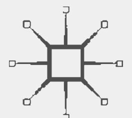
Adorno's Philosophy of the Nonidentical

Thinking as Resistance

OSHRAT C. SILBERBUSCH



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Oshrat C. Silberbusch
Independent Scholar
Brooklyn, NY, USA

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To my children
S., M. and T.
ובחרת בחיים

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Abbreviations[1]

AES	*Ästhetik (1958/59)*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2009. English Translation: *Aesthetics*, trans. Wieland Hobarn. Medford: Polity 2018.
AET	*Ästhetische Theorie*. GS 7. English Translation: *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. R. Hullot-Kentor. New York: Continuum 1997.
DA	*Dialektik der Aufklärung* (with Max Horkheimer). GS 3. English translation: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. E. Jephcott. Stanford University 2002.
DSH	Drei Studien zu Hegel. GS 5, 248–381. English translation: *Hegel. Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge: MIT Press 1993)
JE	*Jargon der Eigentlichkeit*. GS 6. English translation: *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will. Evanston: Northwestern University 1973.
KRV	*Kants 'Kritik der reinen Vernunft'*. English translation: *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. R. Livingstone. Stanford University Press 2001.

[1] These abbreviations are used in the body of the text for citations of Adorno's book-length works and posthumously published lectures. References for Adorno's essays are given in the footnotes. For the German edition of the writings published during Adorno's lifetime, I cite Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 20 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1984), henceforth GS followed by the volume number. The posthumous works are listed separately. Citations are of the format German/English (where applicable).

For the sake of consistency, and in a deliberate effort to remain as close as possible to Adorno's writing, I use my own translations from the German throughout this book. The English page numbers refer to the corresponding passage in the published translations and are given for reference.

LGF *Zur Lehre von der Geschichte und von der Freiheit*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2006. English translation: *History and Freedom*, trans. Rodney Livingstone. Malden: Polity 2006.

MM *Minima Moralia*. GS 4. English translation: *Minima Moralia*, trans. E. Jephcott. New York: Verso 2005.

MP *Metaphysik: Begriff und Probleme*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998. English translation: *Metaphysics. Concept and Problems*, trans. E. Jephcott. Stanford University Press 2000.

ND *Negative Dialektik*. GS 6. English translation: *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton. London: Routledge 1973.

PMP *Probleme der Moralphilosophie*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996. English translation: *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, trans. Rodney Livingstone. Stanford University Press 2001.

PT *Philosophische Terminologie*. 2 vols. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1973.

VND *Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 2003. English translation: *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone. Malden: Polity 2008

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

"The only true thoughts are those that don't understand themselves", Adorno writes in *Minima Moralia*. The sentence stands on its own—a "monogram", Adorno calls it—without any context that would help illuminate its paradoxical meaning. That Adorno believed truth to be something not easily possessed is hardly surprising, The elusiveness of truth, the fact that truth is a process rather than an end, that truth has a "temporal core"—these are all central tenets of Adorno's thinking. But to get to the heart of this aphorism, we have to go a step further and ask why, according to Adorno, truth is out of our reach—or more precisely, incomprehensible. Why do true thoughts not understand themselves? And conversely, why are thoughts that understand themselves not true? For Adorno, the answer has to do with the nature of reason and the fundamental structure of our understanding, and it is closely linked to that elusive other that lies at the very heart of his philosophy: the nonidentical. The relationship of reason to the world is fundamentally conceptual—connected to expression and thus to concepts: to grasp something, we name it. The problem is that we have a limited number of names at our disposal, for an unlimited number of phenomena. Reason solves this conundrum by subsuming the infinite richness of our world under a finite number of concepts, in other words, by pretending that what is different is in fact the same. It identifies the unique phenomenon as a specimen of a category and forces it into the Procrustean bed of conceptuality, treating the unknown as long known, the singular as an instance. This "identity thinking", as Adorno calls it, allows us to form thoughts and makes inter-

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subjective communication possible, but it comes at a price: the elimination of the nonidentical, that which is unique and therefore inexpressible. Adorno called the nonidentical the "concept's other" (DSH 5:363/133), the "ungrasped", the "incomprehensible" (DSH 5:375/147). The nonidentical is that part of the truth that we, quite literally, cannot comprehend, that which slips between the cracks of our conceptual rationality, the unsayable and unsaid that prevents us from having a complete grasp of the world around us and makes all the thoughts that we *can* comprehend incomplete and therefore untrue.

Adorno's philosophy grows out of the tension at the heart of rational thought: between the subject's need to conceptualize, categorize and subsume, and the object's own objectivity, the nonidentical that is erased in a thought cut to fit. "The utopia of knowledge would be to open up the non-conceptual with concepts without making it like them" (ND 6:21/10), Adorno wrote in *Negative Dialectic*—a utopia he pursued all his life. He did it by opening up conceptual rationality to the nonconceptual: to the aesthetic, the somatic, the ephemeral; by letting our *ratio* take cues from that which is not like it. The driving force behind his effort was nothing less than the desperate desire to save the nonidentical from obliteration by reason. But why save the nonidentical? Was Adorno animated by the same age-old quest for Truth with a capital T, the search for the elusive essence, the thing in itself, that had fueled philosophy since its earliest beginnings? The answer is yes and no. If Adorno wanted to get closer to truth, it was for a reason so down-to-earth that many of his philosophical predecessors (and contemporaries) would have recoiled from it in contempt. Adorno wanted to save the nonidentical not because it stood between him and a full disclosure of Truth, but because he was convinced that silencing it plays a prominent role in very real suffering.

Indeed, despite its elusiveness, the implications of the nonidentical—or more precisely: of its constant erasure—are utterly concrete. Adorno's work reveals how social structures of domination, the withering of individual experience, social ills such as bigotry, racism, authoritarianism, political polarization, and ultimately even genocide, are more or less directly linked to identity thinking and the fate of the nonidentical, and with it to the most fundamental underpinnings of constitutive subjectivity. Because we depend on concepts to grasp the infinite richness of the phenomenal world and of our own experience of it, because we need to *identify* in order to make sense, our thinking is, inescapably, *identity thinking*: it levels and makes the same, mutilating the object *and* the subject trying to grasp it.

The conceptual framework of our mind, thus Adorno's sweeping claim, is inherently incapable of doing justice to singularity, and the collateral victim of that inability is the nonidentical, before us and within us.

At its epistemological root, the idea of the nonidentical may seem banal, a simple asterisk added to the concept. "Hold on" is what it seems to tell us: you are missing something. Your concept doesn't tell you the whole truth. You see an old Arab woman? Think of all the things that your mind just erased by seeing her as what she falls under, all the pains and riches that fall between the cracks of the predicates old, Arab and woman. One could be tempted to say, so what? I know that this woman is unique. Just because I categorize her in thought, connect my experience with the words that allow me to express it, doesn't mean that I don't see her unicity. Yet Adorno's point is precisely that the subsumptions of our mind, the urge of rational thought to make everything the same, are not as harmless as we would like to think—as inevitable as they may be. There is a close connection between identity in reason and the identity we impose on the world and on ourselves, and the implications are far-reaching. Adorno's work is a monumental reflection on these implications—on all the different ways in which we erase the nonidentical, and on how to resist the irresistible pull of identity. What starts as an epistemological analysis becomes a reflection on experience, society, history, ethics, art, writing, logos and somos, nature and man. The notion of the nonidentical equally grows, leading from its epistemological core to the social outcast, the artwork, the "torturable body", the transcendent, the somatic in reasoning, history in truth.

Adorno's conviction that history affects and transforms truth is intimately linked to the reality of human suffering. "The need to give voice to suffering is the condition of all truth", he wrote in *Negative Dialectic*, and declared that every thought should have "as its inspiring force, the desire that things be right, that men reach a state in which the pointless suffering ends" (VND 82–3/53). For him, one event stood out in the endless history of suffering: the one he metonymically calls Auschwitz. Standing for a suffering unprecedented in its scale, Auschwitz became for Adorno the rod against which truth henceforth had to be measured. Its importance in his work can hardly be overstated, and it is closely connected to the centrality of the nonidentical in the latter. "Auschwitz", Adorno wrote in *Negative Dialectic*, "confirms the philosopheme of pure identity as death"

(ND 6:355/362). While identity thinking does not inexorably end in genocide, the awareness that it potentially can is crucial to ensure that it never will again—a goal that, according to Adorno, all human thought and action had henceforth to be directed towards: "Hitler has imposed upon humanity in their unfreedom a new categorical imperative: to arrange their thinking and conduct so that Auschwitz will never repeat itself, that nothing similar will ever happen" (ND 6:358/365). That imperative informs and shapes Adorno's philosophy and its focus on the nonidentical. Explicitly or between the lines, Auschwitz as the epitome of pain suffered and inflicted, and the nonidentical as the locus of suffering in thought, are the two poles of Adorno's thought, as much *Mittelpunkte*, implicit reference points, as objects of inquiry.

The present study is composed of three parts, each centered on one of Adorno's three magna opera and focused on the genesis and the numerous forms and traces of the nonidentical in the latter. I begin my investigation with *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno's first major book, co-written with his lifelong friend and philosophical companion Max Horkheimer during the wartime exile. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* presents us with the diagnosis from which all of Adorno's later work will stem: "The wholly enlightened Earth is radiant with triumphant calamity [*Unheil*]" (DA 3:19/1). Reason's progress is unstoppable, the dogmas and fears of yore have been emasculated, man is more and more master over nature—and yet, not only has the promised land of the free and satiated not materialized, but new authoritarian regimes have sprung up and thrive in the very heart of enlightened Europe. Adorno's and Horkeimer's analysis of what went wrong is an account of how enlightened reason, in its effort to overcome myth, disqualified everything that did not meet its newly enthroned criteria of verifiability, univocity, non-contradiction and, last but not least, identity. In its urge to dominate nature, it categorized and subsumed all things without and within, discarding whatever did not fit. Thus began the long road of suffering of the nonidentical. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* sets the stage for Adorno's philosophy of the nonidentical, and it foreshadows the intimate connection of the latter to the calamity that Adorno will come to call Auschwitz. The second part of the present book, centered around *Negative Dialectic*, further explores that connection, and through it the paramount role of suffering in Adorno's notion of the nonidentical—the suffering of the torturable body, and as its historical paroxysm, the suffering of the victims of the Shoah. I show how Adorno's negative dialectic counters philosophy's affirmative essence and the identity thinking it is

bound up with by searching for a way to let the "irrational" and its pain express itself in rational thought. I look at Adorno's critical response to Kantian moral philosophy and explore his dialectic of theory and praxis by examining his turbulent relationship with the German student movement. In the third part, I explore what Adorno intuited as a central pillar in the quest to integrate the nonidentical into reasoning: the aesthetic. I examine the role of aesthetic theory in his negative dialectic, as well as the central role the aesthetic plays in the guise of the *form* of his writing: style, language, rhythm, syntactic choices. Finally, I look at the role of nature, notably natural beauty and animals, in Adorno's understanding of aesthetic experience and of the different subject-object relationship the latter adumbrates.

From a formal viewpoint, the present book reflects Adorno's own constellational approach, which I will say more of in the third part below, inasmuch as it does not follow a linear course in which the arguments build up to a conclusion; rather, the different parts interweave to form a *Gewebe* [fabric] where each thread takes its full meaning only in constellation with the others. Thus, the excursion on Adorno and the student movement is illuminated by the reflections on Adorno's solidarity with the torturable body, as is the chapter on his critique of Heidegger; the meditation on childhood is informed by the analysis of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*; the last chapter on art, where Auschwitz is less prominent, can only be understood in the light of the two preceding ones and their reflections on suffering; etc. While the nonidentical is the centerpiece of this study, it is not the object of inquiry in a conventional sense. "Philosophy is essentially not expoundable", Adorno wrote in *Negative Dialectic*, a difficulty that seems particularly true in his case, and that anyone setting out to expound Adorno's thought will run up against. Rather than a systematic analysis (which neither the nonidentical nor Adorno's thoughts about it are conducive to), I therefore propose a reflection *around* the nonidentical in which its meanings and implications gradually crystallize. Through a constellation of analyses stemming from an immanent reading of Adorno's work, I hope to bring to light the many dimensions of the nonidentical and present a broad exposition of the thought that strives to give it a voice.

