Why Professor Habermas Would Fail a Class on *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

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Abstract: Imagine that you are teaching a class on *Dialectic of Enlightenment*; and that Habermas submits "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment" [1982/1985] as his coursework essay. Would you give him a pass mark for that essay? Using this polemical thought experiment set-up as an estrangement device, I critically discuss Habermas's essay that was pivotal in his repositioning of Critical Theory in the 1980s. I argue that it is philosophically as well as biographically unreflective; and that he is engaging in underhand politicking. Part of my discussion is to re-consider *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: Instead of viewing it as the dead-end that Habermas presents it to be, we can see as a self-therapeutical exercise in destabilizing a complacent self-conception whereby modernity is the pinnacle of moral progress—an exercise which might have a certain exemplarity for others in the on-going quest of making use of our own understanding. The contribution is rounded off with a postscript by a second assessor of Habermas's essay, commenting both on the proposed assessment of the first, and the polemical thought experiment.

1 A polemical thought experiment

Imagine that you are teaching a class on *Dialectic of Enlightenment*; and that Habermas submits "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment" (Habermas [1985] 1987, Lecture V) as his coursework essay.[1]

[1] Henceforth "EME". One complication is that there are two versions of the essay—the 1982 one published in *New German Critique* and an expanded, revised version that was published 1985 in German (and 1987 in

Would you give him a pass mark for that essay?

The question pertains to this essay alone—you are not asked to evaluate Habermas's other engagement with the work of Horkheimer and Adorno.[2] Still, this focus is not overly narrow, given how influential the specific critique of their work presented in this essay has been in marking a break between the first and second generation of the Frankfurt School.[3]

Like any feedback on an essay, it is good to start with summarizing the key moves Habermas makes in said essay (section 2). Then, I will provide my assessment of the essay as if it were coursework (section 3). Next (section 4), I will break with the thought experiment of assessing Habermas's essay, by discussing an objection to the alternative interpretation of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that, in the previous section, I criticize Habermas for not even considering, despite the textual clues and his own contextual knowledge that suggests that this alternative is a serious contender for engaging with the book. This section breaks with the thought experiment insofar as this sort of extended discussion would not normally be part of

translation) as part of *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Giving Habermas the benefit of the doubt, I will mainly discuss here the later, revised, and expanded version, but, ultimately, their content is largely the same.

[2] Habermas engages critically with their work in several publications. There he takes lines of argument that are different from the ones in EME. The two main ones are (a) that Adorno cannot defend his right of critique (Habermas [1969] 1983, 106); and that (b) Horkheimer and Adorno cannot account for the normative foundations of their critical theory (Habermas [1981] 1987, 374). Regarding (a), one might worry that there is a *status quo* bias in insisting on earning a right to critique and that it is more in keeping with the Critical Theory tradition to insisting on earing a right *not* to be criticized. Regarding (b), see (Freyenhagen 2013, Chapters 7-8); and the debate between Freyenhagen (2017 and 2019) and Müller-Doohm & Jos (2019).

[3] As Hohendahl notes, this essay marks a crucial break (and is different in tone) from Habermas's earlier engagements with Horkheimer and Adorno: it "not only sharpens the critique of Horkheimer and Adorno but also displays a certain amount of acrimony absent from Habermas' earlier essays. Habermas states in no uncertain terms that something went wrong in the evolution of Critical Theory during the 1940s." (1985, 4).

the feedback a student would receive.[4] Also, to be clear, the assessment in the earlier section is not based on Habermas's failing to adopt what I favor as interpretation—rather, as will become clearer in section 3, the assessment concerns solely the lack of reflectiveness. Including a discussion of the objection to the alternative interpretation is, nonetheless, merited on the basis that readers of this article will likely wonder about that objection and not rest content with the polemical thought experiment on its own. This discussion is followed by a brief conclusion (section 5). The contribution is rounded off with a postscript by a second assessor, Chris Freefields.

Before reading on, you might want to (re)read Habermas's "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment"—there is a headline summary in Section 2, but a more detailed and 'independent' engagement might be advisable. Also, please note that the discussion is going to touch on a range of issues introduced in roughly this sequence into the dialectic: the issue of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*'s presentation and style (its "rhetoric"), the relation of this to its content, and how to read the book; the performative contradiction objection; the question of the place of "fictional history" in critical, genealogical enquiries; the theme of subjectivity and its history that is often thought to be contained in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*; the role of biographical considerations in engaging with the works of others and reflecting on one's own work; the worry of epistemic authoritarianism; how to (not) write about enlightenment; and the idea of writing as a self-therapy—to name the most important ones. While these issues are (analytically) distinct from each other, they all have a role in the overall dialectic that connects them; and, hopefully, their place and significance will become clear as we move along.

[4] My thanks to an anonymous referee who pressed me to clarify the status of section 4.

2 Key moves in "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment"

The first, and most important, aspect of Habermas's essay to comment on is the *reading strategy* that he adopts in his take on *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. To my knowledge, this reading strategy has not been thematized in the existing literature, but is, for the most part, simply taken for granted.[5] The reading strategy is expressed quite explicitly, when Habermas recommends being a

> … reader who resists being overwhelmed by the rhetoric of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, who steps back and takes seriously the thoroughly philosophical claim of the text, … (EME, 110).

In other words, we should attend to the propositional content of the text, not how it is written—not to its style or form, not to its rhetoric.[6] We are told this relatively nonchalantly, and no

[5] Andreev (2022) is a notable exception. In what follows, there are overlaps with this work, albeit not in tone. I am indebted to the wider project, which I had the privilege to supervise.

[6] One complication here is that there are different uses of "rhetoric." There is an everyday use of it that is not necessarily connected to condemnation—here "rhetoric" denotes use of style, form, (in oral presentations also) tone, and the like, as when we say of a speech (such as Frederick Douglass's 4th July address) that it was "rhetorically brilliant" or when we recommend a political actor to do a course in rhetoric to get their message across better. There is another use—perhaps also found in everyday discourse, but definitely in some philosophical discourse—where "rhetoric" is denoting something fishy or to be condemned, such that the style or form (or tone) of a presentation is criticized for suppressing critical and rational consideration of what is being said. Habermas is clearly worried about the latter when he speaks of resisting "being overwhelmed by the rhetoric of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment.*" My point in what follows is that this is problematically and unreflectively question-begging in at least one way: it overlooks that style, form or tone might be sometimes, in certain context or with certain people (including possible oneself), necessary for stimulating, rather than suppressing, rational and critical consideration, either of what is being said or something that what is being said points to. In those cases, "overwhelming" our rationalizations might be part of what is required for such critical thinking. Another way in which it is question-begging, but not one I will press in this contribution, is that it might be much harder to

rationale for this particular reading strategy is offered. (The question whether the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* would have intended its readers to adopt this reading strategy, is not addressed. I come back to this below.)

