mythology to logistics, thought has lost the element of reflection on itself, and machinery mutilates people today, even if it also feeds them. In the form of machines, however, alienated reason is moving toward a society which reconciles thought, in its solidification as an apparatus both material and intellectual, with a liberated living element, and relates it to society itself as its true subject. The particularist origin and the universal perspective of thought have always been inseparable.[73]

The basic point expressed in this passage is that the institutional forms through which social domination is effected, and the rationality that they objectively instantiate, push beyond their dominating function 'to something different' from domination (note, for a moment, that the 'instruments of power' include not only 'weapons' and 'machines' but also 'language' – I'll come back to this below). Therefore, social domination is not total, but runs up against certain limits. What's more, these limits are insurmountable – social domination could *never* be total. This is because on the understanding developed here, the possibility of non-domination, of a 'society which reconciles thought … with a liberated living element' is *inherent* to thought itself and its institutional forms. The 'universal perspective of thought' that contains the possibility of such a reconciled society is *inseparable* from its 'particularist origin' that ties it down to its function as an instrument of domination (of one class over another and of humanity over nature). Thus, 'alienated reason' already contains the possibility of social reconciliation, and is thus 'moving toward' it through its own institutional dynamic ('in the

[73] DE, 73.

form of machines').[74] Again, this can be understood through a standard Marxist lens – although the productive forces are currently deployed to serve the demands of capital and thereby function as means of domination, they are developed to a level that a different use of them, one that serves the satisfaction of human needs, has become objectively and concretely possible.[75] As Adorno also puts it, 'thanks to the present state of the technical forces of production no one on the planet need suffer deprivation any more'.[76]

What is more, this objective possibility immanent to the productive forces of society already 'implies a criticism' of domination (see the passage above). The increasing opportunities brought forward by technical progress are 'so tangible and so concrete that they provide us with a legitimate platform from which to criticise the actual course of the world'.[77] In this sense, Adorno and Horkheimer may be said to have construed the capitalist production process (and more generally, the world-historical process of the domination of nature of which capitalist society is an endpoint) not only as expressive of an irrational means-ends reversal that disregards and distorts individual human needs (and non-human nature), but also – at least to a certain extent – as a necessary step in human development and a prerequisite for the accomplishment of genuine freedom. As Adorno would also express this point, 'there could be no *possibility* of something different and better, that is, of a rationally organised society, without a means-ends rationality with its domination of nature'.[78] Nevertheless, the point that

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[74] See also Theodor W. Adorno, Progress', in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 149: 'the entanglement of progress in myth, in nature's hold upon the domination of nature, in short the realm of unfreedom, tends by means of its own law towards the realm of freedom'.

[75] See also Fabian Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy: Living Life Less Wrongly* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 58-59.

[76] Adorno, 'Progress', 144.

[77] HF, 67.

[78] HF, 55. See also HF, 47-48; ND, 48, and CM, 152. As Freyenhagen puts it: 'to some extent the capitalist development of the production process and the estrangement from the working process are also a liberation, since they make it possible for humans not to identify themselves with their traditional, narrow roles and eventually to sever their self-conception completely from the production process (and thereby the natural drive of self-preservation). This could lead to a world in which human beings could concentrate on developing their own potential as creatures beyond the drive of self-preservation.' In Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy*, 34.

a stage of unfreedom and the domination of nature is a necessary step towards the emergence even of the possibility of a free and reconciled society does not mean that this step is *absolutely* necessary. Adorno and Horkheimer distance themselves from a teleologically-based understanding of history as a whole – a universal history – that conceives of history as having a singular, unitary direction and which 'defends everything that has happened on the basis of its necessity'[79] – and which thereby justifies the present, and the possibility of a different future, on the grounds of such historical necessity.[80] Rather, as Adorno would put it – against Hegel and Marx – 'the possibility of making a leap forward, of doing things differently, always existed, even in periods when productivity was far less developed, an opportunity that was missed again and again … in every situation there is a concrete possibility of doing things differently'.[81]

While this line of argumentation may go some way towards addressing the objection that Adorno and Horkheimer's critique is self-undermining, one may still argue that it does not suffice on its own. One important reason for this is their own belief that capitalism has proved remarkably resilient in containing the conflict between forces and relations of production that was supposed to lead to its collapse – by economically and politically integrating the working class that was tasked with overthrowing it (e.g. through raising living standards), and by developing mechanisms for managing the tensions and crises of the capitalist economy, (primarily through state intervention).[82] Even more importantly, the capitalist social process is using the mechanisms of the culture industry, the control exerted by 'normal' public opinion,

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[79] HF, 82.
[80] Indeed, as I will argue below (see Chapter 2 and especially Section 5), it is this way of seeing history – specifically as it is articulated in the German Idealist tradition of universal history, but also in Marx and Engels – that forms the main target of Adorno and Horkheimer's critique. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is in a complicated critical relationship to the notion of universal history, best summed up by Adorno's idea that 'universal history must be construed *and* denied' (ND: 320). The main argument I make below is that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* amounts to an attempt to perform this idea textually for the sake of articulating its internal contradictions.
[81] HF, 67-68. See also DE, 32: 'Each advance of civilisation has renewed not only mastery but also the prospect of its alleviation'.
[82] See Adorno, 'Late Capitalism or Industrial Society'; CM, 14; and Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy,* 38-39.

the family and the education system to penetrate into the deepest recesses of human subjectivity, shaping not only their conscious beliefs but also their interests, needs, preconscious and unconscious impulses and reactions.[83] As a result, not only do people generally lack access to the 'most basic knowledge and experience of the most dangerous processes and the most essential critical ideas', but also – and even more perilously – 'society paralyzes people's ability to *imagine* the world in concrete terms as being anything other than it appears to be'.[84] It seems as if in a society whose powers of deceit have increased as dramatically as Adorno and Horkheimer claim they have, it is only critical theorists who can perceive the irrationality of a state of affairs in which the emancipatory potential of the productive forces only serves to increase the power of the social process over human beings.[85]

As I've already briefly indicated above, the *language* social individuals have at their disposal reinforces this predicament by masking social reality, depriving them of the very words, concepts and meanings that may enable them to perceive the irrationality of the social process and identify it as such. And yet, this is not all there is to Adorno and Horkheimer's conception of language. A more detailed consideration of their views – which I will offer below – shows that they *also* conceive of language as an inextinguishable resource of non-instrumentalising (or 'objective') reason, thus offering a fuller response to the objection that their critique is self-undermining. On this basis, we can attain a better grasp of the style of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and its significance for the philosophical and critical-theoretical functions of the text. While Adorno and Horkheimer's dramatic way of expressing the predicament of a self-destructive enlightenment appears to be self-undermining, it is better understood as an attempt to use heterodox linguistic means to immanently break through the

[83] See also HF, 71; CM, 119-120; and Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 15 (Henceforth cited as MM). See also Chapter 3 below.
[84] CM, 119-120, emphasis added.
[85] See also Wellmer, 'Reason, Utopia', 49.

ideological linguistic infrastructure in and through which 'enlightenment', present society and its members, articulates its self-understanding – or as Freyenhagen puts it, to 'implode the bewitchment from the inside'.[86]

4. Adorno and Horkheimer's 'linguistic turn'

Already more than two decades ago, Simon Jarvis hinted at the possibility that 'language itself provides the model for a coercionless synthesis' within the conceptual framework of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* – rather than this role being reserved to the capacity of mimesis (as developed in art in particular), language itself already contains the possibility of reconciliation and provides a model for a 'coercionless synthesis', a non-instrumentalising, nonviolent form of reason.[87] This may sound surprising, given Adorno and Horkheimer's statements about the prevalently ideological function of language which I discussed above, so it is necessary to consider their conception of language in greater detail. This conception is part of their general account of the process of enlightenment as a process of sceptical demythologisation. One of the most important consequences of this process is how it affects the structure of language itself, reducing it to two equally one-sided functions – what we may call its discursive and its mimetic functions that track the separation of science from art:

> 'As sign, language must resign itself to being calculation and, to know nature, must renounce the claim to resemble it. As image it must resign itself to being a likeness and, to be entirely nature, must renounce the claim to know it'.[88]

To an extent, this recapitulates the Weberian theme of rationalisation as a process of the progressive differentiation of reason into autonomous validity spheres. With the development

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[86] Fabian Freyenhagen, 'The Linguistic Turn in the Early Frankfurt School: Horkheimer and Adorno', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 61, no. 1 (January 2023): 141.
[87] Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 32-33.
[88] DE, 13.

of philosophical, and later, scientific forms of reasoning, words and concepts become increasingly separated from the historically specific domain of objects and experiences in the context of which they emerge and to which they ultimately refer. In being limited to its discursive function, language becomes increasingly a formal tool for classification and organisation regardless of the specific content, renouncing any (mimetic) affinity to what is being classified and organised – and in that sense, linguistic signs become increasingly formalised, stripped of any inherent connection to their semantic contents and referents.[89]

This increasingly endows language with the ideological function of presenting the historically specific social conditions in which it originated as if they were universal – 'through their claim to universal validity, the philosophical concepts with which Plato and Aristotle represented the world elevated the conditions those concepts justified to the status of true reality … [l]anguage itself endowed what it expressed, the conditions of domination, with the universality it had acquired as the means of intercourse in civil society'.[90] In spite of their ideological function of justifying actually existing society, the concepts of philosophy marked an important advance precisely by virtue of their claim to universal validity, which pointed beyond this factual reality, and could be mobilised for the sake of its critique – 'metaphysical apologia at least betrayed the injustice of the established order through the incongruence of concept and reality'.[91] But once the process of enlightenment eradicates even the most basic philosophical concepts themselves as the last remainders of mythical superstition, language thereby threatens to turn into a wholly self-contained system of neutral, arbitrary signs whose only function is to register, classify and systematise the 'data' of experience but which has forfeited the capacity to comprehend its meaning. 'The impartiality of scientific language',

[89] By contrast, prior to the beginning of this process, linguistic signs were not really separated from their semantic content and referents, as Adorno and Horkheimer argue in their discussion of the symbolic function of language: 'The teachings of the priests were symbolic in the sense that in them sign and image coincided. As the hieroglyphs attest, the word originally also had a pictorial function' (DE, 12)
[90] DE, 16.
[91] DE, 17.

Adorno and Horkheimer argue,

> deprived what was powerless of the strength to make itself heard and merely provided the existing order with a neutral sign for itself. Such neutrality is more metaphysical than metaphysics.[92]

Ordinary, non-scientific language, too, is becoming increasingly stripped of meaning, reduced to banalities or catchwords serving a utilitarian purpose.[93] It is in this sense that the remark from the Preface to the *Dialectic* discussed above, of language being turned into a 'celebration of the commodity', is to be understood, i.e. not necessarily as any overt endorsement of existing society so much as the loss of very capacity of language to relate to historical experience and to enable subjects to grasp the essential relations of society and, as a result – its unconsciously coming to resemble those same relations, dominated by the abstract principle of commodity exchange.[94] As the decisive concepts for any critical consciousness of society have fallen into linguistic insignificance, this has fateful consequences for both consciousness and the possibility of emancipatory political praxis.

And yet, *pace* Weber, the differentiation of reason into separate autonomous moments is not understood by Adorno and Horkheimer as absolute – despite the talk of a 'totally administered society' and a 'total context of delusion', this point essentially distinguishes Adorno and Horkheimer's outlook from Weber's pessimistic prognosis. Sign and image, concept and intuition, science and art are held together by an indestructible (if presently

[92] DE, 16.
[93] 'Countless people use words and expressions which they either have ceased to understand at all or use only according to their behavioural functions, just as trademarks adhere all the more compulsively to their objects the less their linguistic meaning is apprehended.' (DE, 135)
[94] In turning into an arbitrary system of neutral signs language comes to resemble the logic of commodity exchange in which every linguistic sign is in principle interchangeable with any other. As Adorno puts it in a later text, 'To the subject, who has no genuine relation to the matter at hand, who recoils from its otherness and coldness, everything he says about it, both for the subject and in itself, becomes mere opinion, something that is reproduced and registered and could just as easily be otherwise.' (CM, 120).

subterraneous) link, because they could never be wholly autonomous from each other to begin with. The progressive demythologisation of language that increasingly turns it into an ideological cover for existing society could never be absolute – language could never be completely unmoored from the historical domain of human experience from which it originates without ceasing to be language. The separation of sign and image that grounds the process of linguistic demythologisation could never be completed without rendering thinking itself impossible,[95] because the notion of language being completely reduced to its discursive function as opposed to its mimetic function (as in an entirely formal logic) is unthinkable – a thought which successfully liquidated its affinity to any object, would no longer be a thought of anything whatsoever.[96] Following from this, language retains the capacity to express the truth about the historical context with which it is inextinguishably linked, rather than mask that context ideologically – the use to which it is overwhelmingly harnessed at present. This view is in fact explored in Horkheimer's writings on the philosophy of language from 1939 onward.[98] and letter exchanges show Adorno in emphatic agreement with Horkheimer's views.[99] In a little-known text from 1946, Horkheimer argues that language contains, inextricably intertwined, both the capacity to suppress the particular *and* the capacity to release the particular from this suppression, thereby reconciling it to the universal.[100] The possibility of reconciliation – of a non-instrumentalising, non-dominating form of rationality that reconciles enlightenment and nature, spirit and being – is in that sense not a mere wish but is already implicit as a possibility in the very structure of the language used by individuals.

[95] Jarvis, *Adorno*, 25-26.
[96] Jarvis, *Adorno*, 102. Conversely, pure likeness, an undifferentiated unity of sign and image, would be equally impossible.
[98] Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, 'Editor's Afterword', in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 227-228.
[99] Wiggerhaus, *The Frankfurt School*, 506.
[100] Horkheimer 1946, quoted in translation in Noerr, 'Editor's Afterword', 228. This is what Noerr calls an 'utopia of true language' that is at the background of Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of enlightenment reason in the *Dialectic* – 'The thesis of the universality of blindness implies the complementary thesis that the spell could be lifted at a stroke from humans and things if only the redeeming word were spoken.' (Noerr, ibid., 228.)

Horkheimer points to this line of interpretation in a 1941 letter to Adorno, in which he claims the following

> Language intends, quite independently of the psychological intention of the speaker, the universality that has been ascribed to reason alone. Interpreting this universality necessarily leads to the idea of a correct society. When it serves the status quo, language must therefore find that it consistently contradicts itself, and this is evident from individual linguistic structures themselves.[102]

Later on, in 1956, the records of Adorno and Horkheimer's lively discussions on the possibility of producing a new communist manifesto show Horkheimer making the following, telling statement:

> 'Whatever is right about human society is embedded in the language—the idea that all will be well. When you open your mouth to speak, you always say that too'.[103]

These remarks are of special significance, not only because they offer a potential way of responding to the Habermasian criticism that Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of enlightenment reason is self-undermining. Such remarks also offer – perhaps ironically – a way of responding to Habermas's challenge *on its own terms*, as Fabian Freyenhagen has recently done in arguing that Adorno and Horkheimer in fact performed a 'linguistic turn' of their own

[102] Horkheimer 1941, quoted in translation in Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, 505.
[103] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Towards a New Manifesto*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 2011), 5.

long before Habermas's.[104] What the passages above are suggesting is that there are tendencies embodied in the language individuals use that run counter to its ideological usage – what Horkheimer refers to as the 'universality' the interpretation of which 'necessarily leads to the idea of a correct society'. In Freyenhagen's interpretation, Adorno and Horkheimer can be understood to be committed to a picture of language as tied up with the 'human life form', in parallel to the philosophy of (late) Wittgenstein, for whom 'to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life'.[105] What this entails is that rather than being reducible to words and syntax, meaning has to do fundamentally with the historical *use* of language, with how language is integrated into the historical practices of humankind. By virtue of its entanglement with the human life form, language contains traces of 'objective', non-instrumentalising reason – the type of reason that has, on Habermas's reading, become extinguished by the social dominance of enlightenment rationality (or by enlightenment as merely 'subjective' reason that usurps the place of reason as a whole and eclipses enlightenment as 'objective' reason).

The 'human life form' is best understood, on this view, not as something that can be explicitly talked about or delineated, so much as an implicit system of reference by virtue of which language makes sense – or in Horkheimer's words, what it is to be human 'cannot be captured by any concept' but only shows itself in the sense that language has – 'unnamed, it is at the basis of language and its concepts'.[106] As I've argued above, Adorno and Horkheimer understand language as progressively demythologised, i.e. increasingly turned into an arbitrary, neutral system of signs stripped of any inherent connection to the historical context of experience in which it is used and thereby increasingly lending itself to ideological purposes. And yet, on the interpretation proposed by Freyenhagen, language could never be unmoored

[104] Freyenhagen, *The Linguistic Turn*.
[105] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), §19.
[106] Max Horkheimer, 'Vertrauen auf Geschichte', quoted in translation in Freyenhagen, *The Linguistic Turn*, 135.

from this context – from the human life form – without ceasing to be language.[107] In light of this, and contra Habermas, language cannot but be a repository of objective, non-instrumentalising reason. Not even the most ideological of conventions to which it is harnessed can change the fact that 'language harbours opposition to what runs counter to the human life form'.[108] To return to the Horkheimer passages quoted above – when language is put to ideological use in masking a social reality that runs counter to the life form, it necessarily comes into conflict with meanings and usages reflecting its continual tie to that life form and thereby objective reason. Language ends up 'consistently contradicting itself', and these contradictions are 'evident from individual linguistic structures themselves'. Such contradictions express the irrationality of a social process that goes against the grain of the human life form, and reflect 'the longings of the oppressed, and the plight of nature'.[109]

Recall my earlier claim that Adorno and Horkheimer's text provides a critique of enlightenment rationality that is immanent on the level of both intellectual content and linguistic form. To read the *Dialectic* in this way means to see it as presupposing and taking as given the language in which enlightenment articulates its own self-understanding – the conventional genres, texts, narratives, tropes and usages of concepts that are central to this self-understanding. To list just some examples – anthropological myth criticism, classical philology (and Homer's *Odyssey* in particular) with its typical image of antiquity, speculative universal history and associated narratives of cumulative progress, as well as the very meaning of concepts like 'enlightenment', 'myth', 'civilisation', 'culture', 'barbarism' 'modern', 'archaic', 'history', 'nature', and others. It will help, once again, to refer back to how Adorno describes his mode of procedure in his seminal statement on philosophical style, 'The Essay as Form':

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[107] Freyenhagen, *The Linguistic Turn*, 139-140.
[108] Ibid., 136.
[109] Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 126.

> [The essay] incorporates the antisystematic impulse into its own way of proceeding and introduces concepts unceremoniously, "immediately", just as it receives them … all concepts are already implicitly concretised through the language in which they stand. The essay starts with these meanings, and, being essentially language itself, takes them farther, it wants to help language in its relation to concepts, to take them in reflection as they have been named unreflectingly in language.[110]

> The essay cunningly anchors itself in texts as though they were simply there and had authority. In this way, without the deception of a first principle, the essay gets a ground, however dubious, under its feet, comparable to theological exegeses of sacred texts in earlier times. Its tendency, however, is the opposite, a critical one: to shatter culture's claims by confronting texts with their own emphatic concept, with the truth that each one intends even if it does not want to intend it, and to move culture to become mindful of its own untruth.[111]

On the conception of language just outlined, these specific linguistic forms – concepts as well as texts – may be understood to serve an ideological function in helping to mask social reality, i.e. the irrationality of the social process that goes against the human life form and disregards or distorts the needs of human beings, as well as disregarding non-human nature. As we've seen, one of the key problems identified by Adorno and Horkheimer is the extent to which the irrationality of the social process has been rendered opaque, if not practically invisible for the majority of social individuals. While language plays a key role in reinforcing

[110] Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', in *Notes to Literature Volume One,* trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 12.
[111] Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', 20.

this predicament, it can never be completely rendered completely ideological. Its indestructible tie to the life form and thereby the socially extant (and inextinguishable) traces of objective reason means that when such linguistic forms are used ideologically to serve the ends of social domination, they ineluctably also express the contradictions at the heart of social process, although not in a way that is readily apparent. This idea is hinted at in the two passages above – as they are 'named unreflectingly in language', concepts have certain given, immediate meanings, but when taken up in 'in reflection', these meanings can be taken 'farther', and their full semantic scope, which is not immediately available, can be mobilised for the sake of their critique. Similarly, the key texts of a culture, which are read and understood in a particular way – namely, to support the claims of a culture and the image it creates for itself – can be subjected to critical interpretation that leverages 'their own emphatic concept', and the 'truth that each one intends even if it does not want to intend it' against themselves and the claims of culture. While language – concepts, texts, and other linguistic forms – serves a predominantly ideological function, it also contains meanings that tie it to the life form and thus to objective reason. Such meanings can be buried by ideological distortions, if not rendered completely unconscious, but cannot be completely abjured – on the contrary, the critical interpretation and reflection on language can uncover such meanings and use them 'move culture to become mindful of its own untruth'. In that sense, language can also be used with emancipatory intent – not to mask or render invisible the contradictions at the heart of reality, but on the contrary, to bring them more fully into view.

It needs to be emphasised that on this view, the dominating and emancipatory functions of language cannot be neatly separated – just as one cannot neatly separate 'subjective' from 'objective' reason, or the dominating from the emancipatory aspects of enlightenment rationality. As Adorno puts it

> the critique of subjective reason is only possible on a dialectical basis, i.e. by

> demonstrating the contradictions in its own course of development and transcending it through its own determinate negation.[112]

In this sense, Adorno and Horkheimer cannot help themselves to some purely non-ideological use of language, since this is simply unavailable in the present social arrangement. Rather, their hope is to use the language of domination *against itself,* in the hope of transcending it through its own determinate negation, and this procedure is self-validating to the extent that the critique implicitly relies on the reconciling elements deposited in the structures of language. By virtue of its indestructible tie to the life form, language could never be harnessed completely in the service of domination – or in other words, by virtue of its 'double character', language cannot abjure its mimetic dimension in favour its classificatory function. There is some sense, then, in which Adorno and Horkheimer's critical procedure itself amounts to a form of *mimesis.* As Horkheimer puts it, '[p]hilosophy helps man to allay his fears by helping language to fulfil its genuine mimetic function, its mission of mirroring the natural tendencies'.[113] Yet, this must not be construed as implying the *aestheticisation* of critical theory. As Jarvis has argued, the element of 'mimesis' and 'affinity' in thinking is best understood in terms of the idea of determinate negation – it is emphatically not an attempt to get rid of predicative judgment and turn philosophy into what Adorno pejoratively referred to as 'conceptual poetry'.[114] As Adorno puts it, '[a]ffinity is not a remnant which cognition hands us after the identifying schemata of the categorial machinery have been eliminated. Rather, affinity is the determinate negation of those schemata'.[115] Mimesis or affinity, the 'element of identification *with* the thing itself - as opposed to identification *of* the thing itself',[116] amounts in philosophy to the attempt to 'give

[112] Theodor W. Adorno, quoted in Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, 332.
[113] Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, 127
[114] Jarvis, *Adorno*, 178.
[115] ND, 270 (translation amended).
[116] Theodor W. Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 92.

an account of what reason is *like*', and in the course of doing so, to determinately negate it by showing 'how identification *mis*identifies'[117] – that is, showing how, when reduced to its 'subjective', identifying and classificatory function, reason necessarily contradicts itself.[118]

In what sense are we to understand the notion of 'universality', of the tendencies of objective, non-instrumentalising reason that are implicit in the very structures of language, such that interpreting them 'necessarily leads to the idea of the correct society', or as in the second passage - 'whatever is right about human society is embedded in the language'? This way of putting it may be taken to imply a Habermasian move *avant la lettre* – i.e. a distinction between communicative and strategic action and an appeal (via universal pragmatics) to the quasi-transcendental notion of an ideal speech situation. But these passages need not be read in a Habermasian vein.[119] Adorno and Horkheimer needn't be taken to appeal to a notion of communicative action (guided by moral-practical reason) as distinct from strategic action (guided by instrumental reason), thereby avoiding some of the objections that have been raised about this distinction as to the separability of these two domains to begin with.[120] They needn't be seen as making a quasi-transcendental appeal to the notions of communicative competence and the ideal speech situation – notions which, as we have seen, presuppose a progressive reading of history of a sort that Adorno and Horkheimer are actively calling into question. The possibility of reconciliation identified by them in the structures of language does not refer to a historical teleology that explains modernity as the end product of a cumulative, progressive development of the sort that is implicitly at work in Habermas's version of the 'linguistic turn'. Rather, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that language contained the possibility of non-dominating reconciliation of universal and particular from the very beginning:

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[117] Jarvis, *Adorno*, 179.
[118] See especially Chapter 2, section 4 below for a more detailed discussion of the notion of mimesis, play and affinity.
[119] See Freyenhagen, *The Linguistic Turn*, 137.
[120] See for instance, Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

> If the tree is addressed no longer as simply a tree but as evidence of something else, a location of *mana*, language expresses the contradiction that it is at the same time itself and something other than itself, identical and not identical … The concept, usually defined as the unity of the features of what it subsumes, was rather, from the first, a product of dialectical thinking, in which each thing is what it is by becoming what it is not.[121]

Adorno and Horkheimer here suggest that the 'usual definition' of conceptuality where a concept is understood simply as 'the unity of the features of what it subsumes' is not exhaustive. From its very beginning, language has contained another possibility and function in addition to classifying and ordering sensible particulars and subsuming them under a unity – namely, to also point to existing things as containing immanent possibilities, determinations that they acquire in the course of historical human experience and by virtue of which they are themselves and 'something other than' themselves. Because language is inseparably tied up to history and the historical form of human life, it has always contained the possibility of being used dialectically in order to 'overshoot' its objects and identify immanent meanings and possibilities that they acquire in the course of their historical development and which can be deployed for the sake of their critique.[122]

Allow me to outline the structure of this Thesis. In **Chapter One**, I develop a parallel for my interpretation of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* based on a reading of Nietzsche's *On Genealogy of Morality*. The *Dialectic* is often described as a 'genealogy' – and comparisons with Nietzsche are common, including most prominently, in Habermas's influential critical commentary on the *Dialectic* I've discussed above.[148] The term 'genealogy', however, is all-

[121] DE, 11.
[122] Roger Foster, '*Dialectic of Enlightenment* as Genealogy Critique', Telos: Critical Theory of the Contemporary 120 (2001): 84.
[148] Habermas, 'The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment'.

too often generically defined and construed too narrowly as a historical, rather than critical, method – including, and especially, by Habermas. My reading seeks to show that this is a misinterpretation of Nietzsche, and when the analogy is extended to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (as Habermas does), a misinterpretation of the latter, too. In my chapter, I interpret *On the Genealogy of Morality* anew and argue that Nietzsche is, as it were, only in the business of history insofar as he is in the business of *critique.* Because prevalent perceptions of history are complicit in legitimising or reinforcing the value of contemporary morality, he needs a certain kind of history only insofar as it helps him undermine the claims of morality. What we find under the name 'genealogy' certainly poses as history, a 'real history of morality', but is for the most part a performative aping of history. Nietzsche constructs something like a philosophical ruse, a polemical, mythopoeic, fictionalised form of discourse that does less to recuperate actual historical events than to disclose the internal structuration of morality by power – but which nevertheless mimics a serious historical inquiry. Nietzsche's critical strategy aims both at undermining the claims of contemporary morality, as well as to implicate its readership by undermining the readers' the automatic *affective* attachments to contemporary moral values – both of which, I argue, are positively reinforced by socially prevalent perceptions of history.

This interpretation of the *Genealogy* and its critical strategy will then prepare the ground for seeing *Dialectic of Enlightenment* through a similar interpretive lens, which I develop in the following two chapters. I begin the following **Chapter Two** by arguing that the shift in the conception of Frankfurt School critical theory that occurred in the 1930s and resulted in the publication of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* reflected a heightened sensitivity to the role that socially prevalent perceptions of history and progress played in obscuring or transfiguring regressive social and political tendencies that allowed such tendencies to persist unabated in the present. Consequently, there was a need to rearticulate the project of critical social theory

with respect to this form of historical self-understanding – how ‘enlightenment’, construed as the form of rationality objectively operative in the institutions and practices of modern bourgeois society and as the dominant form of rational consciousness, perceives and constructs past history, and how it situates itself with relation to it. The historical dimension of the *Dialectic* therefore reflects not so much a concern with past history *per se* as how present society constructs an ideologically functional image of history for the sake of self-legitimation.

I then – still in Chapter Two – draw on Adorno’s later writings to explicate why *Dialectic of Enlightenment* took the specific textual form that it did in light of philosophical considerations concerning its critical *object* – enlightenment, the real historical process of socialisation, from the perspective of its historical self-understanding. I reconstruct some of Adorno’s reflections on the pitfalls of positivist historiography to put forward an argument for why the critical work pursued in the *Dialectic* would have been ill suited by a historiographically conventional documentary history based on providing a breadth of contextually specific factual evidence. Enlightenment, the historical process of socialisation, conceals its own essential relations under what Adorno calls the ‘façade’ of facticity – so the critique of its historical self-understanding calls for a fundamentally interpretative approach that self-consciously resists factual comprehensiveness. The ‘natural-historical speculation’ that Adorno develops as an alternative calls for a specific use of language – a twin-tracked ‘serious play’ that allows one both to breach the façade of facticity and register the non-identity between enlightenment’s progressive historical self-understanding and the antagonistic, self-destructive reality of the historical process, but also to take a normative, critical stance towards that historical reality. Finally, I use this notion to make sense of the *Dialectic*’s construction of history – less a history than an imitation of an enlightenment progressive historical narrative that performatively enacts the failure of this narrative to realise its own promise.

In **Chapter Three**, I provide philosophical justification for why the textual form of

composition is simultaneously motivated by considerations concerning its critical *subject*. On Adorno and Horkheimer's account, a weakened subjective capacity for critical self-reflexivity and psychological, unconscious mechanisms of blind attachment to social reality render contemporary individuals resistant to any direct, conventional forms of rational criticism of their theoretical and practical commitments. The *Dialectic* is so devised as to cunningly anchor itself not only in its critical object, but simultaneously, its critical subject. Its deceptive performativity seeks to bypass the readers' defence mechanisms, only in order to then be in a better position to undermine their psychological, affective investments in socially prevalent notions of history and progress, and thereby – at least eventually – open up the space for them to critically self-reflect on such notions.

Finally, in **Chapter Four**, I provide additional philosophical support for my reading of the *Dialectic* through an interpretive excursus on Adorno's aesthetic theory, and in particular, on his reading of the works of Franz Kafka, whose work Adorno describes as embodying a critical comportment of cunning, a performative mimesis of and against myth. Reconstructing key moments from Adorno's aesthetics and his conception of what may be called 'aesthetic critique, I argue that there exists a substantial structural affinity between the latter and the critical-performative procedure of the *Dialectic*. To substantiate this claim, I reconstruct Adorno's interpretation of Kafka. I lay focus on two aspects of Kafka's work in particular – his treatment of language and of the novel form, and show the structural similarities between Kafka's 'aesthetic critique' and Adorno and Horkheimer's philosophical cunning of and against the historical mythologies of enlightenment. Kafka's works, I argue, take up literary conventions keyed to the norms of enlightenment rationality, and subvert these conventions from within, thereby implicitly convicting the norms associated with them, and producing an affectively disruptive reading experience that induces readers to critically reflect on the social world.

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Note on Horkheimer's Contribution

My analysis in some parts of this Thesis clearly owes a lot more to Adorno than to Horkheimer – in particular, the last chapter, which is based almost entirely on Adorno's aesthetics and his reading of Kafka. Yet, here is the place for a disclaimer that I regard *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a joint work by both Adorno and Horkheimer, something which the two explicitly and repeatedly stressed, for instance in the 1969 Preface, where they emphasize the extent to which they 'both feel responsible for every sentence'.[149] Not only this, some of the essential theoretical components of my analysis derive from ideas that either originated from Horkheimer or were shared by him with Adorno – especially my reconstruction of their views on language above (based on Horkheimer's reflections on the philosophy of language after 1939 and on Adorno and Horkheimer's joint discussions for a new communist manifesto in the 50s). Horkheimer's ideas about language were not detached from his own practice as a writer, either. When Paul Tillich made the friendly suggestion that the authors of the *Dialectic* produce an 'argumentative book, rich in material', Horkheimer outlined a different conception, and one which it is worth quoting in full:

> The style of the theory will become much simpler. But this is only because the style will expose simplicity, consciously making simplicity a reflection of the process of barbarisation. The style will assimilate itself to the racketeers in the strength of its hatred, and thus become their opposite. Its logic will become as summary as their justice, as crude as their lies, as unscrupulous as their agents – and in this contradiction to barbarism it will become specific, exact and

[149] DE, xi. For a more detailed discussion of the collaborative dimension of the *Dialectic*, in the context of Adorno and Horkheimer's work as a whole, see also Noerr, 'Editor's Afterword', in DE, 219-221.

> scrupulous … When philosophy omits the subordinate clause relativizing the mutilation of humanity, it will grant to horror the absoluteness which follows from that. The finest nuance of desire is sacred to philosophy. But in its lack of detailed description of the apparatus, the absence of syntactic links giving the why, when and wherefore of the disaster, there becomes eloquent in philosophy the night of despair in which one victim is the same as any other. Science reaches for statistics; but, for the understanding, one concentration camp is enough.[150]

This passage reveals Horkheimer to be every bit as reflective about the linguistic form and style of critical theory as Adorno also was. It describes a critical style that consciously assimilates itself to the object of critique, only in order to reflect its flaws more conspicuously. Horkheimer drew inspiration for this critical style from the 'dark' writers of the bourgeoisie, including de Sade and especially Nietzsche, with whom he had long been fascinated. It is to explore the idea for such a critical style that I now turn to Nietzsche.

[150] Horkheimer to Tillich, 1942, quoted in Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School,* 318.

1

Nietzsche's Philosophical Ruses: *On the Genealogy of Morality* as a Critical Model

Towards the end of his productive intellectual life, Nietzsche casts a retrospective glance over his written works. He notes that the three essays comprising *On the Genealogy of Morality* are 'perhaps, as regards their expression, intention, and art of surprise, the uncanniest thing yet written'.[151] Nietzsche continues:

> Each time a beginning that is *intended* to lead astray, cool, scientific, even ironic, intentionally foreground, intentionally off-putting. Gradually more agitation; patches of sheet lightning; very unpleasant truths growing louder from afar with a muffled drone—till finally a *tempo feroce* is reached, when everything drives forward with immense excitement. At the end each time, among absolutely terrible detonations, a *new* truth visible between thick clouds.[152]

One would be forgiven for finding it difficult to square these remarks with a view that enjoys much support in the contemporary literature, namely that genealogy amounts to an alternative methodology for historical inquiry or even, as one commentator has put it, that genealogy 'simply *is* history, correctly practiced'.[153] The difficulty is no doubt compounded by the term's later usages — most prominently, Foucault's self-description of some of his studies (of mental illness, sexuality, clinical medicine, the penal system) — despite the fact that what Foucault

[151] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How to Become What You Are*, trans. Duncan Large (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 79.
[152] Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, ibid.
[153] Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), 246. Raymond Geuss also quotes this remark by Nehamas approvingly in his 'Nietzsche and Genealogy', *European Journal of Philosophy,* 2:3 (1994): 285.

practices in these studies are clearly outlined, highly analytical, painstakingly documented research projects which, at least on the face of it, differ markedly from Nietzsche's original formulation of genealogy. Indeed, how could what we find under the title of 'genealogy' in *On the Genealogy of Morality* be considered to be 'history, correctly practiced', given the flagrantly fictive, mythopoeic elements of Nietzsche's text, its at best scant historical evidence, its highly rhetorical character, and not least its subtitle — 'A *Polemic*'? Such an enterprise hardly resembles what we are accustomed to regard as 'serious' history — at least considering the dominant approach in historical scholarship since as far back as the 19th century and the rise of historicism, with its emphasis on critical scrutiny of primary historical sources and the faithful recreation of the past 'as it really was'.

But perhaps the tendency to equate genealogy and history is something that Nietzsche himself is not entirely blameless for, and perhaps it even reflects a genuine *intention* Nietzsche had in composing his text in the way he did, despite its historically heterodox features. Here, we must not gloss over Nietzsche's own description of his genealogical project, quoted above, where he states that each of the essays comprising the *Genealogy* are a 'beginning that is *intended* to lead astray', they are styled in a way that is 'cool, scientific, even ironic, intentionally foreground, intentionally off-putting'. There are a number of things that Nietzsche could possibly have meant in stating that his genealogy was intended to lead astray, but I wish to focus on what I consider to be a particularly important aspect — namely, history. In other words, I am suggesting that we see Nietzsche as intending his 'genealogy of morality' to be approached as a history of a certain kind, so that his readers could precisely thereby be 'lead astray', and could then 'gradually', eventually, come to certain 'unpleasant truths'.

Why would Nietzsche consider this necessary for his original formulation of genealogy and where is the evidence for such a reading? Nietzsche argues in his Preface to the *Genealogy* that history of a certain kind — what Nietzsche calls 'hypothesising about the origin of

morality' — is only important and needed 'for the sake of an end to which it is one means among many', this end being the *critical* question concerning the '*value* of morality' in the present — in other words, a certain kind of history of morality is needed only insofar as it can be made useful for the critical aim of raising doubts and questions about morality at present.[154] But if this historical 'hypothesising about the origin of morality' is '*one* means among many' other means to the end of criticising morality in its present form, why should the genealogist choose *that* means in particular over others? It does not seem immediately obvious that a critique of present-day morality needs to take a specifically historical form — and if anything, there are significant difficulties associated with such an approach to begin with. One conceptual difficulty, signposted by Alexander Prescott-Couch, is that, on the assumption that our morality is the product of history and hence that its defining features have changed over the course of that history, then the investigation into the conditions of morality's historical development is unlikely to reveal features that characterise our morality *at present* — so it is not obvious that a critique of morality should have to take its history into account.[155] An additional complication arises from the fact that Nietzsche wants to claim a certain *novelty* for his genealogical critique of morality, which he avers will call into question the value of moral values by providing 'knowledge of a kind that has neither existed up until now nor even been desired'.[156] At least

[154] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality: A Polemic*, trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), Preface, §5, 4: 'The issue for me was the *value* of morality … the value of the unegoistic, of the instincts of compassion, self-denial, self-sacrifice … against precisely *these* instincts there spoke from within me an ever more fundamental suspicion, an ever deeper-delving skepticism! Precisely here I saw the *great* danger to humanity, its most sublime lure and temptation … I understood the ever more widely spreading morality of compassion … as the most uncanny symptom of our now uncanny European culture'. See also §6, 5: '…we need a *critique* of moral values, *for once the value of these values must itself be called into question* — and for this we need a knowledge of the conditions and circumstances out which they have grown, under which they have developed and shifted'.

[155] Alexander Prescott-Couch, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, and Historical Individuals'. *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 46, no. 1 (2015).

[156] Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, §6, 5. The claim of novelty that Nietzsche ascribes to his genealogical undertaking resounds through the whole preface. For instance, at §3, 3, Nietzsche claims that in his attempt to answer the question as to the origin and value of our moral values, he 'found and ventured upon a number of answers … out of the answers came new questions, investigations, conjectures, probabilities: until I finally had a land of my own, a ground of my own, an entire unspoken growing blossoming world, secret gardens as it were, of which no one was permitted even an inkling…' And again, at §7, 5, he speaks of the prospect of a genealogy of moral values as

at first sight, it is not obvious how Nietzsche could achieve this novel — and importantly, critical — end, given that the means he suggests to employ to that end, the practice of hypothesising about origins, are at least as old as Western civilisation itself: think here of what Raymond Geuss has termed 'tracing a pedigree', a practice that dates at least as far back as the *Iliad*, and which furthermore, is undertaken with the intention of legitimising or enhancing the standing of the object whose pedigree it traces, and precisely *not* in order to criticise or delegitimise it.[157] In this well-worn, conventional usage, genealogy simply means something like a family tracing its history down the ages, for instance in order to locate its patent of nobility, in a continuous line of succession, back to some singular point of origin. It is not unwarranted to say that when someone uses the word 'genealogy', this conventional usage of the term will likely be invoked, and perhaps quite often at the expense of other, less conventional usages. If Nietzsche isn't doing anything quite like *that*, and if he isn't out to legitimise or affirm anything but to critique, then why risk being misunderstood, in the first place by calling his supposedly distinctive critical approach, not to mention his very book, a genealogy?

To address these difficulties, I suggest that we perform a certain evaluative reversal which will help us see the matters in much the opposite light: namely, what if Nietzsche *had* to some extent risk being misunderstood, that he thought his critique of morality had at least to a degree to *reproduce* some key elements of a conventional history of origins, but precisely not in order to affirm or legitimise morality but to criticise it? Perhaps a crucial dimension of Nietzsche's strategy was precisely that he intended his reader to be 'lead astray' in thinking they were dealing with a serious history of morality – in the spirit of Nietzsche's remarks on

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a 'matter of travelling the vast, distant, and so concealed land of morality … with a completely new set of questions and as it were with new eyes: and is this not virtually to *discover* this land for the first time?'

[157] Raymond Geuss, 'Nietzsche and Genealogy', *European Journal of Philosophy,* 2:3 (1994). We may of course think of alternative genealogical models that do not imply positive valorisations for the objects whose origins they trace — the story of the Fall, or Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality* may come to mind.

the *Genealogy* quoted at the beginning of this chapter. This kind of reading of the *Genealogy* may, of course, be considered counterintuitive and even far-fetched, but I would like to offer two key considerations in its favour. The first of these amounts to the idea that the historical form of Nietzsche's critique of morality is motivated by a critical sensitivity to the way in which socially prevalent perceptions of history are tied up with, and provide ideological support for, socially prevalent perceptions of moral value, effectively serving to reinforce individuals' continued commitment to present-day morality and moral culture – precisely which commitment Nietzsche deems harmful and wants to put into question. This implies that Nietzsche's critique of morality had to find some means to problematise these historical perceptions in order to lead its readers to revaluate their moral commitments. The second consideration has to do with Nietzsche's contention that strong affective attachments keep individuals tied to their moral and historical outlooks, even when the beliefs involved therein have been rationally disproven. This, I will argue, meant that Nietzsche could not have relied on conventional rational or historical argument to criticise socially prevalent moral beliefs. Instead, he had to construct his critique of morality in some roundabout, indirect way that allowed him to both tap into the affective dispositions of subjects and attempt to radically shift them from within – namely, by dressing up what is effectively a speculative, highly fictive and affectively-laden historical construct in the form of a conventional, documentary, scholarly historical inquiry, a 'real history of morality'.

1. The 'Fever of History'

From early on in his intellectual life, Nietzsche displays an acute sense of how socially prevalent perceptions of history serve an especially important role in reinforcing, often

unwittingly and unconsciously, individuals' affirmative disposition towards the beliefs, institutions and practices they currently uphold, indeed their historically situated form of life as a whole. In 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life', written at the height of the influence of 19th century historicism, including Hegelian conceptions of history, we find Nietzsche arguing that 'something of which our time is rightly proud – its cultivation of history' should be reconsidered as actually 'being injurious to it, a defect and deficiency in it',[158] a malady that we don't even recognise as a malady: 'we are all suffering from a consuming fever of history and ought at least to recognise that we are suffering from it'.[159] While, according to Nietzsche, history can be a virtue by way of serving 'life and action', in our times this virtue has 'hypertrophied' into something indistinguishable from vice – our age is afflicted by an 'oversaturation … with history',[160] an 'excess of history'[161] which, rather than promoting life and action, serves us, on the contrary, to 'turn comfortably away from life and action', rendering life 'stunted and degenerate'.[162] Nietzsche's reflections concern not simply the study of history as a record of past events, but also and especially what he calls 'the historical sense' of the modern age. Though importantly influenced by history in the former sense, the 'historical sense' is best understood as the specific range of historical perspectives through which modern individuals tend to perceive the past and the relation of their own time to that past – or as Porter puts it, history as it is 'conceived, sensed and lived' by individuals, and as the 'manner in which modern subjects construct for themselves, willy-nilly, a posteriori, fantasies about the past and the present'.[163] Nietzsche identifies two main tendencies characteristic of the modern historical sense, and diagnoses their deleterious effects.