Constellations also inform my approach to sources. No essay in Adorno's work stands on its own, no single work finds its full meaning without drawing from his other writings. Thus, *Aesthetic Theory* must be read in a constant dialogue with *Negative Dialectic* and the writings surrounding it. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* comes into its own in *Negative Dialectic*, and

illuminates the path Adorno embarks on in *Aesthetic Theory*. The shorter essays, and the university lectures the Adorno archive has fairly recently begun to publish, are invaluable pieces of the puzzle—not mere additions to the major works, but just as crucial as the latter for an understanding of Adorno's thought. It is in this constellational nexus of a work that spans more than forty years and as many volumes that the centrality of both the notion of nonidentical and the historical caesura of Auschwitz asserts itself. The aspiration of the present book is to show how these two intimately connected centerpieces hold Adorno's thought together, and how they at the same time, at any given point of his vast work, illuminate the latter and add a dimension to what is written, even where the connection to them is not immediately apparent. They are what gives Adorno's thought its urgency, its ethical core, and turn it into a praxis in its own right. Written in the shadow of the nonidentical's suffering, Adorno's philosophy emphatically demonstrates the interconnection of theory and praxis: just how closely *how* we think informs and shapes *what* we think and do; and consequently, the crucial role the critical self-reflection of thought plays in any serious attempt to transform individual and collective action.

Adorno considered self-reflection, the act of theorizing and philosophizing about ourselves and the world we live in, an obligation, particularly for those lucky enough to live in a time and place of material satisfaction and relative peace. "We are experiencing a kind of historical respite [*Atempause*]", he told his students in 1965, a chance that "must not be missed":

> And I would say that in this possibility lies for all of us, and particularly for you, a kind of obligation, to really reflect, and not to let the mental [geistige] activity be subordinated to the general hustle and bustle; therein lies something like a moral obligation, that the state of reality puts on you as much as on me. It is certainly not only for spiritual reasons that the world has not been changed, but it probably also hasn't been changed because it has been too little interpreted. (VND 88–9/58)

More than fifty years later, Adorno's summons rings no less true. The need for interpretation has hardly diminished, and Adorno's advice to his students to "seriously reflect" and to "not let the mental activity be subordinated to the general hustle and bustle" has acute relevance in a time of universal distraction, where sound bites and discursive performances tend to crowd out serious reflection, and where digestibility and Like-ability often trump the desire to get to the bottom of things. Meanwhile, the

plight of the nonidentical continues unalleviated. Auschwitz has not (yet) repeated itself,[1] but the underlying identity thinking is alive and well. We see it in Muslim bans and in the shootings of unarmed black men, in the persistence of everyday racism and in the rise of populist nationalism, in the disparagement of the Humanities in education and in the growing power of fake news and conspiracy theories. At the core of all these different phenomena lies the same inability to differentiate, to see and value the unique, to question one's own infallibility, which Adorno links directly to identity thinking. To read contemporary society through the lens of his philosophy of the nonidentical opens up profound insights even into phenomena that he himself did not directly engage with. By reflecting on the impact of our epistemic framework on social life, psychology, ethics, culture and politics, Adorno reveals not only the intimate connection between seemingly separate phenomena, but also shows how deeply rooted they are in the fundamental structure of our engagement with the world, and hence, just how close we are at any given point to falling into the identity trap, even when we believe ourselves safe from its most ugly manifestations. "I am not a racist"—but that the man walking towards me is black is the first and quite possibly the only thing my mind will register. Adorno does not hand us easy solutions to the entrapments of identity thinking, but he makes us acutely aware of them—which may well be the decisive step, the interpretation that will create the conditions of possibility for the change that we want to see. In a 1963 lecture, Adorno told his students that the most important task of a moral philosophy today was the "creation of consciousness" (PMP 21/9): consciousness that something is wrong, consciousness of the gap between the truth and our grasp of it, between the "paradise that the world could now, here be"[2] and the vale of tears that it is. By questioning the most fundamental tenets of rational thought, Adorno's philosophy of the nonidentical not only builds such consciousness, it also adumbrates what a different way of thinking would look like: one that, by giving voice to suffering, by bringing out into the open the erasure of the nonidentical, edges thinking away from complicity with the latter, and turns it into resistance.

[1] Cambodia, Rwanda, and more recently Sudan and Myanmar prove Adorno's point that "all these things continue in Africa and Asia and are only suppressed because civilized humanity is as always inhumane against those it shamelessly brands as uncivilized" (ND 6:281–2/285–6).

[2] Adorno, "Warum Philosophie?" in GS 10.2:471.

CHAPTER 2

The Fate of the Nonidentical: Auschwitz and the Dialectic of Enlightenment

Auschwitz confirms the philosopheme of pure identity as death.
—*Adorno,* Negative Dialectic

"That of Which One Cannot Speak": A Brief Introduction to the Nonidentical

The nonidentical [*das Nichtidentische*] lies at the very heart of Adorno's philosophy. Long before it even becomes a concept and the centerpiece of his magnum opus *Negative Dialectic*, many of Adorno's key insights point directly or indirectly to the idea of nonidentity. What is the "nonidentical"? Adorno never clearly defines the term but lets its meaning gradually take shape as he reflects on it, well aware that a rigidly delineated definition would be a contradiction in terms. It is in *Minima Moralia*, written in exile in the 1940s, that Adorno speaks of nonidentity for the first time. In the first of two occurrences, a scathing critique of positivism, "nonidentity" appears in the sense that would later become central: as what is lost when rational—in this case: positivist—thought fits the object of its inquiry into a pre-established conceptual framework like into the bed of Procrustes, amputating in doing so precisely what makes that object unique: "(…) the nonidentity which it [positivism] does not want to acknowledge and yet which alone would have made it true thought" (MM 4:144/127). The nonidentical as that which is left out, "[the concept's] other" (DSH 5:363/133), "that of which one cannot speak" (DSH 336/102), will

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haunt Adorno's writing in the two decades following *Minima Moralia*, and I will examine its far-reaching implications in depth. First however, I want to look at the second occurrence of the term, where the word takes on quite a different meaning. In an aphorism under the title "*Halblang*",[1] Adorno condemns the common trend to reduce history to an ever recurring cycle of ever recurring events, the claim that "it has always been like this":

> But even if it has always been like this, although neither Genghis Khan nor the British colonial administration systematically burst the lungs of millions of people with gas, the eternity of the horror reveals itself in the fact that each of its new forms surpasses the older ones. What persists is not an invariable quantum of suffering but its progress towards hell. (…) He who sees the death camps as a technical mishap in civilization's victory march, the martyrdom of the Jews as world-historically indifferent, not only falls short of the dialectic view but inverses the meaning of his own politics: to halt the worst. (…). In other words, to abstract out the historically unchanged is not neutral scientific objectivity, but serves—even where factually accurate—as the smoke screen behind which the graspable and therefore assailable is lost to sight. (…) Auschwitz cannot be brought into an analogy with the destruction of the Greek city-states as a mere gradual increase of the horror, before which one can keep one's peace of mind. Rather, the unprecedented torture and humiliation of those deported in cattle cars sheds its glaring, deadly light on even the most remote past, in whose dull, planless violence the scientifically contrived was already teleologically contained. The identity lies in the nonidentity, in the unprecedented that denounces what precedes it. The phrase that things are always the same is untrue in its immediacy, true only through the dynamics of totality. He who forsakes the awareness of the growth of the horror not only succumbs to cold-hearted contemplation, but fails to see, with the specific difference between the newest and what precedes it, the true identity of the whole, of terror without end (MM 4:267–8/234–5).

Anticipating some of the arguments he would later raise against Hegel's philosophy of history, Adorno revolts against those who want to see the death camps as just another unfortunate "mishap" in the otherwise unstoppable "civilizational victory march" and warns that to simply "abstract the historically unchanged" is not neutral, but will in the end serve "the progress towards hell". Against the temptation to flatten out

[1] The German expression "Mach mal halblang" can be translated as "Give me a break", "Cut it off".

History into a chain of repetitions, Adorno defends the "nonidentity" of Auschwitz, the "specific difference" of its horror. Adorno's insistence on the latter, his unwillingness to smoothly stow away the "unprecedented" under the category of ultimately meaningless historical slip-ups, brings the nonidentity of Auschwitz close to the epistemological nonidentity of the earlier aphorism. In both cases, nonidentity is what forces thought to delve on where it too often breaks off. "The concept smugly pushes itself in front of what thought wants to grasp" (ND 6:17/5), Adorno writes in *Negative Dialectic*, echoing in the concept's smugness the "peace of mind" achieved by bringing Auschwitz "into an analogy with the destruction of the Greek city-states". It is fitting that the only other occurrence of the term nonidentity in *Minima Moralia* is a critique of positivism. The positivists' claim that nothing lies beyond protocol sentences gives the reassuring impression that we are in control of what surrounds us, that nothing escapes our rational grasp. This not only creates the illusion of an orderly and immobile reality, legitimized by its swift conceptualization, but also stifles every attempt to confront the cracks, the tension—which are most of the time not perceived. Likewise, considering Auschwitz as but a twentieth century remake of "the destruction of the Greek city-states" allows the thus calmed subject to convince itself that nothing out of the ordinary has happened, and to return to business as usual. "*Halblang*", written sometime in the years 1946/47, is the only text in which Adorno uses the term "nonidentity" to designate the incomparability of what in his work will appear under the name of "Auschwitz", which incidentally occurs here for the very first time. That these two crucial terms are so closely intertwined in this early text is certainly no coincidence, and becomes even more meaningful when we keep in mind the highly personal nature of the *Minima Moralia* aphorisms (many of them contain—barely concealed—autobiographical passages). Although Adorno will never again link them in that way, the nonidentical horror of Auschwitz is intrinsically connected to the concept of nonidentity in his work. As his reflections on the nonidentical deepen, the link between these two central *loci* of his thought will grow ever more significant. It is the claim of the present book that the two terms which so arbitrarily seem to meet on that page in *Minima Moralia* are nothing less but the two interwoven centerpieces of Adorno's philosophy, mediating each other in a thought in constant movement. The nonidentical is the core from which Adorno's thought stems, while Auschwitz is the negative palimpsest which lies behind it all. As we turn our attention to the place and meaning of the nonidentical in

Adorno's work, this intertwinement will become increasingly obvious. Even where Auschwitz is not explicitly named, it is present between the lines as the open "wound of Adorno's thought".[2]

As I have pointed out, there is not one clear definition of nonidentity, but rather a reflective circling of the concept which lets it gradually take shape. In his early *Metacritique of Epistemology*, Adorno talks about nonidentity as "the impossibility, to grasp without remainder in subjective concepts that which is not of the subject",[3] which he later describes as the fact "that concept and thing are not one" (DSH 5:310/70–1). He calls the nonidentical successively "[the concept's] other" (DSH 5:363/133), the "undissolvable" (DSH 5:367/137), the "unmastered [Unbewältigte]", the concept's "untruth", the "incomprehensible", the "unknown [Unerkannte]" (DSH 5:375/147), "that of which one cannot speak" (DSH 5:336/102). The nonidentical is what is left after human reason has followed its urge, not to say its need, to subsume, to *identify*, to put everything into a pre-established conceptual frame that turns the single, unique object into a representative of a kind, an interchangeable specimen. "Identity thinking says what something falls under, of what it is an exemplar (…), and therefore what it itself is not" (ND 6:152/149), writes Adorno in *Negative Dialectic*. Crucially, identity thinking is not just one problematic way of thinking which we should simply try to steer clear of. Identity thinking is as old as reason. We are all identity thinkers, inescapably. Our mind needs a framework into which to channel the innumerable phenomena that assail our senses at any given moment. We subsume in order to make the overwhelming richness of the universe more graspable.[4] When we see a tree, our mind immediately *identifies* the object in question as *a* tree, a specimen of the category trees, which allows us to link the identified object to a certain number of characteristics associated with

[2] In "Was heißt: Nach Auschwitz?", in *Deutsche Nachkriegsliteratur und der Holocaust* (Frankfurt: Campus, 1998), 296, Burkhardt Lindner writes: "The darkness of Adorno's philosophy, particularly in *Minima Moralia* and *Negative Dialectic*, stems not—as certain formulations seem to suggest—from a general theory of negative historical societalization, of the liquidation of the individual and the nonidentical, but from Auschwitz as the wound of his thought." While Lindner rightly sensed the centrality of Auschwitz in Adorno's thought, he failed to see the intimate connection between the "general theory of … the liquidation of the individual and the nonidentical" and that wound.