The second aspect to highlight in this summary are the main argumentative moves in Habermas's essay. Of these, there are two. That is not always easy to see, as they are running somewhat in sequence, sometimes in parallel, and sometimes intertwined with each other. Still, it is helpful to distinguish them.

The main argumentative move is the *performative contradiction objection*. In a nutshell, it runs as follows: the critique of modernity found in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is a totalizing ideology critique (EME, 119f, 126; see also Habermas 1982: 14, 18, 21, 22, 23, 28); and fails because of this. Its account of the modern world involves a performative contradiction: "in the moment of description it has to make use of the critique which it has declared dead" (EME, 119). Qua performative contradiction, it is similar to making the statement "I am mute" and doing so by speaking out loud (without using artificial means, like a computer's speech program). The saying of it contradicts what is being said—either what is being said is true, but

distinguish between mere rhetorical overwhelming and rational convincing than the condemnatory use of "rhetoric" presupposes. (This is, in part, for Aristotelian reasons that there is not and cannot be a principle for making this distinction, and that rhetoric is constitutive of speech. See, for example, Gormley 2019.) Be that as it may, let me also comment on my use of "rhetoric" in this contribution: for the most part, I use it in the everyday, non-condemning way, referring to the use of style, form, or tone. Sometimes, however, I make use of Habermas's condemning notion, notably in bringing out (towards the end of Section 3 below and in the Conclusion) how the underhand (academic) politicking that is going on in his essay utilizes *rhetoric to overwhelm* the critical capacities of its readers, suggesting that there his own text actually suppresses critical and rational consideration of what is being said in and done with it. I thank one of the anonymous referees for inviting me to clarify the use of "rhetoric" in this contribution,

then it cannot be said; or it is false. Thus, either way, it fails as a communicative act (and, in Horkheimer and Adorno's case, as a social critique).

That first main argumentative move is then supplemented by looking at later work by Adorno—presumably to give the authors (or at least one of them) the benefit of the doubt to correct their mistake. However, the verdict is negative here too: Adorno, in his later work, is read to leave the performative contradiction unresolved and thereby remains stuck in an untenable position, at most gesturing to aesthetics in a way that does not really (re)solve anything either (EME, 119f, 127f, 129).

The second main argumentative move in Habermas's essay is an *argument by association in guilt*: the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* are influenced (in this text) by Nietzsche, and thereby (purportedly) by counter-Enlightenment, leading to "a certain carelessness in their treatment of, to put it quite bluntly, the achievements of Western rationalism" (Habermas 1982: 23; see also EME, 121). Nietzsche, Habermas adds, is either also guilty of a performative contradiction or leaves the horizon of modernity altogether insofar as (his) genealogy, basically, amounts to consider what is of older descent to be better because it occurred earlier (EME, 126).

The third, and final, aspect of Habermas's essay to highlight is that he does not just leave it at the level of negative criticism of Horkheimer and Adorno (and Nietzsche). He also proclaims that there is a way out of the predicament they have landed social critique in. Specifically, a "way back":

> Anyone who abides in a paradox on the very spot once occupied by philosophy with its ultimate groundings is not just taking up an uncomfortable position; one can only hold that place if one makes it at least minimally plausible that there is *no way out*. Even the

> retreat from an aporetic situation has to be barred, for otherwise there is a way—the way back. But I believe this is precisely the case. (EME, 128; emphasis in the original).

According to Habermas, we need to realize that Horkheimer and Adorno flatten out the view of modernity in an astonishing manner, such that their "oversimplified presentation fails to notice essential characteristics of cultural modernity" (EME, 114; see also Habermas 1982: 18). Indeed, their book "does not do justice to the rational content of cultural modernity that was captured in bourgeois ideals" (EME, 113). Most importantly, Horkheimer and Adorno (are said to) remain "insensible to the traces and existing forms of communicative rationality" (EME, 129). Like them, we can recognize that power and validity are interwoven in actual discourses. Yet, disentangling validity from power is—contrary to what they seem to think—possible. Specifically, it is possible with the help of (the necessary presupposition of) the ideal speech situation, in which the "unforced force of the better argument" prevails (EME, 130).[7] Instead of a dead-end, in which Horkheimer and Adorno (purportedly) maneuvered critical theory, we can go into reverse and then continue on the basis of communicative action and rationality, expanding the achievements of modernity, and completing its project.

3 Critical assessment of the essay

Let us—for the purposes of this polemical thought experiment—dispense with the usual positive noises with which typical feedback on university coursework tends to start. The lauding of "attempts at originality" or the like that are quickly followed by the "But …" or "However." Instead, I will focus on why Habermas's essay would fail the assignment and

[7] "Ideal speech situation" is explicitly mentioned only in the 1982 version of the essay (30), not the 1985 version included in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, which mentions only "idealization" (EME, 130).

thereby the class. Still, I shall start with the smaller problems and then work up to the biggest one.

First, one might comment on Habermas's second main argumentative move—what I called an *argument by association in guilt*. Just as arguments by authority— "it's true because Plato said it, and Plato was a jolly clever chap"—are among the weakest we can offer in philosophy, argument by association in guilt are of the weakest variety. Indeed, in both cases, one might think that it is stretching our language too far to call them "arguments" at all. In any case, one might recommend to Habermas that he should have concentrated his discussion on the other main argument instead and merely left the attempted argument by association in guilt out. (It will turn out, we will see later, that it might have been included for somewhat underhand reasons anyway.)

Second, it is especially the case that Habermas should have left the unfavorable comparison to Nietzsche out, since his exposition and thereby understanding of Nietzsche, and particularly Nietzsche's idea of genealogy, is seriously deficient. (For that—not the first critical comment above—we will be forced to deduct some marks.) The understanding of Nietzsche's conception of genealogy is poor. Whatever Nietzsche is up to, it is almost laughable to ascribe to him the view that something is better simply in virtue of being older. It is by no means easy to ascertain how best to interpret Nietzsche, especially on genealogy, but this clearly counts as beyond the boundaries of what can amount to a reasonable interpretation at all.

One particularly pertinent alternative reading of Nietzsche—which, in fairness, has only emerged (or perhaps rather *re*-emerged) after Habermas wrote that essay—is that one key element to Nietzsche's idea of genealogy is the use of *fictional* history.[8] On this interpretation,

[8] It is one of the ironies of (academic) history that this interpretation is presented particularly by someone who now holds Habermas's old chair in Frankfurt (Saar 2007). To clarify, by fictional history I do not mean either narrative history (with its perhaps inevitable embellishments) or writing fiction inspired by historical events;

it is particularly absurd to ascribe to Nietzsche the view that what is older is, simply in virtue of having occurred earlier, better. For, on this view, what Nietzsche presents as having occurred earlier, has not actually occurred *ever*—and Nietzsche was fully aware of it. Instead, the critical thrust of Nietzsche's idea of genealogy is to destabilize the dominant self-conception at his time of writing, showing that something considered necessary within that self-conception is, in fact, not necessary—for which a fictional example would suffice; indeed, for which a fictional example might be more effective than an actual historical example, given the messiness of reality and how difficult it is to disentangle what is going on exactly. (Consider why in philosophy there are such sustained attempts to construct thought experiments, often of an outlandish nature). This kind of maneuver might include performing a fictional history in order to reveal the fictional history itself at work in the self-conception in question.[9]

Third, and related to this, Habermas in "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment" does not consider whether, while Nietzsche's influence on *Dialectic of Enlightenment* might indeed be extensive, this could be a strength rather than an association of guilt. In particular, Habermas overlooks that, for Nietzsche, we need to work on the affects of readers (and

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rather, I mean presenting an account of an *imaginary* past *as if* it was an historical account of *what actually happened*, where this can be done knowingly, but need not be.