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[158] Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life', in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 60.
[159] Nietzsche, 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life', 60.
[160] Ibid., 83.
[161] Ibid., 102.
[162] Ibid., 59.
[163] Porter, 'Theater of the Absurd', 320.

The first tendency of the modern historical sense reflects the influence of 19th century historicism and the then dominant positivist and scientistic trend in historical scholarship, with its insistence on amassing the greatest amounts of available historical facts about the past and application of verificatory methodology – perhaps best summarised in the demand, as Nietzsche puts it, that 'history should be a science'.[164] Nietzsche does not so much take issue with the fact that this scholarly, scientific construal of history employs technical methods in order to do justice to the past – rather, he objects to treating these technical means, and the historical knowledge it accumulates with their aid, as ends in themselves.[165] Rather than employing knowledge of the past as something 'salutary and fruitful for the future … as the attendant of a mighty new current of life',[166] this typically modern construal of history promotes placing a premium on the endless accumulation of historical knowledge for its own sake. This is a deleterious perspective that becomes ingrained, through education and culture, in the historical sense of modern individuals – who are induced to perceive themselves as mere 'latecomers' in history, with nothing notable to their own name aside from their historical knowledge of the past and the achievements of those before them, a burden that they carry around akin to 'a huge quantity of indigestible stones'.[167] It is as if one is already born old and 'grey-haired', a mere 'epigone' of earlier, more notable and venerable ages rather than someone capable of great achievements of their own – in engendering these forms of self-understanding, the modern historical sense renders individuals 'passive and retrospective'[168] and cultivates in them an attitude of tacit acquiescence in the present – there is no point going against the grain of one's time and trying to create something anew, since 'it is too late to do anything better'.[169]

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[164] Nietzsche, 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life', 77.
[165] Anthony K. Jensen, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 94.
[166] Nietzsche, 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life', 67.
[167] Ibid., 78
[168] Ibid., 102.
[169] Ibid., 102.

Paradoxically then, an age that values the contemplation of past history so much renders itself incapable of creating history in the present – effectively, it 'uproots the future'.[170]

The second important feature of the modern historical sense – and Nietzsche appears to regard it as even more perilous – reflects the continuing influence of various teleological, evolutionary and especially Hegelian conceptions of history. Here, the historical perception that we are 'latecomers' is positively re-evaluated and equated to the idea that our age is really 'the true meaning and goal of all previous events', and thereby equated to 'the completion of world-history'.[171] Feeding off a sense of pride and self-righteousness, this 'Hegelianised' historical perspective leads us to see past history as an evolutionary process of which we are the culmination and completion, and as we survey the course of this progressive development, we are predisposed to discern nothing but earlier and more primitive prefigurations of ourselves, of our own age – 'even in the profoundest depths of the sea the universal historian still finds traces of himself as living slime … he stands high and proud upon the pyramid of the world-process', seeming to declare that 'we have reached the goal … we are nature perfected'.[172] This historical perspective cultivates in individuals an even more obediently affirmative disposition towards their world – the sway of what Nietzsche does not hesitate to call the 'mythology' and 'religion of the power of history' produces a powerful 'idolatry of the factual' that conditions individuals to 'accommodate themselves to the facts' – and so, Nietzsche argues, 'he who has once learned to bend his back and bow his head to the 'power of history' at last nods '"Yes" like a Chinese mechanical doll to every power, whether it be a government or public opinion or numerical majority'.[173]

[170] Ibid., 95.
[171] Ibid., 104.
[172] Ibid., 107-108.
[173] Ibid., 104-105.

There is no obvious reason why the general point Nietzsche is making here – that socially prevalent perceptions of history serve to reinforce individuals' uncritical or affirmative perception of the social world, and thereby secure their continuing commitment to it, to the contemporary beliefs, institutions and practices they uphold – shouldn't extend to his understanding of contemporary morality. The specific point to make in this context is that contemporary moral subjects – even while they take the moral values they uphold to be historically invariant – tend to perceive history in ways that are favourable to their present moral commitments. As James I. Porter argues, 'contemporary perceptions of value are intimately bound up with perceptions of history'[174] – contemporary morality and moral culture are seen as representing a genuine advance in civilisation, a progressive domestication of primal instincts, which are thereby regarded as definitively transcended and superseded, or – as in the histories of morality put forward by Nietzsche's genealogical 'predecessors' – morality is seen as having developed as a result of having a certain kind of social utility.[175] If this is indeed right, it would follow that a crucial unstated assumption of Nietzsche's genealogical critique is the idea that, as Porter, puts it, 'history, or rather the sense of history and historical perspective, is the disguise of morality that sustains moral values and a belief in their value'.[176] And as a result, it follows that the critique of moral values and of the belief in the value of these values that Nietzsche states to be the central objective of his genealogy should involve putting into question precisely the perceptions of history that serve to sustain moral subjects' commitment to contemporary morality.

If it is right that Nietzsche's critique of morality aims to unsettle the claims of contemporary morality by problematising the prevalent perceptions of history that are

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[174] James I. Porter, 'Theater of the Absurd: Nietzsche's Genealogy as Cultural Critique', in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly,* vol. 84, no. 2 (2010), 318. I provide further discussion of these genealogical approaches below.
[175] Porter, 'Theater of the Absurd', 318.
[176] Ibid., 317-318.

complicit with it (or even propping it up), this naturally renders even more perplexing Nietzsche's choice to construct his critique in the form of what appears to be a serious historical inquiry. The choice is perplexing, but it is not, I want to suggest, the accidental result of some embarrassing philosophical self-contradiction or a radical change of position on Nietzsche's part, but as the necessary consequence of an intentional strategy – and one devised by a philosophical critic who could hardly have been better steeped in rhetoric and more self-conscious about the textuality and effects of his own writing. As in Wagner's famous line from *Parsifal*, 'Only the spear that inflicted the wound can heal it', Nietzsche's *Genealogy* is the attempt to remedy the 'excess of history' of which his modern readership is afflicted by carefully, selectively, strategically administering more of that same historical poison – history figures here as the *pharmakon* that causes the disease, but which can also heal when aptly concocted and applied. We gain evidence that Nietzsche did indeed consider a strategy of some such sort as an effective response to the problem of history, as well as an idea of what such a strategy could look like, in his remarks on Eduard von Hartmann's *Philosophy of the Unconscious*:

> We have seldom read a merrier invention or a more philosophical piece of roguery than this of Hartmann … The beginning and goal of the world-process, from the first stab of consciousness to its being hurled back into nothingness, together with an exact description of the task of our generation within this world-process, all presented direct from that cleverly discovered well of inspiration, the unconscious, and gleaming with apocalyptic light, all so deceptively mimicking straight-faced earnestness as though it were a genuine serious philosophy and not only a joke philosophy – such a production marks its creator as one of the first philosophical parodists of all time … For what

medicine could be more efficacious against excess of historical culture than Hartmann's parody of world-history?[177]

If Nietzsche considered some such strategy as an effective ‘medicine’ against the historical excess he diagnosed in his contemporaries, and if it is right that Nietzsche’s genealogy is also an attempt to remedy a similar problem of history for the sake of a critique of morality, then it is not unwarranted to suggest that the latter could itself be seen in this light – if not identical to, then at least bearing a family resemblance to Hartmann’s philosophical ‘roguery’ and ‘parody of world-history’. Relatedly, just as (what Nietzsche argues to be) Hartmann’s mischievous struggle against historical delusion is to result in a state of ‘cheerfulness’ with regards to the beliefs that we have now been granted some critical distance from, so the ‘reward’ Nietzsche promises to his readers who indulge in the ‘long, brave, industrious and subterranean seriousness’ of the history of morality is that we may one day look at our morality, more precisely what would then be our *old* morality, *cheerfully*.[178]

But why should Nietzsche have deemed some such roundabout, deliberately deceptive form of writing such as a philosophical ‘parody’ of history to be a *preferable* means for the purpose of putting the claims of morality into question? Why couldn’t Nietzsche have achieved what he was aiming at in some other, more direct and explicit way that did *not* carry the risk of misunderstanding – as, for instance, in his early critical remarks on history? To address this worry, and offer a second important consideration in defence of the line of interpretation I am advancing here, we need to take into account that Nietzsche rejects the idea that perceptions and judgments (about morality, history, and indeed in general) can ever be completely impartial and purely objective. This is especially because Nietzsche regards psychological factors as playing a prominent role in shaping our outlook, holding that our commitment to the views we

[177] Nietzsche, ‘On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life’, 108-109.
[178] GM Preface §§ 7, 6.

hold, or the institutions and practices we participate in, should be explained *in the first place* with reference to the realm of conscious and unconscious psychological drives, instincts and affects, rather than with reference to rational judgements and arguments. This poses a challenge for any direct or straightforward attempt at rational criticism of morality, or of the perceptions in terms of which moral subjects tend to perceive its history. Consequently, this problem can be seen as necessitating an alternative strategy of persuasion – one that, I argue, Nietzsche develops in the *Genealogy.*

2. The Role of Affects

In the period leading up to the writing of the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche emphasises the role psychological factors play in shaping individuals' moral outlook, claiming, for instance, that moral beliefs and belief-systems are a 'sign-language of the affects',[179] and he frequently speaks of 'value feelings'[180] or 'moral sentiment'.[181] Even while he holds that the psychological factors at work in morality – drives, affects, feelings, sentiments, moods – already involve and are importantly shaped by concepts and beliefs,[182] Nietzsche's position is still fundamentally one of (meta-ethical) sentimentalism, the argument for which is that a person's moral behaviour is best explained *in the first place* with reference to that person's specific affective makeup, their specific psychological disposition or profile, rather than in terms of the moral beliefs this person espouses (and by appealing to the existence of some objective moral fact that these beliefs refer to). In other words, someone's particular moral commitments are best explained in terms of their being so psychologically disposed as to want to, for instance, justify

[179] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1966), §§187, 100 (italics removed).
[180] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §4, 12; §211, 136.
[181] Ibid., §186, 97.
[182] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), I, §38, 26.

themselves before others, or to be calmed and content with themselves, or to crucify or humiliate themselves, and so on – to use some of Nietzsche's own examples.[183] Importantly, Nietzsche holds that one can continue to have the same moral commitments even when the rational beliefs involved in these commitments have been disproved, so long as the relevant (affirmative) affective makeup or psychological disposition has remained intact – and indeed, this appears to hold for morality as much as any other belief system:

> *Wherein we are all irrational*. – We still draw the conclusions of judgments we consider false, of teachings we no longer believe in – our feelings make us do it.[184]

This helps make sense of what David Owen has called the 'the problem of not inferring', i.e. of 'failing to draw appropriate conclusions in virtue of being held captive by a picture or perspective',[185] and in the light of which Owen reinterprets the famous parable from *The Gay Science*, 'The Madman'. Recall that in the parable, a 'madman' announces the death of God to a crowd of atheists in the marketplace, only to be met first with laughter, and then with bewildered silence.[186] This can be understood as a failure of (direct) communication or enlightenment, precipitated by the fact that even while the audience in the parable no longer really believes in the existence of God, it remains in the grip of an essentially 'Christian' metaphysical perspective and form of valuation that remains woven into the fabric of contemporary ethical life, and which has implanted itself in individuals as a form of self-understanding. For Nietzsche, individuals in this post-Christian world remain committed to an essentially Christian picture of the will, and even more significantly, uphold the same

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[183] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §345, 284. See also Brian Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 120-121.
[184] 'Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, II, §99, 59.
[185] David Owen, *Nietzsche's* Genealogy of Morality (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2007), 28.
[186] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, III, §125, 181-182.

metaphysical faith in the value of truth characteristic of the Christian worldview by virtue of their faith in modern science – which, according to Nietzsche, is based on the same unconditional, selfless 'will to truth' that also undergirded the Christian perspective.[187] This, then, helps explain the audience's resistance to the 'madman' and his utterances: they may register and follow his announcement of the death of God, but fail to comprehend this announcement as meaningful, being in the grip of a perspective that prevents them from acknowledging the devastating implications of the death of God for their entire culture and form of life. As Owen stresses, this perspective continues to have a grip on human beings precisely because their relationship to it 'is not simply an epistemic issue but also and in some respects more basically, an affective one',[188] and as a result, the so-called problem of 'not inferring' poses a challenge for any straightforward attempt at rational persuasion. These problems, Owen argues, loom high on Nietzsche's mind in the period leading up to the writing of the *Genealogy* and may be said to motivate the latter's heterodox rhetorical strategies.[189] In short – given the prominent role of psychology and affect in Nietzsche's understanding of morality, any attempt at critique of the latter has to work not only at the level of reasons, but also and in some respects more importantly, at the level of affects.

This line of interpretation is valuable in helping us appreciate that the critical strategy at work in the *Genealogy* should engage the psychological forces involved in individuals' moral commitments, but it doesn't yet put is in a position to see why, as I have suggested above, this critical strategy should also engage socially prevalent perceptions of history. Recall, however, that Nietzsche attributes a prominent role of psychological factors to our representations in general, and historical representations are no different – these factors ineluctably mediate our apprehension of the historical world, predisposing us to emphasise

[187] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, V, §344, 280-283; GM III, §24, 108-110.
[188] Owen, *Nietzsche's* Genealogy of Morality, 49.
[189] Ibid., 45.

certain aspects of it at the expense of others. The fundamental link between 'history' and 'life', between historical representations and the 'vital drives', and especially psychological drives, lies as the core of Nietzsche's reflections on history. This becomes clear in his discussion of the different modes of history and the types of historians corresponding to them. So, for instance, 'monumental' history corresponds to the needs of the living human being *qua* 'a being who acts and strives',[190] and the 'monumental historian' – who could be thought of as an 'ideal type' for that particular mode of apprehending history – is driven by a fundamentally 'active' psychological dynamic, being predisposed to represent history in such a way as to emphasise its great events and personalities, and find in them models for action in the present. To apprehend history monumentally thus implies being psychologically and affectively so disposed as to want to learn from it that 'the greatness that once existed … may thus be possible again',[191] while running the simultaneous risk of distorting and beautifying the past, i.e. only emphasising those aspects of it that reveal it as 'imitable and possible for a second time'[192] and ignoring all the aspects that reveal it to be shameful and unworthy of imitation. 'Antiquarian' history, on the other hand, pertains to the human being *qua* a being who 'preserves and reveres',[193] and this mode of historizing embodies, in the ideal-typical figure of the antiquarian historian, a psychological profile of pious modesty and veneration towards the past, of 'tending with care that which has existed from old',[194] since, as Nietzsche notes, what the antiquarian wants to find and preserve in the past are 'the conditions under which he himself came into existence', his gaze is expressive of the desire to find in the past 'an illuminated diary of his youth'.[195] This kind of psychological makeup undergirds the scholarly, discriminating gaze typified by the modern professional historian, who is capable of giving dignity to the past in

[190] Nietzsche, 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life', 67.
[191] Ibid., 69.
[192] Ibid., 70.
[193] Ibid., 73
[194] Ibid.
[195] Ibid.

all its trivial and minute detail, yet precisely thereby runs the risk of turning the past into the sole source of value and reverence, while turning one's back to the present and its interests.

The idea that historical representations are ineluctably mediated by psychological factors becomes especially important for the purposes of the interpretation I am advancing here since it pertains also to socially prevalent perceptions of history, to the 'historical sense' which, as I have suggested above, plays a key role for Nietzsche's formulation of genealogy. Psychological factors feature prominently in Nietzsche's discussion of the modern historical sense – with respect to its scientistic and positivistic aspects, Nietzsche refers to a kind of socially generalised affective state of spiritual weariness, weakness, a felt lack of confidence in one's own age, its creative potency and capacity to engender the future – he speaks, for instance, of the 'historicising, as it were twilight mood' of the modern historical human, his 'fear that his youthful hopes and energy will not survive into the future'[196], and relatedly, of the 'dangerous mood of irony',[197] the 'painfully ironic modesty'[198] characteristic of the modern historical sense. The implication is that this affective state is tied to individuals' perception of themselves as only the 'latecomers' and 'epigones' of 'mightier and happier races', and predisposes them towards the retrospective, backward-gazing stance that, as we have seen above, overvalues historical knowledge of the past at the expense of the interests of 'life' in the present. Countervailing, yet curiously complementary to this, are the affective forces engaged in the teleological and evolutionary tendencies of the modern historical sense. Chiefly, Nietzsche speaks here of a sense of pride, self-righteousness and optimism – these are the psychological attributes of the figure of the 'universal historian' that we briefly touched upon above.[199] Jensen analyses the psychological profile of Nietzsche's 'universal historian'

[196] Ibid., 107.
[197] Ibid., 83.
[198] Ibid., 104.
[199] Related to this is the 'pleasant feeling' produced by the 'even more dangerous mood of cynicism' that 'justifies

typifying this feature of the historical sense in terms of an 'instinct to regard the present as the justification of historical events generally … those satisfied with the present culture, that which in Nietzsche's thought is so degenerate, are led by instinct to re-present their past as a continual process that justifies their kind of life'.[200]

A particularly pertinent case of this latter, teleological or evolutionary tendency – once again, better seen as typifying the modern historical sense – is exemplified by Nietzsche's genealogical 'predecessors', the so-called 'English psychologists'. These latter had hypothesized that our present Christian or post-Christian morality of selflessness evolved out of earlier considerations of how certain selfless, unegoistic actions were originally praised and called 'good' from the perspective of those towards whom they were directed, and hence who originally considered such actions useful or beneficial in some non-moral sense. Over the course of history, the argument runs, this non-moral, utilitarian origin of the evaluation of goodness was 'forgotten', such that unegoistic or selfless actions came to be habitually regarded as morally good, i.e., as if they were good in themselves.

There are reasons to believe that Nietzsche would consider this approach *historically* untenable, and in violation of what he considers 'the main point of historical methodology' — that 'the cause of the genesis of a thing and its final usefulness, its actual employment and integration into a system of purposes, lie *toto caelo* apart'.[201] In other words, whether our moral valuations originally stemmed from considerations of the usefulness of certain actions is an entirely different matter from the function moral valuations perform *at present*. If, in fact, one were to extend a theory about the contemporary function of morality ('its actual employment

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the course of history, indeed the entire evolution of the world, in a manner especially adapted to the use of the modern man … as things are they had to be, as men now are they were bound to become, none may resist this inevitability' (ibid., 107).

[200] Jensen, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of History*, 101.

[201] Nietzsche, GM II, §§12, 50, 51.

and integration into a system of purposes') into an argument about its *original* function or cause, one would simply be retrojecting certain historically specific assumptions about present-day morality as explanatory principles of its historical origins, and taking for granted that these characteristics remained the same throughout its historical development (e.g. the idea that moral valuations always have a certain usefulness for human beings, or that we always associate 'goodness' with 'selfless' or 'unegoistic' actions and their perceived usefulness).[202]

But far from being narrowly focussed on historical methodology, Nietzsche's objection has its crux in the view that such historians of morality are at fault because they do not even raise the *critical* question concerning the value of contemporary morality itself, taking for granted that current moral valuations are worth upholding – in this case, because they are assumed to be beneficial or socially useful in some way. In this way, these genealogical 'historians of morality' end up legitimising, positively valorising contemporary morality, serving as its 'shield-bearers and followers'.[203] It is telling that in the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche's critique of such constructions of morality's history puts especially strong emphasis on the affective factors involved in them – namely, a sense of *pride* in current moral valuations:

> One sees immediately: this first derivation contains all the characteristic traits of the idiosyncrasy of English psychologists – we have "usefulness", "forgetting", "habit", and in the end "error", all as basis for a valuation of which the higher human being has until now been proud as if it were some kind of

[202] Maudemarie Clarke brings this critical argument to bear on Hume's moral philosophy — not named explicitly by Nietzsche, but arguably a position of the kind he is targeting here. Hume's argument to the effect that human beings will universally praise or esteem actions that they consider 'sociable', 'humane' or 'beneficent' (on the assumption they are useful to them) requires him to 'posit at the origin of morality an inborn sympathy with our fellow human beings and with societal aims'. See Maudemarie Clark, 'Introduction', in Nietzsche, GM, xxiii.

[203] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude to Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), §345, 284.

> distinct prerogative of mankind. This pride *must* be humbled, this valuation devalued: has this been achieved?[204]

Although Nietzsche's remarks concern the historical constructions of the 'English psychologists', I will again take the liberty to read them as having broader implications, as speaking to general features of the moral commitments of modern subjects and the role of historical perceptions play in reinforcing such commitments. The above passage is helpful for making sense of what I would argue is a kind of tri-partite feedback loop between affect, history and morality – namely, how some affective disposition (in this case, a sense of pride), which already underlies the current moral commitments of subjects, serves to fuel perceptions of past history that are favourable to these commitments, and conversely, to inhibit perceptions of history that are unfavourable to them.

How, then, does the critic of morality persuasively put into question the value and function of contemporary morality, how do they successfully *de*value contemporary moral values, at least in the eyes of their intended audience, contemporary moral subjects? As seen in the passage quoted immediately above, Nietzsche connects the critical project of moral revaluation with an affective reversal or disruption in moral subjects – such as a humbling effect on the pride they take in their current moral valuations. Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morality*, I suggest, advances the critical goal of moral revaluation precisely by constructing the history of present-day morality not only in order to contribute to a critical understanding of its inner structuration by non-moral mechanisms of power, domination and subjection, but also to advance this critical understanding in just such a way as to effectively produce an *affective reversal* in moral subjects. The genealogical account of '*how such things as moral judgments could ever have come into existence* would spoil these emotional words [such as 'duty' and

[204] Nietzsche, GM I §2, 10.

‘conscience’] for you’,[205] Nietzsche argues, it ‘brings with it *a feeling* of diminution in value of the thing that originated thus and prepares the way to a critical mood and attitude towards it’.[206] As Chris Janaway has argued, it is by producing such a shift in its readership, a ‘loss of one’s more or less automatic emotional alignment with received values’, that Nietzsche’s genealogical strategy may allow a ‘space for a new evaluation and a shift or reversal in values’.[207] The success or failure of Nietzsche’s critical procedure in the *Genealogy* therefore depends not only on the adequacy of the explanatory framework within which it advances a critical understanding of morality, but also and perhaps even more importantly, on its capacity to *effectively disturb its readers’ automatic affective attachment* to their received moral values, to loosen their grip in some way that gives his readers space for a wholesale revaluation of their moral commitments.

I have already explicated why Nietzsche’s critical project of moral revaluation should have involved problematising the perceptions of history that reinforce the affirmative disposition subjects have towards contemporary morality. We can now see why this should have taken the form of polemical, rhetorically charged histories deliberately devised to shock and disturb in revealing the origins of contemporary moral valuations where Nietzsche’s typical readers would least wish to find them – the prime aim of these histories is not factual, documentary truthfulness but a critical revaluation of morality that is capable of stirring up affects and doubts in the reader about their theoretical and practical commitment to that morality. Precisely for the sake of achieving this aim, Nietzsche’s histories are in themselves speculative, highly fictionalised constructs – but they are made to appear, especially at first

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[205] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Josephine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), §335, 188.
[206] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Holligndale (Vintage: New York, 1968), §254, 148.
[207] Christopher Janaway, ‘Autonomy, Affect and the Self in Nietzsche’s Project of Genealogy’, in *Nietzsche on Freedom and Autonomy*, eds. Ken Gemes and Simon May (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 64.

sight, *as if* they were part of conventional historical inquiry – a ‘serious’, documentary, detailed history, or some intuitively familiar origin story.

The aim of this strategy is twofold. First, it aims to internally unsettle the claims of contemporary ‘historical sense’ – and thereby of contemporary morality. Nietzsche does this by producing what seems at first to be a conventional historical inquiry that, as Porter puts it, ‘mimics the fragility and the confusion of historical sense’, concealing ‘its own mechanisms and fictions – the better to foreground those of its object, as if it were enacting consciously the unconscious rifts in the position of his opponents.’[208] What we find in the *Genealogy* is in essence a highly interpretive, fictionalised, mythopoeic form of discourse that does less to recuperate actual historical events from the past than to draw the essential connection between contemporary morality and power. These essential connections may otherwise have remained concealed, had Nietzsche remained beholden to the scholarly ‘idolatry of the factual’ that renounces all interpretation in favour of the scientific ideals of impartial, disinterested, impersonal inquiry – which Nietzsche understands as itself an offshoot of the ascetic ideal, of the contemporary morality of selflessness that is itself in need of critical revaluation, and thereby as already stacking the odds against the goal of critical revaluation. As Nietzsche describes it:

> [t]hat stoicism of the intellect … that wanting to halt before the factual, the *factum brutum*; that fatalism of “*petit faits”* … that renunciation of all interpretation (of doing violence, pressing into orderly form, abridging, omitting, padding, fabricating, falsifying, and whatever else belongs to the *essence* of all interpreting) – broadly speaking, this expresses ascetism of virtue as forcefully as does any negation of sensuality … What *compels* one to this,

[208] Porter, ‘Theater of the Absurd’, 323.

> however, this unconditional will to truth, is the *belief in the ascetic ideal itself*, even if as its unconscious imperative … it is the belief in a *metaphysical* value, a value *in itself of truth* as it is established by that ideal alone.[209]

Second, this twin-tracked strategy is simultaneously addressed to the reader of the *Genealogy,* the contemporary moral subject whose perceptions of morality are, as I have argued, shaped by their perceptions of (moral) history. Nietzsche's text is so structured as to find a way *into* the feedback loop by way of which the affective attachment of moral subjects to their contemporary form of morality fuels positive, legitimising perceptions of (its) history, which in turn feed into and reinforce these affective attachments themselves. It is by dressing up his polemical, iconoclastic stories in the form of a 'serious' history or some intuitively familiar story of origins that Nietzsche is able to accommodate his text to the affective dispositions of his audience, for whom such conventional genres of historical writing will *typically* fit in, and indeed positively reinforce, their moral commitments. In this way, Nietzsche can circumvent the audience's potential resistance to any direct criticism of their moral commitments – avoiding the proverbial situation of a failure of direct communication exemplified by Nietzsche's 'madman' parable. Crucially, this would also put the critic of morality into a particularly privileged position from which to produce a *shift* in the affective dispositions of their audience – precisely by betraying the expectations associated with conventional genres of historical writing. Nietzsche, in other words, composes the *Genealogy* as he does in order to devise something like a guard-lowering ruse for his readers,[210] making idiosyncratic use of the *form* of conventional genres of historical writing in order to circumvent his readers' defences and tap into the affective attachments his readers have to their moral valuations, but precisely in order to then be able to effectively *unsettle* these affective

[209] Nietzsche, *Genealogy* III §24, 109-110.
[210] 'Guard-lowering ruse' is a formulation for which I am indebted to Fabian Freyenhagen.

attachments themselves and thereby put them into a position from which they could put into question and revaluate their moral commitments and self-understanding as a whole.[211]

Nietzsche's genealogical discoveries of disconcerting truths from humanity's moral past are by modern historiographic standards, highly *un*conventional at best, epistemologically unsound and falsifying at worst – they are, as already mentioned, interpretative, speculative, fictionalised historical constructs describing events that could never have happened quite like *that*, rushing past the evidence, grossly simplifying, dramatizing and polemically exaggerating historical materials. But we may not, I contend, wish this difficulty away by arguing that Nietzsche's genealogy does not *claim* to be realistic, to represent and describe real events from the past, for instance, by arguing that it amounts simply to a collection of counterfactual, anti-realist hypothetical claims of the type 'what might have happened if such and such', as opposed to realist ones of the type 'what actually happened'.[212] As Aviezer Tucker has argued, if one key aim of Nietzsche's *Genealogy* is to implicate its readership by producing a critical understanding of contemporary morality that raises affects and generate doubts in its readership for what Tucker calls 'therapeutic' and 'emancipatory' purposes, an anti-realist interpretation of its claims would be significantly less effective than a realist one – wishful thinking, beliefs and narratives aimed at raising affects are widespread, and can indeed be emancipatory and therapeutic but they '*must be believed*; people must have faith in the narrative, have a realist

[211] I do not here argue that Nietzsche's specific usage of the form of a historical inquiry in *GM* was the *only* means available for the task of producing an affective shift in his audience for the sake of moral revaluation – recall Nietzsche's remark that 'hypothesizing about the origin of morality' concerned him 'solely for the sake of an end to which it is one means among many' (GM Preface §5, 4). Nietzsche made use of many of the rhetorical strategies and styles that characterise *GM* in previous, non-historically inflected works – for instance, the impartial, dispassionate tone (characteristic of volume I of *Human, All Too Human*), the attempt to make use of the audience's sense of pride in order to undermine the obstructive effects of this pride from within, as in the frequent appeals Nietzsche makes to the judgment of the present by the future (something Nietzsche also practices, for instance, in *Daybreak*), or the use of narrative fiction (similar to in the construction of the character of Zarathustra in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*) (See also Owen, *Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morality,* 45-59). What I *do* want to argue is that the form of a historical inquiry offers a more potent means to produce the kind of affective shift in moral subjects necessary for the re-valuation of values than those rhetorical strategies alone, on the assumption that perceptions of history play a prominent role in reinforcing their current moral commitments.

[212] Jensen proposes such a reading of Nietzsche's genealogy. See Jensen, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of History*.

interpretation of the genealogies. If speculative and fictional genealogies appear made-up, inauthentic and unreal, they would not liberate and cure'.[213]

This claim needs an important qualification – the historical account put forward by Nietzsche's *Genealogy* needs to be taken to be an earnest, realistic one *at first,* since this would allow Nietzsche's text to invoke the appropriate sets of expectations associated with conventional forms of historical writing and thereby to 'lower the guard' of the readers, in order to then disappoint these expectations and unsettle the readers' affective attachments to their morality. Once the critical procedure at work in the *Genealogy* succeeds in this, giving the reader some distance towards their morality and effectively cultivating the 'critical mood and attitude' in the reader needed for them to be able to revaluate their moral commitments as a whole, the question as to the factual truthfulness of the historical account becomes much less important. I would contend that *only then*, from the standpoint of an *already* cultivated critical attitude towards contemporary morality, would it be appropriate for the readers and interpreters of the *Genealogy* to recognise its historical claims as hypothetical, counterfactual, fictive constructs dressed up as real history. From this standpoint, even the seemingly all-important term 'genealogy' – ironically, a word Nietzsche uses only twice in connection with morality in the book aside from its title – is a prop that plays a functionally important, perhaps crucial role for Nietzsche's critical procedure, but which can ultimately be regarded by the critically enabled reader as just this, a useful prop that can be more or less ignored after it has served its purpose. Nietzsche is much less in the business of genealogy and history than he is in the business of *critique* – and yet, he needs genealogy and history *for the sake of* critique. Even more than this, for his critique to realise its aims, he needed to go to the extreme of dressing it up as a serious, earnest exercise in history. Martin Saar describes Nietzsche's genealogical

[213] Aviezer Tucker, 'Origins and Genealogies', *Nietzsche on Memory and History* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2021), 72.

stories as 'hyperbolic histories for real people'. To paraphrase this slightly, we may claim that they are hyperbolic histories for real people, *dressed up as real histories*.

3. A 'Real History of Morality'

In what follows, I would like to show with some further evidence how this complicated logic – above all of history and mythopoeic speculation, but also of realism and anti-realism, seriousness and playfulness, scholarly conscience and polemical unscrupulousness – is borne out by Nietzsche's text. Nietzsche certainly appears to be announcing something akin to a project of a 'fine-grained' understanding of the history of morality in the Preface to the *Genealogy,* namely when he proposes to turn the 'sharp and disinterested eye' of one of his important 'English psychologist' predecessors, Paul Rée, in the direction of the 'real *history of morality*', against the 'English hypothesising *into the blue*' and towards the colour 'which must be a hundred times more important to a genealogist of morality than blue: namely *gray*, which is to say, that which can be documented, which can really be ascertained, which has really existed, in short, the very long, difficult-to-decipher hieroglyphic writing of the human moral past'.[214] It is questionable, however, that Nietzsche delivered on this statement of intent — or at the very least, that he delivered on it in any straightforward sense. Nietzsche's genealogy certainly presents itself *as if* it were a 'real history of morality', a real recuperation of events from its past. But Nietzsche corroborates none of his claims with references to primary sources,

[214] Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, Preface §7, 6. The idiomatic play on colours in this passage has not gone unnoticed by commentators — Clarke and Swensen suggest the reference to the colour 'blue' with regard to 'English hypothesising' could be made sense of with reference to the English idiom 'out of the blue' or the German *ins Blaue*, meaning 'unexpectedly' or 'without warning', and connoting a sense of 'without aim' or 'randomly'. See Maudemarie Clarke and Alan J. Swensen, 'End Notes', in Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 6:5, 127. Conversely, the idiomatic usage of 'gray' with reference to the '*real* history of morality' in the sense of what can 'documented … ascertained' and what 'really existed' certainly appears to have been picked up by Foucault in his description of genealogy as 'grey, meticulous, and patiently documentary'. See Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, trans. Donald Bouchard and Shierry Simon (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977),

giving no dates or locations for the supposedly real historical occurrences he describes. Instead, Nietzsche produces good deal of declaratives and apodictic claims, such as 'The Celts, incidentally, were by all means a blond race',[215] assertions of a sort that flagrantly put our sense of historical plausibility to the test. The most we are offered by way of evidencing that supposedly most decisive event at the dawn of human history are Nietzsche's scattershot etymologies.[216]

Consider that most well-known of Nietzsche's genealogical constructs – the idea that the origin of our contemporary morality is to be sought in the 'slave revolt in morality'. Nietzsche presents this as if it had been a real historical event that involved discrete historical agents — the representatives of master and slave morality — that were involved in an actual confrontation with each other in which the representatives of slave morality consciously sought to displace their noble rivals through an act of spiritual revenge. Having recounted this supposedly real historical occurrence, Nietzsche then goes on to construct a grand historical narrative that connects it in something akin to an explanatory causal chain not only to the rise of Christianity, but also other major historical events and periods — The Renaissance, The Reformation, the French Revolution, and Napoleon, all figuring as stages of a historical conflict between the two moral ideals that was, as it were, kickstarted by the slave revolt of morality. But when exactly is this original slave revolt supposed to have happened? Though Nietzsche appears to be describing a real event, he provides no dates, names or locations, offering extraordinarily little by way of the historical evidence and documentation that he appears to advertise for his 'real history of morality' in the preface. In fact, there is reason to think Nietzsche did not believe in the real existence of master and slave morality as two entirely *distinct* sets of ethical orientation that have been in historical conflict ever since – in *Beyond*

[215] Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, I §5, 14.
[216] See also Porter, 'Theater of the Absurd', 315.

Good and Evil, he claims that 'in all higher and mixed cultures attempts at mediation between the two are apparent, and more frequently confusion and mutual misunderstanding between them, indeed sometimes their harsh juxtaposition – even within the same man, within one *soul'*.[217] The ideas of master and slave morality are better thought of as 'quasi ideal-typical entities',[218] in the words of Saar, conceptual abstractions which Nietzsche derives from his evaluation of morality in its *current* form ('in all higher and mixed cultures'). In a manner that reproduces our tendency to perceive history in terms of idealised, simplified formulas and abstractions originating from our historical present, Nietzsche too makes use of conceptual abstractions in order to produce something like a genealogical 'grand narrative' to make sense of the historical past. But rather than presenting this in the form of an abstract philosophy of history, Nietzsche as it were concretises and personifies his conceptual abstractions – the ideal types of master and slave morality are rendered incarnate in the representatives of the two entirely separate social groups, and given historical, narrative shape as the conflict between these groups.

Similarly, by Nietzsche's own lights, the 'slave revolt in morality' was a *process*, a lengthy structural transformation in our moral valuations and concepts that has 'taken two thousand years to achieve victory'.[219] Nietzsche does not empirically verify and analyse this process with the critical tools of modern historiography – which would have proven at worst impossible and at best a task of enormous analytical difficulty and scope. Yet, what Nietzsche's account loses in analytical precision, it gains in historical immediacy – by representing the slave revolt in morality as if it were not a long-term tectonic historical development but a singular *event*, a conscious *act* of revenge consciously perpetrated by the slaves against the masters, Nietzsche's genealogy is able to expose the subterranean connection between morality

[217] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1973), pp.175-176.
[218] Saar, 'Understanding Genealogy', 308.
[219] Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 17.

and power with representational immediacy that would have been simply unavailable in an analytical historical exposition.

4. Approaching *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

Having now produced an interpretation of Nietzsche's *Genealogy* as a performative, guard-lowering philosophical ruse aimed at producing a critical revaluation of morality and a simultaneous affective shift in its readership, we can now begin approaching the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* – and hopefully see it afresh too. As already noted in the Introduction above, the idea that the latter provides a model for the kind of critique that is at work in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was articulated most prominently by Jürgen Habermas.[220] The latter argues that Adorno and Horkheimer follow Nietzsche's lead in developing a totalising critique of reason which, in proclaiming the complete fusion of theoretical and practical reason with power, 'consumes the critical impulse itself',[221] and ends up bringing grist to the mill of counter-enlightenment. Like Adorno and Horkheimer, Nietzsche is said to denounce a rational world that has, in its belief in reason and the ascetic ideal of self-denial, 'fallen back into myth',[222] and this denunciation is deemed *genealogical* insofar as it is based, according to Habermas, on an 'ahistorical mode of perception' in which 'particular epochs lose their own profile in favour of a heroic affinity of the present with the most remote and the most primitive',[223] and which can no longer theoretically discriminate, and do justice to, the rational content that is specific to modernity. Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of enlightenment, Habermas argues, suffers from a similar defect. The authors' denunciation of the very rational potential of modernity

[220] Jürgen Habermas, 'The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Re-Reading Dialectic of Enlightenment', *New German Critique,* no. 26, Critical Theory and Modernity (Spring - Summer 1982): 13-30; Jürgen Habermas, 'The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno', in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 106-130. See also the Introduction above.
[221] Habermas, 'The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno', 120.
[222] Ibid., 125.
[223] Ibid.

scarcely holds out any prospect for escape from the myth of a purposive rationality 'gone wild', and this is said by Habermas to stem from an 'oversimplified presentation'[224] that fails to do justice to the historically specific dignity and potential of the rationality characteristic of modernity – leaving the first-time reader of the book with an 'intuitive impression of incompleteness and one-sidedness'.[225] Habermas clearly intends to liken the genealogical character of Nietzsche's critical diagnosis of modernity to that of Adorno and Horkheimer. Both of these are said to derive from the same 'experiential horizon' and to be produced through the same 'cramped optics' that draw a spurious affinity between modern enlightenment rationality and primitive mythic domination – at the expense of blocking the distinctively rational profile of modernity, and the emancipatory potential contained therein, from coming into view.

In a more recent reading that is similar in its charges, John Abromeit has argued that Adorno and Horkheimer's text exhibits worrying 'transhistorical tendencies' rooted in a problematic 'genealogical' conceptualisation of the enlightenment that is purported to underly the text's claims.[226] The authors are said to attribute 'much greater causal significance to the purported 'origins' of the flawed form of Enlightenment'[227] and in accordance with this, 'seek to grasp a wide variety of historical and intellectual historical precedents that display the telltale signs of an inadequate concept of enlightenment that was fated to destroy itself from the very beginning'.[228] As Abromeit understands it, it is the genealogical framework the authors employ in their historical analyses of the Enlightenment that is to blame for the text's lack of critical purchase on the present — an overwhelmingly negative, quasi-deterministic genealogical

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[224] Ibid., 114.
[225] Ibid., 129.
[226] John Abromeit, 'Genealogy and Critical Historicism: Two Models of Enlightenment in Horkheimer and Adorno's Writings', *Critical Historical Studies* (Fall 2016). It is worth noting here that the concept of genealogy attributed to Adorno and Horkheimer is explicitly dissociated by Abromeit from Nietzsche. Instead, Abromeit draws an affinity between *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Heidegger's 'history of being'.
[227] Abromeit, 'Genealogy and Critical Historicism', 292.
[228] Ibid., 293

schema of the text which, Abromeit argues, ‘flattens out the historical specificity of different forms of social domination in different historical epochs, and thereby also obscures the historically specific possibilities for emancipation in the present’.[229]

One may single out two key underlying premises of both these readings (the former of which has been enormously influential in the reception of early Frankfurt School critical theory). The first underlying premise is that what Adorno and Horkheimer are said to be practicing in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* under the name of ‘genealogy’ can be understood more or less straightforwardly as a historical account. A second underlying premise falls out as an implication of the first. If genealogy is understood as a historical account, and if this account is to be made useful for the purposes of social criticism, it is implied that it has to meet certain basic epistemic demands of historical scholarship – respecting the historical difference that separates the past from all previous ages and avoiding anachronistic retrojection of present assumptions onto the past that levels down such difference; bringing a breadth of specific, contextualising, factually evidenced knowledge to bear on the past that situates it in its own setting; relating past historical events into some kind of continuum or process that brings out their wider significance. For the likes of Habermas and Abromeit, these epistemic demands are tied up with normative assumptions – both are committed to a certain conception of historical progress that provides a normative grounding for social critique.[230] If history does not do justice to past and present in their difference and specificity, it obscures view of the progress or learning process that has – it is assumed – led up to the present, and thereby of the unique normative achievements, potentials or possibilities for emancipation in the present without which there could be no emancipatory social critique of that present.

The theoretical model developed in the context of this chapter for the purposes of

[229] Ibid., 296.
[230] See also my Introduction above for a discussion of Habermas’s commitment to a progressive philosophy of history.

making sense of Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morality* allows us to challenge these underlying premises and begin developing an alternative interpretation of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The first of the affinities to Nietzsche's *Genealogy* is that while Adorno and Horkheimer's text conveys a strong sense of history and historical perspective, what is of central interest to the authors is not history *per se*, but how present society itself perceives and relates to past history, and the role that such perceptions of history play in assisting the present state of things to reproduce itself – in no small part, by justifying and reinforcing the continuing theoretical and practical commitments of subjects. The second of the affinities to Nietzsche has to do with how the *Genealogy of Morality* and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* make use of structurally similar kinds of historical discourse put to use for similar critical aims. In both cases, one is dealing with historical descriptions and narratives that go beyond the order of the factual, or which fictionalise, allegorise, simplify, abbreviate or truncate historical material, constructing something that is closer to what may be called a historical 'myth' aimed not only at producing critical knowledge about its object (enlightenment rationality, morality) but necessarily doing so in a way that *also* induces a particular affective response in the subject to whom the text is addressed and whose very subjectivity is mediated and tied up with the object (enlightenment rationality, morality) whose history is being subversively retraced and problematised. For this reason, however, rhetorical form and presentation become crucial – the theoretical content of these historical 'myths' is inseparably tied up with the rhetorical form in which they are textually presented and then received by subjects, rather than with narrowly historiographic epistemic demands. Nietzsche is not to be put to task for narrating a story about a clash between two distinct classes that never actually took place (other than, at the most general level, as a long-term shift in moral valuations) – he is not strictly speaking writing history, but advancing a critical understanding of *present-day* morality through a quasi-historical construct. When Adorno and Horkheimer compare 20th-century positivism to magic, portray Homer and

Odysseus as proto-bourgeois, and fascism as drawing the ultimate conclusion of enlightenment moral philosophy by doing away with morality altogether, they are not to be put to task for doing injustice to historical specificity and difference, as would have been the case if the function of such constructs were narrowly historical. Rather, their aim is primarily one of advancing a critical understanding of our present-day rationality, in particular by undermining or problematising the perceptions of history and progress through which the present understands itself. If we reconceive *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in this way, we can begin to see how its style and rhetoric is particularly suited to achieving this critical aim, and conversely, that precisely a historiographically conventional account, sensitive to historical difference, nuance and specificity and rich in factual evidence for its claims would be ill-suited for it. Nevertheless, and again due to considerations concerning how theoretical truth content of the text is tied up with its rhetorical form and its reception, these deliberately polemical, speculative, quasi-mythical constructs are given a historical make-up, they are dressed up in the guise of what may be considered to be conventional historical genres – a teleologically-driven universal history, an exercise in social anthropology, a philological study of Homer and classical antiquity.