[3] Adorno, *Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie*, in GS 5:152.

[4] Kant, in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, presents the categories of the understanding as what makes this world a world *for us*, rather than an unknowable thing in itself (which it also is, but that, says Kant, is perfectly irrelevant to our human experience).

trees that we can then filter according to our needs at that particular moment (trees give shade, trees have branches that we can use as fire wood, some trees bear fruit, etc.), or we can further identify the tree as a particular kind of tree, a member of the subcategory fruit trees or pine trees. Most of this identification happens unconsciously, unless we make a particular effort to name the species of tree we are looking at. It is what our mind has been trained to do from a very early age, even before we could speak, when pointing at the tree—any tree—in our board book elicited the parent's clearly articulated response: "Tree!" The ability to recognize what a particular object "falls under", to use Adorno's words, "of what it is a specimen", is intimately correlated to our ability to speak at all. If we couldn't identify an object as a specimen, it would be nearly impossible to name it, as we would have to give a new name to every single thing we encounter. This would not only be a paralyzing challenge, it would also eliminate the possibility of communication, as every individual would be the first Adam all over again, giving everything he encounters a new name. The result would be a new Babel infinitely more isolating than God had in mind.[5]

Identifying is thus a necessary corollary to human existence. Adorno was acutely aware of this. As he wrote in *Negative Dialectic*: "The appearance of identity is intrinsic to thinking in its pure form. Thinking means identifying" (ND 6:17/5). Why, then, is Adorno attacking it so virulently? What makes him say that "identity thinking has been throughout history a deadly thing, the all-consuming" (JE 6:506/139)? The problem is that identity thinking does not stop at trees. It encompasses everything abstract and concrete our mind comes in contact with, it determines the underlying

[5] The inescapability of identity thinking and the elusiveness of the nonidentical has led some critics to discard Adorno's point as banal. Robert Pippin writes on Adorno's effort to salvage the nonidentical that "in practice, this seems little more than applying concepts in such a way that an asterisk is always somehow present or implied, as if to add to the invoking of a term such as 'factory' or 'welfare' or 'husband' or 'statue': *Caution: Concepts just used not adequate to the sensuous particulars that might fall under them*". He calls the insight a "platitude" (Pippin, *The Persistence of Subjectivity. On the Kantian Aftermath*. Cambridge University Press, 2005), 105. Pippin accurately describes the "ethical gesture" of *Negative Dialectic* as "a reminder of sorts 'to remember the forgotten nonidentical,' a plea for finitude, humility, to acknowledge in some way what is lost in conceptual codification, to own up to nonconceptualizable sensuous particularity and something like its ethical claim on us.", but considers the gesture "very weak" (ibid.). I hope that my reconstruction of Adorno's thought will reveal the nonidentical as anything but a platitude, and the ethical gesture behind it as forceful and demanding.

structure of our modern society, and it profoundly conditions the way we look at the world. The implications are far-reaching. We get a glimpse of what is at stake the moment we replace the tree in our thought experiment with a human being. In every encounter with an unfamiliar person, the identification is immediate: a man, a woman, a soldier, a doorman, etc. With one sweeping subsumption, the individual, each one a world of their own, is reduced to just an exemplar of millions like him or her. This reduction, arguably as inevitable as in our example with the tree, may seem harmless, yet it plays a decisive role in social evils like racism or sexism, as it allows the mind to reduce the unique human being to a single one of its characteristics: a woman, a black man, a Jew. Individuality is swallowed by the one category the person "falls under", with all the potentially destructive consequences. And it does not stop there. Racism, to remain with this example for a little longer, is not simply a psychological and sociological phenomenon which identity thinking helps to *express*—rather, rational thought with its drive for identity, for making the same, is a foremost factor in the former's coming into being. "Identity always aspires to totality", Adorno writes, a totality that "tolerates nothing besides itself" (JE 6:506/139–40). The nonidentical ruptures the totality and must therefore be excluded, eliminated. This pattern of exclusion that our minds are conditioned to is easily, and too often eagerly, transposed into mentalities and social behaviors, encouraging and facilitating, beyond the individual's exclusivist creed, totalitarian forms of society (or of pockets of society) such as fascism and authoritarianism. Adorno makes the link between rational thought's eliminationist tendency and the elimination of human beings explicit. In *Jargon of Authenticity*, he writes in a criticism of Heidegger: "What tolerates nothing besides itself sees itself in Heidegger, as in every idealist thought, as a totality. The slightest trace outside of such identity would be as unbearable as is to the fascist the other in the remotest corner of the world" (JE 6:506/140). In *Negative Dialectic* finally, he makes the connection between identity thinking and genocide: "Genocide is absolute integration (…). Auschwitz confirms the philosopheme of pure identity as death" (ND 6:355/362). The link of identity thinking to the totalitarian tendencies in society, and to the hell of Auschwitz as their deadly extreme, is much more than a simple example used by Adorno to vindicate his theory—it is the negative drive behind the latter's conception. In other words, Adorno's philosophy of the nonidentical is in many respects a direct answer to Auschwitz and to the human suffering it has come to epitomize. The historical events lie at the root not only of

Adorno's epistemology of nonidentity, but of the wide ramifications of the concept of nonidentical far beyond the strictly epistemological, which are so crucial for his work.

It lies in the nature of a notion as elusive as the nonidentical that even the most thorough investigation will fail to give a full—and unchallengable—picture of it. Rather than try to pin down that whose raison d'être is precisely that it cannot be thus determined, my aim in this book is to weave a tapestry of all the different threads in which the nonidentical appears in Adorno's work, in the hope that the richness of this non-concept and its implications will emerge in the constellation of its multiple layers of meaning. I will not make the impossible claim that the resulting picture is complete, but I hope that it will be vast enough to potentially contain even what I left out. In an effort to reconstruct the genesis and gradual shaping of the nonidentical in Adorno's own thought, I will proceed in a loosely chronological order and begin with Adorno's early writing, focusing in particular on his first major work, the 1942 *Dialectic of Enlightenment.*

Enlightened Earth's Triumphant Calamity—The Dialectic of Enlightenment

Dialectic of Enlightenment stands on its own in Adorno's vast work, yet at the same time it is an integer part of the whole. The reasons that set it apart are a few: First, it is a team effort, written with Adorno's mentor and close friend Max Horkheimer. The two always refused to specify who had written what, insisting that "both of us are responsible for every sentence" (DA 3:9/xi). Second, it was written in the early 1940s and first published in 1944, when Adorno and Horkheimer were in exile in the United States and Hitler was still in power. News on the destruction and murder in Europe had begun to trickle through to the free world, but the full scope of it was yet unknown, and hardly imaginable. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* has a feel of urgency to it that stems from being written while the events it is trying to comprehend are unfolding in full force, and at the same time it is manifest that the authors did not yet see the full picture. As Adorno wrote in his preface to *Minima Moralia*: "The violence that expelled me at the same time denied me full knowledge of it" (MM 4:16/18)—a note equally valid for *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Third and last, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is an early work. Written when Adorno had just turned

forty, it is his first major work of philosophy, the first of a triad of three magna opera of which the following one, *Negative Dialectic*, was to be published only twenty years later, while the third, *Aesthetic Theory*, would still be in progress at the time of Adorno's death in 1969. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* contains many of Adorno's first forays into themes that he would develop extensively in his later work. In the preface to the second edition in 1969, he and Horkheimer point to the "temporal core" of truth to concede that "we do not stand by everything that is said in the book in its original form." (DA 3:9/xi). At the same time, Adorno always remained loyal to his early work, insisting as late as 1965 in an open letter to Max Horkheimer that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* "remained philosophically binding for [him]".[6]

From the very first sentences of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer name the "calamity" that their book is up against: "Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has from its outset aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened Earth is radiant with triumphant calamity [Unheil]" (DA 3:19/1). The seemingly puzzling fact that Hitler's calamitous Nazi Germany is triumphant in the midst of the "enlightened Earth" is the paradox they want to comprehend: "What we had set out to do was nothing less than to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, was sinking into a new kind of barbarism" (DA 3:11/xiv). A first hint at a possible answer is given in the very same sentences that state the paradox, as the authors, through their choice of words, seem to suggest that the triumphant calamity may have been lurking in the ideals of Enlightenment all along: The latter's first and foremost goal is not, as one might have expected, the moral and intellectual advancement of man, but "to [liberate] human beings from fear and [to install] them as masters" (DA 3:19/1). The word master has ambiguous connotations; it implies force, ruthlessness, oppression. Where there is a master, there is a slave. And even though we are not yet told who, or what, the slave of the new enlightened masters is, the disaster of the following sentence seems already at least potentially contained in the opening. Simultaneously, the language creates a connection between the ideals of Enlightenment and their perverted realization in Hitler's Third Reich even before the latter is mentioned. Indeed, the word "masters" (the German "Herren") is anything but neutral in the 1940s. The concept of

[6] Adorno, "Offener Brief an Max Horkheimer", in GS 20.1:162.

"Herrenrasse" [master race] or "Herrenvolk" [master nation] is one of the major pillars of the national-socialistic ideology of Aryan superiority and its counterpart, the Jewish "Untermensch" [subhuman]. Thus, it is fair to assume that speeches like the Nazi propaganda minister Goebbel's on January 17, 1935 underlie like a negative palimpsest the opening sentences of *Dialectic of Enlightenment:* "We must play our part in controlling the world. That is why we must become a *Herrenvolk*, and that is why we must educate our people to become a *Herrenvolk*."[7] Adorno commented on that speech in a letter to Max Horkheimer in 1935, sarcastically pointing out its "symptomatic value".[8] What exactly Goebbels' words were symptomatic for, Adorno would only spell out much later—for the first time, tentatively, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment:* In the "mentality and deeds of the *Herren* [masters] in fascism, *Herrschaft* [mastery, domination] comes fully into its own" (DA 3:139/93)—the same *Herrschaft* that Enlightenment set out as its ultimate goal. Confronted with the "triumphant calamity" of spreading Nazism, Adorno and Horkheimer make the devastating claim that the German disaster is not just a freak occurrence of one enlightened nation gone mad, but rather a terrifying case of a dialectical turn potentially inherent in the dynamics of Enlightenment. Through the radical nature of the *Umschlag*, Nazi Germany becomes indeed "symptomatic"—in very much the same sense as exaggeration alone is true:

> But only exaggeration is true. The essential nature of the preceding history is the appearance of utmost horror in the particular. A statistical compilation of those slaughtered in a pogrom that also includes the mercifully shot, conceals its essence, which emerges only in an exact description of the exception, the worst torture (DA 3:139/92–3).

According to this reading, the Shoah is that very "worst torture", the "utmost horror" in the particular which alone can give us a glimpse of the nature of the whole—in other words, of the enlightened civilization that brought it forth or, at the very least, was not able to prevent it.

What concept of Enlightenment lies behind such a devastating claim? The term Enlightenment commonly designates the socio-historical

[7] Quoted in Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, *Briefwechsel 1927–1969. Band 1: 1927–1937* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2003), 107–8.

[8] Ibid., 105.

movement that toppled the unquestioned, divinely sanctioned authorities and dogmas of the Church and State in Europe and marked the beginning of Reason's triumphant victory march. Kant answered the question "What is Enlightenment?" by calling it "man's emergence from his self-imposed tutelage"[9] He went on to define tutelage as "man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another", which is self-incurred because "its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it".[10] The domination, manipulation and control that Adorno and Horkheimer associate with Enlightenment seem far. And yet, the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* would not entirely disagree with Kant's definition, they would simply consider it incomplete. For them, man's desire to emerge from his self-imposed tutelage is what stood at the beginning—and domination, manipulation and control is what ensued. For in their desire to liberate themselves from the myths and beliefs that held them in tutelage, men, instead of emerging as truly free and autonomous subjects, simply enthroned another master: instrumental, deductive reason. In 1917, Max Weber declared in his famous lecture "Science as vocation": "There are in principle no more mysterious, unpredictable powers, [man] can—in principle—master all things through calculation. This means: disenchantment of the world. Man no longer needs, like the savage for whom there were such powers, to resort to magical means in order to master the spirits or plead with them."[11] Adorno and Horkheimer follow Weber in his analysis of the disenchantment of the world, taking much further his reflections on the price attached to it. Man, not content with disenthroning the gods and myths of yore, seats himself, or more precisely: instrumental, deductive reason, on the empty throne, claiming for it the unquestioned power and infallibility of the fallen gods. Thus, "Enlightenment turns back into mythology" (DA 3:16/xviii) and ratio into the all-powerful God. Scientific reason carries the inherent claim that nothing in human existence escapes its grasp, and if there are things it cannot understand, that only means that it cannot understand them *yet*. Indeed, one of the greatest dangers of enlightened reason, we are told in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, lies in its "totalitarian" nature. To call

[9] Immanuel Kant, "Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?" in Kant, Werke, Band 9, edited by Wilhelm Weischedel (Wiesbaden: Insel, 1957), 53.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Max Weber, "Wissenschaft als Beruf", in *Politik und Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt a. M.: Zweitausendeins, 2006), 1025.