[9] This means that a different set of criticisms of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (also) miss the point, namely criticisms along the lines that it neglects concrete history or grossly violates the conventions of historical research and argumentation (see, for example, Schnädelbach's (2004). If the text is intentionally a fictional history, such criticisms are inapplicable. On the alternative reading, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is performing a kind of satire of the (notion of) history implied in our modern self-conception, where this history is itself (revealed to be) a philosophy-of-history-without-history, a fiction. Importantly, on this alternative reading, not everything in that book is simply fictional history—notably, it would be manifestly absurd to ascribe a view to its authors whereby modern antisemitism is just fictional. Rather, the interpretative claim about (the deployment of) fictional history concerns the notorious pre-history of subjectivity, notably as enacted in the opening essay and the two excursuses.

ourselves) and for this the *form* of presentation is crucial. Specifically, for Nietzsche, people hold on to views (often) because of certain personality structures and affects, not because of argument-based conviction (see Andreev 2022, Ch. 1). Put in a more Freudian way: the cognitive level tends to be about (post-fact) rationalizations, and changing views cannot be done at this level but will provoke, instead, defense mechanisms (such as infinite dialectics about propositional content).[10] We need to work with the affects and use disclosing forms of critique, which, in a sense, overwhelm us rhetorically. This means we cannot simply disregard the form of presentation, but need to pay it special heed. (This is the case in general, but—as we will see momentarily—a disclosing critique might be exactly what is needed in the context of an unfinished/unreflective modernity.[11])

Importantly, it is here where we can identify Habermas's fateful mistake in "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment": that fateful mistake lies in simply assuming that the rhetorical presentation of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* can be just put aside, is just secondary fluff or an external shell that can be excluded from further discussion. In reading his essay—

[10] Here, Allen's critique of Habermas's overly cognitive understanding of (even) psychoanalysis is instructive (Allen 2016). On Adorno's worries about infinite dialectics, especially in the context of living less wrongly, see Freyenhagen 2013, Ch. 7.

[11] It is a curious fact about Honneth's oeuvre that he for the most part accepts the Habermasian critiques of Adorno and Horkheimer (see notably [1985] 1991), but in one paper offers one of the rare instances where the disclosing nature of the critique operative in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is noted (2000). The latter seems to remain without any wider consequences for the rest of Honneth's oeuvre, which remains broadly Habermasian in orientation, despite the differences that exist otherwise between Habermas and Honneth, such as that Honneth runs Habermas's idea of communicative action in terms of recognition or social freedom.

and the key passage in which Habermas explicitly presents his reading strategy—one almost wants to cry out: "*Don't take them so literately, Jürgen!*".[12]

In particular, Habermas seems to operate with an unwarranted background assumption: Enlightenment (already) succeeded in making us sufficiently rational in that we are able to consider the merits and drawbacks of claims and their argumentative support in an impartial way—that, in principle, we are *capable* of being moved solely by the unforced force of the better argument, at least eventually. It is almost as if we were already speaking from within the ideal speech situation.

But what if this is false? What if (Enlightenment) culture failed, and we are instead in the grip of a pernicious ideology that operates not just at cognitive level, but has shaped our affects and psychic economy? What if we are under the yoke of guardians, rather than being enlightened in Kant's sense?

Moreover, once we ask ourselves these questions, we cannot stop there, but also need to ask further questions: How would one have to write for readers (and authors) of that sort? Might not rhetoric become crucially important? Could we ignore the affects then?

In addition, even if we left aside the particularities of Adorno's (or Adorno and Horkheimer's) social critique, might not anyway form and content be more inseparable than the neat separation with which Habermas operates?[13] What kind of picture of language and how it works is being presupposed in thinking we can just attend to propositional content, irrespective of style, form, rhetoric? It seems to suggest that there can be a kind of meta-

[12] It is important to note that there is also a danger to swing too much in the other direction, and ignore the literal meaning completely. In a sense, Horkheimer and Adorno want to be taken literally; and their critique relies on a particular intertwinement of form and content, not just form alone. (See also the Postscript below.)

[13] On this, see Celikates 2010.

language completely abstracted, even purified from actual language use—how plausible a picture is this?

This is not the place to conclusively settle these matters. For our purposes—for our polemical thought experiment—what matters is that it is one thing to disagree with Horkheimer and Adorno about the need for and importance of rhetorical presentation, but quite another to simply put this aside without argument or discussion. This failure to even consider these matters, pushes the coursework essay into the fail category. *It is too unreflective.*

Here one might plead mitigating circumstances. If Horkheimer and Adorno use disclosing critique that does not simply operate at the literal level, then it is easy to miss what they are doing, become puzzled by it, and then make an earnest attempt to try to rescue what they are doing by simply focusing on (reconstructing) the propositional content and then honoring their critical project by engaging critically with that content.

However, these mitigating circumstances seem to apply less to someone like Habermas, who actually worked closely with the authors (albeit at a later stage of their lives); and was keenly aware of their use of style, of rhetoric.[14] Moreover, Habermas misses important clues. For even if Horkheimer and Adorno use disclosing critique in a way that is difficult to recognize at first, there are a number of clues in the text regarding this. I will briefly mention three such clues.

[14] For example, Habermas noted in a 1977 interview that "Adorno took the aphoristic mode of philosophizing to extremes" (Dews (ed.) (1986), 56). Indeed, earlier Habermas—as Hohendahl puts it (1985, 6) —"admire[d] the aphoristic and stylistic qualities of Adorno's writing," notably in his 1963 essay "Theodor W. Adorno: Ein philosophierender Intellektueller [A Philosophizing Intellectual]," which, perhaps tellingly, was omitted from the English edition of *Philosophical-Political Profiles*.

The first clue can be found in this pivotal passage from the Preface to the first two editions of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (the original one from 1944 and the revised and expanded one from 1947):

> … in the present collapse of bourgeois civilization not only the operations but the purpose of science have become dubious. … 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. (Horkheimer & Adorno [1944/7] (2002), xiv-xv).