A strategy of such a sort is motivated by *objective* concerns – expressing the truth about the object of critique, modern enlightenment rationality (in its historical self-conception), requires a specific move of breaking with the given facts about the object, of speculatively 'overshooting' it. This is not an arbitrary stylisation but is motivated by epistemological demands imposed on thought from the 'object' itself, from the outside. I will develop this part of the argument with respect to Adorno and Horkheimer's text in **Chapter Two.**

At the same time, since the object of critique is the very thing by way of which a certain type of rational *subject* and self-understanding are constituted, the specific textual composition of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* should simultaneously be seen as motivated by 'subjective'

concerns – considerations concerning how human beings are constituted as subjects, including and especially their psychological constitution. If Adorno and Horkheimer's text criticises modern enlightenment rationality by undermining the perceptions of history that are intrinsic to it, this critique has its *terminus ad quem* in the subject that is constituted by this rationality, the same subject that we may assume to be the typical reader of their text. It is *this* reader's rationality that is being criticised, *their* perception of history that is being undermined. In this sense, the concern with textual composition should be seen as motivated by a sensitivity to what this implied reader of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is like, how they are constituted as a (rational) subject, and consequently, how they may receive the text, what they may experience when confronted with it. I will develop this part of the argument in greater detail in **Chapter Three**.

2

Dialectic of Enlightenment from the Perspective of its Critical Object

Introduction

I would like to begin by posing a general methodological question concerning the relevance of the concept of 'genealogy' for the project of a critical theory of society. In 1937, Max Horkheimer had programmatically defined this project as the critical activity that has 'society itself as its object',[232] or as Horkheimer also puts it, 'men as producers of their own historical way of life'.[233] One of the key distinguishing features of critical theory, as Horkheimer makes clear, is its historical awareness — that is, the awareness of the historically preformed character of both the object of knowledge (the 'object perceived') and the subject of knowledge (the 'perceiving organ').[234] The primary concern of critical theory as it emerges from Horkheimer's discussion is not, however, the process of *past* historical preformation itself, but only the product of that process, society in its *present* form — or, put slightly differently, it is not so much past history that is relevant to the interests of critical theory, but *present* history, as this transpires in the recognition that the 'social totality in its present form', though operating in accordance with seemingly natural, nonhuman laws, is ultimately 'the product of human work'.[235] Why, then, does the project of critical theory as articulated a few years later, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, have to concern itself so much precisely with past history? Unless comprehending the past has now become the primary concern of critical theory,

[232] Max Horkheimer, 'Traditional and Critical Theory', in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays,* trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Continuum, 1972), 206.
[233] Max Horkheimer, 'Postscript', in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays,* trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Continuum, 1972), 230.
[234] Horkheimer, 'Traditional and Critical Theory', 200.
[235] Ibid., 207.

what bearing does this increased focus on past history have on our comprehension of, and critical purchase on, the present? Even more pressingly, and speaking to concerns raised by critics like Habermas and Abromeit I discussed at the end of the previous chapter, why does *Dialectic of Enlightenment* narrate history in a form that has struck many for being oversimplified, exaggerated, reductive, or even unfalsifiable?

One way to respond to these questions is to suggest that the prominent role the historical dimension assumes in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* reflects a heightened concern not so much with (past) history *per se* as with present society's *conception* of history, i.e. the generally socially prevalent beliefs about history that inform, consciously or unconsciously, the outlook and self-understanding of individuals within this society. The reasons for this theoretical development should be sought first and foremost in objective historical developments (in accordance with the desiderata of a historically self-aware and self-reflexive theory). While the collapse of the working-class movement and the failure of the liberal democratic establishment to prevent the fascist consolidation of power were largely a *fait accompli* — in Germany, already by 1933 — the precise reasons for these developments were yet to fully crystallise in the minds of critical theorists over the remaining course of the decade. At the same time, the Soviet Union, which presented the only resolute bulwark against fascism, had attempted to consolidate the successes of the October revolution through means that were increasingly in conflict with the ideals of the revolution. Denying immediate producers of social wealth control over the process of production, the Soviet regime simply intensified industrial production on a centralised basis, extended factory discipline over all areas of society, and secured social order by means of violent political repression — in a trajectory beginning as early as the crushing of the 1921 Kronstadt rebellion and culminating in the Stalinist purges and show trials.[236] The non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany could be seen as a continuation of this fateful

[236] See also Herbert Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism: A Critical Analysis* (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1971).

tendency, but it obviously dampened the hopes of many a political radical who still sympathised with the Soviet model. When war eventually broke out and news of intensifying Nazi Anti-Semitism and mass murders in the occupied territories started flooding in, the question as to why the ensuing historical catastrophe was not foreseen and stemmed earlier, began demanding an urgent answer. Why did the revolutionary potential that critical theorists had earlier striven so hard to identify and promote in society give rise to fascism in the West and post-revolutionary dystopia in the East?

Among those who, galvanised by these historical events, attempted to provide an answer to this question, was Walter Benjamin. In his seminal 1940 'On the Concept of History', which he penned months before his attempted escape from Vichy France and eventual suicide, Benjamin had argued that fascism had been given a chance in large part because a belief that has been central to our modern self-understanding, the idea of progress, had been turned into an unquestionable dogma that blinded fascism's opponents to the growing tendencies of social regression. Benjamin's critique had as its immediate target not only positivist bourgeois historians and liberal politicians but also, and to even more devastating effect, the dominant ideological tendencies on the left — where the belief in progress had been elevated to the status of a scientific doctrine, an evolutionary-positivist theory of history that prognosticated how the growth of social productive forces will necessarily lead either to the gradual reform of capitalism (in its social democratic version), or to the terminal crisis and revolutionary abolition of capitalism (in its orthodox Marxist version). For all those who 'in the name of progress … treat it as a historical norm',[237] fascism could not but appear as an exception to the historical norm, a temporary detour in history's progressive triumphal procession towards a providential

[237] Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', in *Selected Writings. Volume 1: 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 392.

ending. As Michael Löwy has argued,[238] precisely this is how both social democrats and the official communist movement (in the German context which Benjamin was immediately concerned with) had treated fascism — couching their convictions in terms of evolutionary and deterministic theories of history, both held that advanced scientific, industrial and technological development is incompatible with social and political regression.[239] One of the reasons fascism got the upper hand, Benjamin argued, was because its opponents maintained with almost scientific conviction that its rise was improbable or ephemeral.

What Benjamin sought to expose was the historical myopia and political naïveté attaching to this progressivist outlook — captured, as he acerbically puts it, in the 'amazement that the things we are experiencing are "still" possible in the twentieth century',[240] even while fascism was already providing the practical refutation of progressivism by unleashing the destructive powers of modern technology in the service of political repression, war, and eventually, industrialised genocide.

We can read *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as driven by the same sentiment against the blinkered, dogmatic progressivism that hypostasises the idea of progress into a scientific doctrine, a 'well-informed, farsighted judgment', which Adorno and Horkheimer dub the 'stupidity of cleverness':

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[238] Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's Concept of History*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2016), 59.

[239] Karl Kautsky, the chief spokesman and ideologue of German social democracy, had regarded fascism as an anachronism, a historical aberration that could only emerge in an economically underdeveloped Italy of the 1920s, within quite specific conditions that could not be reproduced in a highly industrialised country like Germany, where 'the overwhelming majority of people will favour the preservation of democratic rights'. In *The Materialist Conception of History,* trans. Raymond Meyer with John H. Kautsky (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 394. The other major strand on the German Left, the Stalinised Communist Party (KPD) loathed the social democrats but it, too, grossly underestimated the fascist threat, going so far as to tolerate letting fascists into the seat of power in the conviction that this would only create further economic chaos and lead to a radicalisation of German workers, who would then sweep the fascists away in a proletarian revolution (hence the KPD's infamous slogan 'After Hitler, our turn!'). See also C. L. R. James, *World Revolution, 1917-1936: The Rise and Fall of the Communist International*, ed. Christian Høgsbjerg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), Ch. 12.

[240] Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', 392.

> ‘How many were the expert arguments with which Jews dismissed the likelihood of Hitler’s rise, when it was already clear as daylight. I recall a conversation with an economist who demonstrated the impossibility of Germany’s militarisation from the interests of Bavarian brewers … according to the clever people, fascism was impossible in the West. Clever people have always made things easy for barbarians, because they are so stupid … the prognoses based on statistics and experience, the observations which begin: “I happen to be an expert in this field,”, it is the well-informed, conclusive judgments which are untrue’.[241]

Benjamin’s critique had implications for narrowly progressivist conceptions of history that went beyond the context of fascism and the political failings of its opponents. The historical vision that ‘recognises only the progress in mastering nature, not the retrogression of society’, Benjamin argues, ‘already displays the technocratic features that later emerge in fascism’.[242] What Benjamin is singling out for critique here are the dominating and dehumanising aspects already inhering in technologically progressivist rationality, as this came to define the Taylorist-Fordist optimisation of modern industrial production, and which found its ideological expression in the idolisation of factory work and industry, a tendency to which left critics of capitalism (in both its social democratic and official communist variants) contributed all too eagerly. While Marx had argued that to be a productive labourer is ‘not a piece of luck, but a misfortune’,[243] the dominant tendencies on the left had, on the contrary, extolled the virtues of labour and industry — a prominent case being the social democrats, who had, in Benjamin’s view, fallen under the illusion that ‘the factory work ostensibly furthering technological progress constituted a political achievement’.[244] A technologically progressivist notion of

[241] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 173.
[242] Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History’, 393.
[243] Karl Marx, *Capital Vol I*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 644.
[244] Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History’, 393.

history to the ostensible benefit of the working class — such as was implied in the social democratic cult of factory work and its reformist politics advocating for a 'fairer' social distribution of the products of labour — disregards that the labourer cut off from control over the means of their subsistence necessarily becomes 'the slave of other men who have made themselves owners'[245] of these means. An emancipatory theory and politics that equates progress with the progressive development of the technological means for the exploitation of nature, ostensibly contrasted with the exploitation of the working class, does not imply the abolition of the conditions of exploitation — as Werner Bonefeld puts it, 'instead of ending slavery, [it] seeks a new deal for slaves'.[246] Such a historical conception not only blocks the regressive tendencies that culminated in fascism from view, but also allows for the ideological obfuscation of persisting socio-economic domination and exploitation: that of social individuals separated from control over their means of subsistence in industrialised capitalism, and indeed, we may add, in the nationalised planned economies.

What Benjamin's critique of the dominant conceptions of history and historical progress suggested was that by the end of the 1930s, these conceptions had become one of the major stumbling blocks for critical consciousness and revolutionary politics in the present: 'Nothing has so corrupted the German working class as the notion that it was moving with the current'.[247] If one was to promote truly emancipatory ends — the end of exploitation rather than, at best, its amelioration, and the elimination of the conditions that had made the rise of fascism possible — it was not enough to criticise the naturalised appearance of society and its institutions, as Horkheimer's 1937 program for critical theory had suggested. Increasingly, one had to come to a reckoning with the specific *historical form* in which society appeared to its

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[245] Karl Marx, 'Critique of the Gotha Programme', in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, vol.24 (New York: International Publishers, 1989), 81.
[246] Werner Bonefeld, 'Critical Theory, History and Revolution', in *Communism in the 21st Century, vol. 3*, ed. Shannon Brincat (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2014), 139.
[247] Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', 393.

members, with the conceptions of history and historical progress that the majority of social individuals had (wittingly or unwittingly) accepted as their own — it was these historical conceptions that had now themselves become a part of 'second nature' requiring demystificatory critique. As Susan Buck-Morss puts it: '[b]y 1940, it was less the static appearance of reality that needed demystifying than the appearance of historical progress'.[248]

A 1940 essay that finds Horkheimer at his most politically radical already reflects a greater sensitivity to the need of a critique of the socially prevalent ideas of history and historical progress: according to Horkheimer in this text, what would constitute genuine progress is not equivalent to 'the socialisation of the means of production, planned management of production, and unlimited control of nature', but implies, crucially, 'the end of exploitation' and the 'break with class society'.[249] The revolution that would bring about such progress, Horkheimer argues 'is not a further acceleration of progress', where this is understood as technological progress in the means of mastery of nature, but a 'qualitative leap out of the dimension of progress'[250] — a formulation equally reminiscent of Benjamin as of Adorno's later reflections on progress, summarised in the view that 'both in the reflection of the concept and in reality, we are faced with the absurdity that it is progress itself that inhibits progress',[251] and hence that 'progress occurs where it ends'.[252]

Finally, a 1941 exchange of letters between Adorno and Horkheimer confirms that their collaborative work on what would become *Dialectic of Enlightenment* would centre around the ideas of 'the conception of history as permanent catastrophe, the critique of progress and

[248] Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 60.
[249] Max Horkheimer, 'The Authoritarian State', in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, eds. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Urizen Books, 1978), 107.
[250] Horkheimer, 'The Authoritarian State', ibid.
[251] HF, 148.
[252] Theodor W. Adorno, 'Progress', in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 150.

mastery of nature, and the place of culture',[253] as well as 'the idea of class struggle as universal oppression, and exposing historiography as empathy with the rulers' — insights which, according to Horkheimer, 'we must view as theoretical axioms'.[254]

With these considerations in mind, it seems justified to follow through the suggestion above, namely that the prominent historical dimension of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ought to be taken as reflecting a heightened concern not with (past) history per se but with the *conceptions* of history and historical progress that had come so pervasively to shape the socially prevalent form of rationality, and which paradoxically, produced their opposites in practice — if not the outright regression of fascism, then the historical blockage of a consciousness and praxis whose self-professed progressivism acts as the best ideological cover for the actual perpetuation of sameness. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the idea that the prevalent form of rationality is inherently shaped by a progressivist vision of history is implicit in how Adorno and Horkheimer define 'enlightenment', in the very opening sentence of their book, as '*fortschreitenden Denkens*' – 'progressing' or 'advancing' thought.[255] From Bacon to Kant,

[253] Adorno to Horkheimer, 12 June 1941, quoted in Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories and Political Significance*, trans. Michael Robertson (1994; repr., Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 311. It is important to underscore the mutual interrelatedness of these ideas — the conception of history as 'permanent catastrophe' is not antithetical to the idea of historical progress, but can be thought of as designating the destruction, domination and suffering which historical progress has so far continuously (or 'permanently') entailed — the point, in other words, is not to deny that progress has taken place, but to help us recognise, as Adorno and Horkheimer put it, 'the destructive side of progress'.

[254] Horkheimer to Adorno, 21 June 1941, quoted in Wiggerhaus, *The Frankfurt School*, 311.

[255] In Edmund Jephcott's translation, the German is rendered as 'the advance of thought' (DE, 1), whilst in Cumming's as 'progressive thought', see Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1997), 3. The word 'fortschreitend' is better understood as 'progressing', 'advancing' or 'developing' rather than Cumming's 'progressive' – it denotes the more neutral, descriptive sense of a gradual progression or development that need not be laden with normative content: for instance, it may be used to describe the continuous process of technological innovation, or the gradual progression of a disease. This is distinct from 'fortschrittlich', which could be translated as 'progressive' or 'forward-looking' and *is* laden with a positive normative connotation. Adorno and Horkheimer choose the former term to describe the specific character of enlightenment's progressiveness – namely, the progressive domination of nature. But they clearly seem to exploit the similarity of 'fortschreitend' and 'fortschrittlich' and their common root in the word for progress, 'Fortschritt', in order to indicate how in the specific form of the progressive domination of nature, enlightenment tends to undermine a more emphatic idea of progress that is also implicit in it – 'liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters'. 'Progress', as an inherent feature of enlightenment thinking, can therefore be understood both as a descriptive and normative category that crystallises the aporia of a self-destructive enlightenment. I am thankful to Fabian Freyenhagen for helping me unpack this nuance from the original German.

Hegel and Marx, ideas of progress and developmental history – be they idealist or materialist, reformist or revolutionary and so on – have provided the key narratives and signifiers for how we understand the times we live in. More than simply moments in enlightenment's intellectual history or parts of its conceptual inventory, they should be thought of as the intellectual expressions of a historical dimension that is integral to how we 'moderns' understand ourselves, to 'enlightenment' understood in the sense of the present, historically specific form of rationality[256] (or at least the rationality contemporaneous with the writing of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*). Amy Allen speaks of the sense in which our contemporary form of rationality is 'both historical and Historical' – meaning, not only is this rationality historically situated and contextually specific (as opposed to transhistorical), but it is also 'already inflected with a certain conception of History'.[257] In Adorno and Horkheimer's presentation, enlightenment is inflected with such 'History' in the sense that it historicises its own concept and understanding of itself, its programme of 'disenchantment of the world', 'the dissolution of myths and the substitution of knowledge for fancy',[258] translating this into a certain kind of narrative that explains the history of enlightenment as a history of continuous, progressive and irreversible dissolution of what preceded it. So, for instance, we read that for enlightenment, '[m]imetic, mythical and metaphysical forms of behaviour were successively regarded as stages of world history which had been left behind'.[259] As Jay Bernstein reconstructs this underlying presupposition of the text – 'enlightening critique necessarily includes other formations of reason amongst its critical targets'.[260] Or to put this slightly differently, there is a structural or

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[256] The term 'enlightenment' is predominantly employed by Adorno and Horkheimer to designate a certain set of general characteristics underlying forms of rationality from vast and disparate range of past historical periods, from Xenophanes to Helvétius to Carnap. (Cf. Jarvis 1998: 24). But it seems equally obvious that 'enlightenment' also designates the present, historically specific form of rationality that expresses both the 'rational consciousness' and the 'form it takes in reality', the 'real movement of bourgeois society', i.e. modern society (DE: xvi)

[257] Amy Allen, 'Adorno, Foucault and the End of Progress', in *Critical Theory in Critical Times*, ed. Penelope Deutscher & Cristina Lafont (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017, 191.

[258] Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1979), 3.

[259] DE, 24.

[260] J. M. Bernstein, *Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 84.

conceptual relation of opposition to 'myth' (or any other formation of reason) that is inscribed into the enlightenment conception of reason itself, which enlightenment then converts into a history: 'the mythic-dominated origin of culture and civilisation is a posit of enlightenment rationality itself … That we should conceive of this conceptual issue historically, as a process of overcoming, is demanded by enlightened reason, whose modern hegemony indeed comes to create the very process it projects onto the historical past.'[261]

If I am on the right track to argue that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* develops a critique of enlightenment rationality by problematising or undermining its own (historical) understanding of itself, it is possible to now see that this constitutes the first key point of affinity to Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morality*. As I argued in Chapter One, Nietzsche's critique of contemporary morality in the *Genealogy* can be interpreted in a similar light, namely as a critique of morality that aims to undermine the perceptions of history and progress that underly or help in the construction of a self-legitimising image for morality and thereby in ensuring moral subjects' continuing commitment to this morality. In this section, I would like to deepen this affinity by reconstructing some further philosophical motivations for why *Dialectic of Enlightenment* advances its critical aim in the specific textual form that we find in the text – motivations similar in nature to what I have argued apropos of Nietzsche's *Genealogy*.

Recall that in my interpretation of the *Genealogy*, I argued that Nietzsche makes use of the form of a seemingly earnestly intended, scholarly, documentary exercise in the history of morality, and exploits this form for the purpose of moral critique, constructing something much closer to a myth with deliberately polemical intent than the 'real history of morality' promised in the Preface to the text. Using the form of the documentary, scholarly historical treatise allows Nietzsche's text to tap into the perceptions of history and cultural progress deemed complicit

[261] Bernstein, *Disenchantment and Ethics*, 85.

with contemporary morality, only to then subvert these perceptions all the more forcefully, in ways that starkly contrast with morality's progressive self-understanding and that shed light on its most deleterious features – its own disavowed entanglement with arbitrary relations of power, violence and aggression. Achieving this effectively, I argued, requires a style and form of writing with a rhetorical force that would be largely *unattainable* precisely in a conventional (in the modern historiographic sense) documentary history where factuality, being grounded in objective fact, is privileged as the main (and even sole) measure of truth. It is only by way of going *beyond* factuality, in some ways by doing violence to it, by rupturing the infinitely nuanced continuum of historical events – philosophising with a hammer, as it were – that Nietzsche's genealogical stories are able to establish the connections between realms usually understood to be antithetical to each other. Nevertheless, these constructs are not presented in a way that immediately gives away their meta-factual, fictitious, imaginative nature – they are presented and narrated *as if* they were the stuff of real history, and are meant to be read and interpreted as such at least *at first sight*.

I also argued that we can only fully appreciate the motivations for the specific style and rhetorical form of the *Genealogy* if we consider these not only with relation to *what* the text is about, but also *who* it is about – the implied reader of the *Genealogy.* It is not only that the style of the *Genealogy* is designed to undermine the affirmative historical self-understanding that informs contemporary morality and ultimately serves to legitimise it. This style is also intrinsically aimed at, or 'implicates' the human beings whose moral beliefs, conduct and self-understanding are informed and shaped by contemporary morality, the moral subjects that we may assume to be the typical readers of Nietzsche's *Genealogy*. Looked at from this side, the specific style and rhetorical form of the *Genealogy*, I argued, ought to be seen as motivated by considerations concerning how human beings are constituted as moral subjects, and why they think and act in accordance with contemporary morality. In particular, Nietzsche's advocacy

of a fundamentally sentimentalist (meta-ethical) outlook motivates his view that the moral commitments of subjects are best explained *in the first place* with reference not to reason and argument, but with reference to the affective inclinations and pre- or unconscious drives of subjects. This implies that that direct attempts at moral critique, even if argumentatively cogent, will not suffice as a form of persuasion – and may even backfire by provoking subjects into putting up resistances and providing rationalisations for the beliefs and conduct that are being subjected to criticism. The *Genealogy* may be said to be well attuned to its reader, on this view of moral subjectivity. Rather than subjecting their morality to direct criticism, it puts up the appearance of a serious history that 'lowers the guard' of the reader, who would typically appeal to historical accounts precisely for the sake of justifying their theoretical and practical commitments. Since this process is fundamentally mediated by affect, i.e., it is an affective attachment by virtue of which moral subjects remain committed to contemporary morality even in the face of argumentatively cogent criticism, the *Genealogy* aims to disrupt these very affective attachments. Precisely for this reason, the *Genealogy* has to present moral history in a style rhetorically forceful enough to disrupt its readers' automatic affective attachment to their moral commitments, making readers *feel* differently about their moral beliefs and conduct or enabling them to perceive them in a new light. And once again, we may argue that this specific desideratum could not have been easily met by a historiographically conventional form of writing that is strictly conscientious about factual evidence, historical difference, nuance and specificity.

I now return to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and provide some arguments to the effect that its form of textual composition is motivated by similar concerns. In this chapter, I will focus on the critical procedure the with regard to its critical object, enlightenment rationality –

or the historical process of socialisation, the 'real movement of bourgeois society',[262] from the perspective of its own (historical) self-understanding. In this, I will be relying on some of Adorno's other texts, particularly his later *History and Freedom* lectures, which I hope to show, provide us with important conceptual clues. In the next chapter, I will focus on how the *Dialectic*'s critical procedure – and thereby, its specific form of composition – can be seen to motivated by considerations concerning its critical subject, what we may assume to be the implied reader of Adorno and Horkheimer's text.

To begin with, one could well imagine Adorno and Horkheimer realising their basic critical intent of bringing the 'self-destruction of enlightenment' to light, but in a different theoretical form — they could have, for instance, followed Paul Tillich's suggestion that Adorno and Horkheimer's collaborative work produce an 'argumentative book, rich in material'.[263] A work grounded in an 'argumentative' vision of this sort would have been much in keeping with the earlier interdisciplinary vision of the Institute, and it could have been elaborated as a sociological, economic and political study of the general tendencies of the present era. Such, indeed, was the original plan for the book, as the authors themselves admit in their Preface, noting that they intended to limit their work primarily to a 'critique or a continuation of specialist theories'.[264] Alternatively, the work could still have had a broader philosophico-historical sweep, but its methodology and form of composition could have been much more historiographically conventional – a more factually scrupulous, evidence-based approach that would exercise greater scholarly caution with regards to historical specificity and difference. This could have been a 'critical history' that leverages insights into the origin and development of modern rationality and subjectivity for the purpose of criticising their presently dominant forms, yet one that took care to avoid appearing to level down the historical

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[262] DE, xi.
[263] Paul Tillich to Max Horkheimer, in Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, 317.
[264] DE, xiv; see also Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, 315-316.

specificity of different forms of rationality, sociality and domination under one single common denominator. Adorno and Horkheimer could have attempted to highlight the self-contradictory character of modern rationality and its entanglement with relations of domination *without* explicitly likening it to mythological thinking and primitive forms of social domination, thereby avoiding any impression of historical circularity. This would foreground the historical specificity of the modern epoch and emphasise much more unequivocally that what is at stake is not a complete rejection of modern rationality, but its dialectical critique – a critique that, as relentlessly thoroughgoing as it is, holds on to the idea that 'freedom in society is inseparable from enlightenment thinking',[265] and aims at the genuine realisation of enlightenment's emancipatory potential – 'not conservation of the past but the fulfilment of past hopes.'[266]

An 'argumentative' book of this sort would likely have been much less vulnerable to the Habermasian type of criticism I discussed at the end of Chapter One. It is my contention, however, that the merits of an approach rich in factual evidence and detail would have, in fact, failed to properly accommodate Adorno and Horkheimer's critical aims, given their assessment of the contemporary state of society, culture and consciousness – and in some sense, it may have even *conflicted* with these critical aims. In particular, such an approach would have been ill-suited for effectively challenging the ideas of progress and developmental history that, as I have previously argued, frame the self-understanding of modern enlightenment rationality, and which conceal or transfigure the (self-)destructive tendencies of this rationality in the present.

The argument I would like to propose in defence of this claim is the following: effectively undermining this historical self-understanding would require not simply a breach with ideas of progress and developmental history, but also with the specific intellectual and linguistic *form* in which these ideas are typically articulated. Since, as Adorno and Horkheimer

[265] DE, xvi.
[266] DE, xvii.

state in their Preface, 'not only the operations but the purpose of science' — including the human sciences — 'have become dubious … the attempt to trace the sources of this degradation must refuse obedience to the current linguistic and intellectual demands'.[267] One must refuse, in other words, the 'strict limitation to the observation of facts and the calculation of probabilities' at the expense of the 'theoretical imagination', a limitation that supposedly protects rational cognition from 'charlatanism', 'superstition' and 'political delusion' but paradoxically ends up precisely paving the way for them.[268] In light of this, it seems justified to take the idea of repudiating the restriction of cognition to the 'observation of facts and calculation of probabilities, of renouncing 'modern civilisation's fear of departing from the facts',[269] as an important clue for the reading and interpretation of *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* for making sense of why Adorno and Horkheimer deemed it necessary that their attempt to trace the sources of present social and intellectual degradation should *not* have taken a factually scrupulous, evidence-driven form.

1. Facts as Cloak, Continuity and Progress, The Negative Universality of History

One may think that the obvious route of criticising the ideas of progress and developmental history is simply to provide a more fine-grained account of history that serves as to provide a factual refutation of these ideas. The problem with this, as Adorno will later

[267] DE, xv.
[268] DE, xv-xvi. It is not without importance that these remarks are to be found in the *Preface* (to the original 1944/1947 editions) of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, considering that a preface is often the most reader-oriented and interpretatively significant part of a written work — Gerard Genette, for instance, argues that the chief function of the (original) authorial preface is 'to ensure that the text is read properly', in particular to 'put the reader in possession of information the author considers necessary for this proper reading' (Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997)), 197, 209. We may only mention in passing the vital importance accorded to prefaces in the modern (and particularly, German) philosophical tradition, where prefaces are treated as interpretatively significant. Novalis, for instance, avers that the preface provides guidance as to the 'usage of the book—and the philosophy of its readings' (In 'Philology', *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia: Das Allgemeine Brouillon* (Albany: State University of New York, 2007)). Sometimes prefaces are treated as philosophically self-standing texts in their own right - the prefaces of Kant and Hegel are the obvious examples here.
[269] DE, xvi.

spell out these ideas in his *History and Freedom* lectures, is that such an approach is *already* implicitly predisposed to a progressivist conception of history – or, at the very least, unsuitable for its critique. To what Adorno calls the 'naively scientific but philosophically pre-critical mind,'[270] history presents itself as an 'assemblage of facts',[271] as 'nothing but spontaneous individual phenomena, the individual acts of individual human beings'[272] This mass of historical facts are then to be reinterpreted in their indirect, derived context'[273] even though this already presupposes some 'larger framework that encompasses human subjects',[274] some general historical process that manifests itself *in* those facts and renders them meaningful. However, according to Adorno, we tend to regard this general historical context or process that mediates the facts of history as something that we can take more or less *for granted*, or not pay much attention to as Adorno puts it, in the 'dominant view, the larger, encompassing context, the context that is not to be immediately grasped in, let us say, factual accounts … finds itself relegated by the general scientific consensus to the status of a kind of sauce or the final chapter in a historical narrative, one that does not need to be taken too seriously … every speculation about history, and indeed every attempt to conceptualise history, appears to be treated as a subjective stylisation'.[275] The critical argument Adorno puts forward in objection to this construal of history may be reconstructed in the following steps:

First, Adorno suggests that privileging the required bulk of factual historical information is *not* epistemologically inconsequential for how we then conceptualise or interpret this information, as implied in the dominant view (the 'general scientific consensus'), where reflections on the general course of history are treated as something secondary, a 'subjective

[270] HF, 19.
[271] HF, 19.
[272] HF, 18.
[273] HF, 19.
[274] HF, 19.
[275] HF, 21.

stylisation' that we have the intellectual freedom to only subsequently 'apply' to the facts. Rather, privileging factual historical information, remaining on the level of individual historical events, decisions, actors and so on, already predisposes us, wittingly or unwittingly, to a *particular* view of the general process of history. Adorno strongly hints at this when he suggests that 'it is a remarkable fact that if, as an observer of history, you simply go along with the flow of events, this ends up by committing you to giving your approval to whichever universal tendency happens to be gaining the upper hand'. Adorno clarifies this with a nod to Benjamin's *Theses on History* – 'you will turn out to be writing history from the point of view of the victors'[276] What appears to us simply as a 'flow of events' is not simply a chain of brute, immediate historical facts that we have the luxury to interpret one way or the other, but *already* mediated by the general process of history – and this ends up committing us to affirm, to give our 'approval' to, this process. In his further commentary on Benjamin's *Theses*, Adorno expands on this idea by claiming that the traditional or dominant view 'inserts facts into the flow of time'.[277] Not to put too fine a point on an already complicated line of argument, Adorno is suggesting here that this dominant view *presupposes* something about the general course and structure of history, namely that it is characterised by temporal continuity, and grasps historical facts simply as moments of this temporal continuum, as transitional nodes of a unified, continuous historical process. An earlier remark that Adorno makes to clarify Hegel's concept of the 'world spirit' helps make sense of what this presupposition of continuity amounts to, namely the 'belief that all things are proper and above board, that events can be understood step by step, that even the worst and most meaningless suffering can be comprehended as the product of overall circumstances'.[278] While this need not *necessarily* commit us to a progressivist view of history, Adorno clearly indicates that this construal of history contains a

[276] HF, 41.
[277] HF, 91.
[278] HF, 27.

tendency towards progressivism:

> In general, the continuous structure of history is based on the assumption that a particular idea runs through history in its entirety and that the various facts gradually come closer to it. The more this way of thinking is resisted, together with its tendency towards idealization, the less will historians be tempted to think of history as a continuum, a continuum in which the idealism, the affirmative element, lies in the belief that things are getting better all the time.[279]

Think of the typical story through which 18th and 19th century enlightenment scholars – classical philologists, philosophers, historiographers, anthropologists – sought to understand the distant past as something like a primitive predecessor to the present, and thereby to clarify why the past *had* to be superseded by the present. The most obvious and relevant example here would be the anthropological conception of mythology as a form of cognition that provided representations of reality based on faith rather than experience – while indispensable at early stages of cultural development to make up for the helplessness of human beings in the face of a reality they could neither truly comprehend nor control, mythology is here commonly understood as a flawed, deficient progenitor of rational cognition. At least implicitly, this understanding of mythology is incorporated into a story of continuous development of human rationality that leads up to the present and explains how and why mythology, as a flawed form of rationality, was gradually displaced by modern reason. So, here we have a good example of how the assumption of historical continuity traversing and uniting disparate historical facts, events and periods tends towards construing history as a progressive development over time. And if, for Adorno, this is most paradigmatically embodied in German idealist philosophies of universal history, it lives on in purportedly non-idealist, post-metaphysical approaches to

[279] HF, 91-92.

history.

Secondly - one might take this to be simply an intellectual-historical point, implying that the disregard of considerations concerning the general course of history is something like a corrigible intellectual mistake, a merely 'subjective' error on the part of historians or the general public. But for Adorno, this is no mere intellectual happenstance, but something rooted in a genuine reality of the process of history itself, how it treats the human beings caught up in this process, and the specific form in which it presents itself to them. It is the process of history *itself* that mediates or preforms the facts of history in such a way as to predispose us to take on a view of that process as a continuous development that unifies these facts – most tendentiously, in a narrative of progress. This is what motivates Adorno to suggest that if we wish to critically examine the validity of the assumptions of historical continuity and progress, we cannot have any straightforward recourse to the given facts of history. In a rather disquieting turn of phrase, Adorno claims that 'the so-called facts become a mere cloak veiling what really exists',[280] and that this is itself the result of their mediation by the historical process – 'it is a function of the growing power of the totality which imperceptibly reduces the facts to epiphenomena'.[281] To explain what he means by this, Adorno provides an account of a specific experience of serving on committees, which it is worth quoting in full:

> If you have ever had to serve on committees on whom important decisions depend, or are thought to depend, you will see how the worst and the basest instincts prevail over the better, more humane ones. I should perhaps say that you will perceive this unless you completely identify with what is going on and subscribe to its principles. This is a basic experience, even though you will not see a simple confrontation between the 'best' and the 'worst', but rather an infinitely nuanced chain of

[280] HF, 30.
[281] HF, 30.

> individual decisions, proposals and processes that focus initially at least on topics that seem utterly remote from such global judgements. Nevertheless, in questions involving individuals there is an overwhelming tendency not so much for the worse speech to triumph over the better one, but for the worse man to be appointed to the position that should have gone to the better one – and this is a common experience that has to be faced up to as frankly as any other experience. And only a concept of experience that is restricted in advance will enable you to avert your gaze from such events by focusing on the immediate matters under discussion.[282]

A similar example discussed by Adorno is the experience of how social groups, such as committees tend to resist courses of action that appear to contravene the pre-existing group consensus or set of rules, despite the fact that such non-conformist courses of action are usually the better and more productive ones for the social group itself – and that, paradoxically, the individuals who resist such improvements 'almost always act with the best of intentions … or they rationalise these intentions by arguing that they are acting only in the interests of the collective which they happen to represent at that moment'.[283] Adorno cites these experiences as examples of 'the way in which the universal succeeds in getting its own way'[284] – of how an objective tendency that contravenes the intentions and interests of individuals asserts itself over their heads even when they think and act in subjectively good will to realise these intentions and interests. But, as the quoted passage above makes clear, when we focus on the immediate facts of such experiences, the 'immediate matters under discussion', we only see an 'infinitely nuanced chain of individual decisions, proposals and processes that focus initially at least on topics that seem utterly remote from such global judgments' – that is, remaining on the level of the facts of the situation somehow blocks such general considerations concerning

[282] HF, 30-31.
[283] HF, 32-33.
[284] HF, 32.

the overall tendency of the situation from view. This resembles the proverbial frog that unsuspectingly lets itself be cooked alive when placed in water which is only slowly heated to boiling point. When our experience of history is limited to apprehension of the given facts, our situation is similar to that of the frog – it is much harder for us to be receptive to the negativity of the historical process, i.e., to gain awareness of how this process contravenes our interests and subjects us to all kinds of wrongs. These ramifications of history may only really transpire – if they ever do – in extreme situations, when it is too late and much damage has already been done.

So, in line with this argument, the so-called facts of history are mediated by the historical process in a way that creates something like a deceptive façade or a 'cloak' that hides the essential reality of this process, the objective, universal tendency of history, from coming into view. Adorno believes that history presents itself to us in the first place with such a deceptive facade, or as he also puts it, with a 'deceptive surface unity',[285] as a chain of events connected in some kind of developmental, usually progressive, order. If the facts of history contain an implicit bias towards a superficially deceptive view of the historical process, then the question of grasping the essential reality of this process cannot be a question of simply providing a different theory of the same bulk of historical facts. Rather, it implies a move of going *beyond* the facts, in some sense distancing oneself from them or departing from them – and doing so precisely not as a move away from the world of historical experience, but in an attempt to properly do justice to it, to grasp its essential nature. In his lectures on history, Adorno refers to this as the need for 'speculation', claiming that

> only speculation can penetrate external reality, and show what really and truly lies behind the façade of facticity that is asserting itself, can be said to do justice

[285] HF, 91.

> to reality ... The only way to capture reality and the true experience of it is to go beyond the immediate givens of experience.[286]

And in a passage from *Negative Dialectics*, we get an even more categorical formulation of this claim:

> The power of the status quo puts up the façades into which our consciousness crashes. It must seek to crash through them … Surviving in such resistance is the speculative moment: what will not have its law prescribed for it by given facts transcends them even in the closest contact with the object … where the thought transcends the bonds it tied in resistance – there is its freedom. Freedom follows the subject's urge to express itself. The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth. For suffering is objectivity that weighs upon the subject; its most subjective experience, its expression, is objectively conveyed.[287]

Adorno's usage of the terms 'speculation' and the 'speculative moment' is idiosyncratic, and a lot more can be said about why this does *not* mean a kind of thinking that judges experience 'from above', in the deductive manner of a rationalist metaphysics, but contrarily, starts 'from below' as it were, and proceeds only following immersion in the concrete details of experience itself (it is not coincidental that Adorno defends the idea of facticity as cloak by elaborating an account of a specific experience, that of serving on committees).[288] The key point in this context is that speculation is identified by Adorno as the medium by which one can 'penetrate the 'façade of facticity', and 'go beyond the immediate givens of experience' in order to capture 'reality and the true experience of it' – which, as the second passage makes clear, is one of *suffering*. Speculation thus defined is driven by the need or urge to give

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[286] HF, 30.
[287] ND, 17-18.
[288] See also Simon Jarvis, 'What is Speculative Thinking', *Revue internationale de philosophie* 227 (2004) 69-83.

expression to human suffering, to 'lend a voice' to it, the implication being that the experience of suffering is in some ways muted, lacking a voice of its own, and potentially, often not recognised as such.

There is a great deal that could be said, and has been said, about the centrality of suffering for Adorno's thinking more generally, but the key point to lay stress on in this context is the idea that suffering is 'objectivity that weighs upon the subject', and the need to give expression to this suffering is a 'condition of all truth'. One way to make sense of this is to suggest that suffering is the mark that history leaves on human beings, that the objective historical process or general tendency which, Adorno holds, asserts itself over our heads and against our interests is experienced subjectively as suffering. This does not mean that the opposition of the historical process to the human beings who are caught up in it is necessarily or consciously experienced as (physical) suffering – as Fabian Freyenhagen argues, the negativity of the social world is not 'reducible to or exhausted by physical suffering, not even suffering in all its forms'.[289] Rather, Adorno's view is that 'all negativity, including emotional pain and negativity other than suffering' – unfreedom, objectification, alienation – is in some sense '*modelled* on physical suffering'.[290] Or, as Adorno himself puts it, 'all pain and negativity ... are the many times over mediated ...form of the physical', which has 'sometimes become unrecognizable'.[291] And on this view, it may be argued that even experiences quite remote from physical suffering that are systematically engendered by the social world and which may not even be consciously experienced and recognised as suffering, can be made intelligible on the model of suffering – such as, for instance, having one's prospects for individual self-realisation thwarted by an unfavourable job market without ever realising it.[292] In other words, by lending

[289] Fabian Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy: Living Life Less Wrongly* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 145.
[290] Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy*, 144-145.
[291] ND, 202 (Redmond's translation used).
[292] Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy*, 145; see also HF 17-18.

a voice to the suffering of human beings, one is giving expression to something essential about the historical process that otherwise tends to remain covered up or muted under the façade of everyday life and the ordinary understanding subjects will have of this façade – the kind of understanding that will be captured when we focus on the immediate, given facts of lived experience. What remains concealed in such immediate experience, in Adorno's account, is the reality of how much we are harnessed to an objective historical tendency that we have no control over and which systematically fails to satisfy, or even contravenes, our interests and needs – in other words, subjects us to suffering. Even if this often takes relatively mediated forms that may not even be explicitly recognised as experiences of suffering, such as the kinds of examples described above, the antagonism of the historical process to human beings can, and in fact systematically tends to, flip over into much more immediate forms of negativity such as discrimination, persecution, outbursts of violence and outright terror. For Adorno, this is epitomised in the proper name 'Auschwitz' which, in the light of the catastrophes of the twentieth century, serves is a metonym for the 'entire system'[293] Following Benjamin's thesis that that the 'state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule', Adorno holds that what happened in the extermination camps was not in any way exceptional but the culmination of a fateful historical logic - 'the horror of our day has arisen from the intrinsic dynamics of our own history; it cannot be described as exceptional'.[294]

To recap, when we remain wedded to the socially prevalent form of consciousness – the dominant view that privileges factual evidence, resists generalisations and imagines historical events can be grasped step by step, we find ourselves exposed to the 'danger of regarding as justified the supremacy of an objective power over human beings who always believe that they are in full possession of themselves'[295] – that is to say, we expose ourselves

[293] HF, 5.
[294] HF, 7-8.
[295] HF, 17.

to the danger of presuming that we are in control of our own history and that its course is in general progressive. It is the very intellectual and linguistic *form* in which history typically presents itself to us that contains an implicit bias towards this, essentially subject-oriented, affirmative or progressive view of history. The 'need for speculation' is therefore best understood as enabling us to penetrate this façade and do justice to the objective reality or tendency of history, waking up to the extent to which we are not the conscious makers but 'merely the functions'[296] of a historical process that appears to us simply as a 'continuous progression towards higher forms of life'[297] that in reality systematically contravenes our interests and subjects us to all manner of suffering – which, for that very reason, is often not consciously recognised and even experienced *as* suffering.