Enlightenment totalitarian at a time when a totalitarian dictatorship—generally perceived as a barbarian regress to pre-enlightened darkness—is laying Europe to waste is little short of provocative. The association, however, is fully intentional. A few pages later, Enlightenment is likened to a dictator: "Enlightenment stands in the same relationship to things as the dictator to human beings. He knows them insofar as he can manipulate them. The man of science knows things insofar as he can make them. Thus their 'in-themselves' becomes 'for him'" (DA 3:25/6). Like in the book's opening sentences, the link between enlightened reason—here in the form of modern science—and dictatorship is made through the desire of control, manipulation, *Herrschaft*. The idealist, Kantian-Hegelian vocabulary used here is obviously no coincidence. Kant's Copernican turn towards the subject that was taken to its paroxysm with Fichte and Schelling before it was slightly straightened by Hegel lay the philosophical foundations for the anthropocentric revolution the Enlightenment stands for. That the promise of liberation and human happiness inherent in that turn was not fulfilled is, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, due to the rationalization and scientization of the potentially liberating human reason. Modern science's role is crucial in the authors' understanding of the relationship between Enlightenment and totalitarianism. The moment the opponents of obscurantism, myth and religious dogmas chose natural science and with it primarily mathematics and its tools to enlighten the world, and declared that nothing in the world lies outside that framework, the totalitarian claim was made. Thought had become mathematical: systematic, coherent, eliminating contradictions and setting up equations. As a result, even the unknown became a known:

> For Enlightenment is as totalitarian as any system. Its untruth does not lie in the analytical method, the reduction to elements, the disintegration through reflection that its romantic enemies have always accused it of, but in its assumption that the trial's outcome is decided in advance. When in mathematics the unknown becomes the unknown in an equation, it is made into something long known even before the value has been calculated. Nature, before and after quantum theory, is what must be apprehended mathematically; even what cannot be assimilated, the insoluble and irrational, is fenced in by mathematical theorems (DA 3:41/18).

Why it is potentially so dangerous when the unknown becomes the long known? Because, as the authors write, "the trial's outcome is decided in

advance". The knowledge is not the result of an in-depth inquiry, undertaken with the willingness to fail, but only the confirmation of a previous assumption built on extensive presuppositions. Since it is assumed that the framework is given and definite and that everything in one way or another fits in, what is resistant to do so—the nonidentical—has to be disregarded or eliminated. Which brings us back to the affinity between the man of science and the dictator: both aim at the elimination of difference. Just like the dictator must eliminate the few voices that challenge his absolute power, the man of science must erase the few "freak" outcomes that jeopardize the neatness of the experiment. Just like the totalitarian regime must transform the individual subjects into a uniform mass in order to exert total control, rational thought must flatten out the differences in order to make everything fit into its preconceived framework of categories, species and placeholders. "What would be different is made the same [*wird gleichgemacht*]" (DA 3:28/8). This is, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, the ultimate—be it perverted—outcome of Enlightenment. The German word "gleichmachen", "to make the same", echoes with the Nazi term "Gleichschaltung" that designated the process by which the regime successfully established a system of totalitarian control over its subjects through tight coordination of all aspects of society. Enlightened reason, which claims to emancipate people and make them autonomous by equipping them with the tools of rational and scientific thought, in reality enslaves the mind anew, by forcing it to conform to the given thought patterns:

> Enlightenment corrodes the injustice of the old inequality of unmediated mastery, but at the same time perpetuates it in universal mediation, by relating every existing thing to every other. It accomplishes what Kierkegaard praised his Protestant ethics for and what in the legend-cycle of Hercules constitutes one of the primal images of mythical violence: it amputates the incommensurable. Not merely are qualities dissolved in thought, but men are forced into real conformity. (DA 3:28–9/8–9)

The elimination of qualities, destined to bring order to the chaos, comes at a high price. To fit an infinite number of phenomena into a finite number of categories and concepts, reason must make the dissimilar comparable, it must cut, trim, erase the little differences that make every phenomenon unique. Reason's ultimate goal is unity—or in Adorno's words: identity, to show that nothing remains outside of the system which

we humans fully comprehend. “Unity is the motto from Parmenides to Russell. They insist on the destruction of Gods and qualities” (DA 3:24/5). The fact that Gods and qualities are named in one breath is not a mere rhetorical flourish. Indeed, divine authority, by definition outside of the framework of human understanding (if it were otherwise, faith would lose its *raison d’être*) has in common with the cumbersome particular that neither of them can withstand the attack of reason. As Enlightenment spread in Europe, the power of the Church diminished at a rate inversely proportional to the progress of science, and while classification and taxonomy became more and more prominent, the Unclassifiable gradually retreated. As a result, God was agonizing long before Nietzsche declared him dead at the end of the nineteenth century. While Adorno did certainly not mourn the divestment of the crushing power of religious dogma over people’s minds and hearts, he did deplore Enlightenment’s failure to keep its promise of freedom, the fact that the disempowerment of the Church simply gave way to new dogmas—not the least of them logical, rational thought: “The deposed God return[ed] in a harder idol” (DA 3:138/92). Adorno will return to the idolization and divinization of ratio in *Negative Dialectic*:

> After the destruction of St. Thomas’ ordo, which presented objectivity as willed by God, the latter seemed to crumble. Simultaneously however, scientific objectivity rose immeasurably over mere opinion, and with it the self-confidence of its organ, reason. Men solved the contradiction by allowing reason to allure them into transforming it from an instrument, the instance of revision, of reflection, to the constituent, as ontological as explicitly vindicated by Wolff and his followers. (ND 6:196/195)

Turned from instrument to constituent, human reason took the place left empty by God. It inherited the latter’s unquestioned authority—without the content. Thus, an empty vessel: rational thought, susceptible to be filled with any content that passes the litmus test of the principle of non-contradiction, found itself invested with the same boundless power that was once attributed to the immutable word of God alone. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* locates the beginnings of this dangerous shift in the specifically German historical experience of Luther’s Reformation—the starting point of a gradual secularization which, by demystifying the transcendent and transferring more and more of its power to man, gradually created a new potential of allegiance: “The attempt made by faith under Protestantism

to locate the principle of truth, which transcends faith and without which faith cannot exist, directly in the word, as in primeval times, and to restore the symbolic power of the word, was paid for by obedience to the word, but not to the holy one" (DA 3:36/14). Once more, we sense an unspoken connection to the events that unfolded in Europe as these words were being written. Countless documents show that blind obedience to the unholy word of man played an important role in the Shoah.[12] Adorno would witness it with his own eyes when in 1953, he worked on the famous *Gruppenexperiment*, a collective field study by the—freshly reopened—Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt on the reactions of the German people to the German guilt. Facilitating group conversations with randomly chosen samples of adult Germans, he was given striking demonstrations as to where the unholy "obedience to the word" can lead. One example is a particularly gruesome discussion in which the participants talk about German soldiers shooting Jewish women with babies in their arms:

> A.: The soldiers, they didn't tell them anything. They told the soldiers: This one is to be shot and that's it. A soldier must obey, right. They weren't allowed to protest against that. Where would this lead to, if a soldier does what he wants…
>
> (Shouts: Yes, of course!)
>
> In times of war? A soldier, he must obey. That's what the other nations do too after all. They shoot us dead too, right, they also follow an order from their…[13]

The order of the military superior appears to be as absolute as the word of God himself. The value-neutrality of the commanding rationale is confirmed by the fact that the object of the order is irrelevant. Shooting an armed enemy soldier and shooting unarmed women with babies is the same. Once the 'reasonable' statement that "a soldier must obey" has been accepted, murder becomes a mere act of discipline, making any moral consideration irrelevant. "Fascism", write Adorno and Horkheimer, "relieves its people of the burden of moral feelings through iron discipline" (DA 3:105/67). Once more, we are confronted with a phenomenon potentially inherent in enlightened reason that simply "comes into its

[12] The problematic role played in Germany by the values of obedience and duty play a prominent role in Adorno's critique of Kant, see Chap. 3 below.

[13] Adorno, *Schuld und Abwehr*, GS 9:217.

own" in totalitarianism. When the former turns "from the instrument, the instance of revision, of reflection, to the constituent", it becomes a powerful tool in the hands of those who determine the rules, recruitable for even the most immoral cause. Accountable to nothing but the laws of reason, man is the new all-powerful god:

> In the face of the unity of such reason the distinction between God and man is reduced to precisely the irrelevance that reason steadfastly pointed to since the earliest critique of Homer. In their mastery over nature, the creating God and the ordering mind are alike. Man's likeness to God consists in sovereignty over existence, in the lordly gaze, in the command. (DA 3:25/5–6)

The fact that the "command", contrary to the disenthroned biblical commandments, is open to receive any content whatsoever, makes dogmatic reason potentially far more dangerous than a dogmatic God. Whereas Christian religion—the repressive and aggressive excesses of the Church notwithstanding—is built on the core moral values of the Ten Commandments (notably "Thou shall'st not kill"), reason has no core nor anchor, it is value-neutral, amoral. "Each of the Ten Commandments is declared void by the tribunal of formal reason" (DA 3:136/91)—but the void is not filled. In this vacuum lies, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, one of reason's major challenges. "Reason", they write, "is the organ of calculation, of plan, against goals it is neutral, its element is coordination" (DA 3:107/69). Reason alone is neither good nor bad, it is morally indifferent. A mere tool, a frame:

> As long as one does not ask who is applying it, reason has no greater affinity with violence than with mediation; depending on the situation of individuals and groups, it makes appear either peace or war, tolerance or repression as the given state of affairs. Because it unmasks substantial goals as the power of nature over mind, as curtailment of its own self-legislation, reason, as a purely formal entity, is at the service of every natural interest. (DA 3:106/68)

In *Negative Dialectic*, Adorno will develop at length his fundamental difference with Kant in that matter. Already in the 1940s however, sent into exile by a totalitarian dictatorship, he considers it perfectly misled to want to oppose the latter by brandishing the banner of reason. If reason is indeed, as *Dialectic of Enlightenment* claims, "the organ of calculation, of plan, (…) coordination", the Nazis were highly rational. Within their own

ideological framework, their acts were frighteningly coherent. A look at any of the thousands of files of Adolf Eichmann's office, the *Referat* IV D 4 (*Matters of evacuation and Reichszentrale for Jewish Emigration*) at the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt*, in charge of the logistics of the extermination of the Jews, shows that a thoroughly organized, calculated and coherent system was at work with murderous efficiency. Once the goal was set—to annihilate the Jewish people—a perfectly rational system was put into place to attain that goal. Reason, become pure instrumental rationality, fulfilled its purpose: to be a tool, and nothing more. "Reason contributes nothing but the idea of systematic unity (…)" (DA 3:101/64). The identity drive of rationalized reason is so devastating not least because—true to itself—it is all-consuming and prevents other factors to interfere in our decisions and actions. Emotions, impulses, intuitions are pushed to the sidelines as they are considered to jeopardize what Kant famously called the "purity" of reason.[14] Adorno and Horkheimer come to the frightening conclusion that totalitarianism, which is much "purer" than democracy or other untidy forms of society, is more than any other regime perfectly in line with scientific reason: "The totalitarian power has granted unlimited rights to calculating thought and sticks to science as such. Its canon is its own brutal efficiency" (DA 3:106/67–8). Single-minded, instrumental reason has no place for considerations of ethical nature. Against Kant, Adorno and Horkheimer claim that morality is not bound up with and intrinsically part of rational thought—on the contrary, it often requires a suspension of the latter in order to be heard.[15] As Adorno and Horkheimer bluntly put it, it is "[impossible] to derive from reason a fundamental argument against murder" (DA 3:140/93)—for that, man has to turn elsewhere. In contrast, reason, which is fundamentally utilitarian,[16] will find it frighteningly easy to justify murder, as Adorno and Horkheimer point out in a commentary on Sade: "[Sade's] philosophe mitré, who justifies murder, must have recourse to fewer sophisms than Maimonides and Aquinas, who condemn it" (DA 3:136/91). Adorno will examine the nonidentical nature of morality extensively in the third chapter of *Negative Dialectic*, which focuses on Kant. Once more, his reflections there seem to

[14] Jay Bernstein analyzes this characteristic of modern reason as the "principle of immanence" in *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*, 83–90.