The first thing to note here is a matter of translation: by "science [*Wissenschaft*]" Horkheimer and Adorno do not just mean the natural and social sciences, but also the humanities, including philosophy. What they are saying then is that we cannot just continue as before with our academic studies and theorizing. Crucially, what we need to change, includes refusing "obedience to the current linguistic and intellectual demands." Specifically, for the kind of theorizing they are doing—notably in the book to which this passage is a preface—this implies breaking with the form of argumentation and presentation of traditional philosophical treaties. Further, we cannot simply express propositional content—however critical it might be—in a straightforward manner, since the very language available to us is itself complicit with what we aim to criticize. While not made explicit, it is pretty clear that what is left for us to do as social critics is to deploy other forms of communication—forms that show us something, even

if they don't say it (or, indeed, show us something by saying the opposite!).[15] What is required is disclosing, performing, perhaps even some form of (serious) play; not presenting propositional content in a linear argumentative form in the hope that the "unforced force of the better argument" will somehow win out, at the end of the day.

Once read in this light, then what follows after the Preface and even the title of the original publication (which then became the sub-title)—"Philosophical Fragments"—can be seen as providing further clues. Is *Dialectic of Enlightenment* a fragment really just because Horkheimer and Adorno run out of time to 'finish' it? Would a completed version (which they still envisaged in 1944) have not been a fragment?[16] Might it not be instead have been completed in terms of "internal coherence and unity of language"? (This is how the 1944 version of the Preface describes the selection criterion for the notes and sketches (Horkheimer & Adorno [1944/7] (2002), 255).) Moreover, is the construction of the whole manuscript (with its opening essays, two excursuses, an essay on culture industry, theses on antisemitism, and aphorisms and mini-essays at the end) just an accident? Would a more complete version leave out the two excursuses? (Think of Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*; and how this finished text contains three "models.") Are the aphorism and mini-essays ("notes and sketches") at the end of the book just tagged on? Or are they perhaps better thought of as the culmination—or even high point—of a particular form of disclosing critique?

[15] An example of this would be social satire, such as someone who praises the achievements of Western modernity in such a way as to make the audience realize the absurdity involved in insisting on the achievements in the face of the deep-seated problems; or someone who claims to be an (epistemic or moral) authority in a way that discloses, indeed performs, the problems with such claims.

[16] Consider Habermas's 1977 description of Adorno as making "the idea of thinking in fragments into a programme" (Dews (ed.) (1986), 56).

A third set of clues can be found in the nested fractals that are at work in the first excursus, the one on "Odysseus or the Myth of Enlightenment."[17] One issue that has not received much, if any, attention is that this essay starts with a discussion of Homer and literary form. It is very puzzling that it does, unless one might come to recognize it as itself another clue: just as Odysseus (as told by Homer) gives the gods their due by observing the letter of their laws, but not their spirit, so Homer gives myths their due by recounting them, but by shifting to a new genre (the epic form). By way of extending the nested fractals, one might then surmise that Horkheimer and Adorno are giving modern Enlightenment thought its due by seeming to offer a philosophical treaty, but actually *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is a different kind of text, an intended philosophical fragment, and breaks, ultimately, with the genre and habitus of philosophical treaties.

Beyond the text of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, there is one additional consideration that should have given Habermas pause before attributing, in earnest, a "primal history of subjectivity" to Adorno and Horkheimer:[18] they elsewhere committed themselves to a historical contextualism, such that they believed no one could step out of their historical context and have a clear view of other historical epochs. This is perhaps most clearly expressed by Horkheimer in his seminal "Traditional and Critical Theory," when he writes that "no one can turn himself into a different subject than he is at this historical moment," meaning that we cannot theorize as "as though a person could remove himself from his present historical juncture and truly insert himself into any other he wished."[19] Particularly, the idea that we could step out of history altogether and view human beings before history begins in earnest, is meeting the derision of

[17] This point I owe to Andreev; it emerged as part of our wider discussion of his project.

[18] Habermas [1969] 1983.

[19] Horkheimer [1937] (1988), 213-214/English translation, 240; translation amended.

Horkheimer and Adorno elsewhere.[20] This strongly suggests that what they present in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* might be something else than an actual primal history of subjectivity—and tallies well with my suggested reading of it as a fictional one that is meant to destabilize the self-conception of their historical moment, giving Enlightenment its due by seeming to offer a philosophical treaty, but actually performs what is problematic about such treaties.[21]

Be that as it may be, let us return to Habermas and to the consequences of this fateful mistake to adopt a reading strategy that does not merely put aside the rhetorical and other presentational nature of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, but does so without critical reflection or discussion. One key consequence of this mistake is that even what seems like good and original work that his essay contains is seriously marred.

For one thing, it leads to incredibly uncharitable readings of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. As mentioned above, Habermas accuses its authors of flattening out the view of modernity in such an astonishing manner that do not "justice to the rational content of cultural modernity that was captured in bourgeois ideals" (EME, 113). In the 1982 version, he even accuses them of "global pessimism" (18). One wants to ask: might Horkheimer and Adorno not have been aware of certain achievements of modernity, but not emphasized these because of considerations about rhetorical presentation motivated by a failed Enlightenment culture, rather than simply overlooking these achievements? Given that for them—in Adorno's striking

[20] This includes such well-known texts as Adorno's "The Essay as Form," in which he writes: "[The essay] does not insist stubbornly on a realm transcending all mediations—and they are the historical ones in which the whole of society is sedimented—rather the essay seeks truth contents as being historical in themselves. It does not concern itself with any supposed primeval condition in order to contravene society's false sociality, … The essay silently abandons the illusion that thought can break out of thesis into physis, out of culture into nature." ([1958] 1984, 159)

[21] For further details of this alternative reading, see section 4 below.

formulation—the best magnifying glass is a splinter in the eye (Adorno [1951] 2005, No. 29, p. 50), would it not make much better sense of the text that they provided the splinter of highlighting the problematic aspects of modernity, rather than a soothing story about its achievements?[22]

More importantly, while Habermas detects a performative contradiction in what Horkheimer and Adorno are writing in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and judges their social critique to have failed in virtue of this, one might think that such a contradiction is not fateful but necessary for expressing certain matters. For Habermas, a performative contradiction or aporia is the end of the road—upon finding it, we need to back up and adopt a different view.

That seems to me too hasty a conclusion. Take an everyday example from the context of personal relationships: one person may well say, as part of yet another argument with her partner, "I can't speak to you!". This looks like a performative contradiction: the propositional content of her utterance conflicts with the act of uttering it. Yet, we can recognize, I submit, that the partner would go wrong if his response was to point this out and to argue that the speaker, hence, cannot mean what she said, but must mean something else. We can also recognize, I submit further, that the original utterance, if it works (where this might include that the partner reacts differently than just imagined and there is a shift in perspective and behavior), works *because* it involves a performative contradiction. In certain contexts (perhaps particularly desperate ones), speech acts of this sort might have the best chance of bringing about the change in perspective, approach, and behavior that a seemingly intractable situation

[22] Consider also what Adorno wrote in another well-known essay of his: "I have exaggerated the somber 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 facade of everyday life before it overflows the institutional dams that, for the time being, are erected against it" ([1959] 1998, 99).

requires to be resolved. Without equating making utterances in the context of personal relationships with writing books like *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, I think we should not stop at noticing (what look to us like) performative contradictions but, in addition, consider what role they might play in expressing a predicament and how indispensable they might be for shifting the listeners or readers—*us*—out of a certain perspective, approach, or behavior. Again, one might disagree, and argue against that suggestion, but not to even reflect about this possibility seems a serious failing in a (supposedly) philosophical essay, and Habermas's "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment" fails in this way.