2. Speculation, 'Natural History', Irony

Naturally, the idea that there is an objective or universal historical tendency operating against our interests and behind our backs will appear as an unwarranted metaphysical assertion. Adorno readily anticipates that any propositions to such effect will instantly meet with 'the backlash of the 'sciences, donning their full academic robes' – the nominalist refutation of any talk of universals, the proposition that reality is 'nothing more than spontaneous individual phenomena, the individual acts of individual human beings', and that only this level of reality can serve as an 'absolutely secure foundation of knowledge'.[298] Short of a more extensive treatment that I cannot provide here, one may plausibly suggest that this response is itself based on an unwarranted metaphysical postulate – the demand for absolutely secure foundations for thinking in the supposedly certain, immediately given facts. To expect that our concepts can

[296] HF, 17.
[297] HF, 8.
[298] HF, 18.

meet such an expectation for absolute certainty is, Adorno argues, itself the product of 'inflated idealism',[299] no less than the nominalist insistence that factuality and immediate givenness – the very existence of which is a matter of metaphysical dispute – should serve as the exclusive criteria for gauging the validity of our thinking.[300]

More importantly, on the view that I am reconstructing here, if it is only by 'speculation' that we can gain appreciation of the essential negativity of the historical process, this is *not* to be understood as a metaphysical insight into some supposed eternal, immutable essence of history. In Adorno's usage, the concept of speculation is rerouted, in a move that is to no small degree polemical in itself, from its traditional place and function in idealist philosophical systems: quintessentially, Hegel's absolute idealism, where speculation is the mode of thinking allowing us to gain hold of the infinite, and where it is necessarily tied to the thesis of the identity of spirit and reality, thought and being. For Adorno, by contrast, speculation can be said to serve precisely the opposite function – it allows one to register the *non-identity* of spirit and reality. From a category that originally posited or created meaning, Adorno transforms speculation into a category of negating, dissolving merely apparent meaning. It would hardly be incorrect to claim that, on this view, our historical reality is *already* speculative in the sense that it presents itself to us with a certain appearance or semblance of meaning – it solicits us to perceive the immediate facts of history as the moments of a continuous process, tempting us to construe this process as a progression, and thereby to justify or legitimate it. Contrary to this, speculation in the sense intended by Adorno is a move that allows us to resist this temptation

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[299] Theodor W. Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008) 99-100. Henceforth cited as LND.

[300] The positivist and scientistic philosophies of the early 20th century are implicated as the targets of Adorno's critique here. Adorno describes the critical stance that informs his own approach to history as an 'immanent critique of positivism' (HF 29), and also as the idea that 'resistance to speculation, like the ideology of positivism in general, tends rather to become the ideology whose adversary it imagines itself to be' (HF 24). In other words, when the renunciation of metaphysical speculation does not recognise its own metaphysical presuppositions, it recoils into its own opposite, another (uncritical, dogmatic) metaphysical speculation. Perhaps the most well-known antecedent of this type of immanent critique of metaphysical anti-realism is Hegel's critique of Kant's notion of the limit (and Kant's theoretical philosophy more generally).

of automatically conferring meaning on the process of history, and thereby granting legitimacy to it – it aims to 'destroy the semblance of meaning usurped by merely existing actuality'.[301] To make use of Benjamin's oft-quoted phrase, speculation is what gives us the intellectual means to 'brush history against the grain'. To destroy the semblance of meaning implies disclosing the negative, regressive dimension of a historical process that is only apparently progressive – but there is no sense in which this implies transfiguring negativity itself into a metaphysical absolute, a timeless or immutable essence. The path to aim for on this view is one that enables us both to 'keep a certain distance' from history that allows us to 'resist the cult of the facts' *and* to 'dissociate ourselves from a total theory of history'.[302] Precisely for the latter reason, Adorno makes explicit that this specific approach to history is fundamentally distinct from what is commonly referred to as a negative or regressive philosophy of history of the sort propounded by the likes of Oswald Spengler, where an essentially critical insight into the destructive, regressive character of history gets elevated to the status of a general, totalising proposition about history as such. Where pessimism is transfigured into a metaphysical absolute that dismisses any attempt to steer human history away from its (self-)destructive path as doomed from the outset, one has simply ended up replacing a progressive historical metaphysic with a regressive one.[303]

Historical speculation understood along the lines proposed by Adorno – and put to work in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, I contend – does not grant any metaphysical or ontological dignity to the negative universality of history it discloses. This negative universality, the 'objectivity that weighs upon the subject' and turns us into the functions and victims of history is best understood in the terms of what Adorno would call a 'natural-historical' concept, and a

[301] LND, 101.
[302] HF, 12.
[303] For Adorno's critique of Spengler, which he calls an attempt to raise the question of the 'truth and untruth of Spengler's work', see Theodor W. Adorno 'Spengler After the Decline', in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1983), 51-73.

brief exposition of what this means would be helpful in this context. As a natural-historical concept, speculation allows our apprehension of the very real way in which the objective laws of motion of society assert themselves over our heads, obtaining the appearance of the inescapable character of natural laws, and determining subjective modes of experience and behaviour to a degree largely unsuspected by most people – what we are tempted to regard as the immediate sphere of individual subjecthood, freedom and autonomy is in fact a function of objective social structures and highly dependent upon them. All the same, speculation thus conceived is informed by the recognition that the laws of social motion are just as much natural as they are the *product of human history* and therefore not *immutably* natural, but revocable in principle – for which reason, there can be no question here of hypostasising them into a metaphysical or ontological doctrine of timeless essences.[304] Adorno proposes just such a reading of the 'natural-historical' dimension of Marx's critical theory, arguing that Marx remained a 'speculative thinker' in grasping the objectivity of historical life and of the total social process as something that 'transcends all the facts'[305] and asserts itself over all social subjects with nature-like lawfulness. All the same, Marx's analysis of the essential relations of historical life and of the capitalist social process as a 'natural-historical process' does not amount to a positive thesis and could only be falsified when treated as such.[306] Rather, it is a *negative*, *critical* concept that already presupposes the potential abolition of the so-called natural laws of historical motion.[307] For this precise reason, the supposedly natural laws that constitute the objectivity of historical life, could be called 'natural' by Marx with no small

[304] See Tom Whyman, 'Understanding Adorno on Natural History', *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* vo.24, no.4 (2016): 452-472.
[305] LND, 96.
[306] ND, 355. Adorno is taking aim at the dogmatic 'dialectical materialism'('Diamat') of the Eastern Bloc, but the tendency to turn Marxian critique into a positive doctrine was already on full display in Engels' *Dialectics of Nature*. See also Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (London, Verso: 2014).
[307] As Adorno puts it, 'The objectivity of historical life is that of natural history ... The natural-rootedness of capitalist society is real and at the same time appearance [*Schein*]. That the assumption of natural laws is not to be taken *à la lettre*, least of all to be ontologised ... is confirmed by the strongest motive of Marxist theory of all, that of the potential abolition of those laws. Where the realm of freedom had begun, they would no longer apply.' (ND 347-351, Redmond's translation used).

degree of *irony* and *polemic.* As Adorno puts it apropos of Marx:

> Human history, progressive natural domination, continues the unconscious [history] of nature, of devouring and being devoured. Marx was ironically a social Darwinist: what the Social Darwinists praised and wished to act according to, is for him the negativity, in which the possibility of its sublation awakens.[308]

This ironic or polemical element is tied to the notion that what natural-historical speculation describes is ultimately historically contingent and mutable. But it adds an ineliminable *normative* dimension. To describe the essential relations of historical life as natural does not only mean to capture their objective lawfulness as distinct from immediate appearances and subjective forms of consciousness – to grasp, for instance, that capitalist exploitation of labour has little to do with the subjective intentions, behaviour or character (e.g. moral character) of any individual capitalist, but that it is a systemic necessity for capitalist production as such, a law to which both capitalist and labourer must submit. It also means, precisely in describing this necessity as *natural*, to also evoke the sense of *blind, unconscious* necessity that the essential relations of historical life exert over individual human beings – independently of their will and consciousness, and against their interests.[309] To call human history natural means, in this sense, to *condemn* it for perpetuating the blind compulsion of the natural realm from which 'history' professes to have extricated itself, for failing to live up to its own concept. If human

[308] ND, 355 (Redmond's translation used).

[309] In the *History and Freedom* lectures, Adorno credits Hobbes and, in particular, Kant, for being among the first to articulate the idea that history is the realm of antagonism whereby social individuals, in pursuing their own independent and often mutually opposed ends, become the exponents of a natural necessity that operates behind their backs, independently of their consciousness and will, and which both reproduces social life and threatens to break it apart. In his 'Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose', Kant claims that '[i]ndividual men and even entire nations little imagine that, while they are pursuing their own ends, each in his own way and often in opposition to others, they are unwittingly guided in their advance along a course intended by nature.' In *Kant: Political Writings,* trans. H. B. Nisbet, ed. Hans Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 41. Of course for Kant, by contrast with Adorno, this antagonistic, conflict-ridden nature of history is conceived as progressively propelling humanity forward, away from the 'kingdom of necessity' and toward the 'kingdom of freedom' (it must be noted, however, that Kant does not conceive of this as a metaphysical hypothesis – the 'idea' for a universal history as law-driven progress can be taken to be more of a heuristic device that aids interpretation, or a regulative ideal).

beings remain in the realm of blind, unconscious necessity, then such a thing as consciously created human history that would alone be worthy of the name simply does not yet exist, history is not yet history proper but prehistory.[310]

'History does nothing, does not 'possess vast wealth', does not 'fight battles'! It is man, rather, the living man who does all that, who does possess and fight; it is not 'history' that uses man as a means to pursue its ends, as if it were a person apart. History is nothing but the activity of man pursuing his ends'.[311] For as long as history remains something that, rather than *made* consciously by us, *happens* to and through human beings, 'abstracting from its individual subjects, degrading them to mere executors'[312] of its law of motion, then it systematically fails to live up to its own concept, and remains trapped in the realm of the prehistorical. Such 'history' can only reproduce human life antagonistically, in a form that necessarily frustrates the satisfaction of their needs and the free development of their capacities – in other words, by subjecting them to suffering. Such a history deserves to be called natural *ironically, polemically, mockingly* – and in this sense, speculation in the 'natural-historical' mode amounts to a *critique* of a history which 'takes on the qualities of blind nature instead of distancing itself from them'.[313] Speculation thus understood does not only allow comprehension of the essential reality of historical life, but is at the same time *ironic, polemical and mocking*, because it is driven by a profound sense of moral indignation and what could be called a visceral contempt for history's inhumanity. Implicitly, by way of an irony or a kind of 'serious play' – I will pick up on this concept in more detail below – speculation aims to evoke the same vehement impulse

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[310] Once again it was Marx who – perhaps most famously – referred to all previous human history as prehistory. In his 'A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy', Marx writes that 'The bourgeois relations of production are the last antagonistic form of the social process of production—antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism but of an antagonism that emanates from the individuals' social conditions of existence … The prehistory of human society accordingly closes with this social formation.' In *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected Works, vol. 29* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 264.
[311] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Die Heilige Familie*, quoted in ND, 304.
[312] ND, 304.
[313] HF, 117.

of opposition that itself animates it. Engels evokes this explicitly when he quotes the cry of Goethe's Mephistopheles to condemn the irrationality of human history: 'All that exists deserves to perish'.[314] Herbert Marcuse brings the 'ironic' element of dialectical, materialist thinking and its implicit normativity into sharp relief: 'all categories that describe the given form of existence as historically mutable become 'ironic': they contain their own negation … all materialist concepts contain an accusation and an imperative', and thereby already envisage and demand another form of existence in which 'the imperative has been fulfilled'.[315] In this definition, the concept of 'irony' accounts for the congruence of the descriptive and normative dimensions of critique, and this allows us to illuminate the internal structure of 'natural-historical' speculation in a similar way. Such speculation comprehends the essential relations of social life as the laws of a seemingly autonomous nature, and insofar as these laws are shown to be not immutably natural, but historically mutable, it already points up the possibility of transcending them, of going beyond them. But then the speculative identification of history and nature transpires as simultaneously ironic, polemical and mocking, and thereby as a critique that amounts to an 'accusation and an imperative' – it exposes history in its failure to extricate itself from the realm of blind necessity and live up to its own concept, and thereby implicitly, but no less emphatically, demands that it do so.

3. Exaggeration as Medium of Truth, Earnestness and Play

Speculation understood through the lens of the notion of 'natural-history' then, is what breaks through the facade of immediate facticity, allowing comprehension of the objective negativity of the historical process, yet without hypostatising it into an ontological or

[314] Friedrich Engels, 'Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy', in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, *vol.26* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2010), 359.
[315] Herbert Marcuse, 'The Concept of Essence', in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (London: Penguin Press, 1968), 63.

metaphysical essence, but contrarily, treating it as something that not only can, but also *ought* to be overturned – hence the ironic, polemical quality of speculation. This provides us with a conceptual tool for making sense of the form of composition of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, specifically as this relates to the book's construction of human history, and how this is itself indispensable for advancing its critical-theoretical aim. The central thesis of the text, formulated in the figure of the chiasmus – 'myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology' – is a speculative identification of myth and enlightenment that does of course amount to a departure from the historically given 'facts', and also a radical break with the view of history as a continuous, progressive development. From the standpoint of the 'general scientific consensus', the idea that animates the construction of history in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* will automatically appear as a 'wild' generalisation that rides roughshod over the specificity and difference that separates the historical periods we are accustomed to associate with 'myth' and 'enlightenment', covering over the chronological gulf separating them with a single stroke. But, in keeping with the above, the veneration of facticity is itself epistemologically and normatively tendentious. A form of historical thinking that is more concerned with accumulating a mass of factual evidence in support of its claims than with examining its own presuppositions simply delivers itself over to unexamined presuppositions about the general historical process and thereby tends to obscure or conceptually transfigure the negative, regressive tendencies of history – or more precisely, it borrows the presuppositions with which history itself conceals its own objective negativity. It is in this sense that the very intellectual form of enlightenment rationality, the form in terms of which it constructs (its own) history, that contributes to and reinforces its lack of self-reflexivity, rendering it even more oblivious with regard to the regression or negativity that it is itself culpable of. This is how we ought to understand Adorno and Horkheimer's claim that their investigation of the self-destruction of enlightenment had to resist 'modern civilisation's fear

of departing from the facts' and 'refuse obedience to current linguistic and intellectual demands', since the 'tabooing [of] any thought which sets out negatively from the facts … holds mind captive in ever deeper blindness'.[316] The two parts of the chiasmus that informs the structure of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and its construal of history, are themselves hyperbolic statements, drastic and dramatic exaggerations of theoretical points which abbreviate vastness of specific historical material in a way that, as it were, ruptures what we are inclined to think of as a steadily unfolding continuum of historical events. Such hyperbolic exaggerations – in which *Dialectic of Enlightenment* abounds, of course – are figures of historical discontinuity, which serve to disclose something essential about the historical process that otherwise remains concealed, covered up. As we read at the end of the Juliette excursus:

> But only exaggeration is true. The essential character of prehistory is the appearance of utmost horror in the individual detail. A statistical compilation of those slaughtered in a pogrom, which also includes mercy killings, conceals its essence, which emerges only in an exact description of the exception, the most hideous torture.[317]

And in an aphorism from *Minima Moralia* entitled 'Keeping one's distance', Adorno provides a statement on the role of exaggeration, which helps connect it to the idea of speculation:

> Only at a remove from life can mental life exist, and truly engage the empirical. While thought relates to facts and moves by criticising them, its movement depends no less on the maintenance of distance. It expresses exactly what is, precisely because what is is never quite as thought expresses it. Essential to it is an element of exaggeration, of over-shooting the object, of self-detachment

[316] DE, xvi-xvii.
[317] DE, 92-93.

> from the weight of the factual, so that instead of merely reproducing being it can, at once rigorous and free, determine it. Thus every thought resembles play, with which Hegel no less than Nietzsche compared the work of the mind … as soon as thought repudiates its inviolable distance and tries with a thousand subtle arguments to prove its literal correctness, it founders. If it leaves behind the medium of virtuality, of anticipation that cannot be wholly fulfilled by any single piece of actuality; in short, if instead of interpretation it seeks to become mere statement, everything it states becomes, in fact, untrue.[318]

Considered from this this angle, the identification of myth and enlightenment, qua speculative departure from the facts, is also precisely what allows us to comprehend their structural similarity – with an immediacy that would have been unavailable or largely blunted in a historiographically conventional account. It allows us to grasp that rather than radically incommensurable from each other, myth and enlightenment are structurally commensurable forms of rationality springing from the same fear of a preponderant, alien nature and impulse for self-preservation that presses humanity towards a relationship of domination over nature. Enlightenment understands itself as the disenchanting critique of myth and opposes itself diagonally to the anthropomorphic logic of mythic representation as the projection of subjective, human properties onto nature. But in its relentless, anti-mythological demand for objectivity, enlightenment ends up disposing of its own objective content.[319] As the ideas of reason, truth and even enlightenment itself are criticised as subjective fictions, enlightenment confines itself to the task of 'mere perception, classification and calculation' of objects.[320] As

[318] Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 126-127. See also Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction to Dialectics*, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2017), 3 'Every thought which breaches the façade, or the necessary illusion which is ideology, is an exaggeration. The tendency of dialectic to move to extremes serves today precisely to resist the enormous pressure which is exerted upon us from without.'
[319] See also Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), esp. pp.1-41.
[320] DE, 20.

a result, enlightenment ends up merely replicating what exists, renouncing the attempt to 'grasp existing things as such … to think of them as surface, as mediated conceptual moments which are only fulfilled by revealing their social, historical and human meaning – this whole aspiration of knowledge is abandoned'.[321] When thinking is arrested to the level of mere immediacy, the result is that 'the actual is validated, knowledge confines itself to repeating it, thought makes itself mere tautology … [e]nlightenment thereby regresses to the mythology it has never been able to escape'.[322] The sceptical, anti-mythological ban on any transcendent knowledge of things themselves that is characteristic of enlightenment rationality from Xenophanes to Kant to the positivists thereby reinstates a fundamentally mythic principle, that of fate. What Adorno and Horkheimer call the 'principle of immanence', the explanation of an object, event or property by classification and subsumption under some known concept, rule or law, is really homologous with the central feature of mythic thought. By subsuming difference under sameness and change under the repetition of a known pattern of occurrence, enlightenment 'merely reproduces the fantastic doctrine it rejects, the sanction of fate which, through retribution, incessantly reinstates what always was'.[323] And of course, this is in no way a merely intellectual point, since 'power in the sphere of the concept is built on the foundation of power in reality'.[324] Modern capitalist society reproduces itself only by way of the principle of abstraction entailed in the form of the capitalist exchange process. It is only through the real, material abstraction from the particularities of the objects of exchange that exchange is possible in the first place. In this sense, enlightenment thinking is embodied in social relations objectively, independently of the will and consciousness of human beings, as the objective 'conceptuality' that ensures that incommensurable things are made commensurable and

[321] DE, 20.
[322] Ibid.
[323] DE, 8. See also J. M. Bernstein, *Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), esp. pp. 83-90.
[324] DE, 10.

exchangeable by being reduced to an universal equivalent.[325] As the essential law of social motion, enlightenment reenchants the social world, endowing the products of human work with objective, quasi–natural properties, in virtue of which they take on a life – at once really and seemingly – of their own. The objective movement of economic categories, of magnitudes of value, of prices and profit, of boom and bust cycles, expresses an overwhelming social interaction of things, which, far from being under the control of human beings, in fact control them.[326] Hence, '[j]ustified in the guise of brutal facts as something eternally immune to intervention, the social injustice from which those facts arise is as sacrosanct today as the medicine man once was under the protection of his gods … even in advance of total planning, the economic apparatus endows commodities with the values which decide the behaviour of people'.[327]

I have taken care to unpack some of the specific intellectual contents of the speculative identification of myth and enlightenment in order to make clear that it is not any kind of arbitrary stylisation or flourish. What is being speculatively put forward is a serious theoretical point about the structural affinity between mythic and enlightenment forms of rationality and their respective forms of sociality. Enlightenment is not literally myth, but it does exemplify some of myth's essential features – just as, seen from the vantage point of the present, myth, while not literally enlightenment, exemplifies some of enlightenment's essential features. And as with nature and history, the speculative identification of myth and enlightenment serves to enable an insight into the essential reality of enlightenment, both objectively and subjectively, as it were. Considered objectively, it allows a grasp of the self-destructive character of enlightenment as the historical process of humanity's progressive domination of nature, a

[325] 'Bourgeois society is ruled by equivalence. It makes dissimilar things comparable by reducing them to abstract quantities' (DE, 4). See also Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 32.
[326] See also Werner Bonefeld, 'Negative Dialectics and the Critique of Economic Objectivity', *History of the Human Sciences* vol. 29 (2) (2016): 60-76.
[327] DE, 21.

process that has ended up gaining autonomy over the human beings from whose activity it ultimately originates, asserting itself over their heads and against their interests in a manner akin to mythic fate. Considered subjectively, it allows a grasp of the self-destructive character of enlightenment as the intellectual equivalent of humanity's technical domination of nature, a form of rationality whose relentless demand for objectivity leads it to eviscerate its own power to penetrate objective reality and thereby to capitulate before that reality in myth-like idolatry of the facts and whatever is the case. It is for this very reason that Adorno and Horkheimer claim that, in its 'strict limitation to the observation of facts and the calculation of probabilities', enlightenment forfeits its self-reflective dimension and renders itself oblivious of the destructiveness it is itself culpable of – the cleverness of enlightenment turns into the stupidity that makes things easy for barbarians. The essential insight into enlightenment as the reproduction of myth on a higher level – with myth, understood retrospectively as already a form of enlightenment – enables a construction of all past history from the vantage point of the present, as the history of humanity's progressive domination of nature, and thereby as enlightenment's continuous failure to extricate itself from the bond of myth.

If the insights into the self-destructive character of enlightenment and its reversion to myth in the present, as well as in all past history are serious theoretical points, we also need to take a moment – and one that make all the difference – to reflect on *just how serious* they are. As we've seen above, the speculative identification of nature and history is informed by the recognition that the laws of social motion are just as much natural as they are the product of human history and hence not immutably natural but historically revocable. With myth and enlightenment, a homologous pattern is easily discernible – if enlightenment, as the expression of the law of social motion and as the form of present rational consciousness, is speculatively identified as having a mythic character, this should not be misunderstood as the thesis that enlightenment is *immutably* mythical and self-destructive. Adorno and Horkheimer's

speculation does not amount to a transhistorical claim about the purported timeless essence of enlightenment, human rationality and sociality *as such*, but concerns, in the first place, their *historically specific* forms in the present, which already presupposes that these forms, though they really assert themselves with an inescapability that resembles the inalterable edicts of myth, are ultimately the product of human activity and therefore historically contingent, mutable, revocable. Neither is the retrospective construction of past history in the context of which the speculation makes sense to be construed either idealistically, as a historical metaphysic about the purported timeless essence of history *as such* (i.e. as a negative philosophy of history), or positivistically, as a documentary historical account of the past 'as it really was'.

There is no shortage of indications that Adorno and Horkheimer conceive of the antagonistic, self-destructive character of enlightenment rationality, its entanglement with the domination of nature and social domination, as revocable in principle – from the idea that thought did not originally take on the objectifying form of subsuming particulars under a conceptual unity but was from the start 'a product of dialectical thinking',[328] to the idea of enlightenment's 'anti-authoritarian tendency, which communicates, if only subterraneously, with the utopia contained in the concept of reason',[329] and of course the idea that enlightenment can steer a path away from self-destruction by becoming self-reflective at the start of the book, as well as its hopeful ending, which states that '[e]nlightenment itself, having mastered itself, and assumed its own power, could break through the limits of enlightenment'.[330] As Amy Allen has argued, Adorno and Horkheimer may be said to conceive of the aporia of enlightenment's self-destructive character as both *conceptual*, stemming from the very concept of enlightenment rationality as the progressive domination of nature, which 'already contains the

[328] DE, 11.
[329] DE, 73.
[330] DE, 172.

germ of the regression',[331] and therefore indicating that this form of rationality essentially, necessarily tends towards undermining itself, as well as *historically contingent*, meaning that the process of enlightenment's historical realisation, from the very start and up to this day, has always contained other possibilities – that of enlightenment reflecting on its own self-destructive tendencies, transcending its own limits and realising its true potential within a non-dominating, non-antagonistic configuration of human rationality.[332]

This, then, allows us to recognise that the speculative identification of myth and enlightenment can only be gravely misunderstood when treated *too seriously*, as a positive thesis about the essence of human rationality, society and history *as such*. The insight such speculation provides into the essential tendency of enlightenment to undermine itself is key, but this insight is not to be hypostatised into an ontological or metaphysical essence, because its truth content is, on the contrary, *negative* and *critical*. Adorno and Horkheimer seek to illuminate the entanglement of myth and enlightenment in the most drastic fashion precisely because they proceed in recognition of the real possibility of going beyond this entanglement, and seek to salvage and promote that possibility. As with nature and history, the speculative identification of myth and enlightenment and the construction of history it enables transpires not only as serious but as simultaneously ironic, polemical, mocking. Its function is just as much cognitive as it is normative and affect-laden, it amounts to a condemnation and judgment on enlightenment for failing to realise its own program and promise of 'liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters',[333] for failing to live up to its full potential, for only realising itself in a self-contradictory, self-destructive form, for continuously failing to extricate itself from the clutches of myth. There is nothing coincidental about choosing to identify

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[331] DE, xvi.
[332] Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonising the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 173.
[333] DE, 1.

enlightenment specifically with myth, since enlightenment only understands itself in opposition to myth, its program being, from the outset, that of the disenchanting critique of myth: 'it wanted to dispel myths, to overthrow fantasy with knowledge'.[334] Collapsing the opposition between the two in the manner of the chiasmus – myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology – is a precisely calculated ironic reversal, which targets enlightenment's weakest and blindest spot, its self-understanding in strict antithesis to myth, and confronts it with the norms objectively embodied in that self-understanding. An appreciation of this fundamentally ironic, polemical dimension of Adorno and Horkheimer's book is therefore necessary if we are not to completely misconstrue its philosophical status – in other words, it cannot be read literally.

In Gillian Rose's account on Adorno's philosophical style, she situates Adorno in the 'tradition of irony', with Nietzsche as the key influence, arguing that both Nietzsche's and Adorno's work is full of arrogantly stated, brazen convictions that strangely contrasts with their modest attempt to present a philosophy not based on first principles, and that yet both 'undercut and contradict even their most sacred assertions and provide instructions for interpreting their strongly voiced-claims' – in other words, that their works 'must be read from a methodological point of view and not literally'.[335] As Adorno argues in a different context, in both philosophy and sociology 'nothing is meant in a completely literal manner, neither statement of fact nor pure validity'.[336] But as Rose astutely observes:

> If someone asks that we do not take him literally, then we should, presumably, not take the advice not to take him literally, literally. To follow the original injunction consistently means both that we must sometimes not take it literally

[334] DE, 1.
[335] Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science* (London: Verso, 1978), 24-25.
[336] Theodor W. Adorno, 'Introduction', in *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology,* trans. Glyn Adey and David Frisbey (London: Heinemann Educational Books,1976), 34.

and that sometimes we must.[337]

Irony is, of course, an indirect method – in the standard sense, it means using words that normally convey a meaning divergent or contrary to what is intended. It is therefore, not to be understood literally, but for it to hit its target, it must be taken literally, seriously, *at first*. The rhetorical force of an ironic inversion is generated precisely from the incongruity between taking an utterance seriously and understanding it literally, only to then realise that the utterance was not meant to be taken seriously and in fact a different or opposite meaning was intended, rather than the literal one. It is this ironic duality of literalness and non-literalness, of seriousness and non-seriousness, and the tension generated from their confrontation and reciprocal mediation that I wish to argue we should be most sensitive to when it comes to reading and interpreting *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. As Adorno will claim years later, in *Negative Dialectics*, '[p]hilosophy is the most serious of things, but then again is not all that serious'.[338] This is certainly a point against the gravitas of all philosophy setting out from the traditional premise that 'the power of thought is sufficient to grasp the totality of the real',[339] and which thereby tends towards absolutising philosophical thinking. In contrast to this, philosophy ought to recognise that it is 'merely one element in the actual life of mankind and therefore not to be turned into an absolute'.[340] The claim that philosophy is concerned with the 'most serious matters' and calls for the 'very greatest efforts on the part of the most advanced state of mind'[341] is not to be renounced but transformed and refunctioned. Philosophy, tasked with providing binding insight 'into what is real',[342] can only live up to this most serious task by way of a certain lack of seriousness, a certain indiscipline, irresponsibility or an element of

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[337] Rose, *The Melancholy Science*, 22.
[338] ND, 14.
[339] Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Actuality of Philosophy', in *The Adorno Reader*, ed. Brian O'Connor, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 24
[340] LND, 91.
[341] LND, 90.
[342] ND, 15, Redmond's translation used.

play, which for that very reason is not *mere* play but something that 'makes an essential contribution to the truth'.[343] The non-seriousness of play is to be sublated into the seriousness of philosophical cogency [*Verbindlichkeit*], such that one cannot do without the other, and the two mutually presuppose each other, hence: 'cogency and play are the two poles of philosophy'.[344] Adorno equates play to a notion that could not be more central in the context of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, namely *mimesis*, and argues that philosophy has to 'appropriate on behalf of the concept that element of identification *with* the thing itself – as opposed to identification *of* the thing itself – that is present - non-conceptually in the mimetic stance and has been inherited by art'.[345] Whereas the traditional conception belies the – all too serious – assumption that conceptual thought can identify its object completely, without remainder, a mode of thinking proceeding in the sober recognition of 'how little it encompasses what is thought' seeks to register the *non-identity* of thought and object, concept and thing, and it is to this end that philosophy has to incorporate play into its procedures. And since play is here synonymous with mimesis, a thinking that incorporates this element must to some extent *imitate* or *mime* what it is directed towards – not the immediate, given facts of reality, but traditional thinking in its chimerical attempt to subsume these facts under a conceptual unity, to 'grasp the totality of the real'. It is in this way, through an ironic critique of traditional forms of conceptual thought, that philosophy may be said to 'use concepts to unseal the non-conceptual, without making it their equal'.[346]

It is important to be sensitive to the specific sense of irony that is implicit here – it is distinct from a more quotidian or ordinary usage, in which the apparent utterance is simply a rhetorical device for indirectly communicating an underlying semantic content. If someone

[343] LND, 90.
[344] ND, 15.
[345] LND, 92.
[346] ND, 10.

commits a blunder, and I ironically utter ‘Smooth move’, I do not actually mean that the move was smooth but very much the opposite. The claim that Enlightenment has reverted to myth is not ironic in that sense – it is meant seriously in that it picks out something essential about the tendency of enlightenment to undermine itself and come to resemble something akin to myth. By that same token, however, it is not meant *all* that seriously, in the sense of proposing that Enlightenment is self-undermining *as such* and thereby terminating its dialectic into some spurious, terminal synthesis. Rather, and to make use of some of Adorno’s vocabulary, the claim that ‘Enlightenment reverts to mythology’ is not made simply in the mode of ‘identification *of* the thing’, but also in the mode of ‘identification *with* the thing’. In other words, alongside its cognitive function, the claim incorporates an element of play or *mimesis* of the thing it is addressed to – enlightenment thinking. Displaying attentiveness to the way enlightenment understands *itself*, the claim presupposes – imitates, mimetically reproduces – the antithesis of myth and enlightenment that is internal to enlightenment self-understanding, and derives its rhetorical (but equally, normative) force precisely from collapsing that antithesis. And yet – and this makes a world of difference – it does this without completely abolishing the distinction between myth and enlightenment and resolving it into a spurious identity.

4. Universal History / ‘Universal History’

This reading may seem somewhat self-evident in the case of a claim like ‘Enlightenment reverts to mythology’, but it is more productive when we turn to a consideration of the book’s form of presentation as a whole. It allows us to make sense of why *Dialectic of Enlightenment* superficially resembles a host of genres whose conventional function is typically one of constructing and/or legitimating enlightenment’s historical self-understanding, its progressive self-image. Chief among these is the genre of an idealist, teleologically driven philosophy of history or a universal history: an overview of the whole of

human history that claims to unearth some putative principle or *telos* that explains historical change over time as a necessary, lawful development, a singular principle which thereby traverses and unifies all historical epochs. In order to make better sense of what *Dialectic of Enlightenment* does with the idea and genre of universal history, it helps once again to think of the text as constructing history not simply in the identificatory, subsumptive mode of 'identification *of* the thing', but also in the mimetic, imitative mode of 'identification *with* the thing' that it is addressed to, viz. modern enlightenment rationality in its progressive historical self-image, and thereby also with universal history as one of the genres playing a central role in the construction of this self-image. As I will argue below, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* mimes a universal history of the progressive, enlightenment variety, but in the course of doing so however, the text manipulates the operative parameters of the story of enlightenment in such a way as to condemn the idea of progress that is embodied in it – it enacts the failure of the narrative to realise itself as a narrative of progress, and in some sense, as a narrative at all.

The possibility of a philosophy of universal history can be understood to be a narrative one at bottom – being able to provide a philosophical account of human history as a whole hinges on being able to successfully *narrate* such a history, to tell a *story* that organises and shapes the events of history.[347] Construed generically, the narrative dimension operative in enlightenment philosophies of universal history can be characterised under two aspects which, taken together, embody an internal contradiction that has to be disavowed or covered up. On the one hand, enlightenment conceives itself as emphatically discontinuous with the past – this aspect expresses the idea of a radically new beginning that deliberately breaks with everything

[347] In HF, Adorno claims that the 'philosophy of history merges with the writing of history', and also: 'philosophy of history, that is, the interpretation of historical events and the philosophical understanding of these events, not only presupposes historiography proper, but also moves in the direction of history-writing in the process of explicating them … I have described the relevant aspects, which I refer to as the 'narrative' [*episch]* aspects in part 3 of my little book on Hegel' (HF 40). While I do not here go into Adorno's discussion of the 'narrative' aspects of Hegel's philosophy, I take Adorno's claim to mean that, insofar as a philosophical account of history presupposes or even merges with the 'writing of history', it thereby entails narrative elements.

preceding it. This can be grasped conceptually with reference to the idea of enlightenment as the radical critique of myth with no positive, objective content of its own, since its essence consists precisely in the critique of all positive content – the 'absolute negativity', as Hegel defines the essence of enlightenment,[348] under whose glare 'any devotion which believed itself objective, grounded in the matter at hand, was dispelled as mythological'.[349] This conception of enlightenment also corresponds to the self-understanding of modernity as radically self-justificatory, normatively self-grounding – modernity understands itself with the 'oppositional significance of an emphatically "new" age',[350] and as such, it 'can and no longer will borrow the criteria by which it takes its orientation from models supplied by another epoch, it has to create its normativity out of itself'.[351] This radically oppositional self-understanding supplies enlightenment narratives of universal history with the sense of historical discontinuity, the idea that there is something 'distinctive and superior about modernity'.[352] It finds its expression in the antinomical, binary pairs that inform such narratives: enlightenment versus myth, knowledge versus superstition, humanity versus barbarism, and so on. In whatever specific way one chooses to tell the story, enlightenment universal histories presuppose that there is something radically, qualitatively different and superior that distinguishes enlightenment (or modernity) from other formations of reason and sociality.

On the other hand, enlightenment (or modernity) can be said to be also the first emphatically *historically self-reflective* formation of reason – it is one whose own conceptual horizon constitutes a 'historico-philosophical perspective: one's own standpoint [is] to be brought to reflective awareness within the horizon of history as a whole'.[353] The emergence of

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[348] G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 333.
[349] DE, 73.
[350] Jürgen Habermas, 'Modernity's Consciousness of Time and Its Need for Self-Reassurance', in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 5.
[351] Habermas, 'Modernity's Consciousness of Time', 7.
[352] Brian O'Connor, 'Philosophy of History', ed. Deborah Cook (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2008), 181.
[353] Habermas, 'Modernity's Consciousness of Time', 6.

this distinct historical self-reflexivity marks also the formation of the image of human history as a uniform, continuous development, which is 'generally conceived as an upward development'.[354] Enlightenment narratives of universal history are tasked with reconstructing the whole of human history as a story of how one's present formation of reason and social life rests on a continuous succession of the actualisations and failures of preceding such formations, so that they can be shaped up and grasped in the form of a unified narrative.[355]

In the German tradition, starting with Kant and continuing through to Hegel and Marx – the tradition Adorno and the Frankfurt School are most directly indebted, and critically responding to – universal-historical narratives are concerned with conceiving the past as part of the project of conceptualising and actualising human freedom. Accordingly, in Hegel's paradigmatic version, history is conceived and constructed as a continuous development of progress in the self-consciousness of freedom, starting from the emergence of self-consciousness and the struggle of recognition between two self-consciousnesses – a process that engenders the succession of historical actualisations and failures of recognition that leads to progressively more complex historical formations for the possibility of actualising recognition between human subjects and thereby, human freedom.[356] The construction of such a narrative is seen as itself a requirement for the achievement of freedom in a substantive sense, for being able to feel at home within the present formation of reason.[357] Such a narrative therefore enables authoritative, justificatory claims about the present to be made – as Adorno argues, this is the element of universal historical narratives that 'defends everything that has happened on the grounds of its necessity', which is connected with the assumption of a

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[354] HF, 80.
[355] E. Förster, *The Twenty–Five Years of Philosophy*, trans. B. Bowman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 306-373, see also Martin Shuster, 'Philosophy of History', in *A Companion to Adorno*, ed. Peter E. Gordon, Espen Hammer and Max Pensky (Hoboken: Wiley, 2019), 51.
[356] Hegel, G. W. F. *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991)
[357] Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 42; Shuster, 'Philosophy of History', 50.

‘continuous *unity* in history [which] seems to point to the idea that history has a positive meaning’.[358] The present can be justified on the grounds of its necessarily proceeding from the formations of reason that preceded it, right back to the original point of origin.[359]

This helps make sense of the tension or contradiction internally structuring enlightenment narratives of universal history – enlightenment translates its oppositional self-understanding, its conception of itself as radically discontinuous with the past, into a retrospective narrative of continuous, progressive development, whereby all previous history appears as a gradual preparation or rehearsal for the present. How is such a history, conceived as continuous progression from a singular point of origin and developing in accordance with a singular principle (or set thereof) supposed to give rise to something radically discontinuous, emphatically new? This resembles the dialectical motif of the transformation of quantity into quality – gradual, cumulative, evolutionary change in quantity is supposed to eventually result in a sudden, discontinuous revolutionary change in quality. It is this sleight of hand that enlightenment narratives of universal history are tasked with performing – and it is one which renders them most vulnerable to the charge that what such developmental histories present as the radically new is in fact, the old in disguise. Adorno, who often speaks of the construction of universal history, the attempt to subsume all of history under a single concept, as a ‘gigantic analytical judgment’, or a ‘syllogism’, argues that this attempt in fact precludes the emergence of anything qualitatively new.[360] As he formulates this idea in relation to Hegel’s philosophy of history:

> The self-movement of the concept, the conception of history as a syllogism, as it is to be found in Hegel’s philosophy, is no developmental doctrine … the law

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[358] HF, 87-88.
[359] O’Connor, ‘The Philosophy of History’, 181.
[360] Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Spengler After the Decline’, in *Prisms* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1983), 66.

> that, according to Hegelian dialectic, governs the restlessly destructive unfolding of the ever-new consists in the fact that at every moment the ever-new is also the old lying close at hand … the latest thing is always the old terror, the myth, which consists in that blind continuum of time that continuously retracts itself.[361]

With this reconstruction of the narrative dimension of enlightenment universal histories in place, we are now in a position to make sense of my earlier claim – that the *Dialectic* mimes a universal history, but manipulates its operative parameters, viz. its narrative dimension, in order to undermine the idea of continuous progress embodied in such constructions, and thereby also the self-understanding of enlightenment that is reliant upon them.

At first sight, the *Dialectic* appears to stick the conventional story of continuous, progressive development that enlightenment tells about itself, and in accordance with which 'mimetic, mythical and metaphysical forms of behaviour [are] successively regarded as stages of world history which [have been] left behind'.[362] This can be easily gleaned from the text's historicising organisation, narrative arc and specific moments chosen for detailed elaboration – prehistoric society, Homeric Greece, early modern Enlightenment, and finally culminating with the present day. And just like in the case of a conventional universal history, this narrative of continuous progression initially appears to mediate enlightenment's radically oppositional self-understanding, as expressed in the multitudinous set of antinomical, binary pairs – enlightenment versus myth, knowledge versus superstition, mastery of nature versus natural compulsion, humanity versus barbarism, moral rigor versus amorality, and so on. It certainly does not seem accidental that the first chapter of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, having

[361] Theodor W. Adorno, 'Reflections on Class Theory', in *Can One Live After Auschwitz: A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 95.
[362] DE, 24.

originally been entitled 'Myth and Enlightenment', and then 'Dialectic of Enlightenment', eventually ended up receiving the title 'The *Concept* of Enlightenment'. As James Schmidt notes,[363] Adorno and Horkheimer's account of the emergence and historical development of enlightenment rationality out of myth could thereby 'rightly claim the status of a Hegelian "concept": a contradictory figure "in which everything is always that which it is because it becomes that which it is not"'.[364]

On the face of it then, *Dialectic* would seem to reprise the story of enlightenment as a story of progressive disenchantment and growth of human sovereignty, a process in which 'each step has been an advance, a stage of enlightenment', and that somehow is meant to result in the revolutionary rupture that modern enlightenment conceives itself as, advancing 'from the very beginning under the banner of radicalism', this being 'what distinguishes it from any of the earlier stages of demythologisation'.[365]

I have tried to bring into relief the contradiction at the heart of this conventional way of telling the story of enlightenment – subsuming the idea of discontinuity within a narrative of continuous progression which strains at the very claim of discontinuity and enlightenment's own conception of itself as the radical, qualitatively progressive leap forward. Adorno and Horkheimer's move may be said to simply seize on this contradiction at the heart of the

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[363] Schmidt, 'Language, Mythology and Enlightenment', 824.
[364] Horkheimer 1993, quoted in Schmidt, 'Language, Mythology and Enlightenment', 824. The model for this account was, by admission of both authors, Hegel's dialectic of faith and enlightenment in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in which Hegel described the spread of enlightenment in its confrontation with religious belief as the 'diffusion of perfume in an unresisting atmosphere' (Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 331). This passage had such a hold on Horkheimer that it led him to claim that what he and Adorno were trying to provide in their book was nothing less than an understanding of the process of enlightenment 'of which Hegel says that if started it is irresistible' (Horkheimer 1996, quoted in Schmidt, 'Language, Mythology', 824). The argument of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* can be said to mirror Hegel's description of the way enlightenment, in its purely negative attitude towards religious belief, faith, fails to perceive how its attack on faith employs principles which are 'implicit in faith itself' (Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 344). It could be claimed, with J. M. Bernstein, that on one level Adorno and Horkheimer simply extend and radicalise the basic conceptual structure of Hegel's account of faith and enlightenment to the world-historical process of disenchantment or societal rationalisation. See J. M. Bernstein, 'Negative Dialectic as Fate: Adorno and Hegel', in *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, ed. Tom Huhn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2005)
[365] DE (Cumming), 92.

narrative and harness its own critical force against it, and thereby against the self-understanding of enlightenment. To this end, while superficially retaining a narrative of continuous progression, the *Dialectic* dissolves the set of antimonial pairs expressive of enlightenment's oppositional self-understanding.