[15] This point will be discussed further in Chap. 4.

[16] Even Kant's attempt to found morality in reason relies on that fact, as the categorical imperative is not rooted in an idea of the moral good, but based on a universalization principle that has at its core the idea of a 'workable society'.

take further the diagnosis that he and Horkheimer arrived at two decades earlier, continuing in many respects where *Dialectic of Enlightenment* left off. In the latter, morality is examined primarily through the lens of the writings of the Marquis de Sade, in a reading that leaves the foundations of Western ethics profoundly shaken. In their analysis, Adorno and Horkheimer claim that Sade's amoral world of orgies, murder and depravity is but the world of formalistic reason driven to its ultimate consequence. They commend him for being one of the very few who "spoke the shocking truth", who "did not pretend that formalistic reason had a closer affinity to morality than to immorality" (DA 3:139/92) and depicted "up to the very details (…) 'reason without guidance from something other', in other words, the bourgeois subject liberated from tutelage" (DA 3:106/48). Sade's protagonist Juliette is the "good philosopher, (…) cool and reflected" (DA 3:124/81), she "has science as her credo" and despises everything that is not rationally provable, like the belief in God, "obedience to the ten commandments, the precedence of good over evil (…)" (DA 3:116/76). Clairwil, another central personage, calls pity a "weakness" and praises her "stoicism", the "calm of her passions" which allow her "to do everything and to endure everything without emotion" (DA 3:121/79–80). Clairwil's words—which the authors quote from Sade—echo eerily with an infamous passage of a speech that Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS, gave to his officers in October 1943. Himmler talks about the "difficult chapter (…) of the extermination of the Jews": "Most of you will know what it means when 100 bodies lie together, when there are 500, or when there are 1000. And to have endured this, and—with the exception of rare cases of human weakness—to have remained decent, has made us hard and is a page of glory never mentioned and never to be mentioned."[17] In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Sade's books are seen as prophecies, which through the description of some particularly ruthless versions of "the bourgeois subject liberated from heteronomy" anticipate what would happen in Germany a little over a century after Sade's death—something much worse than Sade could ever have imagined. As Adorno and Horkheimer write: "Compared to the mindset and the deeds of the masters of fascism, in which mastery came into its own, the enthusiastic account of the life of Brisa-Testa, in which the former are foreshadowed, pales to familiar banality" (DA 3:139/93). In the light of the words and

[17] Heinrich Himmler to 92 leading SS officers on October 4, 1943 in Posen. Quoted in "Heinrich Himmler und die beiden Posener Reden" in *Die Welt*, 11.3.2007.

deeds of Hitler's henchmen, Sade's fantasies indeed pale to banality. And yet, the former is foreshadowed in them because they are a fruit of the same tree. "In Sade as in Mandeville, private vice constitutes a predictive chronicle of the public virtues of the totalitarian era" (DA 3:139–40/93). Himmler and Höss are Juliette, Catwil and Brisa-Testa taken to the ultimate level—that worst that even Sade did not want to know. The domination that Sade's protagonists aspired to "came into its own" in Hitler's Germany. Conversely, the latter is not just another case which the authors refer to in order to illustrate their words with contemporary examples—it is what the bleak diagnosis of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ultimately points to, the most perfect realization of the calamity that Enlightenment potentially contained from the very beginning and whose genesis the authors set out to understand. The link is not always explicit, yet it is with this "full knowledge" in mind that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* must be read. Only in view of what the authors could not yet entirely grasp does the book take on all its meaning. Let us examine this claim further by looking at another subject central to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that will play an equally prominent role in Adorno's later work: experience.

Damaged Life: The Withering of Experience

As we have seen, one reason why morality falls victim to identity thinking, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, is that the non-rational subjective factors that come into play in ethical decisions and actions, such as impulse, intuition, passion and compassion, are rejected by the former. The fact that individual feelings and impulses are disqualified and therefore suppressed does not only affect the action they are not allowed to influence—it eventually mutilates the feelings themselves. Reason's demand for unity thus not only results in an impoverishment of thought, which makes that, unable to *think differently*, man becomes much more vulnerable to ideological indoctrination, but equally, and possibly of even heavier consequences, in an impoverishment of experience. Experience is by definition subjective, personal, hard to subsume under categories. To experience means to see, feel and observe with acuteness, to be willing to "hear the unheard of", as Adorno and Horkheimer put it—to open oneself to the other, be it object or subject, to make oneself vulnerable: "Experiencing is real doing and suffering" (DA 3:102/64). But where the unheard of is discarded, where even "the unknown becomes the unknown of an equation [and thus] the long known" (DA 3:41/18), experience is crippled. As

a result, it becomes nearly impossible to feel against the current, to break the potent societal drive towards unity and rescue the particular, the only dissonant voice.[18] Impoverishment of thought and experience, and the concurrent discredit of feelings and impulse as factors in determining the course of thought and action, paralyze man's abilities to react and respond autonomously and make him incapable of standing up against the bad, which he cannot even see. "The resignation of thought to the production of unanimity implies an impoverishment of thought no less than of experience; the separation of the two realms leaves both damaged" (DA 3:53/28), Adorno and Horkheimer write in their chapter on the concept of Enlightenment.[19] Damaged like the life that Adorno reflected on in his *Minima Moralia—Reflections from a damaged life*, which he once called the "realization of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* towards the subjective side".[20] The latter work's sense of loss and alienation is closely linked to radical separation of experience from thought and the ensuing impoverishment of both. In the modern world Adorno depicts in *Minima Moralia*, there is no space left for the private unless it is kept private, and the subject has lost its ability to interact with his contemporaries outside of the all-embracing rationalization of society: "Privacy has completely given way to the privation it secretly always was, and the stubborn clinging to one's own interest is now mingled with the fury at no longer being able to perceive that things could be different and better" (MM 4:37/34). The aphorisms speak of "alienated human beings" (MM 4:38/35), of "the dying of experience" (MM 4:44/40), "the ever-diminishing sphere of experience" (MM 4:69/62), of "withering experience, the vacuum between men and their doom, in which their real doom lies" (MM 4:61/55. The

[18] In an interesting comparison of Adorno and Cavell, Martin Shuster points out a parallel between Adorno's view of the silenced nonidentical, and Cavell's moral perfectionism, which, in Cavell's own words, portrays "its vision of social as well as of individual misery less in terms of poverty than in terms of imprisonment, or voicelessness." See Shuster, "Nothing to Know. The Epistemology of Moral Perfectionism in Adorno and Cavell" in *Idealistic Studies*, Volume 44, Issue 1, 2014, 9.

[19] Foster points to the affinity of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*'s account of the impoverishment of cognition and experience with Bergson's reading of selective perception. In *Matière et Mémoire*, Bergson writes "The error [of empiricism] is not to value experience too highly, but on the contrary to substitute true experience, that which originates in the immediate contact of the mind with its object, an experience that is disarticulated and in consequence, no doubt, distorted." Quoted in Foster, *Adorno: The Recovery of Experience*, 116.

[20] Letter by Adorno to Hans Paeschke (the editor of the journal *Merkur*), 13.2.48, Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach. Mediennr.: HS001886845.

withering of experience, and conversely, what it would mean to still be in full possession of it, is the focus of an aphorism on the art of giving presents. "People do no longer know how to give presents", Adorno deplores:

> In society's organized operations, there is no longer room for human impulse. Indeed the gift is necessarily accompanied by humiliation through rationing, just allocation, in short through treatment of the recipient as an object. Even private giving of presents has degenerated to a social function fulfilled with rational bad grace, careful adherence to the prescribed budget, skeptical appraisal of the other and the least possible effort. True giving had its joy in imagining the joy of the recipient. It means choosing, spending time, going out of one's way, thinking of the other as a subject: the opposite of forgetfulness. This is precisely what hardly anyone is capable of today. (MM 4:46–7/42)

"Treatment of the recipient as an object" versus "thinking of the other as a subject"—therein lies in a nutshell the difference between a true and a withered experience of the other. True experience is open to human impulse, to empathy, it is "the opposite of forgetfulness". The fact that "hardly anyone is capable of [it] today" is not just a case for nostalgia, but symptomatic for a lack that points to something crucial. This is why, Adorno continues, "people who no longer [give] [are] still in need of giving. In them wither those irreplaceable faculties which cannot flourish in the isolated cell of pure inwardness, but only in live contact with the warmth of things" (MM 4:47/43). Live contact with the warmth of things is yet another way to describe the spiritual experience Adorno is trying to save. Without it, there is only coldness: "Coldness descends on all they do, the kind word that remains unspoken, the consideration not shown. This coldness finally falls back on those from who it emanates. Every undistorted relationship (…) is a giving. He who through consequential logic becomes incapable of it, makes himself a thing and freezes to death" (MM 4:47/43).

"Coldness descends on all they do…"

Coldness plays a key role in Adorno's analysis of modern society. He considers it notably a determining factor in the moral cataclysm of Auschwitz. In *Negative Dialectic*, Adorno calls coldness the "fundamental principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which Auschwitz would not have been

possible" (ND 6:356/363). We have seen one version of bourgeois coldness in *Dialectics of Enlightenment*'s account of Sade: the "cold, reflective" (DA 3:124/81) Juliette, or the stoic Clairwil who considers compassion "effeminate and childish" (DA 3:121/79)—fruits of an Enlightenment which, most famously in the person of Kant, declared "apathy" (quoted in DA 3:114/75) the reasonable man's greatest virtue and rejected compassion as "a certain weakness of heart" that lacked "the dignity of virtue" (quoted in DA 3:122/80). For Adorno, bourgeois coldness is "the antithesis of compassion" (DA 3:123/80). As we will see, it is also the antithesis of the experience Adorno strives to recover, and which he will later come to call "spiritual experience" [geistige Erfahrung].[21] Spiritual experience means a complete openness to the object of inquiry, be it animate or inanimate, a capacity to *experience* it in all its dimensions, embracing the nonidentical instead of eliminating it.[22] Coldness is the exact opposite: closing oneself off from the life of the object in front of you, not allowing oneself to be affected by it, reducing it to an exemplar, to an occurrence of a safely categorized experience—in other words, to an abstraction. For Adorno, coldness is fundamentally a failure: to experience, to feel, to care. "Coldness", he will later jot down in his notebook, "is the historical and psychological failure of the subject."[23]

I will say more on the role of coldness in Adorno's understanding of society's evils, particularly of Auschwitz, at a later stage.[24] For now, I would like to remain with Adorno's early writings and look at how, according to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, bourgeois coldness came about. While the chapter on Sade and Nietzsche reveals the decisive role modern, rational morality played, Adorno's inquiry begins much further in the past and locates the first seeds of coldness in what he calls the "prehistory of subjectivity" (DA 3:73/60), illustrated in the Greek classic epic of the Odyssey. According to Adorno's reading, the hero of the Odyssey could be considered the first cold bourgeois of history. Fighting to overcome

[21] Adorno gave the first draft of *Negative Dialectic* the title "On the Theory of Spiritual Experience". See VND 227/183.

[22] Roger Foster defines spiritual experience in the following terms: "What is distinctive about spiritual experience is that the multilayered relations of a thing with other things outside it, and eventually the entirety of its context, are allowed to inform the cognitive significance of that thing." Foster, *Adorno: The Recovery of Experience*, 2.

[23] Adorno, "Graeculus (II). Notizen zu Philosophie und Gesellschaft 1943–1969" in *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter VIII* (München: text + kritik, 2003), 29.