There is more evidence of lack of reflectiveness (on display) in this essay—indeed, even a kind of unnoticed contradiction. Habermas ends his essay—or rather the earlier 1982 version thereof—with a commitment to the impurity of discourse: "Only a discourse which admits this everlasting impurity can perhaps escape from myth, thus freeing itself, as it were, from the entwinement of myth and Enlightenment" (1982, 30).[23] One might think that this is an important insight to admit to this impurity, and in many ways, it is. Yet, what is puzzling about it is its context in Habermas's text. This conclusion stands in the context (and, indeed, the very paragraph) of his appealing to the (regulative ideal) of a completely pure discourse (the ideal speech situation). It is odd—but has not, to my knowledge, been remarked upon in the secondary literature—that Habermas is, implicitly, accusing Horkheimer and Adorno to hanker after a kind of Platonic purity or even harbor a belief in devil-exorcism (EME, 129-20), while presenting himself as being able to look impurity in the eye; and yet, at the very same time, postulating a pure construct. One really wonders whether Habermas is engaging here in

[23] The later version is similar, but not quite the same: "Only a discourse that admits this"—[that is, that admits that "convictions are formed and confirmed in a medium that is not 'pure'"]—"might break the spell of mythic thinking without incurring the loss of the light radiating from the semantic potentials also preserved in myth" (EME, 130).

a moment of "protesting too much" and splitting off his unacknowledged own hankering for purity, and projecting it onto Horkheimer and Adorno.

Lest I be misunderstood (or accused of psychologizing or psychoanalyzing Habermas, rather than arguing philosophically against his view, assuming for the sake of stating this objection that these are completely separate endeavors): Yes, there might be a way to recognize impurity and still hold on to a regulative ideal of purity without thereby being guilty of making contradictory statements. Still, one might think it is at least necessary to critically reflect how these two statements are meant to fit together exactly—that is, the statements that we have to let to accept "everlasting impurity" and we have to disentangle power from validity by appealing to something pure (the ideal speech situation, which is purportedly purely about validity). Indeed, one might worry that even if the two fit together in principle without contradiction, it is unclear how much the purity of the ideal speech situation as regulative ideal is ever going to help us to deal with the actual impurity of how power and validity are entangled, given that it is from the perspective of the latter that we will always consider the former. In other words, one might hope for more critical reflection by Habermas about how this regulative ideal is not going to lead to wishful thinking, rather than to clear-sighted engagement with the actual forms of entanglement. (In particular, one might wonder about this in the context of a book which contains a rather crude reading and rejection of Foucault's attempts to do the latter).

The unreflectiveness gets, in a sense, even worse in a passage which was added for the 1985 addition (but is not in the 1982 version). Let me quote that passage first, and then comment on it. Habermas writes:

> … it becomes intelligible how the impression could indeed get established in the darkest years of the Second World War that the last sparks of reason were being extinguished

> from this reality and had left the ruins of a civilization in collapse without any hope. (EME, 116f).

On the face of it, this might seem like a reconciliatory statement, suggesting that, even though Horkheimer and Adorno are wrong in their totalizing ideology critique, it was perfectly understandable that they had ended up in a (philosophical) dead-end. The historical and specifically their biographical circumstances made becoming a "dark" writer a natural thing to do.

However, even a little reflecting should make one think differently about the passage. One closer inspection, it is an incredibly condescending statement. More than that, it is a way to explain (the validity of) a philosophical position away with biography; and one wonders whether this explaining away is—at least rhetorically—doing more of the persuasive work than the (purported) arguments the essay also contains.

Worse still, what is remarkable about this passage is the lack of reflection about Habermas's own historical and biographical context—and the double standards of including such considerations in the case of Horkheimer and Adorno, but not even asking himself about this. None of this is made better by the differential biographies. Horkheimer and Adorno, when writing *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, had fled persecution and almost-certain death by the hands of their own countrymen. They might not just be excused but perfectly right to reflect on how their biographies might demonstrate that Western modernity and culture did not just suffer an accidental lapse (a "*Betriebsunfall*"), but were deeply entangled with the atrocities and required fundamental revision. Habermas, in contrast, was writing from the safety of his professorial office. He had grown up in Nazi Germany, during which it seemed to him to be a normal country, until realizing—in the wake of the 1945 Nuremberg trials and early documentary films about the extermination camps—that it had instead been a criminal country (Habermas 1981: 512; see also 2008: 18). As a former member of the Hitler Youth, who had spent the end of the

war as a paramedic on the Western front, what "impression" might have been "intelligible to get established" in his case? Might it be the impression that we must have—somehow—a pure standard to which everyone always has access in virtue of being a language user, so that they are in principle able to overcome the impurity of any existing discourse, the entanglement of validity and power? Perhaps, the view that there is such a standard is anyway intelligible, but not asking the biographical question in his own case, while insisting on it in Horkheimer and Adorno's case, seems a rather significant omission of reflectiveness.

In sum, for a variety of reasons, but most notably different forms of unreflectiveness, the unforced force of the argument points to a clear fail mark for "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment." While this concludes the justification of the fail mark, I think the critical assessment of said essay should include one other consideration, even though it has not directly to do with why it deserves a fail (and would not be, normally, part of feedback on coursework).

This other consideration is the underhand (academic) politicking that is going on in the essay, and particularly the fact that this politicking utilizes *rhetoric to overwhelm* its readers. (I leave aside here whether this was consciously intended by Habermas or not.) To see this, consider first the academic political context. Habermas's stay in Starnberg had been a mixed success (Müller-Doohm [2014] 2016, Ch. 6, especially 178-180 and 199-206). Habermas never got the hoped-for (honorary) professorship in Munich; and he had resigned over the structure and future direction of the Max Plank Institute he had co-directed. Moreover, his recently published *Theory of Communicative Action* was competing with those who tried to continue more directly the first-generation approach of the Frankfurt School, like Negt and Kluge, whose *History and Obstinacy* also appeared in 1981. Yes, Habermas had been able to return to a professorship in Frankfurt, but he clearly felt the need to break with the earlier generation and establish his own approach as dominant. This can be seen from how he his first lecture series back in Frankfurt, which included "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment," changed

tone compared to earlier engagements with Adorno and Horkheimer (Hohendahl 1985, 4). It can also be seen by the way Habermas (co-)organized the Adorno conference 1983 upon his return to Frankfurt. It included key supporters of his view (like Wellmer and Schnädelbach) and other critics of Adorno from Habermas's Heidelberg connection (like Theunissen and Bubner), and excluded key students and supporters of Adorno, either from the conference altogether (like H. Schweppenhäuser) or subsequent publication (like Negt). The partisan nature of the event can also be gathered from the fact that the Adornians felt the need to stage a counter-conference a year later in Hamburg.