The chief example here is, of course, the speculative identification of myth and enlightenment that I have discussed at length above, through which Adorno and Horkheimer push enlightenment's claim of discontinuity from its familiar historical locus (at the end of feudalism), back to what enlightenment paradigmatically takes itself to be discontinuous from, namely, myth. Whilst enlightenment can only conceive itself as the other of myth, as the negativity that dissolves mythic superstition, superseding it once and for all in order to replace it with knowledge and mastery over nature, this move dissolves the antinomy between the two. Rather than being simply the illusory claim of a naïve anthropomorphism, the 'projection of subjective properties onto nature … the reflections of human beings who allow themselves to be frightened by natural phenomena',[366] myth is said to be itself already a form of enlightenment, containing a 'theoretical element' by virtue of which it sought not only 'to report, to name, to tell of origins – but also therefore to narrate, record, explain'[367]. As such, it is not modern enlightenment, but already myth that 'set in motion the endless process of enlightenment, by which with ineluctable necessity, every definite theoretical view is subjected to the criticism that it is only a belief'.[368] Myth is not, on this reading, the sleep of reason producing monsters, the irrational response of helpless humanity faced with an overpowering, inscrutable nature. Rather, it already marks the awakening of the rational subject, striving to comprehend such nature. It is not, in other words, a mere historical anteroom in the long rehearsal for enlightenment proper, but itself already the entry into enlightenment.

[366] DE, 4.
[367] DE, 5.
[368] DE, 7.

But once the antinomy of myth and enlightenment has been levelled down in this way – and it is levelled down from the other side too, as I've discussed in the previous section – then the universal historical narrative of continuous progression encumbered with mediating from one to the other can no longer perform this mediating work. In this way, what initially seemed like the story of reason's progressive growth that would, in the conventional case culminate with the triumphant break into the realm of reason, freedom and progress, now appears as the deception it has been all along, the sleight of hand that 'makes the new appear as something predetermined and which therefore really is the old'.[369]

It is in this sense that we may now better understand the earlier claim that the *Dialectic* enacts the failure of enlightenment narratives of universal history to realise themselves as narratives of progress. By retaining the aspect of continuity, but collapsing the oppositional significance that sustains enlightenment's self-understanding, Adorno and Horkheimer's text frustrates the narrative it reprises from effecting the progression from myth to enlightenment – or similarly, from barbarism to humanity, from prehistory to history, from superstition to knowledge, etc. Instead, the universal history that's been mimetically reprised stands controverted, and in this way the text reverts attention back to the aspect of continuous progress itself. This aspect would initially seem to be one of genuine progress, but now appears to have been one of stasis and even cyclical repetition: 'the course of history as a whole thinks of itself as progressive in many respects, and actually is so, but 'nevertheless … in its natural course it remains constantly the same'.[370] If the human history narrated in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is progressive, it is progressive in only the limited sense of humanity's progressive control over nature – an aspect that is essential for human survival, but which eventually turns into its opposite, and threatens that survival, when taken to be the *only* marker of progress. This is how

[369] DE, 21.
[370] HF, 140

we may understand Adorno's oft-quoted remark that '[n]o universal history leads from savagery to humanity, but one indeed from the slingshot to the H-bomb'.[371]

What prevents this from amounting to a negative or regressive universal history after all, one that is scarcely distinguishable from Spengler's – or even more so, Weber's pessimistic historical vision in which the process of world-historical rationalisation is construed to be apparently progressive and emancipatory but in reality as leading to humanity's increasing imprisonment in the 'iron cage' of impersonal, dehumanising social systems? I would like here to refer, once again, to the twin-tracked attitude of 'earnestness' and 'play' (and the specific notion of irony enabled by this attitude) that I used to make sense of the speculative identification of myth and enlightenment in the previous section. The 'universal history' provided by the *Dialectic* is meant earnestly or seriously to the extent that it picks out something essential about the intrinsic structure of all previous human history – the idea that in the form of the unreflective domination over nature, the progressive growth of human rationality as the growing ability of the human species to preserve itself is inherently antagonistic to the interests of the particular human beings it ensnares and 'harbours within itself an element of self-destruction'.[372] That this can be legitimately conceived as a universal history is not at all far-fetched: in *History and Freedom*, Adorno speaks of the 'element of truth' in the much-criticised idea of universal history, vindicating that idea along Weberian lines.[373]

All the same, this negative 'universal history' is not to be taken *all that* seriously, and it helps once again to refer to the sense in which the *Dialectic* does not construct history simply

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[371] ND, 313-315, Redmond's translation used.
[372] HF, 17.
[373] Adorno argues that considering the extent to which one can witness 'something of a convergence towards a kind of universal standard at the level of technical rationality' that sweeps across frontiers of nations, cultures, etc, it takes little to convince oneself of the 'power of this trend toward universal history' – and 'doubtless this element of truth can be traced back to periods in which such a universalist element did not exist, at least not one implicit in the process indispensable for the reproduction of life and the social formations contained in them or in the forms taken by the forces of production' (HF 14-15).

in the of ‘identification *of* the thing’, but also, and more importantly, in the mimetic, playful mode of ‘identification *with* the thing’, which it is addressed to, viz. enlightenment thinking, in its historical self-understanding. In other words, it is vitally important to see the extent to which Adorno and Horkheimer’s construction of history amounts to an attempt to reprise the conventional, progressive universal histories of the enlightenment for the sake of undermining their philosophical legitimacy not only thematically, but at the most fundamental, narrative level, and to thereby revert attention back to idea of progress that is embodied in such universal histories. The structure of this procedure is captured aptly in Adorno’s claim that ‘[u]niversal history must be construed and denied’.[374] The *Dialectic* mimes a conventional, enlightenment universal history and deploys the inconsistency of their own narrative structure against itself, in order to ‘deny’ them and their legitimacy in propping up enlightenment’s progressive self-image. The main goal of this procedure is not the conventional one of a universal history – of making a claim about the essential tendency of human history and human rationality *as such*, but the goal of a *critique* of enlightenment universal history carried out in its own medium and condemned with the force of its own internal contradiction. If the *Dialectic* does articulate a negative or regressive universal history, it is at best what Martin Shuster has called a ‘*minimal* regressive universal history’,[375] and one that is not endowed with a metaphysical ‘thickness’ or ontological dignity of a conventional universal history. Rather, Adorno claims that this minimal, universal history is one that only exists *insofar as* the principle of progressive, instrumental, nature-dominating rationality continues to be at work – hence, ‘universal history exists precisely to the same degree as the principle of particularity, or as I now prefer to call it, the principle of antagonism, persists and perpetuates itself’.[376]

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[374] ND, 320.
[375] Shuster, ‘Philosophy of History’, 59.
[376] HF, 14.

3

Dialectic of Enlightenment from the Perspective of its Critical Subject

We need not suppose that appeal to emotion belongs to those who strive in the direction of fascism, while democratic propaganda must limit itself to reason and restraint.[377]

Introduction

So far, I have argued that the specific form of composition of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* can be grasped as motivated by philosophical considerations concerning its critical *object*, enlightenment, or 'the real movement of bourgeois society as a whole from the perspective of the idea embodied in its personalities and institutions'[378] In line with this, I have predominantly been speaking of the target of Adorno and Horkheimer's critique in the supra-individual, impersonal terms of modern bourgeois society's idea of itself as this is objectively embodied in 'concrete historical forms, the institutions of society with which [this idea] is intertwined'.[379] This is the self-understanding such as this can be seen to inform the institutions and practices that make up the social fabric, and it is one that I have argued to be *historical* in an emphatic sense. The task of critique, roughly, is that of staging a confrontation between society's historical self-understanding and its 'real movement', the actual historical process by way of which society reproduces itself and the life of its members.

At the same time, the object of Adorno and Horkheimer's critique, the actual historical process of bourgeois society seen from the perspective of its historical self-understanding, is the very process by way of which a certain type of historical *subject*, with a specific form of

[377] Theodor W. Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality* (London: Verso, 2019), 976.
[378] DE, xvi.
[379] Ibid.

historical self-understanding is constituted. In what follows, I will explicate why the *Dialectic*'s critical procedure can be seen as motivated by considerations concerning the specific historical constitution of human subjectivity, including and especially their psychological constitution.

In Chapter One, I argued that Nietzsche accords affects and psychological factors in general a prime role in explaining why human beings think and act in accordance with contemporary morality and how they can continue to have the same moral commitments even when the rational beliefs involved in these commitments have been disproved. This, I argued, should be understood to motivate the specific textual composition of *Genealogy of Morality*. Below, I will argue that the textual composition of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* – conceived as inseparable from its specific strategy of critique – should be understood to be motivated by similar considerations. Enlightenment rationality, 'the real movement of bourgeois society',[380] the historical process by way of which this society holds together and reproduces itself, is a process that has a crucial role not only in constituting human beings as individual rational subjects, in shaping their conscious beliefs and practical commitments, but also in shaping their very psychic constitution, and especially their unconscious and preconscious reactions.

1.Individuality and Socialisation

The historical process of modern society, as I argued above, asserts itself objectively, independently of the interests, needs, and indeed even the consciousness and will of the human beings caught up in it, in such a way that 'no single mind and no single human will suffices truly and effectively to resist it'.[381] But this process doesn't *only* realise itself objectively, but also – *subjectively*, hence Adorno's claim that 'what prevails always passes not only merely

[380] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), xvi. Henceforth cited as DE.
[381] HF, 26.

over people's heads but *through* them', it is 'something that also prevails *in* them'.[382] Though it is vitally important to appreciate the 'objective nature of history', and the sense in which it is something that, in the first place, happens *to* human beings, this does not imply construing human history in the manner of an ineffable, substantive rational force beyond human beings that simply directs the actions of human beings from above akin to a divine providence, 'a divine plan that floats above mankind'.[383] Rather, history, in all its antagonism to the particular human beings on the receiving end of it, realises itself subjectively, too – 'events assert themselves over people's heads because they assert themselves *in* people's minds themselves'.[384]

This line of argument is supported first, on the most general level, by the claim that unlike the common sense view, individual human subjects and the very category of the individual are not naturally, transhistorically given, but socially and historically produced, they are the 'products of history'.[385]

This is not to deny that human beings are naturally individuated in a *biological sense*, in that they come into existence as single, particular beings. But it is to suggest first, that in contrast to animals who are also biologically individuated in this sense (perhaps with the exception of certain species like corals), the individuation specific to human beings is much thicker and determinate, and perhaps qualitatively distinct, in that it is a *reflexive* category – it entails that human subjects attain self-awareness or self-consciousness of their own individuality. Adorno claims that 'individuality is a reflexive concept, that is to say, we can only speak of individuality where individual subjects become conscious of their individuality

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[382] HF, 26.
[383] HF, 5. Adorno is restating a fundamentally Hegelian idea here. Hegel claims that 'we cannot … be satisfied … with the merely abstract, undetermined faith in the universal statement that there is a Providence, without determining its definite acts. On the contrary, we must seriously try to recognise the ways of Providence, its means and manifestations in history', in G. W. F. Hegel, *Reason in History*, trans. Robert S. Hartman (Indianapolis: The Liberal Arts Press, 1953), 15-16.
[384] HF, 27.
[385] HF, 70.

and singularity, in contrast to the totality, and only define themselves as individuals, as particular beings, in the consciousness of this opposition'.[386] Elsewhere, Adorno and Horkheimer state similarly that 'only he differentiates himself from the interests and aspirations of others … who establishes his self-preservation and development as a norm, is an individual'.[387]

Secondly, the claim is that human individuation thus understood – as the self-awareness of one's own individuality in differentiation from and opposition to, external reality and the individuality of others – is a historical achievement. The self-awareness of the individual human subject *as* an individual only comes about in the process of human socialisation, and arguably does so in a definitive, substantive sense only with the entry into modernity,[388] and especially with the rise of modern bourgeois society. The very general principle of this society presupposes the existence of free individuals, who, in pursuing their own particular interest, thereby serve the general interest of society as a whole.[389]

So, it is first in this general sense that the historical process of bourgeois society – enlightenment – may be said to realise itself not only objectively, over the heads of human beings, which would thereby be rendered the mere passive executors of the historical process, but also subjectively, in and through human beings, in the sense that their very individuality is itself a product of the historical process, the self-consciousness that renders them individuals in the first place is a social consciousness, a function of human socialisation, a result of the inclusion of human beings in society as a whole.

Liberal capitalism introduced an individualistic type of socialisation that presupposed the existence of a multitude of subjects pursuing their interests independently of each other.

[386] HF, 70-71.
[387] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Aspects of Sociology* (London: Heinemann, 1973), 44-45.
[388] For which reason, the category 'individual' as a designation for the particular human being hardly occurs before the beginning of the Renaissance, for instance. See HF 70, and Horkheimer and Adorno, *Aspects*, 44.
[389] 'The form of the individual is itself is one proper to a society which maintains its life by means of the free market, where free and independent economic subjects come together', in Horkheimer and Adorno, *Aspects*, 45.

The individual came into being as the ‘power cell of economic activity’ - ‘Emancipated from the tutelage of earlier economic stages, individuals fended for themselves alone’.[390] The competitive market economy, characterised by the existence of a multitude of small-scale, privately owned firms provided the economic basis for the emergence of the individual. This was typified, of course, above all in the figure of the independent proprietor who had to learn how to promote his long-term economic interests, those of the small enterprise of which he was in charge and which he had to defend against his competitors, by renouncing momentary pleasures and instinctual needs – the bourgeois individual ‘could maintain his own long-term interests at the expense of ephemeral instinctual gratifications’.[391] It is in this process of adjusting to the objective requirements of social existence, those of individual self-preservation through instinctual control and renunciation, that the individual as such comes into existence, as a self-conscious, rational subject. The economic subject of the bourgeois era develops a ’strong yet sober ego, maintaining interests that transcended his immediate needs’[392] and by virtue of which they are able to respond adequately to the challenges of competitive society. The subjects that were able and required to fend for themselves ‘had to think for themselves’[393], having to learn how to defend their enterprise against competitors and prepare for all economic and political eventualities, which stimulated them to learn from the past and formulate plans for the future. Not least importantly, because the material conditions for this individualised form of socialisation are relatively stable – the privately owned enterprise being managed on the assumption of being passed down in the family – the deliberations of the economic subject assumes a temporally continuous, long-term horizon, extending ‘far beyond his own life span’.[394] Thus the self-preserving economic agent of liberal capitalism emerges as the

[390] DE, 168.
[391] Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 98.
[392] Horkheimer, *Eclipse*, 99.
[393] Ibid.
[394] Ibid.

individual proper, as a subject conscious of their own identity as differentiated from that of other subjects, equipped with foresight, self-responsibility, and a temporal continuity of consciousness that enables them to face the uncertainties of the future. In however rudimentary a form, the bourgeois individual acquires an intellectual autonomy that enables him not only to transcend the immediacy of his instinctual needs and given position in society, but also to develop an interest in cultivating his own personality.[395]

Classical psychoanalysis captures the psychological structure of the bourgeois individual, the 'internal small business'[396] as a complex dynamic of conscious and unconscious elements in which the ego is tasked with negotiating with the superego, the internalised agency of social control, in order to keep the instinctual demands originating from the id within the limits set by self-preservation.[397] The task of the ego is that of 'co-ordinator of all psychological impulses'[398] in order to adjust the subject's conduct within external reality. As such, it necessarily traverses the psychic and extra-psychic regions: 'although itself psychic in origin it is supposed to arrest the play of inner forces and check it against reality'[399] , although the ego emerges out of the domain of the psychological, it 'constitutes itself through objective moments beyond the immanence of the psyche, through the adequacy of its judgments to states of affairs'.[400]

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[395] Ibid., 110-111.
[396] DE, 168.
[397] In David Riesman's well-known sociological study of character types, this corresponds to the concept of the inner-directed character, emerging in the modern era and developing, via his strong family upbringing and communal socialisation, an ability to 'live socially without strict and self-evident tradition-direction', in David Riesman et al, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), 14. This is a highly individualised subject equipped with an inner psychological 'gyroscope' that enables him to become aware of the multiple and competing aims society presents him with and affords him a high degree of flexibility in adapting himself to his environment in order to meet his chosen aims – 'the inner directed person becomes capable of maintaining a delicate balance between the demands upon him of his goal in life and the buffetings of his external environment' (Riesman et al, *Lonely Crowd*, 16)
[398] Theodor W. Adorno, 'Sociology and Psychology', *New Left Review* 47 (Jan/Feb 1968): 86.
[399] Adorno, 'Sociology and Psychology', 86.
[400] Ibid.

2.Regression of Individuality

The very same historical process of socialisation that gives rise to the figure of the individual - in however rudimentary, limited and fleeting a form – ends up undermining the objective conditions and necessity for individuation thus understood, and produces a regression – from a psychoanalytic standpoint, at least – in the psychodynamic structure of human subjectivity. In place of the relatively intellectually autonomous bourgeois individual with a well-developed conscious, rational ego, the era of advanced capitalism calls for a submissive, intellectually conformist type of subject whose socialisation is no longer mediated through a conscious process of understanding and adapting himself to social reality, but increasingly through unconscious and preconscious identification with that reality.

The progressive development of capitalism sees the commodity form assume a decisive role in the mediation of all social relations. The abstraction of value that first takes place in commodity exchange, what Adorno describes as the 'underlying social fact through which socialisation first comes about',[401] progressively becomes the universal structuring principle of all areas of society, leading toward their ever-greater integration and homogenisation under the same mechanism of abstraction. As Adorno puts it in a late essay, 'elements of the social process that were formerly separate – and this includes living human beings – have been brought down to a common denominator. Material production, distribution and consumption are administered jointly. Their boundaries flow into one another, even though within the overall social process they were at once different from one another and related, and for that reason they respected what was qualitatively different. Everything is now one.'[402] This is concomitant with the tendency towards increased concentration and centralisation of capitalist production, which progressively erodes the competitive market of small-scale independent producers

[401] Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 31.
[402] Theodor W. Adorno, 'Late Capitalism or Industrial Society', trans. Rodney Livingstone, in *Can One Live After Auschwitz: A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 124

characteristic of the early bourgeois period in favour of oligopolistic and monopolistic forms of productive ownership.

The more the social process detaches itself from the needs of living human beings and becomes an abstract function of its own self-reproduction and self-expansion (or what is the same thing, of the valorisation of value for its own sake) and the more production gets concentrated and centralised in the hands of big business and state agencies, the less it needs to be mediated through a multitude of self-conscious, relatively intellectually autonomous individuals. 'In the era of large combines and world wars', Adorno and Horkheimer write:

> the mediation of the social process by innumerable monads is proving obsolete. The subjects of the drive economy are being psychologically expropriated, and the drive economy is being more rationally operated by society itself. The individual no longer has to decide what he or she is supposed to do in a given situation in a painful inner dialogue between conscience, self-preservation and drives. For the human being as wage earner the decision is taken by a hierarchy extending from trade associations to the national administration; in the private sphere it is taken by the schema of mass culture, which appropriates even the most intimate impulses of its forced consumers … If, in liberalism, the individuation of a section of the population was necessary for the adaptation of society as a whole to the state of technology, today the functioning of the economic apparatus demands that the masses be directed without the hindrance of individuation. The economically determined direction of the whole of society, which has always governed the mental and physical constitution of human beings, is causing the organs which enabled individuals to manage their lives autonomously to atrophy … the plans of the authorised experts and leaders

> have made individuals who plan their own happiness redundant. The irrationality of unresisting and eager adaption to reality becomes, for the individual, more reasonable than reason.[403]

To paraphrase the account of the change that has taken place according to Adorno and Horkheimer slightly - the economic organisation of society, which has in general always had a decisive role in shaping the form and content of human subjectivity, has developed from one that had required and facilitated the formation of individuals with a psychological makeup that allowed them to 'manage their lives autonomously' to one that neither requires nor facilitates such an individualised form of socialisation. The socially important decisions that individual economic subjects had previously been tasked with get transferred to the economic, political and cultural institutions of society, where they become a matter for planning and administration by 'authorised experts and leaders', institutions that are ultimately harnessed to the goal of social self-preservation, of society's self-reproduction through the valorisation of value. On the contrary, the new formation of industrialised capitalism advances the power of the socio-economic process to such an extent that it 'demands that the masses be directed without the hindrance of individuation' – hence the claim that individuals have been 'psychologically expropriated' – thus causing the subjective 'organs' that enabled the self-differentiated, self-conscious socialisation of individuals to 'atrophy'.

Chief of these organs is of course the ego, whose cognitive function – based on instinctual control and renunciation in the interest of individual self-preservation – presupposes some material basis for the individuation of human beings, some objective scope within which social individuals are able to realise themselves as individuals by maintaining and pursuing their own interests, and in terms of which they may rationally justify the renunciation and

[403] DE, 168-169.

control of their instinctual demands. The intellectual autonomy of the ego during the early phases of bourgeois society might have been illusory to a lesser or greater extent, not to mention being obviously limited to the propertied middle classes.[404] Nevertheless, bourgeois society was the first form of human society which, by virtue of its mode of production, provided at least the material *possibility* for (in principle, all) human beings in society to develop a strong, intellectually autonomous ego and thereby for their individuation – we may even claim, individual self-realisation. It is this very possibility that is being undermined by the progressive development of bourgeois socialisation itself. In advanced industrialised capitalism, all individuals – the 'captains of industry' as well as the working class – end up being progressively deprived of the material prerequisites for their individuation and reduced to the status of mere 'functions of their functions',[405] all while the technological development of the industrial forces of production has made it objectively possible to eliminate material deprivation universally.[406] It therefore becomes decreasingly possible for social individuals to rationally justify the constant renunciations and adjustments that society continues to demand of them for their own individual self-preservation – 'rendered superfluous by the productive forces', such renunciations and exertions 'become objectively irrational'.[407]

The irrationality of the socialisation process, concentrated in the overwhelming power of the external world which no single individual can evade if they are to survive, means that the rational ego 'cannot perform at all adequately the function allotted to it by society',[408] and in terms of psychoanalytic theory it is 'clearly unequal to its task'.[409] If it were to live up to this

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[404] 'The masses, of course, could not aspire to this position, but the presence of a numerous class of such individuals genuinely interested in humanistic values, laid the ground for theoretical thought and artistic creativity that expressed, by virtue of their inherent truth, the needs of society as a whole', in Horkheimer, *Eclipse*, 110-111.
[405] HF, 3.
[406] 'Material needs, which long seemed to mock progress, have been potentially eliminated; thanks to the present state of the technical forces of production no one on the planet need suffer deprivation anymore', in CM: 144.
[407] ND, 349.
[408] Adorno, 'Sociology and Psychology', 86-87.
[409] Ibid., 87.

task, it has 'to be able to assert itself in reality', and to do so 'the ego has to understand reality and operate consciously',[410] and yet since this cognitive activity is premised on the rational justification of instinctual renunciation (or the ultimate gratification of instinctual demands) that society fails to provide,[411] then the ego has to a large extent to give up its cognitive function for the sake of enabling the individual to effect the senseless renunciations imposed on him for the sake of his social self-preservation - 'the ego's cognitive activity, performed in the interests of self-preservation, has to be constantly reversed, and self-awareness foregone in the interests of self-preservation'.[412] Taxed beyond its powers, the rational ego 'has itself to become unconscious, part of the instinctual dynamic it is still, however, supposed to transcend'.[413]

Insofar as the ego fails to develop its inherent potential for self-differentiation in relation to the unconscious, it regresses in a psychoanalytic sense. This does not however imply that it cancels itself out and disappears into the unconscious – rather, the ego 'retains several of its functions it had acquired as societal agent' and subordinates them to the demands of the unconscious'.[414] Thus, the rational ego, which in its very concept was to go beyond the unconscious, 're-enters the service of the unconscious and may thus strengthen its force'.[415] Deflected away from the scrutiny of a self-aware ego, which has now entered its service, the unconscious 'happily co-operates with the organised standardization without'[416] - in other words, it opens itself up to being more directly influenced and shaped by the overwhelming external social forces - although again, and this will become important later, this does not happen without the mediation of the now weakened, unreflective ego. This idea is expressed

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[410] Ibid.
[411] 'the resolution of the antinomy of universal and particular remains mere ideology as long as the instinctual renunciation society expects of the individual neither can be objectively justified as true and necessary nor later provides him with the delayed gratification'. Ibid., 86.
[412] Ibid., 87.
[413] Ibid.
[414] Ibid.
[415] Ibid.
[416] Ibid., 80.

in Adorno's claim that the historical process of socialisation ('enlightenment') shapes subjectivity all the way down to the unconscious mental life of human beings and thereby ensures its self-reproduction by compelling blind adaptation and adjustment of them:

> The historical coercion that moulds human beings enters into the very core of their psyche … the more individuals identify with the universal – not consciously, but in their unconscious and preconscious reactions – the more they can be said to distance themselves in a sense from the universal by the fact that their identification with it is blind and defenceless because they are acting unconsciously, as a form of adaptation.[417]

Because the socialisation process can only reproduce the life of human beings in an irrational form directed against their conscious interests, the latter 'can achieve their own socialisation only in a way that is irrational'.[418] As the irrational rationality of the social process enters the inner recesses of human subjectivity and thereby psychologically 'expropriates' it, it 'gets melted together with the psychological residues inside the instinctual dynamic', so that 'reality is translated into the language of the id'.[419] The id, the internal unconscious dynamic of instinctual forces, is thereby itself transformed and may be said to regress. In the psychic economy of the early bourgeois individual, the id represented an 'ex territorial' agency, occupying a similar place to that of use value in classical political economy.[420] At the early stage of capitalist development, the id is constituted of differentiated forms of object-libido that find expression in the form of subjective needs, affects, wishes and desires, much as these are

[417] HF, 71.
[418] HF, 72.
[419] Adorno, 'Sociology and Psychology', 78-79.
[420] Stefan Breuer, 'Adorno's Anthropology', in *Telos* 64 (1985): 24.

not to be understood as purely natural but already socially mediated. Libidinal needs are still objectively 'cathected', i.e. oriented towards their objective gratification in reality, just as they were in pre-bourgeois society, even if need gratification is already and necessarily secondary to the socially primary goal of profit maximisation and therefore has to be indefinitely delayed, if not altogether renounced or modified in some other way for the sake of enabling the individual's social self-preservation. With the progressive integration and structuration of capitalist society in accordance with the abstract rationality of the commodity form, the maximisation of profit for the sake of valorising value, libidinal needs are increasingly transferred from the use value of commodities to their exchange value, from their concretely useful, qualitatively differentiated aspect to their exchangeability for something else such as enhanced social standing or value.[421] What is consumed is increasingly this social fetish itself, especially in the culture industry, where it becomes the only use value of the commodity, all its other concrete qualities being disregarded and not even consciously registered. Stefan Breuer has described this as a 'change in the affect structure itself' – 'desire is no longer desire for an object, or in psychoanalytic terms, no longer object-libido', instead it is desire 'exclusively for the confirmation and maintenance of the endangered self, which can no longer find any footholds within social reality as a basis for achieving realization and thus is constantly thrown back upon itself'.[422]

Under the pressure of the external world and as a result of the ego's regression, the id therefore regresses as well - from the differentiated form of object-libido, it turns into the more developmentally primitive 'ego-libido', which Adorno describes as a 'psychodynamic derivative, a hybrid, ego-oriented and yet unsublimated, undifferentiated form of libido'.[423]

[421] 'Everything is perceived only from the point of view that it can serve as something else … [e]everything has value only insofar as it can be exchanged, not in so far as it is something in itself' (DE: 128)
[422] Breuer, 'Adorno's Anthropology', 24.
[423] Adorno, 'Sociology and Psychology', 88.

The ego-libido is highly *narcissistic* – as the subject is continuously prevented from gratifying their libidinal needs in externally cathected objects in the world, the unused libidinal energies get redirected back to the subject, or as Adorno puts it, narcissism consists in the fact that human beings are 'obliged to withhold a measure of their ability to love from, for instance, their loved ones, and instead love themselves in a repressed, unacknowledged, and therefore insidious manner'.[424] The narcissistic energies of the ego-libido fuel the rise of 'archaic' feelings of omnipotence and superiority and conversely raise the potential for 'narcissistic injury' whenever these feelings are challenged in any way. The narcissistic psychic economy of the individual is understood by Adorno as a response to, and derivate of, the real social powerlessness of individuals. People have to constantly repress the conscious experience of their own powerlessness not only because their social self-preservation demands they give up their understanding of reality in favour of blind, unconscious adaption to it. In addition to this, once the narcissistic psychological mechanisms kick in, such understanding bears the risk of inflicting injury on individuals' narcissistic impulses and therefore has to be repressed by them for 'fear of realising that they themselves go to make up the false forces of domination before which they have every reason to cringe'.[425] As Adorno also puts it:

> [I]f people really were to become fully aware that their own selves – that is to say, the point where they believe that they belong entirely to themselves – that their own selves belong not to them but that they are, right down to and including their idiosyncrasies and peculiarities, what might be called the negative imprint of the universal, that would involve such a fearful loss of self-esteem as one tends to call it in bourgeois circles that in all probability they would be unable to bear it.[426]

[424] CM: 107.
[425] Adorno, 'Sociology and Psychology', 89.
[426] HF, 74.

3. Collective Narcissism – Nationalism, Opinion, Rationalisation

Narcissistic impulses intended at shoring up a frail ego produce a feeling of omnipotence that is flatly and continuously contradicted by the real powerlessness of individuals - they cannot master such impulses and hence they necessarily ricochet back to them.[427] This pent-up, perennially frustrated narcissistic libidinal energy can therefore be 'absorbed and satisfied only through idealisation as the partial transfer of the narcissistic libido to the object'.[428] Following Freud's study of group psychology, Adorno discerns the most pernicious example of this process of idealisation as the partial externalisation of narcissistic libido in nationalist mass movements. These are forms of collective narcissism whose political efficacy in rallying individuals for aims that contradict their rational interests is libidinal and not discursive for precise socio-psychological reasons. Nationalist and fascist movements do not win over the masses through rational argument,[429] but rely on converting the private narcissism of individuals which society constantly frustrates into collective narcissism that 'restores to them as individuals some of the self-esteem the same collective strips from them and that they hope to fully recover through their delusive identification with it'.[430] Nationalist and fascist mass formation thus functions by promoting the narcissistic identification of individuals with the collective subject of the nation, typically personalised in the image of the

[427] 'it is scarcely possible to make good the narcissistic loss, that is to say, the constant injuries offered to the narcissistically driven instincts whose violence cannot be exaggerated; it exceeds everything that the imagination can grasp, and I would say that this is true of every human being, without exception, in the world in which we live' (HF, 74).

[428] Theodor W. Adorno, 'Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda', in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, eds. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Urizen Books, 1978), 126.

[429] This is not only because nationalist and fascist movements promote objectively irrational political aims, but also due to the regression of the rational ego. Importantly, this socio-psychological understanding of the ego's regression also implies that progressive political movements at the very least cannot limit themselves to discursive means in appealing to people's rational interests for the sake of mass political organisation. Hence Adorno's assertion, at the end of the *Authoritarian Personality*, that 'we need not suppose that appeal to emotion belongs to those who strive in the direction of fascism, while democratic propaganda must limit itself to reason and restraint'.

[430] CM, 118.

nationalist or fascist leader. Through the use of a stock of psychological techniques, this serves to endow the leader image both with fantastical qualities of omnipotence and with resemblance to his followers – he is fashioned into a 'great little man' – and thus rendered into an idealised substitute for the narcissistic ego ideal that individuals fail to attain.[431] Hence 'the semblance of the leader image to an enlargement of the subject: by making the leader his ideal he loves himself, as it were, but gets rid of the stains of frustration and discontent which mar his picture of his own empirical self'.[432]

Collective narcissism through the idealising projection of narcissistic libido finds only its most flagrant and pernicious expression in such mass movements – its primary manifestation is much more insidious and generalised. It takes the form of the seemingly innocuous 'healthy' common sense and 'normal' opinion – socially universalised forms of consciousness that already contain a tendency towards rigidification and lack of self-reflexivity, and from which ultimately derive the varieties of 'unhealthy', pathological opinion like prejudice, superstition, conspiracy thinking, collective delusion, and so on. To have an opinion means to posit something as true without being certain of its truth. On Adorno's account, this is a subjective form of consciousness that 'does not yet have its object',[433] still lacking 'contact with what it intends' which would transform it from a merely subjective form of reasoning into knowledge. Since thinking relies not merely on the subjective faculty of correctly forming concepts, judgments and conclusions, but also in the ability of the subject to 'apply this faculty to what is unlike it',[434] the moment of thought's 'affective investment in the object' – its cathexis in objects outside the self – is 'not extrinsic to thought, not merely psychological but rather the condition of its truth'.[435] Where object-cathexis, the affective or

[431] Adorno, 'Freudian Theory', 127.
[432] Ibid., 126.
[433] CM, 110.
[434] CM, 109.
[435] Ibid.

libidinal investment of consciousness in objects outside the self, is structurally intact, individuals will have the cognitive power to apply their subjective *ratio* to objective reality for the sake of knowing and acting within it, and be well placed in using their reflective capacity to guard against taking their unsubstantiated opinions as conclusively true without empirical examination and deliberation.

The opposite tendency, where people cling stubbornly to their own unsubstantiated opinions and resist reflectively examining them, stems not only from a more fundamental 'potential for fixation' inherent, according to Adorno, in the very logical form of judgment.[436] Especially in the latest stage of bourgeois socialisation, this tendency is decisively reinforced by the psychological forces based on narcissism:

> Whoever has an opinion about a question that is still relatively open and undecided … tends to cling to that opinion, or in the language of psychoanalysis, to invest it with affect … The tendency is based on narcissism … Personal opinion becomes, as one's possession, an integral component of one's person, and anything that weakens that opinion is registered by one's unconscious and preconscious as though it were a personal injury. Self-righteousness, the propensity to insist on defending ridiculous opinions even when their falsity has become obvious to reason, attests to the prevalence of this situation.[437]

Forced to adapt themselves to the irrational rationality of a social world that confronts them as

[436] Ibid., 108. As Adorno puts it, '[t]he positing of an opinion, the mere statement that something is such and such, already implies the potential for fixation, reification … The logical form of a judgment, regardless of whether it is right or wrong, has in it something lordly, proprietary, that is then reflected in the insistence upon opinions as though they were property. Having an opinion at all, judging, already to a certain extent seals itself off from experience and tends toward delusion, while on the other hand only the person capable of judging possesses reason.'
[437] CM, 107-108.

alien and impenetrable, and that only amplifies and frustrates their narcissistic impulses, individuals invest these impulses in their own pre-existing opinions, thereby lending them epistemic authority they do not have. The narcissistic ego-libido, which has 'ricocheted back from its real goals' is thereby 'fused with moments specific to the ego',[438] reinforcing the atrophying of object-cathexis, the subjective investment of libido in the object that is essential to the ego's cognitive function, and 'where cathexis atrophies, intelligence becomes stultified'.[439] The socially compelled shift from object-libido to the narcissistic ego-libido reinforces intellectual stultification, the rational ego's regression, with the aid of individuals' own narcissistic energies. Effectively, the transfer of narcissistic libido onto one's own unsubstantiated opinions fixates and rigidifies them in the consciousness of the opinionated person, drying up their self-reflective capacities and consistently obstructing or distorting their genuinely cognitive relation to objective reality.

Adorno derives the psychological function of these socially generalised forms of false consciousness in a similar way to his analysis of mass movements. People do not cling to all kinds of widely accepted ideas and clichés even when they are obviously nonsensical simply because they have been intellectually stultified enough to buy into them. Rather, such ideas allow individuals to restore some of the self-esteem their social existence continuously robs them of, and to attain a roundabout gratification for their frustrated narcissistic libido and delusive pretensions of superiority - so that in clinging to their opinions they can, as it were, love themselves. 'Normal' as well as 'pathological' opinion procures facile, simplistic explanations 'through which contradictory reality can without great exertion be rendered free of contradiction',[440] and thereby 'deceptively removes the otherness between the

[438] Adorno, 'Sociology and Psychology', 88.
[439] CM, 109.
[440] CM, 111.

epistemological subject and the reality that slips away from him'.[441] In a contradictory world that eludes their rational understanding and in which they are constantly confronted with their own powerlessness, people will adopt all sorts of unsubstantiated beliefs as their own as long as

> they give them, no matter how spuriously, some orientation and momentarily soothe their feelings of alienation from life … and there is the narcissistic satisfaction that the facile opinion affords by reinforcing its adherents' belief that they themselves have known it, and that consequently they belong to the ones in the know.[442]

This psychological function is performed much more obviously in 'pathological' forms of opinion like superstition, occultism, prejudice, conspiratorial thinking and so on - forms of consciousness whose irrationality is plain to point out, but Adorno makes clear that 'normal' opinion, healthy common sense is an especially insidious manifestation of the narcissistic tendencies of reified, false consciousness, and going beyond that - even highly sophisticated, logically coherent forms of intellectual reflection.

The psychic economy of individuals under late industrial-capitalist conditions is based on the energies of the highly narcissistic ego-libido that has subordinated the 'extra-psychic' demands of the rational ego, whose function was to arrest the play of inner instinctual forces by checking them against its judgments of objective reality. Instead, the narcissistic individual conducts themselves in accordance with the 'intra-psychic', instinctual demands of the ego-

[441] Ibid., 111. See also HF 77: 'The success of race theory, which is based on something as close as so-called blood relationships and, ultimately, the family, has exploited these elements by contrasting them with remote, objective mechanisms, even though it is to these that human beings are in truth connected. Its immensely profound appeal was based on the illusion of closeness that is echoed in such formulae as the term 'national community' [Volksgemeinschaft] and which went to the innermost core of the human unconscious.'
[442] CM, 111.

libido – a libidinal ‘economy of forces’[443] in which anything that confirms the ego’s position is unconsciously or preconsciously registered as a narcissistic *gain*, and anything that weakens it – as a narcissistic *loss*. Whenever their opinions are exposed to any sort of rational criticism, individuals register this unconsciously or preconsciously as if it were a personal injury, a narcissistic loss. They are therefore much less likely to be receptive to criticism – hence ‘the all too prevalent tendency’, Adorno observes, ‘when confronted with a convincing and well-grounded judgment that nevertheless is discomfiting and cannot be refuted … to disqualify it by declaring it to be mere opinion’.[444]

As I argued above, the rational ego’s regression does not imply its self-cancellation, but only its subordination to unconscious demands. The ego not only ‘re-enters the service of the unconscious’ - which has itself become a function of the individual’s compulsive adaptation to a world inimical to his rational interests – it may also strengthen the force of the unconscious.[445] The phenomenon of ‘rationalisation’, or as Adorno puts it, ‘reason in the service of unreason’, is a particularly pernicious manifestation of this. Rationalisation is understood, on Adorno’s view, as designating all those statements that, ‘quite apart from their truth content, fulfil certain functions within the psychic economy of the speaker, the commonest being defence against unconscious tendencies’.[446] Where it takes this most common form of a defence mechanism, rationalisation fulfils the specific psychological function of warding off narcissistic injury:

> Solely in order to ward off the narcissistic injury he undergoes in exposing his opinion, the self-opinionated person develops an acumen that often far surpasses his intellectual means. The cleverness that is expended in the world

[443] CM, 110.
[444] Ibid., 106-107.
[445] Adorno, ‘Sociology and Psychology’, 87.
[446] Ibid., 81.

> for the purpose of defending narcissistic nonsense would probably be sufficient to change what is being defended. Reason in the service of unreason—in Freud's language, "rationalization"—rushes to the aid of opinion and so hardens it that nothing more can affect it or reveal its absurdity. Sublime theoretical systems have been built upon the most insane opinions. (ODS 108)

It is not difficult to see that what Adorno and Horkheimer call the 'stupidity of cleverness' in the *Dialectic* very much bears the features of rationalisation, a psychological, narcissistically driven defence mechanism whereby 'expert arguments', 'well-informed, farsighted judgments', 'prognoses based on statistics and experience'[447] are brought to bear for the sake of rationally defending what remains, at bottom, an irrational acceptance of a social world and historical process that is directed against their rational, conscious interests. As Adorno also describes this:

> People manage to come to terms with this phenomenon, with the realization that their own rationality is irrational, and that they do not obtain what their rational behaviour promises, only by making an irrational response. It is to accept the irrational course of the world, to identify with it and to make it their own. You can see this every day, in discussions, for example, where people simply echo what others say and produce 100,000 arguments to prove that things can't be any different, won't be any different and shouldn't be any different. It is as if they are inwardly prepared to take the side of whoever will prevent them from embarking on the course of action that would be best for them.[448]

[447] DE, 173.
[448] HF, 76.

Since the socio-historical process is understood by Adorno and Horkheimer to be destructive in a specific sense, i.e. to be directed against the conscious, rational interests of human beings, the latter can only be prevented from realising their true predicament in a way that is properly speaking irrational, and which relies on psychological factors, especially unconscious and preconscious ones. The importance of this point could not be overemphasised – in his *History and Freedom* lectures, Adorno refers to the psychological constitution of modern subjects as the irrational 'cement of the world as it exists', and a 'state of mind that blinds them to the unreconciled nature of life and leads them to accept and adopt as their own the very conditions that they feel to be their exact antitheses'.[449]

A crucial corollary of this is that it sets up a sort of vicious circle getting in the way of any direct attempt at bringing subjects to awareness of the fact that the rationality they have accepted as their own is irrational, that it is directed against their own rational interests. Subjects' psychological mechanisms of identification with that rationality create a powerful wall of resistance that militates against coming to such realisation, leading subjects either to ignore any such direct criticism, or to respond defensively and attempt to justify their theoretical and practical commitments by way of providing rationalisations. What Adorno and Horkheimer describe as 'the stupidity of cleverness' is a close enough description of this rationalising resistance to conventional forms of criticism. It is my contention that the above considerations concerning the state of modern subjectivity weigh against conventional forms of criticism that remain on the level of cogent argumentation, and leave unaddressed the psychological mechanisms at work in subjects that keep them attached to the prevalent form of rationality. Conversely, such considerations provide important clues for making sense of the textual composition and critical strategy of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* – which, I claim, is designed to bypass its typical reader's defence mechanisms, in order to then be in a position to

[449] HF, 78.

effectively unsettle the reader's psychological attachment to the prevalent form of rationality.

4

Dialectic of Enlightenment through the Prism of the Aesthetic – Kafka as a Critical Model

"I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound or stab us. If the book we're reading doesn't wake us up with a blow to the head, what are we reading for? … A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us.."