[24] See Chap. 3 below.

nature within himself and without, just as his enlightened brethren will do 2500 years later, Odysseus alienates himself more and more from it, until "ironically, inexorable nature, which he commands, triumphs by making him return home as inexorable as itself, as judge and avenger the heir of the powers from which he escaped" (DA 3:73/38–9). Odysseus wins, but the price is high. Victory is attained by submission of the natural impulse to the iron will, exemplified most strikingly when Odysseus has himself tied to the mast of his ship so as not to give in to the temptation of the luring songs of the sirens. The ship sails by with Odysseus unvanquished, the scar of having resisted to the enchanting voices his legacy to the post-mythical world. Without knowing, he has made a first step towards the perfect enlightened bourgeois: strong-willed, unmoved, feelings under control. The price continues to be paid: "Terrible things did men have to do to themselves before the self, the identical, purposive, virile character of man was formed, and something of that recurs in every childhood" (DA 3:50/26). Odysseus shows the way, and pursues his educational journey with Circe, the lustful enchantress that turns all Odysseus' companions into pigs, yet gives herself freely to him because he was the only one to resist her—the only one to respect the prohibition of love:

> On the pleasure that she grants, she sets a price: that pleasure has been disdained. (…) In the transition from saga to story, she makes a decisive contribution to bourgeois coldness. Her behavior is an enactment of the prohibition of love that later on would all the stronger assert itself the more love as ideology had to deceive about the hatred between competitors. In the world of exchange, he who gives more is in the wrong; the one who loves, however, is always the one who loves more. (DA 3:91–2/57)

In the world of exchange and rational equations, the one who loves is in the wrong—and so is the one who takes pity, for he is moved to action, and therefore gives, without thinking about the possible return. Nietzsche, one of those who Adorno and Horkheimer praise for "not having warded off the consequences of Enlightenment by harmonistic doctrines" but instead "having declared the shocking truth" (DA 3:139/92), expressed the "quintessence of that doctrine: 'The weak and failed must perish: first principle of *our* philanthropy. And they should even be helped with it'" (DA 3:117/76). The weak should be helped perishing, not helped surviving, for their survival only hinders the strong and powerful. In the purpose-driven world of rational thought, they are as useless and as alien as

compassion—the antithesis of the bourgeois coldness that rules that world. "Sade and Nietzsche knew that their doctrine of the sinfulness of compassion was an old bourgeois legacy" (DA 3:122/80). Just as compassion is sinful, weakness is a provocation: it "awakens the lust for murder" (DA 3:132/88). In Western society, the weak are those who have been denied participation in power for thousands of years. Next to women, Adorno identifies one major group: the Jews: "(…) With Jews among Aryans, their defenselessness is the license to their oppression. [They] have it written all over them that they haven't ruled for thousands of years. They live, even though they could be eliminated" (DA 3:132/88). The only thing that stands between them and elimination is the heteronomous power (worldly or otherworldly) that keeps the citizens in check. Once the bourgeois subject is liberated from heteronomy and left with only "reason without guidance from something other", the protective fence falls. When finally, the new heteronomous entity, the State, no longer bridles the murderous drive but institutes it as law, the absence of compassion will develop its lethal potential to the full.[25] The Nazis were indeed faithful heirs to the coldness whose roots Adorno traced back as far as the Odyssey: "The Fascist masters of the world have translated the detestation of compassion into that of political indulgence and into recourse to martial law" (DA 3:123/81). Just how far the Fascist masters had taken the detestation of compassion, Adorno and Horkheimer could not know yet when they wrote *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Even so, Adorno's account of the genesis of bourgeois coldness makes Hitler's Germany appear as the apogee of an evolution which, through Enlightenment, the bourgeois revolution and the progressive rationalization of society, gradually prepared the

[25] The view that the Jews owed their relative security solely to the authority of the ruling power keeping the people in check was particularly widespread in nineteenth century Austria-Hungary (see e.g. Joseph S. Bloch, *Der nationale Zwist und die Juden in Österreich*, Wien: M. Gottlieb, 1886). More recently, the idea has been revived by the French philosopher Jean-Claude Milner, who, borrowing the terminology of *pays légal* (legal country) and *pays réel* (real country) coined with very different intentions by Charles Maurras, the right-wing ideologist of the *Action Française*, depicts the history of Jewish emancipation in the nineteenth century as a very tense set-up, where Jews owe their revocable liberty only to the fact that the *pays légal* rules against the *pays réel* and keeps it at bay. Every once in a while, however, the *pays réél* breaks through, thus laying bare the utmost fragility of the structure. The Dreyfus affair and its outbreak of popular antisemitism was for Milner one such incidence of the *pays réél* unleashed, with the *pays légal* finally taking the upper hand one last time. See Jean-Claude Milner, *Le juif de savoir* (Paris: Grasset, 2006). The antidemocratic undercurrent of this reading is self-evident.

ground for a potentially fatal explosion. In National-Socialism, the bourgeois coldness "comes into its own" as it becomes the dominant feature of a society that relies on the coldness of its members—cold indifference at best, cold cruelty at worst—in order to carry out its major goal: the extermination of an entire people in its midst.[26] Himmler's speech gruesomely exemplifies how Nazism—faithful to Sade's and Nietzsche's dark visions—redefined coldness as strength and compassion as weakness. As the German writer and Nazi sympathizer Rudolf G. Binding put it, quoted by Jean Améry: "We Germans are heroic when it comes to enduring the spectacle of other people's suffering"[27]—words which are, according to Améry, neither "bitter irony" nor "malicious cynicism", but "a simple and serious statement, [and] at the same time a demand addressed to a generation of Germans to educate themselves to cruelty." [28] Binding's statement echoes eerily with Adorno and Horkheimer's remark that stoicism "made it easier for the privileged, at the sight of other people's suffering, to confront the threat facing themselves" (DA 3:116/76). Stoic the Germans were in the face of the others' suffering and their own, revealing through their stoicism the danger that always lurked at stoicism's root. Nazism turned the stoic "detestation of compassion" into full-blown state-organized terror: "After the short interlude of liberalism, in which the citizens of the bourgeois state kept each other in check, *Herrschaft* reveals itself as archaic terror in fascistically rationalized form" (DA 3:106–7/68). Auschwitz is its ultimate realization, the disaster whose grain bourgeois coldness always potentially contained, yet that even its darkest visionaries Sade and Nietzsche could not have predicted. In this context, Adorno's philosophical reflections on how the subject relates to himself, to others and to the world become an issue of life and death, turning his concern about people's incapacity to enter into "live contact with the warmth of things", about their "freezing to death", into an existential question on which hinges the continuity of humanity (in the double sense of the term).

[26] Apart from Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Knopf, 1996), accounts of ordinary coldness can be found in Ernst Klee and Willy Dressen and Volker Riess, *"Schöne Zeiten": Judenmord aus der Sicht der Täter und Gaffer* (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1988).

[27] Hans Mayer [Jean Améry], "Zur Psychologie des deutschen Volkes" in *Werke*. Band 2, 507.

[28] Ibid.

The same urgency is felt in Adorno and Horkheimer's treatment of two other phenomena of modern society, both intimately linked to identity thinking and the marginalization of the nonidentical: the fungibility of modern man, and antisemitism.

The Fungibility of Modern Man

Fungibility is a central manifestation of the nonidentical's forceful integration into a greater totality. By reducing the singular object to but an instantiation of a universal concept, identity thinking turns the individual into something replaceable, fungible. As Roger Foster writes, the "layout of experience as seen from the perspective of the constitutive subject [is] reality as composed of discrete, fungible exemplars".[29] The fungibility of man and thing in modern society where the exchange value has triumphed over the use-value and everything has become replaceable is omnipresent in Adorno's work, especially in his early writings. It is one of the aspects of his thought where the Marxist influence is most tangible. According to Adorno, the a priori *economic* principle of exchange has become the universal law of modern society, governing thought and action indiscriminately. The reification and categorization of things and people has turned them into interchangeable and replaceable specimens—at the workplace as always potentially unemployed employees, on the marketplace as consumers of wares and culture, and in the private sphere.[30] Fungibility is a logical consequence of rationalized thought, and at the same time a necessary precondition to it. As Adorno and Horkheimer point out in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, it did not appear out of naught with the advent of modernity—what is new is its all-pervasiveness. Fungibility was already at least potentially contained in the primitive sacrifice and the idea of the sacrificed animal as a substitute—*a* newborn lamb to be offered for the first-born, *a* one-year-old deer for the daughter: "The substitution which takes place in sacrifice marks a step toward discursive logic. Even though the hind which was offered up for the daughter, the lamb for the firstborn, necessarily still had qualities of their own, they already represented the species. They contained the randomness of the exemplar" (DA 3:26/6).

[29] Foster, *Adorno: The Recovery of Experience*, 13.

[30] Adorno's diagnosis of increasing fungibility in the private sphere takes on a new meaning in the age of dating apps, unfriending and cybersex.

Yet there remains a fundamental difference between the sacrifice of the ancient people and the experiment of the modern man of science:

> But the sanctitiy of the hic et nunc, the uniqueness of the chosen victim into which its substitutional status blends, distinguishes it radically, makes it non-exchangeable in the exchange. Science puts an end to this. In it there is no specific representation. There are sacrificed animals, but no God. Representation turns into universal fungibility. An Atom is smashed not as a substitute, but as a specimen of matter, and the rabbit that suffers the torment of the laboratory is not seen as a substitute, but mistaken for a mere exemplar. (DA 3:26/6–7)

Through the unexpected examples of a split atom and a rabbit destined for vivisection, the authors point to the potentially deadly violence inherent in universal fungibility, to its complicity with the clear conscience of the killer. Neither Adorno nor Horkheimer could know that, as they were writing these lines, not rabbits, but millions of human beings were reduced to redundant exemplars of a subhuman race and put through the torment of a sophisticated system of extermination. Even though there is no teleological inevitability leading from fungibility to genocide, the latter can be seen as one potential consequence of the former. Genocide happens when an entire people are deindividualized to such an extent that the men, women and children that compose it come to represent nothing more than exemplars of a collective to be annihilated—which is precisely what happened in Germany. In the carefully orchestrated process of dehumanization that characterized the Shoah, the victims were gradually stripped of their individuality and turned first into *a* Jew, then into a number, and finally into an anonymous corpse destined to go up in smoke. While Adorno did not, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, make an explicit link between the fungibility he denounced and the Nazi genocide (which at that time he did not, as I pointed out, grasp in all its horror), he would draw the connection in *Negative Dialectic*:

> What the sadists told their victims in the camp: Tomorrow, you will come out of this chimney as smoke and rise to heaven, reveals the indifference of each individual life: even in their formal freedom, they are as fungible and replaceable as under the blows of the liquidators. (ND 6:355/362)

One may rightly ask whether the analogy is not a little bit too swiftly drawn here between a concentration camp inmate slated for extermination

and a "formally free" member of our modern society. Adorno's penchant for rhetorical "shocks" aside, it is clear that for him, fungibility is just like other aspects of identity thinking a potentially deadly phenomenon that lays the ground for the devaluation of human (and animal) life. Even though in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the sociocultural critique of fungibility—the fungibility of the worker in the modern factory, the fungibility of the consumer in the culture industry—eventually takes the forefront, the annihilating potential of the latter is never far from Adorno's mind, as the example of the rabbit shows. In a passage from the chapter on culture industry, the deadly grain of fungibility becomes tangible, as the interchangeability of Hollywood stars points to a much more ominous replaceability: "The culture industry has sardonically realized man as a specimen. Everyone is reduced to that by which he can replace everyone else—fungible, an exemplar. He himself, as individual, is absolutely replaceable, pure nothingness" (DA 3:168/116–7).[31]

From this outline, one could be tempted to infer that fungibility has at the very least one positive consequence: it works as the great equalizer. If everybody can replace everybody else, nobody is superior or inferior to anybody. The reality, however, looks different—a fact most acutely apparent at the epicenter of fungibility in modern society, the labor market: "The egalitarian ideal of replaceability is a fraud" (MM 3:146/128), Adorno points out, because in late capitalism, the fungible rank and file only make more powerful—and thus seemingly more irrepleaceable—the one who "unloads on [replaceable] others [the work] from which he profits" (MM 3:146/128). Fungibility is most acutely felt by those that can be hired and fired at will, who are made to feel replaceable on a daily basis, while society inculcates into them the conviction that they will never be able to replace those that hire and fire them. Even though the irreplaceability of the powerful is, according to Adorno, itself a fraud—he calls it a "miserable ideology" that you need more "intelligence, experience and even training to manage a trust than to read a manometer" (MM 3:146/128)—the reality of economic power structures reinforces the real

[31] As Martin Shuster writes, "Adorno's work is exactly guided by the idea that we need not wait for or wonder about some imaginary future where the human 'vanishes', but rather such a vanishing is happening every day under the influence of later capitalism; the ordinary just is the site of our vanishing humanity, for example in the form of the culture industry and the conformity it leaves in its wake." Shuster, "Nothing to Know", 8–9.

and felt fungibility of the lower 95%, which Adorno and Horkheimer see cemented in turn by a culture industry set on leveling out differences.