Next, consider again the two main argumentative moves in the essay. If one wants to bury an opponent in philosophy—that is, not just present their position as unconvincing but as a non-option or dead-end—then the way to do this is to accuse them of the cardinal sin as philosopher: a contradiction. That way, the position is ruled out altogether, not just seen as second best. Moreover, if on top of it, one also politically or morally discredits the opponent, then their view truly is dead and buried. In this light, Habermas's invoking an argument by association in guilt seems less surprising. It might be based on a misreading of Nietzsche, and it might not be an important argument philosophically speaking, but it serves well for the (academic) political purpose. Specifically, it serves well for mudslinging or name-calling. Horkheimer and Adorno are not just guilty of maneuvering us into a dead-end; no, they are also opening the doors to the counter-Enlightenment, and specifically they are associated with Nietzsche, who, in turn, is associated—in Germany's popular and sometimes academic imagination—with the Nazis. They might not have intended this, but the suggestion is that the darkness of their biography made them inadvertently open the door to the very darkness they were seeking to escape.

What we encounter here is, thus, a way of burying the earlier critical theory by rhetorically overwhelming the readers, rather than relying on the "unforced force of the better

argument." Instead of being worried about the rhetorical presentation of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, what we should be worried about, is the rhetoric of "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment." One could have only hoped that readers were not overwhelmed by the latter, but looking at the next twenty years of scholarship that followed that essay's publication—that is, the period of 1982-2002—and even at more recent publications (such as Jay 2016), it would seem that, unfortunately, for a significant period the readers largely were overwhelmed by it. In this way, Habermas's text (and lecturing) buried the critical theory of Horkheimer and Adorno as unworkable because contradictory and opening the floodgates to counter-Enlightenment.

Perhaps it is inevitable that any passing of the baton in academia involves a kind of patricide of supervisors and other mentors by their academic children. Still, the patricide of Adorno (and Horkheimer) by Habermas in "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment" is of an extraordinarily brutal kind. However, this is somewhat hidden by the fact that its brutality happens not (so much) at the level of propositional content, but (mostly) at the level of rhetorical presentation, while it is exactly that level that we are told (as part of the propositional content of Habermas's text) to ignore.

4 Addressing one objection: epistemic authoritarianism

In this section, I want to switch gears and suspend my polemical thought experiment of assessing Habermas's essay for a moment. Instead, I focus on addressing an objection that might seem to arise naturally.

Specifically, one might think that the interpretation I sketched of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as an alternative to Habermas's implies that Horkheimer and Adorno adopt an epistemically authoritarian stance in that book, laying claim to speaking from a particularly

privileged epistemic position. And one might think that adopting such a stance is problematic. Indeed, the worry of epistemic authoritarianism is often raised against that work, even on Habermas's own interpretation of it (Cooke 2006, 41). It tends to come with the suggestion that Habermas's own theory is better in escaping this criticism, albeit perhaps in need of revision and addition to avoid it completely (Cooke 2006, esp. Chapters 3, 5-8).

In what follows I will reply to this (potential) objection. I will remain agnostic about whether or not claiming special epistemic privilege for some group is always problematic. I will suggest that it is not the case that Horkheimer and Adorno need to make any such claim on the reading I propose. Indeed, the reading suggests that they take a very different stance.

To see this, it will help to consider a contrast case: Kant's famous "Answer to the Question 'What is Enlightenment?'" ([1784] 1995). Kant defines Enlightenment in terms of making use of one's own understanding without the guidance of others. Kant also claims that few are able to gain it on their own, but that the free use of public reason can ultimately be the (proverbial) rising tide that lifts all the boats. He initially lays the blame for lack of Enlightenment with the individuals—whom he accuses of failing to become enlightened due to laziness and lack of courage. Yet, as the essay goes on, Kant also mentions the tutelage by guardians, who keep the masses in a state of immaturity and speak on their behalf (the German original is *Vormünder*—literally, what is before the mouth).

While celebrated as a key text of the Enlightenment, it is possible to perform an aspect shift and see it as an instance of epistemic authoritarianism, something helped by seeing it through the eyes of Harman with his keen sensibilities for such matters. As Hamann ([1784] 1996) pointed out within weeks of the publication of Kant's text, Kant is implicitly installing himself in the text as one of the rare individuals who have managed to become enlightened on their own, and thereby as a kind of guardian, albeit a supposedly enlightened one. Moreover, Kant speaks about the masses, who are (purportedly) unable to do so on their own, in a

moralizing way—recall the whole rhetoric of self-incurred minority, of lacking courage and being lazy. In this way, we can detect epistemic (and moralistic) authoritarianism in the very text celebrated for the (purported) Enlightenment message that we are all equally capable of thinking for ourselves and only need freedom of the press (and of conscience and religion) to do so.

Now, compare this to Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and the implicit stance they are taking on the interpretation I suggested earlier. That suggestion included that they are using genealogy in the sense of destabilizing a self-conception from the inside.

For following up this suggestion, it helps to ask the question *which* and *whose* particular self-conception were they targeting? Following Allen (2017) and Andreev (2022), we can answer as follows. The key background premise of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is that we moderns—or at least Horkheimer, Adorno and their contemporaries—have tended to have a self-conception of being the product of moral progress; indeed, perhaps even standing at the end of such progress. In other words, a particular conception of history, even a kind of (Hegelian) philosophy of history is integral to our self-conception. That conception of history—that is the second background premise of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*—misunderstands itself as being driven by actual history, when in fact it is (largely) not, but instead by a certain psychological attitude (or set of attitudes: complacency, superiority, desperately clinging on to hope and affirmation) and defense mechanisms (notably splitting and projection).

Horkheimer and Adorno thought that a detailed actual history would not be suitable to dislodge this. This was so for the Nietzschean reasons mentioned earlier, amplified by Freudian

concerns.[24] Specifically, the thought is that rationalization is the biggest defense mechanism to overcome; and once we enter the game of a certain kind of argumentation, it will lead to an infinite dialectic. So, instead we need a different form of communication.