- Franz Kafka, "Letters to Friends, Family and Editors"

Introduction

In the preceding chapters I have argued that the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* instantiates a particular model of critique, carried out in a philosophical register in which the criteria of linguistic presentation rank on the same footing as the criteria of rational argumentation. For a critique of this sort, the specific linguistic presentation of the text is not of perfunctory, but of essential concern. We would misread the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* if we were to isolate from it a portable set of statements, theses or theories – such as, perhaps most temptingly but all the more infelicitously, a philosophy of history – and take these to constitute, by themselves, the genuine philosophical import or truth content of the text. To get an actual handle on this truth content, and develop an account of the procedure of performative critique in the text, I have attempted to show that it is of key importance to consider *how* these propositional contents appear in the text, their specific literary form of presentation. The philosophical truth content of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is not reducible to the truth or falsity of its propositions taken in isolation from the particular form through which they are presented and mutually interrelated in the text. Rather, this truth content *unfolds* in the course of the text's presentation, with an illocutionary force other than that of a standard theoretical argumentation. Adorno expresses the essence of this idea well: '…instead of reducing philosophy to categories, one would in a

sense have to compose it first … The crux is what happens in it, not a thesis or a position—the texture, not the deductive or inductive course of one-track minds'.[450]

In the passage just quoted, Adorno likens philosophy to something that has to be *composed* – akin to the composition of music – and argues that its substance, or 'crux' is not reducible to a set of fixed, stable categories, but consists rather in 'what happens in it' – we may say, not dissimilar to the unfolding of a musical movement. None of this accidental. In his programmatic statement on philosophical style, *The Essay as Form*, Adorno contends that philosophy that 'works emphatically at the form of its presentation', conscious of the non-identity, tension between presentation and subject matter, 'resembles art',[451] and elsewhere argues that '[p]hilosophy and art converge in their truth content: The progressive self-unfolding truth of the artwork is none other than the truth of the philosophical concept'.[452]

But there is a case to be made that for Adorno, philosophy and art not only converge in their truth content but also proceed towards it in methodologically congruous ways, deploying homologous strategies in order to enact a critique of modern rationality and the social organization of life. Under Adorno's interpretive gaze, artworks are disclosed as constructs that, while pursuing their own autonomous aesthetic objectives informed by the particular art-historical situation,[453] simultaneously draw on the overall socio-historical reality ordinarily experienced by individuals at the given moment. Artworks recapitulate the form of rationality that mediates ordinary socio-historical experience – the socially dominant norms, beliefs and narratives through which society understands itself and which ineluctably filters the ordinary experience of social individuals. The artistic process, however, does not recapitulate the form

[450] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (London: Routledge, 1973), 33.
[451] Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', in *Notes to Literature*, 18.
[452] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 130.
[453] What is meant here is that artistic production takes place, at any given historical moment, within a particular 'art-historical situation' – a set of aesthetic norms, expectations, and so on – which provides a certain set of criteria for what would be considered a 'successful' or 'authentic' work of art. This is not in the least to suggest that these aesthetic criteria are somehow purely formal or exclusive to the sphere of art – a view that may perhaps be ascribed to the likes of Clement Greenberg, but not to Adorno.

of rationality in order simply to repeat it and reproduce the ordinary pattern of experiences. Rather, works of art – or at least those that we may call the most ‘successful’ or ‘authentic’ works – are capable of processing and manipulating the formal elements of this rationality, the mediators of socially dominant experience, in such a way as to generate a new, unfamiliar and disorientating experience for the recipient of the work, one which may enable the latter to achieve a critical awareness of the irrational, regressive underside of modern rationality and the social organisation of life.

Adorno gives succinct expression to the critical comportment of art in his characterisation of artworks as the ‘mimesis of domination’. As Adorno puts it:

> The opposition of artworks to domination is mimesis of domination. They must assimilate themselves to the comportment of domination in order to produce something qualitatively distinct from the world of domination.[454]

Notwithstanding Adorno’s emphasis on the aesthetics of production and the primacy of the aesthetic object, it is vital not to overlook the role which the aesthetic subject continues to play in Adorno’s aesthetics. Adorno’s repeated insistences that artworks ‘*await* their interpretation’,[455] that ‘what the work *demands* from its beholder is knowledge, and indeed knowledge that does justice to it’ helps[456] elucidate the idea that the aesthetic object requires the contribution of an experiencing *subject* for its consummation, its successful accomplishment – what Adorno also refers to as the ‘objective mediatedness of art through the subject’.[457] Because of this, while artworks enact a ‘mimesis of domination’ through the

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[454] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 289.
[455] Ibid.,128, my italics.
[456] Ibid., 15, my italics.
[457] Ibid., 166.

objective constitution of their elements, they require their mediation by the subjective consciousness of the recipient that re-enacts the aesthetic mimesis in order to 'produce something qualitatively distinct from the world of domination'.

In this chapter, I will provide a reconstruction of the central elements of Adorno's aesthetics and, focusing particularly on Adorno's interpretation of Kafka, develop an account of Adorno's conception of aesthetic critique, which I contend displays substantial affinities with the model of philosophical critique that I have argued is operative in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Three general areas of convergence between these models should emerge in the course of my exposition – an affinity between the philosophical text and the work of art in terms of: 1) the principles of construction: both recapitulate or rehearse the constitutive moments of rationality, but subject them to a manipulation which subverts their internal consistency, 2) in doing so, philosophical texts and works of art alike are meant to elicit a disorientating, disruptive experience for the recipient, and 3) such a reception by the experiencing subject is a necessary requirement for the consummation of the truth content of both philosophical text and the work of art and thereby for the successful accomplishment of the critique of rationality enunciated by both. Making a case for the existence of a substantial affinity between these two models of critique – one philosophical and the other aesthetic – will provide me with an interpretive lens which will enable me both to provide further support for my reading of the *Dialectic* by better elucidating certain features, *and* to complement this model by expanding on other, less developed features.

To make an effective case for this affinity that goes beyond the methodological level should also involve require demonstrating how Adorno's conception of aesthetic critique plays out in his interpretive studies of specific artists and artworks. Of all these studies, Adorno's interpretation of the work of Franz Kafka appears to be particularly suited for the purpose of demonstrating an affinity with *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Although a similar case could

certainly be made with regard to Adorno's evaluations of some of his other favoured representatives of aesthetic modernism, such as Beckett and Schoenberg, the work of Kafka appears to display a particularly pronounced affinity with the philosophical procedure of the *Dialectic* (and arguably, Adorno's philosophical procedure at large). Directly echoing the critical-theoretical problematic of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno argues that Kafka's work constitutes a critical confrontation with modern rationality in what is disclosed to be its essentially *mythic* character. The rationality characteristic of capitalist society reappears in Kafka's works as a 'blind force endlessly reproducing itself',[458] as a law that has ended up asserting its dominance not only over the external reality of human beings, i.e. over the social organisation of their material life, but also over their internal reality and their consciousness – inhibited from interrogating their fundamental beliefs about the social world and their role within it, human beings are deprived even of the ability to apprehend their predicament for what it is. As if under a mythic spell that asserts itself through and by means of them, human beings act of their own accord in compliance with the law of social motion, and precisely in this way strengthen its dominance over them, much as Kafka's Josef K. only grows more enthralled and disempowered by the legal system in which he has been ensnared the more he attempts, with stubborn conviction, to navigate it rationally. As Brian O'Connor observes, Adorno 'accords specifically to Kafka the capacity to expose what he sees as the *mythic* structure of society: its indefensible norms and conventions that are, nevertheless, uncritically lived'.[459] On Adorno's interpretation, Kafka's exposure of mythic rationality as the governing principle of the capitalist social world can be impactful enough to unsettle the 'spell' that this rationality keeps human consciousness under, i.e. to induce us to assume a critical distance towards our unreflectively held beliefs about society and ourselves, and appreciate the practical

[458] Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka', in *Prisms* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1983), 260.
[459] Brian O'Connor, 'On the Mimesis of Reification: Adorno's Critical Theoretical Interpretation of Kafka', in *Philosophy and Kafka*, ed. Brendan Moran and Carlo Salzani (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2013): 240.

implications of our uncritical attachment to these beliefs – similarly to the critical strategies I have argued could be also be extrapolated as implicit in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Works of the type paradigmatically represented by Kafka, Adorno contends, are capable of inducing such critical self-reflection in their recipients by producing 'interventions in consciousness',[460] and these interventions take the form of aesthetic experiences in which the subject's (rational, conceptually laden) ability to organise experience is temporarily disrupted, resulting in what Adorno refers to as 'breaking through of reified consciousness'[461] – similarly, as I will attempt to show, to the disruptive reading experience *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is capable of enabling.

What speaks even more promisingly in favour of the parallel I wish to develop between Adorno's Kafka and the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, has to do with what Adorno identifies as the specific aesthetic strategy to which Kafka's work owes its capacity to expose the mythic character of enlightenment rationality in the genuinely experientially impactful sense alluded to above. Kafka's refraining from any explicit condemnation of, or indeed even overt reference to, the existing social world, is key in the construction of the aesthetic habitus of 'the world is as it is' that is characteristic of Kafka's work and that lends the latter a gloss of ethico-political resignation – what appears to be a comportment towards the existing social world that basically affirms its inexorable, unfathomable force of compulsion over human beings and denies the viability of attempting to resist this, proffering no more than the wry recommendation than for one to 'do his duty, humbly and without great aspirations, and to integrate himself into a collective which expects just this'.[462] But rather than finding any such comportment of resignation in Kafka, Adorno argues that it is precisely Kafka's literary overt 'lack of resistance' to the world that is 'paradoxically rewarded by the compelling authority of its

[460] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 196.
[461] Ibid., 196.
[462] Ibid.

expression'.[463] The aesthetic comportment of submissiveness turns out to be the sign not of humility or resignation, but of a strategic concession to mythic powers, which Adorno describes all too suggestively as a behaviour of *cunning* against myth:

> It was not humility that Kafka preached, but rather the most tried and tested mode of behaviour against myth: cunning. The only chance, however feeble and minute, of preventing the world from being all-triumphant, was to concede it the victory from the beginning. Like the youngest boy in the fairy tale, one must make oneself completely unobtrusive, small, a defenceless victim, instead of insisting on one's rights according to the mores of the world, that of exchange, which unremittingly reproduced injustice. Kafka's humor hopes to reconcile myth through a kind of mimicry. In this as well he follows that tradition from the Homeric myth to Hegel and Marx, in whom the spontaneous deed, the act of freedom, coincides with the culmination of the powers of the adversary. The subject seeks to break the spell of reification by reifying itself. It prepares to complete the fate which befell it.[464]

In this passage, Adorno maintains that Kafka opposes myth through a sort of imitative engagement with it, a 'mimicry' in which the subject 'seeks to break the spell of reification by reifying itself'. This characterisation closely matches Adorno's conception of the critical comportment of artworks more generally. Adorno contends that successful artworks oppose the domination operative in the social world through a 'mimesis of domination' - artworks 'must assimilate themselves to the comportment of domination in order to produce something

[463] Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka', 252
[464] Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka', 270.

qualitatively distinct from the world of domination',[465] and also, 'the absolute spell of external reality over subjects means that art can only oppose the spell by assimilating itself to it'.[466] But what is of particular interest in the above passage is Adorno's characterisation of this mode of aesthetic comportment through terminology familiar from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* – Kafka's 'mimesis of domination', his 'mimicry' of myth, turns out to be a form of *cunning* against myth which, furthermore, inserts Kafka in a tradition that has Homer at its beginning. The way Adorno describes Kafka above bears similarity to the mode of critical comportment of Adorno and Horkheimer's Odysseus. Just as Kafka's trickery against the myth of the modern social world requires him, as we learn from the above-quoted passage, to 'concede it victory from the beginning', Odysseus 'admits defeat in advance'[467] in order to get the better of mythic powers, and similarly, what Adorno describes as Kafka's 'mimicry' of myth brings up associations with the actions of Odysseus, who defies mythic nature by 'imitating its rigidity'.[468]

Even more suggestive is the link that may be drawn between the Homer that emerges from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as the proto-Enlightenment poet whose novel usage of the epic form to rework and narratively unify ancient Greek myths covertly defies the mythic tradition, and Kafka, in whose work the epic has assimilated itself to the mythic form of modern social reality where an indecipherable world of things has prevailed over an abstract, self-contained human subjectivity no longer capable of genuine, temporally unified experience – hence the paradoxical character of Kafka's 'expressionist epic' that 'tells of something about which nothing can be told',[469] narrating a form of experience that has degraded to a point as to become unnarratable, thereby covertly – cunningly, we may say – exposing this degradation.

[465] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 289.
[466] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 31.
[467] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 45
[468] Ibid. 44-45.
[469] Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka', 265.

Kafka's confrontation with myth appears to operate in consonance with the model of Homeric-Odyssean cunning, which provides some evidence for Adorno's claim that Kafka follows and – we may add, extends and pushes forward – the 'tradition from the Homeric myth to Hegel and Marx'. But the same could be claimed with regards to Adorno and Horkheimer's own critical-theoretical procedure in the *Dialectic* – which as I've argued above, amounts to a submissive embrace of enlightenment's ideological language and linguistic forms, and an attempt to expose the contradictions implicit in this language from within, a critical comportment of cunning against the mythology which enlightenment entangles itself in constructing its own ideological self-image. Both Kafka, on the one hand, and Adorno and Horkheimer, on the other, follow and extend the critical tradition of cunning with and against myth originating from Homer – my intention in what follows will be to show that they do so in substantively analogous ways. Through a close reading of Adorno's interpretation of Kafka, I will provide evidence for the proposition that the critical comportment Adorno finds in Kafka's works is congruous – at least at certain key junctures – with the critical procedure I have previously argued is at work in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. This will provide us with concrete, and not only methodological, evidence of the affinity between Adorno's conception of aesthetic critique and the philosophical model of critique in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

To provide concrete interpretive evidence for the above-mentioned set of suggestions, I now wish to consider Adorno's reading of Kafka in two key aspects that single out the specificity of his writing. Firstly, I will consider (in section 1 of this chapter) Kafka's characteristic use of language – that is, his style or manner of literary expression more generally, and then, (in section 2 of this chapter) Kafka's poetics of the novel – that is, what Kafka does with the conventions of the novel form. In Section 3, I will substantiate this reading with some initial reflections on misreadings of (or 'infelicitous' encounters with) Kafka, whilst Section 4 will explore Adorno's notion of the 'enigmatic' or 'riddle-character' of Kafka's work

as the alternative conception for the type of 'felicitous' encounter Adorno argues to be facilitated by the literary composition of Kafka's texts. The final section will provide a more robust account of the principles of literary construction and reception in Kafka, as theorised by Adorno's aesthetics, and respond to some objections that have been posed apropos of Adorno's interpretation of Kafka.

1.Kafka's Language

Turning first to the question of Kafka's language, his specific style, or manner of expression – by which I mean his choice of words, his figures of speech, the literary devices he makes use of, his syntax, and so on – let us first consider a few typical examples. The description of the Castle at the beginning of Kafka's eponymous novel could be as good a place to start as any:

> On the whole the Castle, as it appeared from this distance, corresponded to K's expectations. It was neither an old knight's fortress nor a magnificent new edifice, but a large complex made up of two-story buildings and many lower, tightly packed ones; had one not known that this was a castle, one could have mistaken it for a small town.[470]

What kind of castle is this that could be mistaken for a 'small town', that is – for no castle at all? The passage is likely to disconfirm whatever pre-existing idea we might have had of what a castle does or could look like – it solicits us to represent something that remains, no matter how industrious our imagination, peculiarly resistant to representation, an object that is difficult to picture as a whole. And while this description results in a sense of being presented with

[470] Franz Kafka, *The Castle*, trans. Mark Harman (New York: Shocken Books, 1998), 8.

something opaque, indeterminate and resistant to easy representation or definition, what is of particular interest is that the literary language through which this result is achieved is by no means intrinsically ambiguous or vague. On the contrary – the passage begins by evoking an expectation of clarity and accuracy - we are informed that the Castle's outward appearance *corresponded* to K's expectations, and if the protagonist's expectation for how something should appear is said to have been confirmed, then this is already promissory of clarity and of there being a fit between the object's appearance and the subject's representation of it. Kafka's technique relies on simple but effective devices to heighten this sense of clarity. The passage is consequential, logically tight, and free of stylistic flourishes and ornaments such as metaphors or similes. When the passage goes on to bring the Castle into focus through the observation that the castle was 'neither an old knight's fortress nor a magnificent new edifice', the grammatical function of the determiner 'neither … nor' to narrow down the Castle's appearance with specificity serves to build up the text's promise of clarity and a close fit between what is being represented and its representation – as well as the reader's expectation that this promise be met. Kafka breaks this promise in a way that is not immediately obvious, but which, precisely by virtue of this, produces a stronger impact once registered by the reader. Opaqueness and indeterminacy is developed from within the framework of an apparently clear and determinate language, through the use of the same seemingly pellucid manner of expression. The same 'neither…nor' determiner promissory of specificity and clarity has, in fact, served to resolve the represented object to something curiously elusive; in the same sentence, with the same voice of apparent lucidity and with a great deal of detail and precision, the castle's appearance is specified to a point where it is no longer evident that what is being described is anything remotely reminiscent of a castle.

For Adorno, passages such as these are exemplary of Kafka's style as a whole (in at least one important respect). On the one hand, 'ambiguity … like a disease has eaten into all

signification in Kafka.'[471] It may be easy to associate literary ambiguity with ideas of deliberately writing in an allusive way, particularly through the use of metaphors, but this doesn't seem to be the kind of ambiguity at work in the passage above, where ambiguity arises much more in the process of syntactically manipulating a language that is intrinsically unmetaphorical and prosaic rather than metaphorical and allusive. For this reason, Adorno argues that in order to appreciate what Kafka does with language, we must be attentive not only to the sense of ambiguity and indeterminacy that it results in, but also its intrinsic unambiguousness and determinacy, we have to heed the 'infinite number of entirely determinate aspects, be it in the sphere of law or the sphere of sadism', aspects which are 'evident in Kafka's work in the most unambiguous and emphatic form'.[472] Note, once again, not only the syntactic markers of determinacy and clarity in the passage above, but also the amount of quite precise and detailed information condensed into the passage that brings into relief the distinct components of the Castle's architecture (namely, its being 'made up of two-story buildings and many lower, tightly packed ones'). In the context of this passage, this descriptive precision does not result in clarity, however. It serves, contrarily, to increase ambiguity - how could what is thereby being described pass for a castle in anything but name?

Here we have, then, the basic logic of at least one key characteristic of Kafka's handling of language, according to Adorno - namely, a development of ambiguity, opaqueness and indeterminacy from within a language whose defining parameters are those of unambiguousness, clarity and determinacy. Everything in Kafka, Adorno writes, is 'as hard, defined and distinct as possible'[473] – we get a good sense of what Adorno means here when we consider the precision applied for the description of the discrete elements of the castle's architecture, or, to name but a few other examples, the technical and detailed inventory of all

[471] Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka', 248.
[472] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 207.
[473] Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka', 246.

the constituent parts of the freakish torture apparatus from 'In the Penal Colony', or the vivid portrayal of Gregor Samsa's transformed body in all its minute details, from 'The Metamorphosis'. Kafka's language, Adorno maintains, is one in which '[e]ach sentence is literal and each signifies'.[474] The principles of 'literalness' that Adorno argues 'finds support in many of Kafka's texts', has to do with the specificity of Kafka's language and the extent to which this language has renounced as far as possible its *mimetic* function - its claim to be *like* external reality, to conjure a *figure* or *image* that resembles it - in favour of its *signifying* function - its claim to represent the objects of reality by bringing them under a sign or concept. But as we have seen above, it is precisely through the use of *this* language, whose very 'literal' form betrays an attempt to master the objects of external reality by capturing them in as clear and determinate terms as possible, that Kafka arrives at something that remains, on the whole, ambiguous and opaque. The castle's appearance is made precise in its individual aspects, but, as a whole, it remains not only elusive but representationally perplexing. Similarly, for all the painstaking precision in the description of the constituent parts of the torture apparatus from 'In the Penal Colony', the passage does not actually succeed in conveying a particularly clear representation of the machine as a whole, mustering at best a rather faint and elusive semblance of such a representation. As Ritchie Robertson puts it, 'despite the detailed description of the individual parts, the machine as a whole remains curiously hard to picture'.[475] In 'The Metamorphosis', Kafka's portrayal of Gregor Samsa brings the various parts of his metamorphosed body into sharp relief - he is described as having an 'armor plated' back, a 'domelike brown body divided into stiff arched segments', and 'numerous legs, which were pitifully thin compared to the rest of his bulk'[476]. But later on in the story, it is also revealed

[474] Ibid.
[475] Ritchie Robertson, 'Style', in Caroline Duttlinger (ed.) *Franz Kafka in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 63.
[476] Franz Kafka, 'The Metamorphosis', in *The Complete Stories* (New York: Shocken Books, 1971), 89.

that Samsa has a voice, even if this is screechy and hardly resembling any human voice, and it is also said that he has eyelids, nostrils and a neck. As John Updike notes, Samsa remains, as a whole, 'impossible to picture'.[477] We are given a lot of quite precise information about Samsa's appearance, but all these various snapshots are just too disparate and mutually inconsistent to add up to a single coherent representation of Samsa as a whole. We may be led to doubt not only what kind of insect he is, but whether he resembles any actually existing insect at all – or has turned into some sort of hybrid between human and insect.

Kafka's is a language that holds out the promise of representing reality in all its concrete determinacy and specificity, but continually *fails* to deliver on this promise. This amounts to something akin to a negative dialectic – a continuous movement from the literal and the determinate to the ambiguous and the indeterminate – that Adorno argues to be at work in Kafka's writing: '[I]n an art that is constantly obscuring and revoking itself, every determinate statement counterbalances the general proviso of indeterminateness'.[478] Adorno again: 'without the principle of literalness as criterion, the ambiguities in Kafka would dissolve into indifferent equivalence'.[479]

We can discern a similar pattern not only on the level of representational language, but also in Kafka's handling of communicative language, too. Consider, for instance, the long and inexhaustible speeches to which the lawyer subjects K. in the course of the meetings between the two. Although K.'s trial is, to the best of our judgment as readers, going nowhere, the lawyer's speeches are rife with fine-grained legalese ratiocinations that are supposed to assure K. that his trial is actually going well, all things considered, and that his defence is in good hands. The following set of arguments concerning the 'importance' of submitting an initial petition to the court illustrates the logic of the lawyer's speeches well:

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[477] John Updike, 'Foreword', in Franz Kafka, *The Complete Stories* (New York: Shocken Books, 1971), xv.
[478] Ibid., 247
[479] Ibid., 248.

> [The lawyer] had of course set to work immediately, and the first petition was already nearly finished. It was very important, for the first impression made by the defence often influenced the whole course of the proceedings. Unfortunately, and he felt he must point this out to K., on some occasions initial petitions were not even read by the court. They were simply put in the file with a note that for the time being the hearings and surveillance of the accused were much more important than anything put in writing. If the petitioner pressed the issue, it was added that once all the evidence had been collected, and prior to the verdict, this first petition would be considered as well, together will all the documents of course. Unfortunately that wasn't true either in most cases; the first petition was generally misplaced or completely lost, and even if it was retained to the very end, the lawyer had only heard this by way of rumor of course, it was scarcely even glanced at. All that was regrettable, but not entirely without justification; K. must not overlook the fact that the proceedings are not public […] As a result, the court records, and above all the writ of indictment, are not available to the accused and his defence lawyers, so that in general it's not known, or not known precisely, what the first petition should be directed against, and for that reason it can only be by chance that it contains something of importance to the case.[480]

By adding a vast number of clarifications to his initial claim concerning the importance of submitting a petition, the lawyer gradually undermines the validity of this claim, and ultimately resolves it into its very opposite - a technique often practiced by Kafka in his treatment of communicative language, and one which Robertson refers to as 'making a statement, then

[480] Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. Breon Mitchell (New York: Schocken Books, 1998), 113.

qualifying it out of existence'[481]. The confident assumption of individual agency, of having the means at one's disposal to effect changes in the world is gradually dissolved to the point where it turns out that it is only by chance that any rationally oriented, purposeful activity may produce real effects in the world. But the means through which this passage discloses the agency of the autonomous *ratio* in its own illusoriness and dependence on chance are those of that ratio itself - the lawyer's monologue is conducted through the linguistic medium of rational, enlightened subjectivity. The lawyer's speech unravels its own validity with logical consistency, utilising to a parodic, self-contradictory excess his own capacity for argumentation, for surveying the external world and drawing authoritatively from past experience in order to discriminate adequately between available possibilities in order to chart a path for action. No doubt helped by Kafka's own legal training, this 'legalese' rhetoric, as Philip Weinstein puts it, 'delights in fine logical distinctions, telling markers of improvement, signals of authoritative orientation'[482]. Notice, for instance, the presence of syntactic markers of qualification and correction, such as 'unfortunately', and 'he felt he must point this out'; signals of epistemic authority such as clarifications as to what transpires in 'in most cases', or 'in general', or 'not entirely without justification'. The deployment of such rational language however, does not produce the required results - as we read in the novel, at such speeches 'progress had always been made, but the nature of this progress could never be specified'.[483] Rather than satisfying their proposed ends, Kafka's protagonists use language in such a way as to 'demonstrate the inadequacy of the means — their considerable powers of judgment, definition, and speculation — at their disposal'.[484]

Not only does language used in this way lead K. to the conclusion that the lawyer will

[481] Robertson, 'Style', 66.
[482] Philip Weinstein, *Unknowing: The Work of Modernist Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 138.
[483] Kafka, *The Trial*, 122.
[484] David Constantine, 'Kafka's writing and our reading', in *The Cambridge Companion to Kafka*, 22.

not help him make much progress in his trial ('he soon held it for an established fact that his defence was not in good hands'),[485] but also sow doubt in K. – and in us as readers – as to whether the lawyer's intentions really are to help K. in his trial. Dismissing conventional legal routes for proceeding further in the trial, the lawyer takes to emphasise his own personal contacts – these are said to be 'the most valuable aspects of a defence … and with higher officials, by which is meant of course higher officials from the lower ranks'.[486] This, however, itself raises suspicion in K. – if the lawyer's personal contacts are themselves lower-rank figures, themselves in a position of dependence, 'and for whose advancement certain developments in the trials might presumably be of importance', it is not clear how these contacts can be exploited solely to K,'s advantage. In fact, quite the opposite seems equally likely – that, perhaps, the lawyer's contacts were 'using the lawyer to effect such developments', that is, to promote their own interest and upward progress within the court's hierarchy, and therefore, to 'be to the defendant's disadvantage'. If these suspicions, which do indeed amount to a plausible interpretation of the lawyer's claims, were true, then it's conceivable that the lawyer's emphasis on his own personal contacts may not at all stem from a genuine intention to help K. in his case, but from a desire to promote his own rank, and that of his contacts, given their own vested interest in influencing K.'s trial to their own advantage, and possibly, to K.'s disadvantage.

2.Kafka's Poetics of the Novel

The foregoing discussion of Kafka's treatment of language has been predominantly 'micro-textual' in its focus on Kafka's literary construction of individual passages. The logic

[485] Kafka, *The Trial*, 123.
[486] Ibid., 115-116

that Adorno maintains runs through Kafka's writing at this level of textual analysis, is also repeated at a more, general, 'macro-textual' level, in how his works are constructed as a whole, how their various individual elements are made to work together. In this section, I will turn my attention in particular to Kafka's novels, and will concentrate in particular on his treatment of the narrative conventions of the modern novel. By focusing on what may be called Kafka's 'poetics' of the novel form, we can gain a fuller understanding of Kafka's literary technique, and how this technique can be understood, with Adorno, as a critical confrontation with modern rationality – a confrontation that ultimately hinges on the effects Kafka's technique is capable of producing in the reader.

It is by now a trivial observation that modernist literature is difficult to read, that it is incomprehensible, that it requires too much of the reader, who is allegedly more inclined to 'curl up' with something more easily digestible and less interpretively taxing. Though it is by no means granted that Kafka is exempt from this charge — many might find him too drab and even boring to begin with — the overwhelming popularity his works have enjoyed attests to the claim that literary modernism can also be eminently *readable* and even *absorbing* despite, but perhaps even precisely because of, the barriers it places on readerly comprehension. The apparent lucidity of Kafka's literary language and the actual confusion it results in, which I have focussed on in the previous section, is one possible way of grasping the specific strategy to which Kafka's texts manage to engage their readership. Another possible answer to this quandary is to suggest that Kafka's works reprise certain well established, conventional literary codes and protocols and that they do so sufficiently and consistently enough to solicit the reader's expectation, or even more, their desire, that these codes and protocols be abided by — and that Kafka's technique entails precisely the consistent failure to do so. Such, indeed, appears to be Adorno's claim.

Following Adorno, we may better grasp the specificity of Kafka's technique as a

novelist if we conceive his work in relation to the novelistic tradition that preceded him, and appreciate how his novels receive and critically appropriate that tradition. In the background of Adorno's remarks on Kafka's treatment of the novel is a certain aesthetic theory of the modern novel, where the latter is grasped as a historically specific literary form, tied to particular form of society – modern bourgeois society – and the particular form of experience characteristic of that society. Drawing heavily on insights from Lukács's *Theory of the Novel* as well as on Benjamin's reflections on storytelling, Adorno characterises the novel as the quintessential bourgeois literary form: 'The novel was the literary form specific to the bourgeois age'.[487] Though the novel form predates the rise of bourgeois society and the development of modern capitalism, as Benjamin argues, it is only with 'fully developed capitalism' and the 'evolving middle class' that the novel found 'those elements which were favourable to its flowering'.[488] Such an understanding of the novel amounts to the thesis that the novel form is premised on the particular historical conditions characteristic of bourgeois society, that the literary preconditions encoded in the novel form as such, are tied to these historical conditions.

The process of Enlightenment, the 'disenchantment' of the world through the increasing secularism of bourgeois society and the rise of modern science provides one of the important preconditions of the novel: its inherent *realism*. Since 'the experience of the disenchanted world in *Don Quixote*', Adorno contends, 'the artistic treatment of mere existence has remained the novel's sphere. Realism was inherent in the novel'.[489] The Enlightenment program of understanding matter in a 'demystified way, without the illusion of any immanent powers or hidden properties',[490] or as 'mere existence', as Adorno also puts it, is translated aesthetically

[487] Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Position of the Narrator in the Contemporary Novel', in *Notes to Literature, Volume One*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 30.
[488] Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', in *Illuminations,* trans. Harry Zohn (London: Vintage, 2015), 88.
[489] Adorno, 'The Position of the Narrator', 31.
[490] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 3.

into the novelistic precept of realism, such that novelistic narratives cannot but evoke the 'suggestion of reality' – even where the subject matter of a novelistic representation is unrealistic or fantastic, the very form of the novel has it that an implicit claim of 'objective', realistic representation, or what Adorno sometimes dubs the gesture of 'that's the way it is', is posed.[491] The textual canvas weaved by the modern novel – at least in its early development, and most of all in its 'classical' realist variant – is fundamentally undergirded by the protocols of the bourgeois Enlightenment view of the universe. As Philip Weinstein argues, the realist representational norm of *verisimilitude* produces a literary universe in which everything appears in conformity with the 'familiar' and the 'lawful' – the inherently realistic character of the novel, therefore, presupposes, and implicitly invokes, an Enlightenment understanding of the world in which 'there is nothing uncanny; the world is there to be known, mapped and exploited by venturing subjects'.[492] The laws of the fully disenchanted world can be known, their operation captured in statistical models and predicted well in advance. The world in which human beings organise their life thus appears to lend itself without remainder to human agency and control: nothing is – in principle, if not in practice – outside the reach of the rationality of the modern enlightened subject, the world appears as entirely congruous with this rationality and amenable to its projects. In the modern novel, the precept of realism can also be understood as the idea of the narrative 'mastery' of the world – as Lukács argues, just as the ancient epic had attempted to articulate, in a narrative form, the 'extensive totality of life' of a whole community or nation, so the modern novel still seeks to give narrative representation to the modern world and form of life as a whole, to capture the threads that connect disparate things, people and events – the novel, like the epic, still 'thinks in terms of totality[493]', even if in the modern period, the world has been thoroughly 'disenchanted', and human life is no longer

[491] Adorno, 'The Position of the Narrator', 31.
[492] Philip Weinstein, *Unknowing: The Work of Modernist Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 97.
[493] Georg Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1978), 56.

conceived as having any 'immanent meaning'. Echoing Lukács's thesis, Adorno argues that the very stance of the modern novelistic narrator presupposes the 'immanent claim' that the author 'knows precisely what went on'[494], that the narrator has been able to 'master' the narrated experience in such a way as to unearth its internal connections and disclose its deeper significance. This stance of narrative mastery presupposes 'the identity of experience in the form of a life that is articulated and possesses internal continuity'[495]. Once again, consider this claim as following from the idea that the modern novel form is internally mediated to the bourgeois Enlightenment view of the world – the novel's implicit claim of narrative mastery over the world it seeks to represent has to presuppose its 'internal continuity', i.e. its constitution in accordance with lawful, continuously operating principles, just as Enlightenment rationality has to presuppose that the world is constituted in accordance with necessary, self-identical laws that operate continuously over time, in order to get its project of knowing and mastering that world off the ground. In the classical realist novel of the 18th and 19th century, this implicit presupposition of the novel form is accomplished most consummately – the realist novel's most basic precondition is the lawful, continuous self-identity of narrative space and time, which makes possible a continuous, self-identical form of human experience belonging to a unified, self-identical subject. As Weinstein puts it:

> the coherence of subjectivity is grounded in purposeful movement through space and time. Textual alignment of subjects within these orientational axes works to establish their identity and reveal it to the reader.[496]

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[494] Adorno, 'The Position of the Narrator', 33.
[495] Adorno, 'The Position of the Narrator', 31.
[496] Weinstein, *Unknowing: The Work of Modernist Fiction*, 96.

By establishing a spatio-temporally lawful narrative universe, the classical realist novel provides the *a priori* conditions that enable the realist novel's project-driven subjects to navigate this universe confidently and acquisitively, surveying and mapping its possibilities in order to exploit them for their personal growth and development.

Closely related to the notion of a realistic, spatio-temporally continuous narrative is another presupposition Adorno contends is characteristic of the novel, and which pertains not simply to form, but also to 'the content and its form' – namely, the idea that 'telling a story means having something *special* to say[497]', as Adorno puts it. The function of telling stories is, in the words of Jonathan Culler, to circulate something that is 'tellable' or 'worth it',[498] and Adorno's claim is that a story's being 'tellable' consists in its being about something special, non-standard, outside the bounds of the everyday and the ordinary. To write a novel, Adorno contends, is to be able to tell a story of this kind, and if the Latin origin of the word still preserved in English stands for something, the novel's story is also meant to be the sign of the *new*, the unprecedented. The prototypical example of such a story, in Adorno's view, is the Homeric epic — the 'counterpart of the novel', which already 'exhibits features reminiscent of that genre'.[499] The content of Homer's epic celebration of Achilles' wrath against Agamemnon, the warrior king, and of Odysseus's nautical adventures that demythologise the primeval world, is precisely the emergence of the historically *new* out of the prehistorical, quasi-natural sameness of mythology, effected through the self-assertion of the singular, autonomous self — the 'prototype of the bourgeois individual'[500] – over and against earlier tribal and communal forms of life. As the prototype of the bourgeois individual, the epic hero's adventures prefigure the adventures of the modern novel's hero: 'the self does not exist simply in rigid antithesis to

[497] Adorno, 'The Position of the Narrator', 31.
[498] Jonathan Culler, 'Narrative', in *Literary Theory*: *A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 91.
[499] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 35.
[500] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 35.

adventure but takes on its solidity only through this antithesis … Odysseus, like the heroes of all true novels after him, throws himself away, so to speak, in order to win himself; he achieves his estrangement from nature by abandoning himself to nature, trying his strength against it in all his adventures'[501]. So, there are good reasons to believe that Adorno thinks of the kind of story the modern novel is characteristically meant to provide in terms similar to those indicated in his remarks on the epic. The 'special' thing the novel tells of is an *adventure*, or alternatively, a *journey* or a *test* of some sort, a non-standard, special experience that allows one an opportunity for asserting oneself and thereby for developing as a self, for attaining a stable and coherent sense of selfhood — an idea also intimated by Lukács, who contends that '[t]he novel tells of the adventure of interiority, the content of the novel is the story of the soul that goes to find itself, that seeks adventures to be proved and testified by them, and, by proving itself, to find its own essence'.[502]

Crucially, however, the novel's characteristic story of individual self-formation, of the self's adventure towards itself, is premised on the existence of a form of social life where human beings already have enough personal freedom and autonomy to embark on such adventures, to have those experiences that may afford them the opportunity for self-assertion and for the formation of genuine individuality and coherent selfhood. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, this was already possible, in however meagre a degree, in Homeric Greece – hence the claim that the Homeric epic represents something akin to a proto-novel. Adorno's remarks suggest that strictly speaking, the novel form comes into its own with the emergence of bourgeois society, and most of all, with 'high' or 'early' bourgeois society during the phase of liberal capitalism – the form of social organisation that, according to Adorno, afforded the hitherto highest degree of personal freedom and autonomy, and hence the most favourable

[501] Ibid., 38.
[502] Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 89.

conditions for the development of individuality. Because the modern novel form is understood by Adorno as premised on these specific conditions of bourgeois, liberal capitalist society, we find Adorno claiming that in writing a novel, one poses the 'implicit claim that the course of the world is still essentially one of individuation, that the individual with his impulses and his feelings is still the equal of fate, that the inner person is still directly capable of something[503]'.

These, then, are the basic elements of Adorno's aesthetic theory of the modern novel in its 'classical' form, roughly coinciding with the development of early bourgeois, liberal capitalist society, with its secular, disenchanted view of the world, and with its emphasis on the personal freedom and autonomy. These socio-historical characteristics are aesthetically translated into the classical novel form, which characteristically produces a 'disenchanted', realistic, spatio-temporally lawful narrative universe, and populates that universe with subjects whose basic capacity for experientially navigating and mastering that universe over time is never questioned, and who are already in a position to grow and develop fully as individuals over time, already operating with sufficient personal autonomy as to embark on an adventure that would allow them to seek and find themselves – this adventure may succeed or fail, the subject's individual development may be realised or aborted, but their basic capacity of self-projection into the future is never doubted.

Given the contextualist character of Adorno's aesthetic theory, once the socio-historical conditions on which the novel form is premised change, so too must one's novelistic practice. With the demise of liberal capitalism and the growing integration of all social spheres under the commodity form, the development of monopoly capitalism and 'administered society' largely strips human beings of whatever faint personal autonomy they had been afforded in the earlier period, and significantly robs them of the capacities to develop genuine individuality of their own, and of the possibility of having any experiences outside the bound of what is already

[503] Adorno, 'The Position of the Narrator', 31.

socially established. If being able to have such experiences is central to the development of individuality, and to the novel as the characteristic story of individual self-development, Adorno contends that 'that is precisely what is prevented by the administered world, by standardization and eternal sameness'.[504] Even while human beings are still beholden to a view of themselves as free and autonomous individuals, their experience actually becomes less and less their own individual experience, they increasingly 'experience themselves solely as objects of opaque processes and, torn between sudden shock and sudden forgetfulness, are no longer capable of a sense of temporal continuity'.[505] Paradoxically, then, the more standardised and homogenised human experience, the less its discrete moments can be unified as belonging to a single, unified self — experience becomes fragmented and loses its temporal continuity. This puts a strain on the very conditions of possibility for storytelling, resulting in the basic paradox facing the storyteller or novelist in these changed circumstances, which Adorno expresses as the idea that 'it is no longer no possible to tell a story, but the form of the novel requires narration'[506]. To tell a coherent and continuous story, as we have seen, requires having an experience that 'possesses an internal continuity', but this becomes a paradoxical task once human experience — including that of the narrator themselves — undergoes such a deterioration as to begin losing its temporal continuity, to internally fragment to such a point as to thwart the possibility of coherent narration.

How does one then face up to *these* circumstances and still go on writing novels? Adorno's remarks on Kafka's practice as a novelist reveals an interpretation of Kafka as a writer who attempted to abide by the conventions of the classical modern novel and thereby demonstrated the paradoxicality of this attempt, because he was writing at a time when these

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[504] Adorno, *The Position of the Narrator*, 31.
[505] Theodor W. Adorno, 'Spengler After the Decline', in *Prisms* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1983), 55.
[506] Adorno, 'The Position of the Narrator', 30.

conventions, while no doubt still widely shared by literary audiences, had already been condemned to obsolescence by objective socio-historical trends. Adorno argues that as a writer 'in the tradition of enlightenment',[507] Kafka's work preserves the enlightenment's 'disenchanting touch'[508] — from which, as we have seen, derives the realism of the modern novel — this is Kafka's gesture of 'that's the way it is', or as Adorno also puts it, Kafka simply 'reports what actually happens'[509], and does so 'without any illusion concerning the subject'.[510] There is a lot of interpretive insight condensed in these remarks, but one way to unpack them would be to suggest that when Adorno speaks of Kafka's literary 'disenchantment', taking the form of a 'report' and the gesture of 'that's the way it is', what he means is that Kafka pays obeisance to literary realism, and in his novels – to the realism most characteristic of the classical realist novel. This is not to suggest that Kafka's works offer a realistic representation of external reality, but that they do reprise important elements of literary realism. As has been argued earlier, the classical realist novel presupposes the idea that the narrative universe brought forth in this novel should be presented in a spatio-temporally lawful, internally continuous manner, a basic requirement enabling the subjects of the novel to navigate this universe confidently and master it for their individual development. The narrative of *The Trial* reprises these presuppositions, or at least provides enough material to evoke the sense that they are being reprised.

On the level of plot, the beginning of the novel shows Josef K. as the level-headed, rational figure determined to 'gain some clarity about his situation',[511] that is, the reasons for his sudden, inexplicable arrest, someone completely resolved to bring what he regards as the whole 'senseless affair'[512] of his trial to a quick end, and who at one point does not even shy

[507] Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka', 266.
[508] Ibid.
[509] Ibid.
[510] Ibid.
[511] Kafka, *The Trial,* 6.
[512] Ibid., 50.

away from entertaining the 'small degree of self-confidence' to 'simply smash the entire court'[513]. This attitude of enlightened, rational self-confidence is replicated on the level of K.'s movement through space and time: we read, for instance, of K.'s trip to the suburbs for his first inquiry at the court, where K. takes 'close note' of all the 'surface details' of his surroundings[514] and, not knowing the precise whereabouts of the court room, devises a practical plan to discover it for himself (by knocking on every door claiming he is looking for someone, and peeking through), rather than stumbling upon the court room by chance and thereby inadvertently confirming the superstitious idea that 'the court is attracted by guilt'[515]; in a similar spirit we find K. touring the court's offices housed in the attic with almost nonchalant confidence, his 'erect' figure in striking contrast with the stooped, beggar-like postures of the other defendants in the office hallway.[516] In textual examples such as these, the novel's narration depicts the scenery the protagonist is moving through — the squalid working-class scenery in the suburbs, the dimly lit, stuffy court offices — in believable, realistic terms, with a great amount of sharply defined detail, locating, inventorying and putting into relief all the elements of K.'s surroundings, or at least those ones relevant to his spatio-temporal orientation. In what Weinstein describes as a basic precondition of all realist narrative, Kafka can be seen 'domesticating' space silently, in the very act of describing it, so as to allow the literary subject to orientate themselves unproblematically in their surroundings[517]. In this respect, Kafka's narrative technique in the novel can be said to mirror, but also precondition, its protagonist's comportment of rational, enlightened mastery over the external world — by reprising the classical novelistic claim of narrative domestication of, and mastery over that world, and producing an ostensibly realistic space-time continuum.

[513] Ibid., 62.
[514] Kafka, *The Trial*, 39
[515] Ibid.
[516] Kafka, *The Trial*, 77.
[517] Weinstein, *Unknowing: The Work of Modernist Fiction*, 102.

And while Kafka's narrative produces a textual canvas that appears realistic, that has its 'realistic lineaments',[518] as Adorno also puts it, Kafka's technique invariably entails going beyond, and often far beyond, any conventional form of realism. To convey a sense of familiarity and believability, realistic narration of space, place and time has to produce both a coherent, lawfully constituted space-time continuum *and* to accommodate the possibility of differentiation and variation – for instance, to provide a believable portrayal of a town, realistic narration has to make sure there are no inconsistencies or overlaps in where various spatial locations are placed on the novel's fictional 'map', *and* to ensure the depiction does justice to their individual specificities, the various 'feels' and 'atmospheres' of different parts of the town. But, according to Adorno, it is precisely specificity, differentiation and variation as conditions of possibility of the external world's familiarity, that get sucked out of Kafka's narrative space and time. Kafka's world, Adorno contends, is 'hermetically' sealed, with everything fitting into 'the same order of reality', it is 'logically air-tight', and 'all the stories take place in the same spaceless space, all the holes are so tightly plugged that one shudders whenever anything is mentioned that does not fit in, such as Spain and Southern France at one point in The Castle'[519].