The "pure nothingness" caused by universal fungibility, the false egalitarianism that makes everybody equally irrelevant, pushes some to rebel against their insignificance by creating a new hierarchy: one based on differences between subgroups, composed not of individuals, but of replaceable specimens. Thus, fungibility becomes intimately entangled with what appears at first sight to be its opposite: the separation between in-group and out-group, the singling out of a person (on account of their race, religion, skin color, etc.) as someone inferior to be despised.

The Limits of Enlightenment: On Antisemitism

Adorno and Horkheimer focus their attention on one despised group in particular: that of the Jews. At first sight, antisemitism (in particular the Nazi antisemitism that was ravaging Europe as *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was being written) does indeed seem to run counter to fungibility. The nonidentical, rather than disappearing in the greater whole, is singled out—stamped and labeled, most literally—and prevented from blending in with the masses. In reality, however, antisemitism is a prime example of the close bond between fungibility and discrimination mentioned above. Its victims are simultaneously deindividualized, reduced to mere exemplars of a despised race, and singled out—yet singled out they are *as a collective*, their belonging to that collective erasing, in the antisemite's eyes, every individual trait. The Nazi perpetrator saw the Jewish victim as a faceless specimen of a detested group, a Jew in the same way as an ant is an ant. Made fungible and collectively despised, the Jews fell victim to one of the most prominent forms in which the plight of the nonidentical becomes manifest in modern society: rejection of the one who is—or is considered to be—different. We have seen Adorno make the connection in *Jargon of Authenticity*, where he writes that "the slightest trace" of the nonidentical in thought is to identity thinking "as unbearable as is to the fascist the other in the remotest corner of the world" (JE 6:506/140). That connection appears for the first time in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where the authors explicitly link the disappearance of the nonidentical in the concept, the disappearance of the individual subject in society and the collective labelization that ensues, and the murder of the Jews:

> If, even within the field of logic, the concept is forced upon the particular as something strictly external, how must indeed tremble in society anything that represents the difference. Everyone is labeled: friend or foe. The disregard for the subject makes things easy for administration. Ethnic groups are transferred to different latitudes, individuals labeled 'Jew' are sent to the gas chamber. (DA 3:228/167)

Thus Adorno and Horkheimer write in "Elements of Antisemitism: Limits of Enlightenment", the fifth and last full chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, whose title presents antisemitism as the epitome of the limits of Enlightenment. The fact that antisemitism was brought to occupy such a central place in the study of Enlightenment's shortcomings shows that, even before the scale of the Shoah was fully known to Adorno, he understood that what was happening to the Jews was not an epiphenomenon of a process whose primary forces lay elsewhere, but a fundamental piece of that process. In a letter to Horkheimer discussing the book project, Adorno even suggested that they make antisemitism *Dialectic of Enlightenment's* centerpiece: "How would it be if the book … were to crystallize around antisemitism? This would bring with it the concretization and limitation that we have been looking for." It was their task, he added, to "attend to the world where it shows its face at its most gruesome."[32] From the very start, he and Horkheimer insist on the intimate link between modern antisemitism and the ills of enlightened societies examined in the preceding chapters. "The existence of Jews and their appearance compromise the existing order through insufficient adaptation" (DA 3:193/138)—they are the nonidentical that too visibly interferes with the apparent identity. The way in which modern society has reacted to their presence exemplifies "the dialectical intertwinement of Enlightenment and power, the dual relationship of progress to both cruelty and liberation" (DA 3:193/138), as humanity's move forward makes antisemitism simultaneously more sophisticated and more reviled. At its root, antisemitism has always been a "leveling [Gleichmacherei: literally *making the same*]" (DA 3:194/139), and from the very beginning, there was "an intimate connection between antisemitism and totality" (DA 3:196/140–1). Adorno and Horkheimer see antisemitism as a "ritual of civilization" in which the blind rage of those who unconsciously sense that

[32] Theodor W. Adorno to Max Horkheimer, October 2, 1941, quoted in Wiggershaus, Rolf, *The Frankfurt School* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 309.

the society they live in is betraying them, is unloaded on the one "who stands out unprotected" (DA 3:195/140). The Jew, whose otherness has withstood the leveling steamroll of civilization, who symbolizes the possibility of "happiness without power, reward without labor, homeland without boundaries, religion without myth" (DA 3:225/165), attracts the "destructive fury of the civilized, who have never fully completed the process of civilization" (DA 3:196/141) and take revenge for its pains on the Jews. The forcefully uniformized assuage their "urge to annihilate" (DA 3:194/139) by attacking the nonidentical that mirrors back to them what they have lost.

"Elements of Antisemitism" is composed of seven theses, which I will not all examine in depth.[33] One key concept in Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis however warrants a closer look here, as it will take on crucial importance in Adorno's later thought and will thus continue to preoccupy us: the concept of *mimesis*. According to the authors, mimesis is the drawing near of the subject to the object (and vice versa), the legacy of the archaic "organic nestling up to the other". At a later, "magical stage", it evolved into ritualized mimetic behavior, until growing rationalization led to the vilification or even prohibition of mimesis and its gradual substitution with "objectifying behavior" (DA 3:205/148), a de facto negation of mimesis. In an in-depth study of the theory of mimesis which draws on Adorno, Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf call mimesis a "movement of drawing near to things and people that leaves them their singularity" and therefore "holds hope for an enriching encounter with the world."[34] Mimesis plays a crucial role in empathy, as it is a "pre-condition for compassion, pity, sympathy and love to other people"[35] which allows the subject to feel other people's feelings without objectifying them or reacting against them. "Loved you are only, where you can show weakness without provoking force" (MM 4:218/192), Adorno writes in *Minima Moralia*.

The mimetic relationship with the world takes place outside the separation between subject and object. Growing rationalization and the

[33] For further reading, see e.g. Anson Rabinbach, "Why Were the Jews Sacrificed?: The Place of Anti-Semitism in Dialectic of Enlightenment," New German Critique 81, (2000), 49–64. Another informative source for Adorno's and Horkheimer's approach to antisemitism is Jack Jacobs, *The Frankfurt School, Jewish Lives and Antisemitism* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[34] Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf, *Mimesis. Kultur—Kunst—Gesellschaft* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rororo, 1998), 435.

[35] Ibid., 395.

marginalization of mimesis it entails have brought about a split between subject and object as well as within the subject itself, as "the elimination of a mimetic relationship to outer and inner nature and to the other lead to isolation and to an increase in abstraction and objectivation."[36] In Adorno's and Horkheimer's words: "Physical assimilation to nature is replaced by 'recognition in the concept', the subsuming of difference under sameness" (DA 3:205/148). While mimesis unmitigated by reflection is as blind as a swift subsumption under a concept, reflective mimesis can be an important corrective to identity thinking: "By pushing the subject to resemble the world and the other, [mimesis] enables a sensual approach to the world. This approach forms the starting point to a living experience, in which the manifold and the uninterpreted […] take center stage."[37] A dialectic of mimesis and reflection has a redemptive potential that conceptual rationality by itself has not. It implies a certain abandonment to the object of cognition, a "live contact with the warmth of things", as Adorno put it in the aphorism of *Minima Moralia* examined earlier.

It is easy to see a link between the marginalization of mimesis and the objectifying mindset at the heart of all xenophobias. But according to the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightement*, the connection between mimesis and antisemitism goes even further. Jews, thus their theory, are the visible bearers of the last remnants of expunged mimesis, and as such, they attract the ire of those who have long ago stopped to allow themselves such abandonment. Horkheimer and Adorno bring as examples of "mimetic codes" (DA 3:208/151) that provoke the hatred of those whose suppressed mimetic urges they mirror, "the argumentative gesturing of the hands, the singsong of the voice", "the gestures of immediacy suppressed by civilization: touching, nestling, appeasing, coaxing" (DA 3:206/149). They are experienced by the onlookers as "shameful residues" (DA 3:206/149), "undisciplined expressions","grimaces" (DA 3:207/149), forcing them to confront their own alienation. Fascism, on the other hand, serves as outlet for the repressed mimesis: "The purpose of the fascist cult of formulae, the ritualized discipline, the uniforms and the whole allegedly irrational apparatus, is to make possible mimetic behavior" (DA 3:209/152). However, fascism's mimesis is far from the empathetic, de-objectifying mimesis that Adorno sees as a potential corrective to identity thinking—it is in fact the very opposite. The fascist cult of collective uniformity does

[36] Gebauer and Wulf, *Mimesis*, 394.

[37] Ibid., 397.

not enrich the subject through an opening up to the other but de facto annihilates it through mimikry, mimesis' identifying distortion, while the object serves as a mere tool in the furthering of fascism's goals.[38]

As has been pointed out, Adorno and Horkheimer's use of "typical" Jewish behavior patterns and gestures to elucidate antisemitism is not unproblematic.[39] It repeats the generalizations antisemitism feeds on and seems to do away with the nonidentical in the same way as the thinking it denounces.[40] As unfortunate as that may be, there is no denying that the authors' intention is quite different, as for them, said patterns are residues of something worth saving, and the flaw is not with the Jew but with the onlooker. Later in the same chapter, Adorno and Horkheimer credit the Jewish religion with safeguarding at least partly the redemptive potential of mimesis:

> The Jews appeared to have successfully achieved what Christianity had attempted in vain: the disempowerment of magic by its own power, which, as worship of God, turns against itself. They have not so much eradicated the assimilation to nature, as safeguarded it in the pure obligations of ritual. Thus they have preserved its redemptive memory without relapsing through symbols into mythology. (DA 3:211/153)

There is another, distorted form in which mimesis plays a role in antisemitism: Turned on its head, it no longer, faintly perceived in the Jews, provokes the anger of those who had to stamp it out within themselves, but returns as false projection, a perverted mirror image of the real, suppressed mimesis, "possibly the pathological character trait in which the latter manifests. Whereas mimesis makes itself resemble its surroundings, false pro-

[38] Interestingly, both Jacobs and Rabinbach seem to read the *Elements'* fifth thesis as an indictment of mimesis: "The major point of the fifth thesis of 'Elements' is that contemporary antisemitism entails, as Rabinbach has taught us, 'the return of the archaic impulse to mimesis, which in its paranoid fear, imitates and therefore liquidates the Jews all the more consequently …'" Jack Jacobs, *The Frankfurt School*, 77–8. Adorno and Horkheimer, however, clearly don't see mimesis as such as the problem, but its distortion and suppression.

[39] See e.g. Jonathan Judaken, "Between Philosemitism and Antisemitism: The Frankfurt School's Anti-Antisemitism," in *Antisemitism and Philosemitism in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries. Representing Jews, Jewishness, and Modern Culture*, ed. Phylllis Lassner and Lara Trubowitz (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008), 23–46.

[40] As Jacobs notes, "both Horkheimer and Adorno, products of a time and place, were influenced by antisemitic stereotypes". Jacobs, *The Frankfurt School*, 78.

jection makes its surroundings resemble itself" (DA 3:211–2/154). Closely related to paranoia, it turns the prospective victim into the assailant, the threatened into the threat. The pathology lies in the subject's inability to distinguish "between its own contribution to the projected material and that of the other" (DA 3:212/154). As Adorno and Horkheimer point out, all perception is in a certain sense projection. "The pathological element in antisemitism is not the projective behavior as such, but the absence of reflection in the latter" (DA 3:214/156), which makes the subject incapable of returning to the object what it received from it. Instead of a back and forth between subject and object, which enriches both, we have a one-way road, in which the subject forcefully projects onto its surroundings what is within it. Thus, the antisemite's thirst for power turns into the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, his envy of the better-off into Jewish greed, and his sexual fantasies into Jewish lewdness.