What is crucial for this is that one suitable way to go is to deploy a *guard-lowering ruse* and this is, arguably, what is deployed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (and especially its opening essay): the text has to, *at first*, appear as if it is doing the 'normal thing' —that is, that it is in some way(s) continuous with the self-conception and its philosophy of history, and seeking to meet it on its own grounds, such as by offering an alternative, negatively turned philosophy of history, one of the fall—and only later, namely once the defenses have been lowered, can the subversion and deconstruction begin, perhaps initially slowly before striking like lightning. As part of this, the authors have to (be seen to) appeal to the usual sources (such as Fraser's *Golden Bough*). It has to seem like they are doing philosophical anthropology. The text has to have periodization and a story of progression, from pre-animism to animism to (Greek) mythology to the rise of modern science and thought. It has to have the feature of both continuity—the pre-Enlightenment has to be in a sense already a kind of (proto-)Enlightenment to secure that there is a learning process leading up to the Enlightenment properly speaking—and discontinuity—to ensure that the latter really is a radical break from the former.

Most importantly perhaps, the text has to *perform* the very thing it is aiming to criticize.[25] Like the historical plank of the targeted self-conception, it has to oscillate between

[24] There might also be an additional reason: the sense of history that is part of the self-conception they seek to dislodge might seem to have transcendental status, such that offering an empirical refutation would then be anyway unsuitable (or seem that way).

[25] Evans (2020) also offers a performative reading of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, albeit a different one than the one proposed here. According to Evans, the book offers "parodies of anti-enlightenment ideas that were common

continuity and discontinuity claims—for it is not possible to stabilize the narrative completely, since it is mysterious how something can be both the outcome of a learning process and a radical break with what came before. Ultimately, the antidote has to present a fictional history as if it was a real one—performing the very fictionality of the 'history' inscribed in the targeted self-conception.

It is thereby a kind of immunization strategy. Like vaccinations (or homeopathy), it is hoping to stimulate the immune system by the very poison it is seeking to protect us from, so as to train the immune system for the real thing. It is not presupposing that readers have critical capacities, but seeks to foster the critical capacities—through puzzling them, though being both striking and seeming to say something impossible, through aporia and performative contradiction. Style, form, rhetoric are crucial for this fostering of a critical attitude and capacities.

Here, we can easily imagine someone coming back and restating the very objection I sought to address: if the above interpretation of what Horkheimer and Adorno sought to do is correct, does it not make it worse for the worry about (epistemic) authoritarianism?

Yet, we are now in the position to answer the objection by adding a further key additional interpretative element. It is neither necessary nor apt to ascribe epistemic authoritarianism to Horkheimer and Adorno, since what they are doing, is best read as first and foremost a kind of *self*-therapeutic move: a genealogical working through to rid themselves of the icy grip of a certain self-understanding that they were subject to just as much as their contemporaries.[26] The ruse they are playing would then be, first and foremost, a ruse on

through the first half of the 20th century." (482) On my reading, the book extends something like (self-)parody to enlightenment ideas.

[26] Here might be another parallel with or inspiration by Nietzsche, whose Preface to *On the Genealogy of Morals* famously starts: "We are unknown to ourselves, we knowers." ([1887] 2006, 3)

themselves; and the immunization through building critical capacities one of self-inoculation.[27] There has been much discussion as to what kind of shift *Dialectic of Enlightenment* involves for the early Frankfurt School. Often, the shift is understood in terms of dropping either Marxism or the interdisciplinary project or both.[28] What I want to suggest is that it is, rather, something else: The key shift in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* compared to the 1930s writings is becoming critical of the implicit Hegelian philosophy of history (and of the concomitant conception of and relation to nature) to which Horkheimer and Adorno *themselves* had subscribed. This is not the place to evidence this, but I would suggest that this shift is due to Benjamin's 1940 "On the Concept of History" (aka "Theses on the Philosophy of History"). It is this text, which reached them after Benjamin's death by suicide, that alerted them to the danger of the self-conception dominant in modernity—including amongst the socialist critics thereof, and themselves.

[27] This raises further questions which I cannot address here. In particular, we might want to know how the text can be *both intricately constructed* (for example, with its nested fractals) in a way that seems to presuppose critical capacities *and a form of self-therapy* through which the very critical capacities are meant to be developed. One part of the answer would be about the somewhat peculiar, collective process of Adorno and Horkheimer (and various people around them, notably Leo Löwenthal and Gretel Adorno) in which the work emerged over many years. Another part might be about how such self-therapy endeavors involve—or perhaps even *must* involve—playing ruses on oneself and related strategies, and perhaps also a kind of "fake it to make it" move. And yet another would be that enlightenment might be better understood as an on-going process of (second) reflection and self-critical questioning than a status we can achieve once and for all.

[28] See, for example, EME, 118; or Honneth [1985] 1991. Regarding the purported break with the interdisciplinary research program, see Freyenhagen (2020) for an interpretation which places "Elements of Anti-Semitism"—the penultimate part of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*—firmly within the on-going interdisciplinary research program envisaged but only partially carried out by Horkheimer, Adorno, and other members of the Institute for Social Research in exile.

To think of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as mainly an exercise of self-therapy fits with the low circulation of the initial manuscript, which is too quickly dismissed as simply due to the low-running resources and missing audience in the final year of the war (the 1944 first edition) and the immediate aftermath (the revised edition of 1947). Horkheimer and Adorno's reluctance to republish the book might also be related to this—rather than merely to the worries about how such republication would harm the Institute of Social Research in the Cold War environment.

Thinking of a book as first and foremost an exercise of self-therapy is not to deny that it can have a significance for others too—perhaps as exemplification of what (self-) enlightenment involves. This would again fit well with modelling the book on Nietzsche's writings.[29] Indeed, one might think that any enlightenment has to—by its very nature—be auto-didactical; otherwise, to return to Kant's famous definition, one is not making use of one's own understanding without the guidance of others, after all. If so, then the only writing that genuinely captures its spirit, has to be of a performative, exemplifying form. It has to be written not from a perspective of already being enlightened (recall the contrast to Kant), but trying to perform the enlightening on oneself, perhaps with the hope—or 'merely' the side-effect—that this might inspire others to perform it on themselves, too.

5 Conclusion

In sum, Habermas misses the point with his performative contradiction objection to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. If there is a performative contradiction involved in what Horkheimer and

[29] For illuminating discussion of the wider issues involved in exemplification (with particular reference to Nietzsche's "Schopenhauer as Educator" [1874]), see Conant 2001.

Adorno present to us in that book, it has a rationale, such that the presence of such a contradiction is not fateful for the position but required for (or least intelligible as part of) its form of communication. More generally, there is a performance dimension to the text which is completely missed by Habermas's overly literal reading and due to his stark separation of philosophical argument and rhetoric, content and form.

To return to our polemical thought experiment with which we started: Habermas would fail a class on *Dialectic of Enlightenment* because his 'coursework essay'—"The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment"—is philosophically unreflective to the point that falls clearly short of a pass mark. It is also biographically unreflective and engaging in underhand politicking, but these are additional faults, not ones for which Professor Habermas would be deducted points in any academic marking exercise (real or polemically and fictional). As such, his text looks much more like a strategic than a communicative action. Hence, it is, actually, his text that is caught in a *problematic* form of performative contradiction: in the terms of his own theory, it is a form of pseudo-communication masquerading as the real thing, and thereby violating the (purported) logic of communicative action in a pretense exercise of it.