Paradoxically, the more self-same, monotonous and coherent the outside world, the more unfamiliar it becomes to us – think, for instance, of Freud's vignette of getting lost in the streets of a provincial town in Italy in 'The Uncanny', where the feeling of unfamiliarity and uncanniness results from the author's attempts to escape a narrow street, only to find himself repeatedly arriving *at the same street*, at every renewed attempt.[520] We find similar occurrences in Kafka's novels, attestations to what Adorno refers to as Kafka's hermetically sealed, 'spaceless space': for instance, in *The Trial*, when K., already heavily worn down and

[518] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 230
[519] Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka', 255.
[520] Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *The Complete Works of Sigmund Freud,* vol. 7,

weakened by his trial, finds himself too desperate not to accept the offer of legal counsel from Titorelli, the court painter, and visits the latter's lodgings 'in a suburb that lay in a completely opposite direction from the one with law court offices'.[521] All the more shock, therefore, that when K. attempts to leave through a door behind the painter's bed, he finds himself again facing court offices, identical in appearance to the offices of the court in charge of K.'s trial – 'There are law court offices in practically every attic, why shouldn't they be here too?'[522]. Kafka's narratives distort both space *and* time – in the 'Flogger' scene, K. discovers the guards who had earlier arrested him, as the latter are being beaten in a lumber room within the precincts of K.'s own place of work, the bank. On the following day, to his horror, K. finds the same scene *identically re-enacted*, down to the smallest detail – not only has the space of the court been inexplicably, seamlessly merged with the space of K.'s place of work, but the unfolding of time itself has been arrested. As the space of Kafka's novel gets despatialised, as if by a hermetic vacuum, and reduced to the self-same homogeneousness of 'spaceless space', time gets detemporalised, reduced to the timelessness of 'what is perpetually the same'[523]. Previously assured, to the point of hubris, of the insignificance of his trial and of his own ability to bring it to a quick end, K. can now be seen getting more and more entangled in his legal proceedings, increasingly spellbound by the court's inexplicable authority over him, and less and less capable of finding a way out. This reversion is not simply communicated by way of plot, but is replicated in the novel's very narrative form, which intensifies monotony and sameness, compressing, as if by a hermetic vacuum, the space-time of the novel's anonymous city into the space-time of the court and the realm of the law. In this way, the novel's narrative universe is rendered less and less familiar, knowable and amenable to the subject's attempts to orientate herself within this universe and master it.

[521] Kafka, *The Trial*, 139-140.
[522] Ibid., 164.
[523] Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka', 253

The more homogenised the continuum of space and time, the more its individual moments get undifferentiated and indistinguishable from each other, and the less they can actually be held together in the unity of an experiencing consciousness – paradoxically, human experience becomes fragmented, reduced to the apprehension of perpetually repeating moments, which can no longer be experienced in their differentiation, instead appearing to consciousness as simply random sequential occurrences: in Kafka's 'compulsive world', everything that happens 'combines the expression of utter necessity with that of … utter contingency'.[524] The undifferentiated character of autarchic subjectivity strengthens the feeling of uncertainty and the monotony of compulsive repetition'.[525] Intensifying continuity to an extreme results in discontinuity and fragmentation, and the subject of Kafka's novel experiences the world accordingly — in a random, unfamiliar and unpredictable way: 'Dissociated into the compulsive moments of its own restrictive and confined existence, stripped of identity with itself, its life has no continuity'.[526] If Kafka's novels do enough to produce something reminiscent of an empirically realistic narrative development, they continuously insert literary devices that rupture the continuity of that universe: 'Again and again, the space-time continuum of 'empirical realism' is exploded through small acts of sabotage, like perspective in contemporary painting; as for instance [in Kafka's *The Castle*], when the land surveyor wandering about, is surprised by nightfall which comes much too soon'.[527] In *The Trial*, it is noted that it was morning when K. enters the cathedral to meet a client, but not much later, during K.'s unexpected encounter and conversation with the priest, it is said that '[i]t was no longer a dull day, it was already deep night.'[528]

Above, I have proposed that on Adorno's theorisation, the novel in its 'classical' form,

[524] Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka', 257
[525] Ibid., 262
[526] Ibid., 265.
[527] Ibid., 262.
[528] Kafka, *The Trial*, 213.

as premised on the conditions of early bourgeois, liberal capitalist society, is typically the story of individual growth and self-development, of the self's adventure towards itself. To recall, on Adorno's understanding, the very form of the novel contains the implicit claim that 'the course of the world is still essentially one of individuation', that the individual is 'still the equal of fate … still directly capable of something'[529], that the individual is capable of having 'special' experiences such as adventures — the kinds of experiences that would allow one opportunities for self-development and maturation. Kafka's novels reprise all of these assumptions, and there are reasons to believe that on Adorno's reading, they do so quite emphatically. As we have seen above, *The Trial* styles Josef K. in quite conventional terms as the enlightened, resourceful figure of the bourgeois individual thrown in unusual circumstances (and much the same could be said of the land surveyor, K., the main protagonist in *The Castle*). From its famous beginning – 'Someone must have slandered Josef K., for one morning, without having done anything wrong, he was arrested' – *The Trial* sets its protagonist on the journey of his attempt to demonstrate his own innocence against what, we are told, is a slanderous accusation. The beginning paints K. as precisely the kind of figure armed with 'sound common sense' and 'sound reasoning', as Adorno puts it, that is characteristic of Kafka's protagonists. Upon his arrest, K.'s reaction is the predictably commonsensical one of perplexity and disbelief: 'After all, K. lived in a state governed by law, there was universal peace, all statutes were governed by law, who dared assault him in his own lodgings'.[530] As we have briefly alluded to above, particularly in the novel's beginning, K.'s comportment is depicted as one of unshakable confidence in his own ability to get the better of the court and find his own way out his predicament in order to assert his innocence (even later on, when the trial already weighs much heavier on him, K. dismisses his lawyer and takes his defence in his own hands). By

[529] Adorno, 'The Position of the Narrator', 31.
[530] Kafka, *The Trial*, 6.

constructing the novel's beginning and its protagonist in this way, Kafka's novel invokes certain expectations for how a story with a beginning and protagonist like *this,* should unfold.

The Trial does not simply fail to deliver on the promise of its beginning in the more superficial sense that K. does not succeed in asserting his innocence and meets with the court's verdict — his execution — at the novel's end. The predicament the novel attests to is more radical — before his death, K. can hardly be said to have had a genuine existence at all. Kafka's novel achieves this through the fragmentation of narrative temporality. Typically, continuous duration and a certain kind of temporal ordering of actions and events is required for the novel to narrate the expansive story of the self's quest for maturation — as Lukács, whose ideas are again worth considering given their influence on Adorno's own theorisation of the novel, puts it: 'Only in the novel … is time posited together with the form'.[531] In the most conventional case, this temporal order is linear and chronological, with a beginning, middle and end, and with a distinct emphasis on teleological progression — moving from a state of equilibrium, to a state of disturbance and back to a state of stability, which is also, characteristically, a place of revelation and understanding. Even in novels with a much more complex and heterogeneous plot structure, the temporality of narrative is capable of synthesising the novel's actions and events into a coherent whole — for instance, in Lukács's interpretation of Flaubert's *A Sentimental Education,* it is the unfolding of 'unrestricted, uninterrupted flow of time' and the experience of such time by the novel's characters, that serves to provide the inner continuity of what is otherwise a heterogeneous and fragmentary sequence of events and actions.[532]

[531] Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 122.
[532] Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 125. In Lukács's words: 'The unrestricted, uninterrupted flow of time is the unifying principle of the homogeneity that rubs the sharp edges off each heterogeneous fragment and establishes a relationship - albeit an irrational and inexpressible one - between them. Time brings order into the chaos of men's lives and gives it the semblance of a spontaneously flowering, organic entity; characters having no apparent meaning appear, establish relations with one another, break them off, disappear again without any meaning having been revealed. But the characters are not simply dropped into that meaningless becoming and dissolving which preceded man and will outlast him. Beyond events, beyond psychology, time gives them the essential quality of their existence: however accidental the appearance of a character may be in pragmatic and psychological terms,

Kafka's novels, Adorno contends, problematise this — 'form which is constituted through time as the unity of inner meaning is not possible for him … [t]he fragmentary quality of the three large novels, works which, moreover, are hardly covered any more by the concept of the novel, is determined by their inner form. They do not permit themselves to be brought to an end as the totality of rounded, temporal experience'.[533] A novel that no longer permits, or makes difficult, the realisation of its temporal form, goes against its own concept — it becomes hostile to the project of individual self-development and maturation, which cannot be achieved except through that form. The fragmentary character of Kafka's novels attest precisely to this.

3.Infelicitous Readings

Now that we have acquainted ourselves with some key motifs of Kafka's literary techniques as interpreted by Adorno, I wish to put some substance on the thesis that there is an affinity between Adorno's aesthetic and philosophical models of critical composition. One of the main areas of convergence between the two is that in both, the critique is so instantiated through the specific textual or aesthetic construction of the work (of philosophy or of art, respectively) as to impel the receiving subject to actively engage the work's critical procedure in their reception of the work, which then facilitates the production of a genuinely experientially impactful encounter of the subject with the work. If successful, this encounter prompts a process of critical self-reflection in the receiving subject, which could be seen as the subjective 'consummation' or completion of the critique instantiated in the work. Therefore, 'critique', in both Adorno's philosophical and aesthetic conceptions of critique, should rather be seen as the performance of a series of critical acts, the validity of which could not be assessed

it emerges from an existent, experienced continuity, and the atmosphere of thus being borne upon the unique and irreparable stream of life cancels out the accidental nature of their experiences and the isolated nature of the events recounted' (Ibid.)

[533] Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka', 264.

only in terms of the correspondence to fact or internal logical validity of the argumentation in the philosophical work, or in terms of the consistency of construction in the work of art. Without being appropriately taken up by its recipients and producing an experientially impactful effect in them, this critical procedure would not have been successfully accomplished and could not be said to have lodged a legitimate claim to truth – in the terminology of speech act theory, it cannot be taken to have been 'happily' or 'felicitously' performed.

'Infelicities', i.e., cases where the critical work has not been encountered and taken up in the appropriate way by its recipients, can be instructive to learn from, too. It is useful to distinguish between a type of infelicitous encounter with the *Dialectic* that takes the text too literally, and construes the philosophical function (or in speech act terms, illocutionary force) of the text as simply descriptive or argumentative, and a felicitous engagement with it that is experientially, affectively impactful for the receiving subject and effectively takes up the philosophical critique instantiated therein. A similar heuristic may be followed here in approaching the intricacies of Kafka as read by Adorno, in order to get a better understanding of the critical comportment of cunning against myth that Adorno finds playing itself out in Kafka's work, and do so in a way that may offer us a parallel interpretive lens for understanding the philosophical model of critique as cunning against myth at work in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. I therefore turn first to what may be called ways of reading Kafka infelicitously – examples of how Adorno believes one ought *not* to read Kafka, of how to fail to approach and engage with his work in a way that does justice to it. In ways that echo the case of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, these infelicitous readings of Kafka betray a misconstrual of the illocutionary force of Kafka's work, and result in a failure to achieve the appropriate experientially impactful encounter of the reader with the work.

Kafka's works are among those examples of modern literature that are particularly likely to be associated with the notion of 'philosophical fiction', along with the accompanying

expectation that in works of this type, one is to discover a certain philosophical view conveyed in literary form. Surely enough, this expectation has its basis in the palpably philosophical bearings of a great number of Kafka's works, which frequently involve exercises in speculation and reflection (e.g. 'Investigations of a Dog'), philosophical parables and tales (e.g. 'Before the Law', 'An Imperial Message'), and as Adorno observes, Kafka's two great novels, *The Trial* and *The Castle*, 'seem to bear the mark of philosophical theorems'.[534] This suggests that Kafka's works not only *include* philosophical elements, but sometimes appear to have philosophical goals as their principal *teloi*, they seem to be *fundamentally* concerned with the conveyance of some philosophical idea or thesis. One of the best examples of this is *The Trial*, which, as Walter Benjamin argues, introduces the philosophical parable 'Before the Law' at such a significant moment in the novel that it 'looks as if the novel were nothing but the unfolding of the parable'[535] – the reader is left with the impression that the novel is, as a whole, concerned with the exposition and demonstration of some idea or thesis that is supposed to be crystallised in the parable.

But, according to Adorno, as soon as one attempts to identify this putative idea or thesis that a work like *The Trial* is meant to 'illustrate', one risks committing a 'deadly aesthetic error'[536] (whether or not this be traced back to author's intention and ascribed to them as 'the philosophy that an author pumps into a work').[537] Such an approach towards Kafka would amount to a hermeneutic 'short-circuit', which 'jumps directly to the significance intended by the work'.[538] If our encounter with Kafka's work exhausts itself in the attempt to explain what particular idea or set of ideas it purportedly represents, to pin down the 'significance intended by the work', something goes so badly wrong as to render us guilty of a 'deadly aesthetic error'.

[534] Adorno, Notes on Kafka, 247.
[535] Walter Benjamin, 'Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death', in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968): 122.
[536] Ibid.
[537] Theodor W. Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka', in *Prisms* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1983), 247.
[538] Ibid.

Adorno argues that it is precisely in this way that Kafka's works have, for the most part, been received. The existentialist and existentialist-theological readings that, from early on, provided the dominant context for reading and engaging with Kafka's work,[539] seem to amount to an attempt to extract some abstract, formulaic thesis from Kafka's texts. This kind of approach, Adorno observes wryly, has made of Kafka's oeuvre 'an information bureau of the human condition', bringing[540] him nothing but 'false renown', a 'fatal variant of the oblivion which Kafka so bitterly desired for himself'.[541] By equating the import of Kafka's work with the literary illustration of a philosophical or theological thesis, such readings break Kafka down to an easily comprehensible, summary paraphrase. It would seem as if 'all he had to say was that man had lost the possibility of salvation or that the way to the absolute is barred, that man's life is dark, confused, or in currently fashionable terminology, "suspended in nothingness."'[542] The popular Kafka that emerges from this type of reading, Adorno suggests here, is something akin to a bad philosopher or theologian who only used so many words to communicate a relatively straightforward shibboleth of universal pessimism, despair and hopelessness.

It is important to underscore that the crux of Adorno's criticism of existentialist readings of Kafka does not in the first place amount to the objection that we do Kafka an injustice if we read his works as illustrating the truth of existentialist philosophy in particular – the implication being that we would do better to substitute existentialism for another philosophy. Adorno confirms this in his claim that '[t]o include [Kafka] among the pessimists, the existentialists of despair, is as misguided as to make him a prophet of salvation'.[543] The flaws of existentialist readings of Kafka would not be rectified by exchanging a pessimistic philosophy for an optimistic one. Adorno takes issue not simply with the specific theoretical

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[539] Adorno mentions readings of Kafka in the spirit of the existentialist theologies of Kierkegaard and Karl Barth.
[540] Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka', 245.
[541] Ibid, 245.
[542] Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka', ibid.
[543] Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka', 269.

content of readings of this type, but with their very *form.* The problem – and the crux of the 'deadly aesthetic error' referred to above - isn't with existentialist philosophy per se, but with the assimilation of Kafka into *any* philosophy or theoretical doctrine, any 'established trend of thought'.[544] As Roger Foster argues, 'what is at stake here is the very principle of a theoretical appropriation of the literary text … [s]omething about the construction of meaning in Kafka's texts resists any attempt to read it as embodying a theoretical idea'.[545] For Adorno, it seems, it is not that we are wrong about what specific philosophy Kafka's work supposedly represents, but that our reckoning with Kafka is so centred on the attempt to read *any* philosophy out of Kafka in the first place – as if what is most important about Kafka's works were the communication of such a philosophy, and as if our principal task as readers of these works were to ascertain what this philosophy is. In the vocabulary of speech acts, we may put this thought a bit more precisely: we run into serious problems when we construe the illocutionary force of Kafka's work as one of illustrating, symbolising or in some other way representing some already given idea or philosophy.

The reason this type of reading does an injustice to Kafka so severe as to be worthy of being called aesthetically 'deadly' or 'fatal' by Adorno, is that by assimilating Kafka to some already given philosophical doctrine, it 'dispenses with the scandal on which his work is built'.[546] The 'scandal' which Adorno takes to be so central to Kafka's literary success is simply not something that can be 'explained away' with a trusty philosophical resumé, and this has to do with the extent to which Kafka's works are fundamentally, constitutively inexplicable. Much as these works may *invite* being taken up as if they were 'philosophical theorems', they are also riddled with 'incommensurable' elements, 'opaque details' and 'blind spots' that

[544] Ibid., 245.
[545] Roger Foster, 'Adorno on Kafka: Interpreting the Grimace on the Face of Truth', *New German Critique* 118, Vol. 40, No.1 (Winter 2013): 182
[546] Ibid.

simply refuse easy, seamless comprehension and render the work emphatically *resistant* to being fitted into a unifying conceptual mould such as existentialist philosophy.

For instance, what are we to make of the countless examples of pre-linguistic gestures that remain incomprehensible even to Kafka's characters, or such details as 'the fact Leni's fingers are connected by a web, or that the executioners resemble tenors'.[547] Kafka's prose generates its weirdly compelling power precisely by constructing stories at once comprehensible and incomprehensible, unfolding what seems like a realistic, even banal description of our familiar social world, yet weaving thoroughly unrealistic and oftentimes utterly incomprehensible elements into the texture of this presentation. This type of literary construction renders Kafka's work constitutively *enigmatic* and is responsible for what Adorno calls Kafka's 'maelstrom force' – Kafka writes in a language that somehow manages to be simultaneously both intelligible and unintelligible, clear and opaque, straightforward and twisted. Like picture puzzles in which what is hidden is plainly on display, enigmatic works – of which those of Kafka are a paradigmatical example – 'say something and in the same breath conceal it'.[548] The existentialist rendering of Kafka errs at the point which, even when it recognises the literary dynamic through which Kafka's enigmas are constructed, it grinds this dynamic to a halt by hypostatising it to the level of a philosophical thesis. If Kafka's works are like literary maelstroms designed to whirl the reader in, the infelicitous approach is one of plugging the maelstrom, as it were.

How, then, are we to approach Kafka's works, if we are to do them justice? Adorno provides very clear indications for what such an encounter would look like – and his account is grounded in a close analysis of the textual specifics of Kafka's writing. According to Adorno, the literary construction that renders Kafka's work constitutively enigmatic calls by itself for,

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547 Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka, 248.
548 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 120.

and even ‘compels’, a different kind of comportment than theoretical assimilation, one in which the 'contemplative relation between text and reader is shaken to its roots'.[549] Rather than disposing over the text from a contemplative distance, and judging it in accordance with a categorial schema brought from outside, the reader is solicited to immerse themselves in the text and let its own laws of construction and development dictate the encounter of the reader with the text. These laws, as we have briefly seen above, entail the dynamic interweaving of mutually opposed elements, and in accordance with this dynamic, Kafka’s texts both stimulate and dissuade the reader’s collusion, both opening themselves up to, and forbidding, the reader’s comprehension. Through this dynamic, the text pulls the reader into its continuous hermeneutic loop:

> [Kafka] demands a desperate effort of the allegedly 'disinterested' observer of an earlier time, overwhelms him, suggesting that far more than his intellectual equilibrium depends on whether he truly understands; life and death are at stake ... His texts are designed not to sustain a constant distance between themselves and their victim but rather to agitate his feelings to a point where he fears that the narrative will shoot towards him like a locomotive in a three-dimensional film.[550]

Adorno spares no words to describe this experience as particularly disruptive for the reader of the text, who is said to be ‘overwhelmed’ by the text, their feelings ‘agitated’, and from an ‘allegedly disinterested’ observer capable of judging the aesthetic object from a distance, the reader is left 'gasping for air' and turned into the text’s ‘victim’. As Adorno contends in *Aesthetic Theory* along similar lines, the Kantian criterion of disinterestedness would be awkwardly inadequate when applied to texts like *The Metamorphosis* and *The Penal Colony,*

[549] Adorno, *Prisms*, 246.
[550] Adorno, ‘Notes on Kafka’, 246.

works that trigger 'real fear', and incite a 'shock of revulsion and disgust that shakes the physis'.[551] Elsewhere, Adorno reasserts the emphasis on the experiential force of Kafka's works on the reader, drawing an instructive contrast with the aesthetics of political 'commitment' which, as in the existentialist rendering of Kafka, construes the artwork as a vehicle for ideas - 'Kafka and Beckett arouse the fear which existentialism merely talks about … The inescapability of their work compels the change of attitude which committed works merely demand'.[552] 'Committed' works, such as Sartre's existentialist novels and plays, simply do not muster the aesthetic force needed to produce an experientially significant impact on their readers.

Adorno argues that the aesthetic experience Kafka's works are designed to elicit is not simply *affectively* impactful in the way just described, but also has a profoundly *cognitive* character – it is revelatory of a *truth* – indeed since, as Adorno notes, 'in works of Kafka's type, [truth] outweighs every other element'.[553] As we read in the passage quoted above, Kafka demands a 'desperate effort' from the reader, so that the latter 'truly understands'. The truth of the work is not at all readily or easily available – the work remains enigmatic and continues to puzzle the reader with its 'rebuses'. It is up to the reader's hard work to linger on this enigma and attempt to interpret it, to solve the work's 'rebuses' in order to allow for the revelation of the work's truth. As Adorno puts it, '[t]he reader who succeeds in solving such rebuses will understand more of Kafka than all those who find in him ontology illustrated'.[554] In the passage just quoted, Adorno clearly contrasts what he maintains to be a genuine apprehension of the truth that Kafka's work is capable of disclosing, and the defective form of understanding issuing from the construal of his work as the illustration of a preconceived theoretical schema.

[551] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997): 12.
[552] Adorno, 'Commitment', in *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 2007), 191.
[553] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 13.
[554] Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka', 249

To clarify what may be a less than immediately obvious contrast – while the latter approach to Kafka 'explains away' the enigma of his work, effectively dissolving it because this enigma is precisely something fundamentally inexplicable, in the former approach the reader responds to the work's solicitation to 'dwell on the enigma'. Whereas the infelicitous approach reduces the work to its chosen theoretical schema and assimilates under this schema that crucial dimension of Kafka's work that emphatically resists being so assimilated, the felicitous encounter with Kafka is one that immerses itself in the work and lingers precisely on those theoretically unassimilable elements – as Adorno puts it, the reader 'should dwell on the incommensurable, opaque details, the blind spots'.[555] The fact that these elements, as Adorno maintains, 'require interpretation', speaks to the idea that the kind of interpretation Adorno has in mind as an alternative to the theoretical assimilation of the work has to be of a categorially different kind – it cannot boil down to an act of conceptual synthesis that subsumes those aspects of the interpreted work that are constitutively resistant to being so subsumed. As J.M. Bernstein puts this, 'hermeneutical reflection on art works does not conclude with a subsumptive judgment … the work of interpretation is judgment-like, but does not actually issue in a judgement'.[556] The understanding provided by this interpretation is non-subsumptive and non-reductive, taking the form of what Adorno calls 'a solution to the enigma that at the same time maintains the enigma'.[557]

At this point, we can confidently identify a point of decisive contrast between the 'infelicitous' reception of Kafka and Adorno's alternative interpretation, and this is consequential both for making sense of Adorno's conception of aesthetic critique, and for developing a parallel of this conception with its philosophical counterpart in *Dialectic of*

[555] Ibid., 247.
[556] J. M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*: *Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), pp.194–195.
[557] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 122.

Enlightenment. The existentialist rendering of Kafka is infelicitous because it suppresses the possibility of an encounter with Kafka that is truly experientially – and thereby, cognitively – impactful for the reader. Such an encounter appears necessary for the successful accomplishment of the critique of social rationality that Adorno holds is instantiated in Kafka's work. Given Adorno's critical-theoretical understanding of the character of capitalist domination and his account of the reification of consciousness, it appears that social critique can only get a footing if it successfully manages, if only momentarily, to unsettle the 'spell' of reified consciousness. Adorno maintains that Kafka's works are capable of producing effects in their readers profound enough to (momentarily) unsettle the spell, and in this way, induce Kafka's reader to gain an appreciation of the irrational, regressive underside of social reality and the rationality that rules within this reality. This strategy is in many ways the centrepiece of the critical model Adorno finds at work in Kafka, and is the main advantage over works that are explicitly concerned with the communication of socially critical theses. If the latter type of works is merely capable of 'talking about' social reality critically, Kafka's works can muster the power to enable a 'negative feel for reality'[558] by expressing its irrational, regressive underside in a genuinely experientially impactful way. We have already provided some hints as to the specific aesthetic strategy through which, on Adorno's reading, Kafka's writings enact a critique of modern enlightenment rationality. To recapitulate briefly, it has been suggested that this aesthetic strategy takes a form captured by what Adorno refers to as a 'cunning against myth', and a 'mimesis of domination'. In the preceding section, we have also suggested that the experiential force of Kafka's works on the reader is a central element in this aesthetic strategy, and that this force is strongly linked, according to Adorno, to the specific literary construction at work in Kafka's texts, which involves, as was briefly suggested, a dynamic combination of multiple, mutually dependent layers of presentation weaved into each other.

[558] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 19

We now need to consider this form of literary construction in more detail, and indicate how exactly it may provide the preconditions for an experientially impactful encounter of the reader with the text. This will allow us to give evidence for Adorno's view that Kafka's texts not only express the mythic, regressive underside of modern rationality, but do so in a way that can impact on the reader with enough force as to induce them to critically reflect on their own, normally unexamined, presuppositions about the social world.

4. Kafka's Enigma as Riddle

To unravel this complex set of issues, we may return once again to the question of the constitutively enigmatic character of Kafka's writing, which Adorno strongly links to the capacity of Kafka's works to draw us into their narratives and impact on us in profound ways. In general, something may be considered enigmatic because it seems to convey some meaning that remains hidden or concealed. The hieroglyphs that we find written or carved into ancient Egyptian artefacts in the Oxford Ashmolean Museum, for instance, may appear enigmatic to us in this general sense. We may be intrigued, but with the exception of those of us with archaeological inclinations, most of us will likely not find ourselves feeling 'compelled' to discover the meaning conveyed by the writing, in a way that matches what Adorno describes - in quite emphatic terms – as the experience of being confronted with Kafka's enigmatic writing, which exerts enough pull on the reader as to 'command interpretation', overwhelming them to a point where they feel they are 'held accountable' for understanding the meaning of the enigmatic text.[559] An activity which Adorno likens to his own conception of philosophy from as early as his 1931 inaugural lecture – that of trying to solve a *riddle* – may be a closer match. Most of us will have had the experience of attempting to provide the answer to a riddle, and

[559] Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka', 246.

will be familiar with its distinct phenomenological character. Some of the most enigmatic and testing riddles are capable of consuming all our attention, making us concentrate all our mental energies towards working out their solution. As such, riddles may be said to have the capacity to 'command interpretation' and even to make us feel we are 'held accountable' for coming up with an answer.

This experiential effect is owed to the distinctive form through which a riddle puts together apparently familiar items of knowledge. An ordinary question like 'Where do Emperor penguins live?' or a statement such as 'Emperor penguins live in Antarctica' is straightforwardly intelligible and therefore unenigmatic, and an ancient hieroglyphic writing on display in the museum, written in a long-extinct language, will likely come across as simply unintelligible to most of us. A riddle charts a path between these two extremes – it is constructed in a language that on the face of it is intelligible, even straightforwardly so, but recoils into something quite unintelligible and puzzling as soon as we attempt to arrive straightforwardly at an answer. Consider what is arguably the most famous riddle in history, the Sphinx's riddle to Oedipus - 'What goes on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three legs in the evening?'. As Henry W. Pickford has argued, the riddle *appears* to be a straightforwardly intelligible question that predicates a certain set of characteristics of the sought-after object that have a determinate or fixed (Fregean) sense.[560] The word 'leg', for instance, is most likely to be initially understood only in its literal, conventional sense, as the limb on which an animal walks or stands; and 'morning', 'noon', and 'evening' simply as the times of the day. As Adorno relates matters in his 1931 lecture, the attempt to solve the riddle on the basis of these initial presuppositions (which coincides with the idea of 'science' and 'research') 'assumes the reduction of the question to given and known elements where nothing

[560] Henry W. Pickford, 'Riddlework I', 71.

would seem necessary except the answer'.[561] To reduce the question set out in the riddle to its 'given and known elements' Adorno means, I take it, to presuppose the sense of the words out of which it is composed, and to treat it as the straightforward question that it appears to be. If the riddle was indeed a straightforward question, then its solution would, surely, be straightforward also – it would be a matter of discovering an object that fits the desired description – in this case, as Adorno puts it, we would be attempting to 'find in the riddle the reflection of a being which lies behind it, a being mirrored in the riddle, in which it is contained'.[562] But, as soon as we look for such an object, we meet with difficulty. In the case of the Sphinx's riddle, we would be trying various objects that fail to satisfy the complete set of desired predicates: many animals have four legs, a few have two legs, but we will be hard-pressed to conceive of any actually existing animal with three legs, and even more so, an animal whose legs vary numerically according to the time of the day. Faced with this difficulty, we are eventually forced to revisit the wording of the riddle and reflect on what seemed like an ordinary question. This would effectively allow us to conceive of the possibility that the conceptual resources with which we initially attempted to solve the riddle were in some way limited or insufficient – i.e. that the predicates of the description do not have a determinate, fixed sense, that they admit of interpretation. As Pickford argues, to successfully solve the riddle it would not be enough to know *what* the right answer is – 'human being' – but *how* this is the right answer.[563] Only through interpretation could we recognise that 'leg' could also be understood to mean 'point of support' and 'morning', 'noon', and 'evening' – as 'childhood', 'adulthood' and 'old age', respectively. Only if we *see* how our concepts may acquire these additional meanings and fit persuasively into the pattern set out by the riddle, does 'human

[561] Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Actuality of Philosophy', 126-127.
[562] Adorno, 'Actuality of Philosophy', 127.
[563] As Pickford explains: 'And even when the respondent is told the answer, he may then know *what* the solution is, but not yet know *how* it is the solution, and thus the riddle-character of the question abides' (Henry W. Pickford, 'Riddlework I', 72). That is, without knowing the *how* of the solution, we cannot be said to have solved the riddle, hence its persisting incomprehensibility, its abiding 'riddle-character'.

being' make sense as an answer – as Adorno puts this thought, this would enable us to see how 'the singular and dispersed elements of the question are brought into various groupings long enough for them to close together in a figure out of which the solution springs forth'.[564] Whilst discovering the correct answer to the question 'Where do Emperor penguins live?' would be a matter of acquiring or communicating an item of knowledge, solving a riddle is, as Pickford reads Adorno, a matter of gaining a new sense that allows us to recognise 'the pattern or rule implicit in the riddle's solution', and this 'extends the reach of our concepts and thus their applicability to reality'.[565]

The figure of the riddle and the notion of riddle-solving, construed along lines similar to the above, offer us a promising lead for gaining some clarity on how Adorno conceives of Kafka's enigmatic literary constructs. The latter seem to be based on a similar logic to that of riddles, and to elicit an experiential response in their readers with a similar phenomenological profile to the experience of being confronted with a (particularly testing) riddle, and the consequent activity of attempting to solve it. Riddles bring together what appear to be familiar items of knowledge arranged in a pattern that appears intelligible or congruous with our own pre-existing patterns for organising the items of our knowledge (or our experience more generally) – the Sphinx's riddle, for instance, appears as a deceptively simple, lucid and quite straightforward question. Similarly, Kafka's works do not initially strike us as particularly mysterious or far-fetched – on the contrary, they lend themselves to instant rapport with Kafka's reader, both because they appear to recount experiences from the familiar domain of ordinary life, and to do so in a style that, at least initially, does not indicate hermeneutic resistance. Kafka's stories and situations appear, at first, to be hermeneutically accessible, tractable. The literary ingenuity of Kafka, and what can make the experience of reading him so

[564] Adorno, 'Actuality of Philosophy', 127.
[565] Pickford, 'Riddlework I', 73.

impactful, has to do with how his texts *appear* to be profoundly intelligible and hermeneutically accessible, yet when we attempt to engage on the basis of these assumptions, they prove themselves to be, on the contrary, rather unintelligible, inaccessible, intractable. This is similar, I wish to suggest, to the experience of trying and continually failing to solve a riddle by treating it as if it were a straightforward question with a clearly intelligible, determinate sense. The specific literary construction at work in Kafka's work generates a push-pull dynamic that stimulates the reader's conduit with the text and yet dissuades it, invoking a certain set of expectations in the reader about the text, only to have these eventually unsettled. In Kafka's case, as in riddles, this experience is geared towards inducing the reader to recognise the insufficiencies or limitations of their (largely unreflective) presuppositions and pre-existing beliefs, the conceptual resources on the basis of which they initially engaged with the enigmatic text, and critically revise these presuppositions and beliefs in an act of interpretation.

5.Construction and Reception

If the above suggestions are on the right track, we need to provide a more robust account of the principles of literary construction Adorno understands to be at work in Kafka, as well as the subjective response that Adorno envisions this type of literary construction is geared towards facilitating, while the notion of riddles and riddle-solving will be helpful in providing some orientational signposts along the way. This reconstructive account has to indicate both how this specific strategy of literary construction and the subjective response it facilitates can be understood by Adorno as steps in a specific form of critical engagement with modern rationality. Due to Adorno's commitment to a certain conception of aesthetic autonomy, Adorno maintains that Kafka's texts only fulfil this critical function *indirectly* and *inexplicitly* (and even, at least to some extent, independently of their author's actual intentions). There is no space here to discuss, at any great length, Adorno's complex, and not to mention, easily

misunderstood, account of aesthetic autonomy. By way of a brief summary - Adorno takes artworks to be formed in accordance with intrinsically aesthetic norms and criteria for success, distinct from the mechanisms and categorial determinations of modern rationality – the rationality of capitalist socialisation that integrates all aspects of human life and non-human nature, and harnesses them instrumentally, as means for the reproduction of capitalist society. In this sense, the kind of critique Adorno sees enacted in and through aesthetically autonomous works like Kafka's differs importantly from what one finds in explicitly socially critical and political works that *are* formed in conformity with the demands of modern rationality. These are demands that, on Adorno's reading, are strictly speaking external and heterogeneous to art – in the aesthetic schema of explicitly political or socially 'engaged' art, the work ultimately fulfils a heteronomous, instrumental function, figuring as a vehicle for communicating a certain socially critical content or for making a direct political appeal to audiences, and this fundamentally obstructs the capacity of such works to achieve aesthetic autonomy.[566] And while autonomous works must maintain their distinction from the social world and the mechanisms of modern social rationality, they cannot be indifferent to this external, heterogeneous context – in fact, Adorno urges the contrary point, that the autonomy of artworks is actually *premised* on their continuing relation to this heterogeneous context: '[art] is defined by its relation to what it is not. The specifically artistic in art is derived concretely from its other … [a]rt is autonomous and it is not; without what is heterogeneous to it, its autonomy eludes it.'[567] In other words, Adorno understands art's continuing relation to the social world as necessary for its own autonomous constitution. This relation bears, firstly, on the fact that artworks draw their 'content' from the historically specific context in which they are produced,

[566] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 148. This point has been one of the corollaries of the discussion in the previous section – on Adorno's account, explicitly political art commits the same sort of error on the plane of artistic production as the error of existentialist and theological renderings of Kafka on the plane of aesthetic interpretation – in both cases, the work of art is construed non-autonomously, it is treated in accordance with an aesthetic understanding in which the artwork is made to serve an extra-artistic, heteronomous demand.
[567] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 3, 6.

or, as Adorno puts it, artworks ‘communicate with the empirical experience that they reject and from which they draw their content’[568] – even though this socio-historical content is not made directly accessible or intelligible, but is ‘enciphered’ or ‘encoded’ in the artwork during the process of its production, wherein artistic ‘materials’ (words, associations, colours, sounds, techniques) are worked on, processed and pressed into a formal unity by artists (who need not intentionally aim at, or even be aware of, introducing socio-historical content in their work). Furthermore, the artistic process operates in accordance with formal laws that are reminiscent of, and in some sense recapitulate, the laws of social processes, the suppression of differentiation in all aspects of human life and non-human nature, their integration and instrumentalization for the sake of the self-preservation of modern rationality and the reproduction of capitalist society. Adorno refers to the process of aesthetic production as one of aesthetic *mastery* of materials, of aesthetic *domination* over ‘nature’ – artists are confronted with a multiplicity of diffuse aesthetic materials, which they subject to a process of meticulous selection and refinement, manipulation and even distortion, in order to press them into the formal unity that constitutes the autonomous artwork. In other words, Adorno conceives of the processes that obtain in autonomous artworks on the model of the socio-historical process – ‘their own dynamic, their immanent historicity as a dialectic of nature and its domination, not only is of the same essence as the dialectic external to them but resembles it without imitating it’.[569] This is important, because it forms the premiss of Adorno’s claim that autonomous artworks are capable of providing far-reaching critiques of society – not because they aim at providing a verisimilar ‘copy’ of society, a representationally accurate ‘imitation’ of it, but because they recapitulate through their own formal organisation the form of social reality itself, aesthetic processes in some way ‘resemble’ the social process, while remaining fundamentally

[568] Ibid., 4.
[569] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 5.

distinct from it.[570] This is why Adorno sees in autonomous works a critical comportment towards social reality that he terms the 'mimesis of domination': 'the opposition of artworks to domination is mimesis of domination. They must assimilate themselves to the comportment of domination in order to produce something qualitatively distinct from the world of domination'.[571]

How does the foregoing help us in reconstructing Adorno's interpretation of Kafka? To begin with, Adorno's historical and contextualist understanding of artistic production, as well as the historical character of his aesthetic categories, commits him to the view that Kafka's works have to be understood as indexed to the specific socio-historical context in which they are produced, at a particular stage in the historical development of society – the crisis-ridden disintegration of 'high' or liberal capitalism which had marked, in however equivocal and contradictory a form, a progressive transformation in all aspects of social, political and individual life. While no different from previous societies in perpetuating class domination, liberal capitalism had succeeded in mediating the relations of class domination through the rationality of capitalist commodity exchange that sees members of opposing classes confront each other for the first time as formally free and formally equal participants in social life. The modern conception of the individual as a free and autonomous subject that was thereby formed, codified in law and articulated intellectually by bourgeois philosophy and science, was in direct contradiction with the material conditions of existence based on economic domination and unfreedom. But while this contradiction – between bourgeois ideology and social reality – was still comprehended relatively clearly at the start of capitalist development, this becomes increasingly more difficult at the time in which Kafka is writing, the period Adorno refers to

[570] As Brian O'Connor has argued, in Adorno's critical reformulation of the traditional aesthetic notion of mimesis, artworks *are* imitative, but not in the sense of a *representational* imitation or immediate 'copy' of reality, but of an imitation of a *process* or processual structure, which brings the Adornian conception of mimesis in surprisingly close proximity to that of Aristotle. See Brian O'Connor, *Adorno* (Routledge: London, 2013), 156.
[571] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 289.

as the ‘monopoly’ or ‘administered’ phase of capitalism that displaces its liberal antecedent. In this later period of capitalist development, the commodity form that structures capitalist relations of production and exchange increasingly becomes the structuring principle of *all* social relations.[572] This changes the scope and character of bourgeois ideology: this latter can no longer be understood as a theoretical veil in direct contradiction to social reality, since it has established itself objectively in social reality itself, as the structuring principle of all social practices and institutions - as Adorno puts it, ‘ideology drones, as it were, from the gears of an irresistible *praxis*’.[573] As the rationality of the economic sphere transforms into socially prevalent rationality, it permeates all domains of social life, including intellectual life and individual consciousness more generally – and thus becomes the prevalent lens through which individuals understand themselves and their society. This is what Adorno refers to as the ‘spell’ that individuals have come under – ‘the equivalent of the fetish-character of the commodity’, ‘the subjective form of the world spirit, whose primacy over the externalised life process is reinforced internally’.[574] In the conditions of monopoly capitalism, Adorno maintains, individuals have accepted the form of social rationality that dominates them and the general social process (having ‘primacy over the externalised life process’) as their own rationality, their own conceptual self-understanding: ‘what they can do nothing about, and which negates them, is what they themselves become’.[575] The reason it is difficult for individuals to comprehend the ideological character of this form of rationality is that it has now become their own, and as such, it increasingly deprives them of the self-reflective intellectual capacities necessary for apprehending their predicament for what it is. Individuals are hindered, in other

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[572] This development is grasped theoretically as early as Georg Lukács’ 1923 *History and Class Consciousness*, whose analysis of the processes of reification in developed capitalist society was of unparalleled influence for Adorno’s critical social theory.
[573] Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Cultural Criticism and Society’, in *Prisms* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1983), 29.
[574] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. Dennis Redmond, 337-340. Available at https://www.academia.edu/39707967/Negative_Dialectics.
[575] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, ibid.

words, in registering the discrepancy between their own conception of themselves as free and autonomous subjects, and existing social processes which reduce their freedom to the performance of functions over which they have no control, constrain their experience to an unreflective, self-enclosed and instrumental relation to things in the world, and obstruct, in some sense, their very capacity to cultivate a genuine individuality of their own – paradoxically, 'individuals' are increasingly less capable of being individuals to begin with.

Now, to return to Kafka - as much as his work avoids 'virtually every overt reference to anything historical',[576] Adorno insists that Kafka's works are to be understood not in relation to any trans-historical, metaphysical plane of reality, as they traditionally have been, but on the contrary – as 'crystallisations' of history, of the concrete socio-historical moment (surely, not essentially different from our own) in which they are produced:

> 'Kafka unmasks monopolism by focusing on the waste-products of the liberal era that it liquidates. This historical moment, not anything allegedly metatemporal illuminating history from above, is the crystallization of his metaphysics'.[577]

Adorno again:

> 'Kafka, in whose work monopoly capitalism appears only distantly, codifies in the dregs of the administered world what becomes of people under the total social spell more faithfully and powerfully than do any novels about corrupt industrial trusts'.[578]

[576] Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka', 257.
[577] Ibid.
[578] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 230.