Another upshot of the discussion is that we might re-consider *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: Instead of viewing it as a dead-end, we might come to understand it as a self-therapeutical exercise in destabilizing a complacent self-conception whereby modernity is the pinnacle of moral progress—an exercise which might have a certain exemplarity for others in the on-going quest of making use of our own understanding. And we might re-consider the nature and merit of Habermas's break with the critical theory of Horkheimer and Adorno—a break advocated, it turns out, less by the unforced force of the better argument than by overwhelming readers with underhand rhetoric.

Postscript by Chris Freefields

As a second assessor of "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment," I will begin by noting my disagreement with the proposed mark, before below taking issue with the polemical thought experiment itself.

I agree that Habermas's essay is marked by a certain unreflectiveness, especially being unreflective about why the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* might have used the particular rhetorical forms they used. Habermas only tries to explain why the content is so dark, so pessimistic—and even here he reverts to explaining this feature away by biography. But the style, the rhetoric (and the intertwinement of form and content), is simply dismissed, not reflected upon.

However, this by itself does not suffice, in my view, for pushing it clearly into the fail category. For one thing, the way *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is written, in a sense, invites its being read as Habermas does—it invites this especially on the interpretation which, Freyenhagen, as first assessor, favors. For, if the book (and especially its opening essay) involves a kind of guard-lowering ruse of coming across, at least initially, as traditional philosophical anthropology, then it is not simply a fault (and, thereby, not a simple fault) on behalf of readers—Habermas included—to be taken in by this ruse. In this sense, Habermas's "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment" would be just another of the essays that we routinely pass as part of our 2020s academic practices. Also, it does not always constitute a fail, if a student does not concentrate on what the authors style or rhetorical strategy for their text is, but instead focuses—as Habermas does with *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in his essay—on discussing its propositional content in abstraction from these intentions about style or rhetoric. Perhaps, this is done in part because the student is writing in a different historical context, say one in which they perceive postmodernism and its precursors as a threat to the

universalist core of the enlightenment. It might be that there are problems with the motivation for such focus, but these problems are not necessarily of an academic nature.

More importantly, if *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is about shifting affects and informed by worries about how engaging the cognitive level might trigger rationalizations and defense mechanisms, then, in a way, *the problem* of Habermas's essay *is not a lack of reflectiveness*—at least not reflectiveness as it is, typically, understood in academic contexts, which is, broadly, the sense Freyenhagen deploys when introducing the rhetorical device of assessing that essay as if it were coursework. Freyenhagen presents his case as if the readers, after falling initially for the ruse should next engage in a second reflection, and come to see *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in a different light—as a self-therapeutic working through of the dominant modern self-conception and its particular sense of our place in history, where this self-therapy can play an exemplary role for others in developing their critical capacities and self-enlightening themselves. Freyenhagen suggests that, if a reader—like, Freyenhagen argues, Habermas does—fails in moving to this second reflection stage, they are unreflective. However, this is mis-framing the issue. Especially if Freyenhagen is right about *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as a kind of exemplary self-therapy in the face of affective investment in ideological worldviews, then more reflectiveness is, in a sense, not the solution—it would remain at the cognitive level and its infinite dialectic of argumentation. Instead, what is needed is a kind of affective response, such that we might talk of insensitivity when it is missing, but not so much lack of reflectiveness. In a way, the missing element is what Adorno describes in "The Essay as Form" by saying that receiving significance requires from readers "… precisely that spontaneity of subjective fantasy that is chastised in the name of objective discipline" ([1958] 1984, 153). Put yet differently, what Habermas is missing is inhabiting what is presenting to him in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* from the inside, finding *within himself* the imaginative world from which Horkheimer and Adorno's seemingly exaggerated expressions

will seem fitting, even necessary. Perhaps such "subjective fantasy" could be called reflectiveness—indeed, maybe this is what Adorno means by "second reflection"—but it is not just the same as being unreflective about alternative interpretations of a text or about the intentions of the authors in choosing a certain rhetoric form of a work one discusses.

Freyenhagen, when countering mitigating considerations, points to the fact that Habermas was acquainted with Horkheimer and Adorno, their work, and the importance of rhetoric in it. His suggestion seems to be that Habermas should have known better. Freyenhagen also points to certain clues that Horkheimer and Adorno seem to leave in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to signal to the (reflective) reader what they are up to. Still, neither suffices, in my view, to change the above judgement that Habermas's essay can reasonably receive a pass mark, despite its unreflectiveness. All of this—including, arguably, the clues Freyenhagen points us to—remain at a cognitive level. And this will not do. For, as noted above, the nub of his concern regards a sense of (un)reflectiveness that is different from the one relevant for academic contexts.

It seems to me that, at this key point, we can see the breakdown of the very nature of the rhetorical device Freyenhagen employs—the polemical thought experiment and the genre of feedback on coursework. It seems that Freyenhagen, after all, treats Habermas not as a student, but as a professor with a particular history (which includes having worked with Horkheimer and Adorno) who should know better; or perhaps as someone with whose (academic) politics he disagrees; or even as someone whose defense mechanisms get in the way of engaging in subjective fantasy, perhaps to the point that he is psychologizing the exemplars and trying to make the (self-)therapy unavailable (no small resistance there!). In any of these ways, Freyenhagen confuses the standards and methods by which we typically and appropriately read coursework essays and those by which we read the work of established authors.

Indeed, one might worry that Freyenhagen's rhetorical device makes him guilty of epistemic authoritarianism, even if his interpretation might answer that charge when put against Horkheimer and Adorno in relation to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In this vein, one might ask critically: "Who is Freyenhagen to take it on himself to engage in such a polemical fashion with Habermas? And what justification could there be for his having grasp the truth about *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and deny that Habermas has understood it correctly?".

These critical questions would, however, also be somewhat skewed. Freyenhagen's critical comments above do not rely on accepting his interpretation as the true or only one. The point of the critique is "simply" that Habermas was unreflective for not even considering the alternative interpretation (and unreflective in other ways not pertaining to the coursework mark). Moreover, these critical questions would repeat the mistake of overlooking the performative dimension of Freyenhagen's text in a way that would repeat the very mistake of which he accuses Habermas in his rendering of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. To explain: presumably the whole rhetorical device Freyenhagen deploys is, at least in part, about his performing the very authoritarian stance that he implicitly suggests Habermas is taking in "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment"—a stance, akin to Kant's, of being one of few who have achieved enlightenment on their own and are now protecting the masses from succumbing to overwhelming rhetoric.

Still, one might think that there also has to be an element of self-polemic or self-ironizing or, at least, self-reflectivity about the estrangement exercise Freyenhagen performs (and how it is in tension with the content of his (self-)therapeutic reading of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*). In the history of philosophy, a number of devices for this have been tried (not least by Kierkegaard, whose influence on Adorno is well-attested); and it behooves Freyenhagen's endeavor to deploy at least one such device.

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