What we gain from these remarks is the idea that although Kafka's works do not provide any 'overt reference' to an immediate socio-historical context, they nevertheless draw on this context – they concentrate within themselves the 'waste products' of the 'liberal era' in the process of its 'liquidation', Kafka 'codifies' in his work the 'dregs' of the process whereby the 'administered world' displaces liberal capitalism, and these 'dregs' are indicative of the human costs incurred in this process – 'what becomes of people under the total social spell' – that is, as Adorno maintains, the material and spiritual unfreedom of human beings, the qualitative deterioration of their experience, their increasing incapacity to cultivate an individuality of their own, and so forth. Adorno reasserts these ideas as he compares the literary construction of Kafka's texts to Freud's definition of the psychoanalytic procedure as one of attending to the 'dregs of the world of appearances'.[579] Kafka's method, Adorno claims, is one of 'constructing art out of nothing but the refuse of reality', depicting society as a 'montage composed of waste-products which the new order, in the process of forming itself, extracts from the perishing present'.[580]

The affinity Adorno draws with the psychoanalytic procedure is informative - while Freud's 'dregs' refer to various apparently trivial and insignificant occurrences such as slips of the tongue, dreams, free associations and neurotic symptoms that reveal in a covert, transmuted form, the repressions inflicted on instinctual drives preserved in the unconscious, the 'waste-products' concentrated in Kafka's works are indirectly reflective of the 'wounds with which society brands the individual'[581] – that is, the damages inflicted on individuals in the process of capitalist socialisation. To follow up on Adorno's analogy with the psychoanalytic situation, these damages are for the most part not even consciously registered as such due to the extent to which individuals have themselves become unreflective of the fact that that the social

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[579] Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka', 251.
[580] Ibid., 251-252.
[581] Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka', 252

process in which they participate systematically dehumanises them, that the form of rationality to which they subscribe and which governs the social process, does not enable their freedom and autonomy, but results in their own domination. This, Adorno, argues, is the actual experience of individuals in developed capitalist societies – an experience that, for the most part, individuals do not even consciously come to terms with, but which cannot but leave its recalcitrant traces, the 'waste products' of the process of social domination cannot be completely covered over. Kafka's works, Adorno suggests, concentrate precisely such waste products into themselves, and present them as 'ciphers of the social untruth, as the negative of truth'.[582]

Adorno refers to a quality of 'shabbiness' and 'obsolescence' characteristic of Kafka's works – the most obvious examples of this would be the fact that the offices of the court that conducts Josef. K.'s trial are housed in a dusty, stuffy, and quite literally suffocating attic room of an apartment building in a poor suburban area, or the fact that Kafka's characters are, in general, ineffectual, incapable of performing socially useful work; think, for instance, of the fact that K.'s preoccupation with his trial prevents him from doing his job at the bank properly, in stark contrast to the Assistant Manager, an overly ambitious and careerist figure determined to rise to the top of the ranks. Kafka's protagonists are rendered quite literally dysfunctional, superfluous by the context of institutions which increasingly traps and entangles them, and this shabby, dysfunctional quality of Kafka's world constitutes, according to Adorno, 'a cryptogram of capitalism's highly polished, glittering late phase, which he excludes in order to define it all the more precisely in the negative'.[583] Kafka's 'sad and dilapidated'[584] world of images does not offer an objectively realistic description of social reality. Nevertheless, this world manages to touch on a more fundamental level of social reality, and to reproduce the

[582] Ibid.
[583] Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka', 256.
[584] Ibid., 255.

experience of capitalist society as it *truly* is, ‘as an experience of its essence, not its façade … the obverse, the negative that truly reveals the seeming positive of modern streamlined capitalist society’,[585] the negative obverse of social experience behind the ‘soothing façade to which a repressive reason increasingly conforms’.[586]

Kafka’ works then, are keyed to their specific socio-historical context, and draw from this context certain elements of the ordinary experience of individuals in this specific context. These elements may be situations which individuals are obliquely familiar with from their daily, ordinary life – for instance, the feeling that one is being observed and followed; various ideas that have gained common currency in society, colloquial phrases, and such like. Akin to the ‘dregs’ in the psychoanalytic situation such as slips of the tongue and neurotic symptoms in, these moments of experience will not be consciously registered as problematic, and are instead likely to be dismissed as insignificant or unimportant. But, when presented in a particular way – which Adorno believes Kafka’s works are capable of doing – these recalcitrant traces of a process of largely unconscious social domination, these ‘mirror signs of capitalism’s untruth’,[587] as Stanley Corngold calls them, can stand out to us. Something about how Kafka’s works present what we previously held to be familiar items of knowledge and experience can then suddenly appear ‘off’, strange, and unfamiliar – an experience that Adorno compares to the feeling of *déjà vu*: ‘each sentence compels the reaction: ‘that’s the way it is, and with it the question. ‘where have I seen that before?’; the *déjà vu* is declared permanent’.[588] A presentation of this sort will be capable of providing us with a different relation to the social experience in which we are normally unreflectively, uncritically immersed, such that this experience is, as Brian O’Connor puts it, ‘no longer undergone without a sense that there is something

[585] Adorno, *Aesthetics*, 208.
[586] Adorno, ‘Notes on Kafka’, 252.
[587] Stanley Corngold, ‘Adorno’s “Notes on Kafka” – A Critical Reconstruction’, *Monatshefte* 94, no. 1, Rereading Adorno (Spring, 2002), 28.
[588] Adorno, ‘Notes on Kafka’, 246.

wrong',[589] and so that the 'unthinking relationship we have with social norms'[590] may thereby be unsettled.

This may be helpful, but it does not yet get us very far – what we need to account for is the *how* of Kafka's strategy, the manner of the presentation of the essential layer of socio-historical experience – and this is key, because it is precisely because this layer of experience is not normally attended to by social individuals that there is a need to present it in a different way, that is, with enough experiential impact as to unsettle the unreflective relation individuals have towards their world and themselves. But let us recall that according to Adorno, artworks are capable of far-reaching critical engagements with social reality by virtue of the fact that their very form, the procedures and techniques through which artworks process and organise their materials, mimetically recapitulates the form of social reality itself. The 'how' of aesthetic expression is itself, in some way, modelled on the 'how' of social processes. The form of rationality that presides over all domain of capitalist social life, and which has entrenched itself as the form of individual consciousness itself, has taken on a form akin to that of a mythic spell. Art responds, according to Adorno, by re-enacting this spell as their principal law of form, and by means of which artworks are capable of organising and expressing a certain social content – 'the spell with which art through its unity encompasses the membra disjecta of reality is borrowed from reality'.[591] And although they recapitulate the rationality of domination, the spell of myth that governs social reality, artworks achieve this in a way that disarms the dominating, coercive force of this rationality – whereas this latter represses whatever is non-identical with itself, covering over its own recalcitrant traces and hence remaining largely unconsciously registered by individuals for what it truly is, artworks give an effective expression, a voice to these repressed non-identical elements (these 'waste products' of

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[589] Brian O'Connor, 'On the Mimesis of Reification', xxx.
[590] O'Connor, Ibid.
[591] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 130.

society), whatever attests to the actual state of individuals as one of suffering, domination and unfreedom – artworks seek to 'aid the non-identical, which in empirical reality is repressed by the compulsion to identify everything with the subject'.[592]

Adorno's argues to the effect that, since modern rationality is so deeply entrenched as a structuring principle of all social process *and* since it become the dominant lens through which individuals relate to themselves and the world – 'hardly anything escapes it far enough to make the difference show it'[593] – Kafka's works could not give social reality a faithful, truthful expression if they were to make its dominant, coercive character thematic, a matter of content, or subject matter. Rather, they incorporate the 'spell' of this reality, its form of rationality, into something akin to their ground zero, an unnamed *a priori* that structures the very literary form of Kafka's text:

> The linguistic habitus of 'the world is as it is' is the medium through which the social spell becomes aesthetic appearance. Kafka wisely guards against naming it, as if otherwise the spell would be broken whose insurmountable presence defines the arena of Kafka's work and which, as it's a priori, cannot become thematic … Reified consciousness, which presupposes and confirms the inevitability of what exists is – as the heritage of the ancient spell – the new form of the myth of the ever-same. Kafka's epic style is, in its archaism, a mimesis of reification. Whereas his work must renounce any claim to transcending myth, it makes the social web of delusion knowable in myth through the how, through language. In his writing, absurdity is as self-evident as it has actually become in society.[594]

[592] Ibid., 4.
[593] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 345.
[594] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 230-231.

This, then, is the sense in which we are to understand Adorno's reference to Kafka's strategy of aesthetic critique as a 'cunning against myth'. Rather than explicitly denouncing socially prevalent rationality in its reversion to a new form of myth – or indeed, thematising such a thing to begin with – Kafka's strategy seeks to 'concede it victory from the beginning', and to attempt to break the spell this myth keeps human consciousness under by engaging in a 'kind of mimicry'[595] of it. For Adorno, this translates to the idea that Kafka writes a text whose very literary form amount to a 'mimesis of reification', a comportment that makes itself *like* the reified consciousness that it opposes, or *like* the form of social processes more generally. As 'cryptograms' of capitalist social reality, Kafka's works may be said to mimetically recapitulate, as Susan Buck-Morss puts it, 'the bourgeois social and psychological structure in monadological abbreviation'.[596]

I began this chapter by noting the emphasis Adorno places on the conceptually unassimilable character of Kafka's writing – the extent to which it resists being subsumed under a preconceived thesis or theoretical idea – and yet continuously invites attempts at interpretation. This does not mean that Kafka's works are not to be reflectively engaged with – as we have seen, Adorno makes clear that it is precisely through this push-pull dynamic that Kafka's works 'commands interpretation' and solicits readers to 'dwell' on their enigma. The objection may be raised, however, that given his diagnosis of the extent of the reification of social relations and consciousness, Adorno is restricting this capacity for reflective engagement with Kafka's works (and art more generally) to a few privileged 'critical individuals' such as himself. A version of this criticism is levelled at Adorno by Maeve Cooke, who argues that Adorno is 'vulnerable to the accusation of epistemological authoritarianism' – he has claimed privileged access to knowledge of truth, by virtue of which only individuals like himself are

[595] Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka', 270.
[596] Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 97.

able to engage reflectively with Kafka's works (and with modern art more generally).[597] Cooke credits Adorno for his insight into Kafka's aesthetic technique as generative of affectively powerful, bodily experiences of the negativity of the social world and the qualitative degeneration of individual experience in such a world. But on Cooke's interpretation, for Adorno such experiences are only mediated affectively and cannot be linguistically articulated and rationally comprehended. For Cooke's Adorno, the truth of Kafka's art 'cannot be grasped in conceptual language but can be experienced only affectively … it can merely be felt, not rationally understood'.[598] This is because Cooke takes Adorno to be committed to a picture of language as irredeemably reifying and ideologically falsifying social reality, a 'closed system of instrumental rationality' in accordance with which any attempt at rational reflection and interpretation of such aesthetic experiences would 'merely serve to reproduce and perpetuate and reproduce a repressive linguistic system'.[599] And yet – Cooke contends – here we have Adorno who produces just such a philosophical, linguistically mediated interpretation of Kafka's work, since 'the critical philosopher is somehow able to avoid succumbing to the reifying system into which language has degenerated under conditions of advanced capitalism'.[600] Hence the charge of 'epistemological authoritarianism' – Adorno appears to claim a privileged access to a domain of truth that everyone else can at best experience affectively, but lacks the reflective capacities and linguistic resources to articulate rationally.

Cooke's critique has potentially far-reaching implications for Adorno's aesthetics and also for the affinity I have been attempting to develop between his aesthetic and philosophical models of critique, particularly as it implies that works of philosophy and art could only ever make us *feel* differently about a thoroughly reified social world but are severely limited or even

[597] Maeve Cooke, 'Truth in Narrative Fiction: Kafka, Adorno and Beyond', *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 40, no. 7 (September 2014): 629-643.
[598] Cooke, 'Truth in Narrative Fiction', 633.
[599] Ibid., 632.
[600] Ibid., 634.

powerless in helping us to reflectively engage with it. And yet, I have already provided the key philosophical elements for responding to Cooke's challenge for Adorno. In the first place, as I have argued in my Introduction, Adorno is not committed to a picture of language as completely ideological and repressive. On the contrary, he (along with Horkheimer) identifies reconciling tendencies in language which both critical theorist and artist implicitly rely on in articulating wholesale critiques of the social world in their own respective linguistic mediums, including and especially by using language to expose ideological distortions in ordinary usages of language itself. As I've previously argued, Adorno and Horkheimer believe that the ideological and demystifying functions of language cannot be separated (at least not in the present social arrangement), so the critical strategy they employ is one of attempting to immanently work through and determinately negate conventional linguistic usages, exposing the contradictions language necessarily gets entangled into when it serves the ideological purpose of masking the status quo. This is the basis of the parallel I have attempted to draw with Kafka and his literary use of language, understood by Adorno as a 'mimesis of reification' that cunningly imitates and subverts reified language from within. Correcting Cooke on Adorno's conception of language can thereby help explain that the critical philosopher (and by extension, the critical artist) does not claim to have access to a special domain of truth that is somehow exempt from the reifying structures of language – and that he is therefore guilty of 'epistemological authoritarianism'. Rather, language *in general* can never be reduced to a 'closed system of instrumental rationality', and the contradictions it necessarily contains when it serves ideological usages are the hinges for a wholesale critique of society, in either philosophical or aesthetic form.

As we've seen, on the side of reception too, Cooke argues that because of his totalising view of the ideological function of language, Adorno thinks that any attempt at reflective engagement with Kafka's work will undermine its truth content, which cannot be articulated

linguistically but only experienced affectively (except for a handful of lucky critical individuals). In light of this, Cooke claims that Adorno suppressed his own better insight into the literary techniques of Kafka, and in particular the ambiguity of Kafka's language which both invites and prevents any straightforward attempt at extracting Kafka's 'message'. For Cooke, Adorno thus fails to make the point that this 'ambiguity of language calls for interpretation on the part of the reader'[601] and ignores the ways in which Kafka's stories 'both invite and permit interpretations, though never stable ones'.[602] And yet, this is precisely what I have claimed Adorno *does* think about how Kafka's texts impact on their readers. Whilst Adorno criticises attempts to subsume Kafka's work under a pre-conceived thesis or philosophy imposed on the text from outside and argues Kafka's texts are constructed to produce a profoundly affective, bodily impact on their readers, this does not, *pace* Cooke, come at the cost of rational reflection. Not only this – the affective impact of his work is *inseparable* from its importance for engaging the reflective, interpretive capacities of its readers.

To show that this is the case, allow me to revisit some of the claims I made earlier in this chapter (see in particular Sections 3 and 4 above). Adorno makes clear that the affective pull Kafka's work exerts on its reader is one which demands a 'desperate effort' so that she 'truly understands'.[603] For Adorno, then, Kafka's work agitates and impacts on us affectively, but this does not simply end up producing a 'negative feel for reality'[604] that cannot be linguistically articulated and reflected on. On the contrary, it is precisely their enigmatic, riddle-like literary construction that invites yet resists any attempt at straightforward theoretical assimilation that calls for shifting to a more demanding level of reflective engagement with Kafka's texts, and thereby with the socially prevalent presuppositions and perspectives these

[601] Ibid., 636.
[602] Ibid., 637.
[603] Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka', 246.
[604] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 19.

texts have problematised in literary language. Kafka's enigma cannot be explained away - but it solicits the reader to interpret it, to 'dwell on the enigma' in acts of textual interpretation and theoretical (self-)reflection. As Cooke herself, Adorno does not understand the interpretation produced in such reflective engagement to be stable, final or reductive. The critical understanding produced in such engagement is non-subsumptive and non-reductive - the solution to Kafka's enigmas and puzzles is a solution 'that at the same time maintains the enigma'.[605]

All this is in fact friendly to Cooke's own reading of Kafka, which aims to vindicate the disclosive power of narrative fiction as involving *both* rational agency and affective engagement. My contention, rather, is that she is unfair to Adorno, whose position is much closer to her own than she concedes. As I have previously argued in this Thesis, Adorno *does* think that language has become predominantly (though *not completely*) ideological, masking social reality and stunting our reflective capacities, particularly by helping to reinforce our positive affective ties to that reality. Adorno does also think that in the present social arrangement, only 'critical individuals' have the requisite capacities for critically reflecting on the social world that subjects them to unfreedom and suffering. It is only in this limited, conditional, and historically specific sense that there is a grain of truth to the charge of 'epistemic authoritarianism'. This does not, however, commit Adorno (or Horkheimer) to 'epistemic authoritarianism' in the strong, elitist sense where he is taken to claim that such capacities are the sole prerogative of critical individuals and are unattainable by anyone else *in principle*. On the contrary, it has been my contention that the critical composition of the *Dialectic* amounts to an attempt to reinvigorate the reflective capacities in its readers, and in this sense, Adorno and Horkheimer can be said to take it *for granted* that everyone is in principle capable of developing such capacities to a considerable extent. Adorno and

[605] Ibid., 122.

Horkheimer's difference from Cooke (and Habermas) is that for them, these capacities are *currently* underdeveloped or stunted. In Adorno and Horkheimer's (and Nietzsche's) view, this is due to individuals' strong positive affective bonds to the social world. It is this assessment of the present state of subjectivity – along with Adorno and Horkheimer's reflections on the predominantly ideological function of language – that calls for rhetorically and linguistically heterodox form of critical composition. Such critical forms and uses of language can only open up the space for developing critical self-reflexivity in individuals if they also unsettle the affective identifications and bonds individuals have forged to a social world that makes them unfree and subjects them to suffering.

Conclusion

The central argument of this thesis was initiated by the claim that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* need not be seen as a self-undermining form of social critique, as it almost invariably is when the work is read too literally, and particularly when construed as a negative philosophy of history. In response to this persistent strand in its reception, I have argued that Adorno and Horkheimer's work is more plausibly and profitably read not literally, but from a methodological perspective that that pays particular attention to the philosophical style and form of presentation of the book. This opened up a way of reading the Dialectic that sees the style and form of the book as essential to the philosophical function(s) of the text – and in turn, this has required a re-evaluation of what these philosophical function(s) are, as well as reconstructive work in support of the key claims. In particular, paying attention to the stylistic features of the text allowed us to see that their heterodox and apparently self-contradictory use of language amounts to an attempt to take up the language in which enlightenment articulates its own self-understanding, and expose the contradictions in which it invariably entangles itself when it serves the ideological function of masking the contradictions at the heart of social reality, or what amounts to the same, the objective negativity of a socialisation process indifferent or antagonistic to the needs of human beings and non-human nature. As my discussion in Chapter 2 showed in particular, whilst Adorno and Horkheimer are intending to bring these self-destructive tendencies of enlightenment and the socialisation process into view, they do not put forward a totalising, metaphysically 'thick' account of the self-destructive essence of rationality, sociality, history or culture *as such*, as one would be led to believe on a literal reading (which also rules out a reading of the *Dialectic* as a teleologically based, negative philosophy of history). This crucial point cannot be properly understood without a consideration of the stylistic features of the text, in particular the role of natural-historical speculation and the ironic, twin-tracked 'serious play' that is at work in their philosophical

language and which works in the way it does not *in spite* of the fact it contains exaggeration and is apparently self-contradictory, but *by virtue of* this fact.

The first set of philosophical motivations for this style of critical composition stems from Adorno and Horkheimer's reflections on the philosophy of language and their account of conceptuality that I discussed in my Introduction. Although language cannot be unmoored from the historical domain of experience and the human 'life form' and thereby contains traces of 'objective reason' that point to the possibility of historical reconciliation, these reconciling elements cannot be separated from the socially prevalent ideological use of language that only serves to reinforce the instrumentalisation of reason and to mask a social reality antagonistic to the human life form. Because of this, Adorno and Horkheimer believe they will not succeed in bringing the self-destructive tendencies of enlightenment into view if they rely on an ordinary, ideological use of language and concepts, and nor can they avail themselves of some putative purely non-ideological use that simply does not exist in the present social context. Yet, in virtue of the fact that language contains inextinguishable reconciling elements, a dialectical use of language of the sort I have described in this Thesis is philosophically warranted – namely, one in which they immanently retrace the language in which enlightenment articulates its self-understanding and expose the contradictions which it necessarily disavows when put to ideological use. Adorno and Horkheimer's hope is that in doing so, they can determinately negate and 'explode' this ideological linguistic infrastructure of enlightenment from within.

As I argued at greater length in my Introduction, understood through this 'lingiustic-philosophical' frame, my Thesis offers a response to the Habermasian objection that the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is self-undermining, and it does so on Habermas's own terms. Insofar as Adorno and Horkheimer see language as having an ineluctably 'double' character and as inseparably tied to the human life form, they also see it as containing inextinguishable traces of 'objective', non-instrumentalising reason, and thereby to socially operative

possibilities of historical reconciliation. This would be one of at least two ways of making sense of Adorno and Horkheimer's talk of enlightenment's 'anti-authoritarian tendency' and the 'utopia contained in the concept of reason'.[670] It is not immediately clear that these utopian possibilities have any identifiable socially operative locus at present, such that they can have a normative claim on subjects and be utilised as critical resources – lest they are only abstract ideals whose conditions of realisation have no objective basis in existing society. Yet, as I argued in my Introduction, these utopian potentials which comprise the systematically betrayed utopian promise of enlightenment, *do* have a socially operative locus. For Adorno and Horkheimer they reside in the objective possibilities brought about by the growth in productive forces as well as in the structures of language itself. In the Preface to his *magnum opus, The Theory of Communicative Action*, Jürgen Habermas sets himself the weighty task of producing a critical theory that 'validates its own critical standards'.[671] It is perhaps ironic that Adorno and Horkheimer may be said to have already produced such a theory long before Habermas – insofar as the dialectical use of language they employ in the critical composition of their work implicitly relies and draws on the normative resources the authors argue are inextinguishably deposited in language.

I have also drawn attention to a second set of philosophical reasons – inseparable from, and no less important than the first – for the type of critical composition I argued is at work in the *Dialectic.* This has to do with Adorno and Horkheimer's socio-psychological account of 'enlightened' human subjectivity, which I first drew attention to in my discussion of affectivity in Nietzsche's genealogy, and which I then developed on an independent basis, within the psychoanalytic conceptual framework of Adorno and Horkheimer's critical theory (in Chapter 3). The key idea, to recall, was that the rational and reflective capacities of modern subjects are

[670] DE, 172.
[671] Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, *Volume One*, xii.

sapped and overshadowed by the much stronger affective, libidinal attachments of subjects to the present antagonistic social arrangement and in particular to the socially prevalent perceptions of history that ideologically mask and legitimise that arrangement. The corollary of this was that attempts at using concepts and rational arguments articulated in linguistically conventional theoretical form is unlikely to succeed at disturbing at destabilising the affirmative affect-laden commitments of subjects to a social reality that is antagonistic to their interests and needs. In fact, such critical attempts are more likely to backfire by provoking defensive mechanisms and strategies of rationalisation that only reinforce the affective bonds that keep subjects affirmatively attached to their social reality. For these sets of reasons too, I argued that Adorno and Horkheimer's style of critical composition is philosophically warranted. Their ironic 'serious play' based on exaggeration and textually performative contradiction amounts to an attempt to retrace the conventional linguistic forms through which the self-understanding of 'enlightened' subjects is typically formed, and in particular the conventional narratives, tropes, genres that inform their historical self-understanding. The point of this strategy is to bypass the affect-laden defences subjects build against rational criticism of their commitments, only in order to then upset these affective bonds more effectively and loosen the hold of these affective bonds to an extent that would allow rational (self-)reflection on the social world – and on the theoretical content of Adorno and Horkheimer's text.

Here is also the place to draw attention back to Nietzsche and reflect once more on the nature of the affinity between him and Adorno and Horkheimer, as well as clarify some of the disparities and potential objections which I have not addressed so far. I began this Thesis with an 'excursus' on the *Genealogy of Morality* because this text provides arguably the most proximate philosophical precedent and model for Adorno and Horkheimer's critical strategy. We saw the affinities in the style of critical composition of both Nietzsche and Adorno – in

both cases, we are dealing with theoretical constructs that are given a historical makeup of some form of other (for instance a genealogy, a history of morality in the manner of the 'English psychologists' in the case of Nietzsche; a speculative universal history, an anthropology, a piece of classical philology in the case of Adorno and Horkheimer). Both strategies are self-consciously deceptive in raising certain conventional expectations attached to the objects whose history is being retraced, and self-consciously polemical in betraying such expectations in dramatically antithetical, iconoclastic ways. Nietzsche locates the origin of Christian morality not in any divine commandment, an inbuilt or rationally acquired predisposition towards selflessness and the love of one's neighbour, but in a dramatic clash that sees these moral conceptions emerge in the attempt of the envious, resentful slave priests to overpower a disdainful, self-assertive nobility for whom 'goodness' simply meant physical and political superiority. Adorno and Horkheimer locate the origin of modern enlightenment rationality and the rational, purpose-directed self not in some inherent inclination to knowledge that frees human beings from the fear and compulsion of nature – in their reinterpretation of Odysseus's confrontation with the Sirens, rationality becomes intelligible as springing precisely *from* the fear of (reverting back to) nature, in a newly compulsive relationship that can only ensure the preservation of the self at the cost of renouncing self-fulfilment and neutralising the promise of happiness.

Both these constructs have a specific theoretical content and cognitive function, which is derived from an analysis of the *present* form of the object under criticism – morality, enlightenment rationality – but this theoretical content is styled and shaped in a heterodox rhetorical form aimed at immanently imploding the normative claims of the object under criticism, and at producing an affective response in the readership (more on this below). This rhetorical form makes use of various strategies that may be taken to violate the epistemic demands of our ordinary use of language and concepts, including and especially modern

historiographic convention – exaggeration and simplification, (textually) performative contradiction, retrojection, personification, caricature, parody. Nietzsche retrojects his critical understanding of *present*-day morality onto the past, his slave priests and nobles personifying what are in themselves ideal types based on this critical understanding. In thus illuminating the present as much as the past, Nietzsche's 'theory-fictions' hit their target - the normative claims of morality, insofar as this is inherently structured and reinforced by the 'historical sense', i.e., conventional perceptions of present and past. In Adorno and Horkheimer, we find something similar. In a palimpsest-like manner, the authors of the *Dialectic* retrojectively superimpose their critical analysis of the present onto the past. One of the most illustrative instances of this is the Sirens episode from the *Odyssey* in the first chapter that documents the birth of enlightened subjectivity, and the separation of art and labour. Odysseus and the Sirens are made to personify ideal-typical categories derived from an analysis of the present and become critically useful for revealing both past and present in a disturbing, strange – and even humorous – new light. Odysseus, the exalted epic hero and Trojan war veteran appears comically unheroic, a weak and cunning swindler and proto-bourgeois entrepreneur, the lethal promise of happiness exerted by the Siren song is neutralised by Odysseus's cunning and turned into proto-modern art – a mere object of contemplation deprived of practical import that Odysseus enjoys as if listening to a concert performance. Unable to give in to the temptation of the Sirens, Odysseus remains tied to work discipline, just like his men who resemble proletarian factory workers, and deprived even of Odysseus's torturous luxury, are forced instead to row restlessly, with their senses numbed.

Once again, these constructs do have a cognitive function and advance theoretical claims – to simplify to the utmost, the inner structuration of morality by power and domination in Nietzsche's case, the antagonistic, self-destructive character of enlightenment rationality, sociality and subjectivity in Adorno and Horkheimer's. We need to be mindful of this when we

use the word ‘myth’ to describe them – as I occasionally did in the Thesis. The inverted commas around the word speak to the idea that these ‘myths’ are not simple or ‘mere’ fictions but are already theoretical, or from within the conceptual framework of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* we may say that they are myths that are themselves ‘already’ a form of enlightenment. However, this cognitive or theoretical dimension is *inseparable* from the rhetorical presentation and affective function of these ‘myths’. This inseparability is not only due to linguistic-philosophical and epistemological considerations – in Adorno and Horkheimer’s case, stemming from their conception of the ‘double character’ of language, i.e. the inseparability of sign from image, concept from intuition, the classificatory from the mimetic functions of language (see Introduction again), and in Nietzsche’s case, the idea that conceptuality indelibly (and often, unwittingly) involves and is shaped by affectivity.[672] The cognitive function of the ‘myths’ of both Nietzsche and Horkheimer is *also and especially* tied to their rhetorical form and affective function because of the sorts of considerations I’ve described concerning how it tends to be affect in the first place, rather than rational belief, that ensures subjects maintain their existing (theoretical and practical) commitments, even when such commitments have been disproved through rational argument (in Nietzsche’s case, the so-called ‘problem of not inferring’, in Adorno and Horkheimer’s, the psychoanalytic notions of defence mechanisms and rationalisation). This explains why the specific textual form in which the critique is presented becomes crucial – it needs to work not only on the rational level, but also on the affective level. The choice of constructing the critique in the form of a historical inquiry is informed by such considerations, insofar as perceptions of history are fed by affect, and in turn reinforce the existing affective dispositions of subjects. But even more importantly,

[672] See Section 2 in this chapter, in particular my discussion of the different types of psychological drives that feed into the historical representations involved in different uses of history, such that certain aspects of historical reality are emphasized at the expense of others and specific affective states necessarily accompany the cognitive apprehension of historical reality. For a more general discussion, see also Christopher Janaway, 'Autonomy, Affect and the Self in Nietzsche's Project of Genealogy' in *Nietzsche on Freedom and Autonomy*, ed. Ken Gemes and Simon May (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 57-68.

these socio-psychological considerations explain why the ‘histories’ of both Nietzsche and Adorno and Horkheimer are instrumentalised not only for the sake of advancing theoretical claims, but *also and especially* for doing so in a way that is maximally provocative and capable of producing an affective response in their respective audiences.

The theoretical content of these critical constructs is thus tied up with their rhetorical form and their affective reception, and not – despite their historical makeup – their historical accuracy. The significance of this point needs special emphasis - without the appropriate affective response, the significance of the theoretical claim put forward by the text would not be effectively appreciated by the readers whose very identities and most intimate affective dispositions are affirmatively tied up with the objects under criticism, which militates against linguistically and rhetorically conventional (i.e. affectively inefficacious) forms of criticism. It is only when the text manages to unsettle these affective ties that a space for theoretical (self-) reflection is opened in the reader. This is another sense in which the style and rhetorical composition of both texts is neither an arbitrary flourish or ornament – ‘mere’ rhetoric, ‘mere’ exaggeration, etc. – nor a textual vehicle for a propositional content that could just as easily have been communicated in a linguistically and rhetorically conventional form.[673] In one sense, it is certainly the case that Adorno and Horkheimer are overplaying or exaggerating the extent of the instrumentalisation of reason and social relations, the actual *scope* of which they do not view as total, since – as I have argued particularly in my Introduction – they identify socially operative tendencies countervailing reason’s instrumentalisation both in the productive forces and in language. And yet, to say that they are ‘merely’ exaggerating or overplaying the extent of instrumentalisation in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is to do injustice to the philosophical

[673] This is also why it may be somewhat misleading to speak of Adorno and Horkheimer as practicing ‘indirect communication’, as this may imply that they simply meant to communicate some theoretical claim or thesis but used indirect textual means to do so. This is true in a general sense, but the expression risks emphasising the communicative dimension at the expense of the affective one. I am thankful to Fabian Freyenhagen, in discussions with whom we tried to clarify this point.

specificity and function of their text, the style and rhetorical form of which is *essential* to its theoretical truth content. This is because 1) this truth content could only be articulated in a heterodox linguistic form – in Adorno and Horkheimer's case, in light of their views on the instrumentalisation of language, according to which 'only exaggeration is true', and 2) it is only by being articulated in a linguistically and rhetorically heterodox, affectively efficacious form, that the theoretical truth content of these texts can be appropriately taken up by recipients which, as we've seen, requires that the text produces an affective response in the reader that momentarily distances them from their affective ties to what is being criticised, and opens up the space for theoretical reflection on this latter. This is because, again, on both Nietzsche's and Adorno and Horkheimer's views, the space for such theoretical (self-)reflection is systematically blocked at present.

What is implicit in point 2) above is a philosophical view of truth as (textually) *dialogical*, i.e. truth is not reducible to the logical validity of propositional claims on their own but requires an interaction between 'text' (or utterance) and reader in which the relevant claim(s) are appropriately taken up the reader. Connected with this, and with the idea of 'appropriateness' just mentioned, is that it is also a view of truth as tied up with the *practical* and *political* efficacy of texts (or utterances) – in the first place, on the subjective level, their truth content is conditional for its validation on inducing a process of critical (self)-reflection in the reader. In Adorno and Horkheimer's case (but not, or not necessarily, in Nietzsche's) the philosophical or critical-theoretical truth of the text (or of individual utterances) also requires being validated on a more substantial, objective level – it requires that readers realise its truth content practically and politically, i.e. by collectively transforming the social world and the structures of rationality operative in it (and in themselves), transforming the critical object (and subject) that the text has induced critical (self-)reflection about. This is in keeping with the concept of truth developed in the early phase of critical theory, in accordance with which the

truth of a theory about society 'must be decided not in supposedly neutral reflection but in personal thought and action, in concrete historical activity'.[674]

As we read in a memorandum documenting the planned work for what was to become the *Dialectic*, Adorno and Horkheimer took themselves to be tasked with producing a 'comprehensive critique of current ideology … taken here to mean not only consciousness, but also the constitution of humanity in the current phase', and that 'the work as a whole aims to overcome political stagnation'.[675] Nietzsche turned out to be a guiding star for this project because like him, Adorno and Horkheimer were concerned with producing a wholesale critique of an ideology that had not only captured human consciousness, but had also migrated into the 'constitution' of human beings themselves and come to shape their innermost needs, interests, and desires. Nietzsche provided Adorno and Horkheimer with a critical model, because he too saw himself as faced with a similar predicament and understood that the question of successfully producing such a wholesale critique without grounding it externally in any ultimate criterion or first principle was a question of a 'search for style', as Gillian Rose once described Adorno's critical theory. Adorno and Horkheimer followed Nietzsche as a critical stylist, because they too were looking for a style that would best intervene in society, consciousness, and the constitution of human beings – that would 'overcome political stagnation' – by revealing the dynamic, historically produced character of the social world, exposing the human costs involved in maintaining its presently dominant form, and yet refusing to ground this critique on any external, indubitable first principle.

One objection that may be raised at this point is that arguably, Nietzsche operates with an instrumental or pragmatist view of truth, i.e. that he in principle denies the distinction

[674] Max Horkheimer, 'Traditional and Critical Theory', 222.
[675] Max Horkheimer and (?) Theodor W. Adorno, '*Memorandum über Teile des Los Angeles Arbeitsprogramms, die von den Philosophen nicht durchgeführt werden können*' (1942), quoted in Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School, Its History, Theories and Political Significance,* trans. Michael Robertson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 315.

between truth and illusion or appearance and essence, and that truth for him gets reduced to what is instrumentally useful for agents in increasing their power. Thus, when Nietzsche exposes socially dominant moral values as a false or ideological expression of an underlying will to power, his critique is not itself grounded in any critical standard other than being itself an instrumentally useful expression of a will to power that counteracts the culturally dominant one. Indeed, a version of this criticism is famously articulated by Habermas, who accuses Nietzsche of aestheticism and ultimately, irrationalism. For Habermas, Nietzsche reduces criticisable validity claims (propositional and normative claims) to simple value preferences and judgments of taste (such that 'p is true' and 'f is right' becomes simply a matter of preferring the true over the false, or the good over the evil).[676] Nietzsche, in Habermas's view, denies that such judgments of taste have universal validity, and reinterprets them instead as the subjective expressions of an underlying will to power – modelled on the ideal figure of the active, value-positing artist.[677]

A relatively straightforward response to this objection is that Adorno and Horkheimer follow Nietzsche as a critical stylist and employ a rhetorically analogous form of composition in a way that allows them to produce a wholesale critique of ideology yet without adopting Nietzsche's instrumental view of truth.[678] Habermas himself draws an (admittedly tortured) distinction between Nietzsche, who he argues replaces truth as a critical standard with a 'theory' of power without basis as a theory, and Adorno and Horkheimer, who simply 'practice determinate negation on an ad hoc basis'.[679] (and yet, we've seen that they have a cogent response to this criticism). Adorno, too, took distance from Nietzsche (or at least 'certain invectives of Nietzsche') on the point of his alleged denial of the separation between

[676] Habermas, 'The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment', 123-124.
[677] Habermas, 'Entwinement', 124.
[678] Rose, *The Melancholy Science*, 27.
[679] Habermas, 'Entwinement', 128.

appearance and essence. Adorno vehemently condemns this denial, especially in its positivist variant, as the 'arch-ideology today', since it condemns us to accept society in the appearance of its presently reified social relations for society in its essence, all that society could ever be.[680] As he put it in his 'Contribution to a Theory of Ideology', the 'dialectical problem of ideology' is that 'there certainly is false consciousness, but it is not only false'.[681] A genuinely critical theory cannot dispose of the 'emphatic concepts' of enlightenment thought, which are descriptively false when applied to present social reality but contain an implicit normative truth against which this reality can be judged.[682] I have argued that Adorno and Horkheimer maintain commitment to these implicit normative potentials of enlightenment thought in their dialectical critique of the latter, such as they are articulated in the productive forces as well as in the structures of language.

There is, in any case, a strong recognition within contemporary Nietzsche scholarship that challenges the view that Nietzsche has an instrumental theory of truth,[683] that argues that he does not reject the concept of truth or deny the distinction between essence and appearance which he consistently deploys,[684] and that rather than committing him to such a denial, his 'perspectivism' simply allows him to give an account of how knowledge is indelibly tied up with human interests, needs and affects – this latter is a position that my account of the *Genealogy* has laid special emphasis on.[685] There are good indications in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, too, that Adorno and Horkheimer took a more nuanced view of Nietzsche, whose attitude to the enlightenment 'remained ambivalent', in that 'he perceived in enlightenment both the universal movement of sovereign mind, whose supreme exponent he

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[680] Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 100.
[681] Theodor W. Adorno, 'Contribution to a Theory of Ideology', trans. Jacob-Bard Rosenberg. Available at https://selvajournal.org/article/contribution-to-the-theory-of-ideology/ (Accessed 1 September 2023).
[682] See also Jarvis, *Adorno*, 66-67.
[683]Raymond Geuss, 'Nietzsche and Genealogy', *European Journal of Philosophy,* 2:3 (1994): 274-292.
[684] David Owen, 'Nietzsche and the Frankfurt School', in *The Routledge Companion to the Frankfurt School*, eds. Peter E. Gordon, Espen Hammer and Axel Honneth (New York: Routledge, 2019), 261-262.
[685] See Christopher Janaway, *Beyond Selflessness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

believed himself to be, and a "nihilistic," life-denying power'.[686]

Whatever the final verdict on Nietzsche, there is enough evidence that Adorno and Horkheimer do not have an instrumental conception of truth. I wish to suggest that Adorno and Horkheimer part ways with Nietzsche not so much on a metatheoretical as on a theoretical level – i.e., on his critical diagnoses themselves, as well as, and especially, his responses to the predicament he diagnoses. In the words of Rose, Nietzsche 'has no general concept of society and thus of a specific kind of society',[687] meaning that his critical understanding of contemporary morality as inherently driven by the will to power does not logically depend on being situated in any historically specific subject, social group, or class. Nietzsche lacks a theoretical understanding of the historical dynamics and social structures with which the emergence of ascetic morality is bound.[688] This ultimately commits Nietzsche to social conformism.

Nietzsche famously advocated the affirmation of 'life' – but his lack of theoretical understanding of social structures means that he does not see how 'life' is inseparable from culture or society, such that it is not possible to affirm life separately from affirming culture or society and its possibilities.[689] For Adorno, Nietzsche's affirmation of life is thus an affirmation of a society in which 'life does not live' (as he states in his famous inversion of Nietzsche's dictum in *Minima Moralia*), a society that runs counter to the human life form. Thus, Nietzsche's critical project of a 'transvaluation of values' is ultimately a conformist one. In the words of Jarvis, Nietzsche

> does not hope for the end of domination and looks instead towards the honest recognition and even the celebration, of a domination with which all our values

[686] DE, 36.
[687] Rose, *The Melancholy Science*, 34.
[688] Max Horkheimer, 'Egoism and the Freedom Movement: On the Anthropology of the Bourgeois Era,' *Télos* 1982 (54): 59. See also Owen, 'Nietzsche and the Frankfurt School'.
[689] Rose, *The Melancholy Science*, 33.

must needs be entangled. Adorno's thought is, instead, that the domination in rationality and in sociability could only be fully recognised if domination itself were to come to an end.[690]

In other words, since Adorno (and Horkheimer) understand life in its present, historically specific form, as inseparably tied up with a society based on the domination of nature which disregards, distorts or denies this life (and nature more generally), the only way to affirm life is to transcend that society and domination itself.

In the Preface to the *Dialectic*, Adorno and Horkheimer state that their work advances the aim of helping enlightenment become reflective of its own predicament: 'if enlightenment does not assimilate reflection on this regressive moment, it seals its own fate'.[691] Enlightenment had promised and aimed at 'liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters'[692] by emancipating human beings from the compulsion of nature. To this end, human beings have developed technical means and conceptual and institutional forms to ensure their own survival in coping with their natural environment - human self-preservation thus requires a level of domination over (human and non-human) nature. As I argued in my Introduction, on Adorno and Horkheimer's view, genuine emancipation necessitates a certain level of technical, instrumental domination over nature – a development of the productive forces of society to a certain level which has already been achieved (if not much earlier than typically assumed by Marxists). What Adorno and Horkheimer really take issue with is not this necessary step of enlightenment and human emancipation, but the reversal of means and ends that occurs when the process of domination of nature is carried out for its own sake, without regard for the human ends and needs which it is supposed to serve. It is at the point where 'progress' is equated

[690] Jarvis, *Adorno*, 67.
[691] DE, xvi.
[692] DE, 1.

squarely with the progressive instrumental mastery of nature that the process of enlightenment becomes *unreflective* and starts dominating the human beings who reproduce it and in whose name it is apparently carried out. While Adorno and Horkheimer do trace this tendency back to the earliest form of sociality, they derive their theoretical understanding of this means-ends reversal on their analysis of contemporary capitalism, in which social production is organised for profit, i.e. the sake of the maximising surplus value, rather than for satisfying human needs. Capitalism uses the technical and organisational means human beings have developed to ensure their survival and secure their needs to satisfy its own ends – and which also deploys these means to the destructive ends of war and genocide.[693] It is in this specific sense that the process of enlightenment is understood to be unreflective, and so long as it continues to be realised in an unreflective form, it fails to deliver on its promise of human emancipation.

In the most general terms, the promise of enlightenment can be genuinely realised if humanity reverses the means-ends reversal typical of capitalism – and in a wider sense, of the whole history of human socialisation, which capitalism instantiates most consummately. This can only be achieved if humanity transforms the social organisation of production in a way that employs the vast technological and organisational means at its disposal for the satisfaction of its needs. Where progress is no longer understood narrowly, as the technical progress in the domination of nature for its own sake, this would also mean re-establishing humanity's relation to, and metabolism with, nature. Adorno and Horkheimer speak of reconciliation of civilisation with nature[694] and of the 'remembrance of nature within the subject … which contains the unrecognised truth of all culture'.[695] The Marxist valence to these ideas was explored at length in the work of Marx himself by Adorno and Horkheimer's student, Alfred Schmidt.[696] Based

[693] See Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy*, 30-31.
[694] DE, 56, 71, 89.
[695] DE, 32.
[696] Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (London: Verso, 1971).

on this, we may conjecture that what Adorno and Horkheimer have in mind is going beyond the traditional Enlightenment, Baconian relation to (external) nature that they describe so well in the *Dialectic*, i.e. one based on rigid separation between humanity and nature, where the latter is stripped of any qualitative characteristics of its own and reduced to a function of the productive apparatus of society. A reconciled relation to external nature would require a social organisation of production in which this rigid separation is abolished and in which the socially productive human being 'confronts the material of nature as one of her own forces', appropriating nature according to his needs by employing his labour power, which is itself 'a force of nature'.[697] The idea of a reconciliation with nature also obviously refers to a reconciliation of humanity with its own 'internal', nature – again following Nietzsche (but also, Freud) this would amount to a new psychic constitution in which 'egoistic' expressions of self-love, pleasure and individual happiness are not repressed and demonised in the name of the 'common good', as they effectively are within capitalism, but instead acknowledged and given expression and recognition.[698] Such a psychic transformation would not, however – and again, in contrast to Nietzsche – be possible separately from a wider social transformation of humanity's productive interchange with external, non-human nature. Although Adorno and Horkheimer do not say much if anything on how this social transformation is to take place, i.e., they do not specify the political means and strategy to achieve it, this is how we can cash out – in the most general terms – the idea of the redeeming the promise of progress and enlightenment.

[697] Marx, 1965, quoted in Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, 78.
[698] Horkheimer, *Egoism and the Freedom Movement*. See also Owen, *Nietzsche and the Frankfurt School.*

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