Again, the theory presents many elements which Adorno will later develop and deepen in his philosophy of nonidentity. The interrupted exchange between subject and object, with the subject shutting out the object's richness and uniqueness, forcing it instead into preconceived concepts that make the unknown known, lie at the heart of the nonidentical's predicament and its collateral, the subject's impoverishment, just as they are at the source of false projection. In the "Elements of Antisemitism", Adorno and Horkheimer write: "The inner depth of the subject consists in nothing other than the delicacy and the richness of the outer perceptual world. Where the interconnection is interrupted, the I becomes paralyzed" (DA 3:214/155–6)—it "freezes to death", as Adorno will even more radically put it in *Minima Moralia*. The paralyzed subject forcefully grasps and objectifies the object with which the dialogue has been broken. Conscience, one of the primordial elements of morality, is another victim of this process. Defined by Adorno and Horkheimer as "the abandonment of the self to something substantial outside of it, the ability to make the true concern of others one's own, […] the ability to reflection as an interpenetration of receptivity and imagination" (DA 3:224/164), it is lost in the withered cognition where the object is silenced. In Nazism, which once more reveals itself as the epitome of the phenomena *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is warning against, "conscience is liquidated" (DA 3:224/164), replaced by blind obedience to the Fuehrer and to the ideology of the Third

Reich. As the collective subject crushes the individual one, moral decisions lose their basis and relevance and instead of "the individual's personal responsibility [...] stands their output for the apparatus" (DA 3:224/164). The notion that the duty to follow an order relieves of personal responsibility and in fact supersedes any personal qualms one might have is blatant in the excerpt of the *Gruppenexperiment* quoted earlier, where the German interviewees are questioned about soldiers shooting women with babies in their arms. It is equally prominent in the post-war attempts at self-justification of a number of high-ranked Nazi officials instrumental in carrying out the murder of the Jews, like Adolf Eichmann or Rudolf Höss. Even when Adorno and Horkheimer turn to a more conventional explanation for antisemitism, socioeconomic resentment, they connect it to their analysis of the shortcomings of modern rationalized society. The Jew, they write, who was long shut out of the producing sector of the economy and confined to trade, is the too visible scapegoat who is "attributed the economic injustice of the whole class", the "bailiff for the whole system [who] takes upon himself the odium due to others" (DA 3:198/143)—he pays the bill for flaws of a society where compartmentalization and rationalization of labor deprive man of the true fruit of his toil and leave him constantly wanting.

As this short analysis shows, many of the phenomena Adorno and Horkheimer bring in connection with antisemitism—categorization and labelization, banishment of mimesis, social compartmentalization—are intimately linked with the marginalization of the nonidentical in modern reason. All of them will return in force in Adorno's later work, and just like in this chapter, they will always be, explicitly or implicitly, intertwined with the question of the rejection of the other, and more specifically with the unspeakable crime that rejection brought about in Adorno's lifetime: Auschwitz. While the latter is only glimpsed in the 1944 *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, it is present between the lines in a book whose devastating diagnosis informs all Adorno's work of later years. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was his first effort to come to grips with the "triumphant calamity" that would haunt his life and work, his first attempt to make good on a categorical imperative he would only write down much later: to live and think in such a way that Auschwitz will never happen again.

"Utter Enormities"—An Auschwitz Survivor's Objections to Dialectic of Enlightenment

Given what has just been said, it may come as a surprise that one of the most virulent attacks against *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was penned by a thinker whose personal life and intellectual path was profoundly marked by Auschwitz: the Austrian-Jewish writer and intellectual Jean Améry. Améry was far from alone—the book, by casting a shadow over a historical phenomenon that commonly evokes positive associations, attracted not little criticism, particularly when it was reissued in 1969. While the most influential critique to this day is likely that led by Jürgen Habermas,[41] Améry's objections are more pertinent for our purposes. Not only are they not tainted by the element of intellectual patricide, but more crucially, they give voice to the very same torturable body whose plight I see as the driving force behind all of Adorno's work—not least *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Améry experienced in his very own flesh the "detestation of compassion" of the "fascist masters of the world" that Adorno and Horkheimer see as one of the avatars of enlightened reason. Tortured by the SS in Belgium, imprisoned in Auschwitz for over a year and finally liberated in April 1945 in Bergen Belsen, Améry was a survivor for the rest of his life (he committed suicide in 1978), all his writing haunted by the experience "at the mind's limits". That experience forms the palimpsest of his 1977 essay "Enlightenment as philosophia perennis", in which Améry deplores the "sad aberrance" that has turned Enlightenment into a "bourgeois mystification", into the "evil instrumentality of unjust and obsolete forms of production", and progress into "the frenzy of a bourgeoisie obsessed with production and profit who has subjugated the proletariat and with it the entire Earth."[42] Even though Améry's description does not entirely reflect the position of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the latter comes immediately to mind. And so it is not at all a surprise when, after criticizing the French post-structuralist philosophers Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, Améry turns to Adorno and Horkheimer. "In their effort to free Enlightenment from the naiveté of its epoch", Améry writes, "the authors [of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*] got carried

[41] See notably Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993).

[42] Jean Améry, "Aufklärung als Philosophia perennis" in *Werke 6, Aufsätze zur Philosophie* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2004), 549.

away to utter true enormities".[43] He then proceeds to quote some of these enormities, such as "Enlightenment is totalitarian" and "machinery mutilates people today even when it feeds them", seeing in each of them

> the resistance against logic, the irrational rage against the technical-industrial world, the totally mistaken view that historical Enlightenment was nothing but the instrument of a brutal bourgeoisie cementing its control, and blindness towards the obvious fact that the bourgeois was also citoyen, that the particular of the bourgeois revolution also contained the universal, that industry and machines certainly damaged man, but also liberated him from the dullness and stupor of the biblically cursed tillage.[44]

Let us examine the different elements of Améry's critique. Resistance against logic? Yes, to a degree. Logic, the inescapable framework of modern rational thought, is a primary tool for the elimination of the nonidentical: "Formal logic is the great school of unification", (DA 3:23/4) it "makes the unequal comparable by reducing it to abstract placeholders" (DA 3:23–4/4). We have seen how Adorno and Horkheimer connect the substitution in logic to the sacrifice of the animal, the labelization in logic to the stigmatization of the Jews. They blame logic's underlying 'placeholder' mentality for the pervasive fungibility in modern society. Moreover, with its claim to inevitability, logic recreates the same "principle of fated necessity" (DA 3:27/8) that dominated the mythological universe, assuming an almost dictatorial authority which he who "does not want to forego thought" will "always [find] on the opposite side" (DA 3:274/199), attacking him. The authors see a direct link between logic's "command [*Herrschaft*] in the concept" and *Herrschaft* in society, the drive for uniformity "expelling thought from logic" (DA 3:47/23)—and, one is tempted to add, from society. So yes, there is without a doubt a resistance against logic in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, even though it would be more accurate to say that, as with their criticism of formal rational thought in a broader sense, the authors oppose not so much logic per se as its absolutization, its totalitarian claim. The question remains whether their however qualified resistance to logic is one of those "enormities which, taken literally, could serve as an alibi for the worst obscurantism".[45] Before we examine this question further, let us look at Améry's other points of criticism.

[43] Ibid., 554–5.
[44] Ibid., 555.
[45] Améry, Aufklärung als Philosophia Perennis, 555.

What about Adorno and Horkheimer's "irrational rage against the technical-industrial world"? There is no doubt that the critical analysis of industrialized society is a centerpiece of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. However, the authors' critique is not, as Améry suggests, directed at the technical-industrial progress as such, but at its role in society, its entanglement with power and control. This transpires clearly in the very paragraph Améry excerpts, his critique challenged by the very words he quotes. Adorno and Horkheimer denounce that "technical and social tendencies, which have always been intertwined, converge in the total control of man" (DA 3:53/28). According to them, the rationalization of the industrial revolution has swept the entire society along in its wake, leading to a world where everything is rationalized, calculated, allotted, rationed, and where every citizen has his or her assigned place in the big apparatus. The authors are well aware that, as Améry puts it, machines "also liberated man". They go even further when they write that "the growth in economical productivity creates the conditions for a more just world" (DA 3:14/xvii) and underline that it is not "the material precondition for fulfillment, unleashed technology as such, [which] calls fulfillment into question" (DA 3:59/33). What is to blame is "a social context of delusion [Verblendungszusammenhang[46]]" that creates an almost mythical serfdom to the scientifically and socially given, making the people oblivious to the fact that they are the ones who "constantly create" (DA 3:59/33) that given.[47] Industrialization and technology play a fundamental role in the *Verblendungszusammenhang* on various levels. With the rationalization of the workplace and the ensuing division of labor, the worker turns from a skilled laborer, who completes a task from beginning to end, into a mere operator, a pawn in the big machinery, who can no longer comprehend the production process and finds himself estranged from the fruit of his labor. He becomes not only replaceable, but also controllable, as he now depends on whoever provides the machines he operates. Industrialization, Adorno and Horkheimer write, "conveys to the social groups that control [the technical apparatus] an undue dominance over the rest of the population" (DA 3:14–5/xvii), while the individual "finds

[46] "Verblendungszusammenhang" designates for Adorno the complex context of delusion perpetuated by identity thinking that turns second nature into first and makes man-made economic power structures, withered experience, unfreedom and inequality seem like the inescapable "*So ist es*" ("That's the way it is", as Adorno put it).

[47] Hence Adorno's and Horkheimer's famous claim that "Enlightement turns back into mythology", see DA 3:16/xviii.

himself completely nullified in the face of the economical powers" (DA 3:15/xvii). In agreement with Améry however, Adorno, in a post-war interview, rejects "theoretical Ludditism", pointing out that "not technology is the issue", but the fact that "interest in profit guides [technological] development" and that "technology, for now, colludes fatally with the aspiration for control and power."[48] It is not surprising, he adds, that "the invention of means of destruction has become the prototype of the new quality of technology".[49] What Adorno and Horkheimer are revolting against is not technology per se, but the uses to which it is put and the way it has become fatally intertwined with power and oppression. For them, the rise of machines is but one, reinforcing element of the rampant rationalization which compartmentalizes society and individual existence and disenfranchises man, whose fragmentary experience is so impoverished that it becomes, just like his thought, reduced and resigned to the "creation of unanimity" (DA 3:53/28), the flattening out of dissonances which he, incapable "to hear the unheard of" (DA 3:54/28), will be increasingly unable to perceive, but which are indispensable for critical thinking and social awareness. Identity thinking reproduces the division of labor by a separation of thought and experience which "leaves both damaged" (DA 3:53/28). As a result, modern man finds himself with the same "deaf ears" (DA 3:53/28) that made Odysseus' rowers docile, victim of a new *Verblendung* that replaces the old mythical one. For Adorno and Horkheimer, today's worker is a reincarnation of the mythical rower, caught as they both are in a relentless, uniformized cadence that they cannot control. "Compel[led] to conformism" by the rationalized and technologized working environment in modern society, the individuals, who had only just barely started to discover their individuality, become, once again, "mere exemplars, made identical to one another through isolation in the forcefully controlled collectivity" (DA 3:54/29). Ideal fodder, in other words, for the dictator who needs obedient, deindividualized subjects incapable of autonomous, critical thinking to attain his totalitarian goal. It is the violence of society over nature, of the apparatus over the citizens, "pushed to unimagined extremes [by the economical powers]" (DA 3:15/xvii), and the violence that people thus rendered dependent and malleable are potentially liable to inflict in return, that are Adorno's and Horkheimer's first concern in their critique of the pitfalls of industrialized

[48] Adorno, "Spätkapitalismus oder Industriegesellschaft" in GS 8:362–3.
[49] Ibid., 363.

society. It is the unkept promise of progress, in which rational thought, instead of leading the way to an enlightened, free society, is reified into "mathematics, machine and organization" and paves the way for the very same "triumphant calamity" that lies at the outset of *Dialectics of Enlightement*. This intimate connection is without question a key point to keep in mind, particularly in the context of Jean Améry's criticism, not least because the calamity in question plays a decisive role in that criticism as well. Améry makes it very clear in his essay that what he is standing up for is what he calls the "classic Enlightenment", with its values of "freedom, reason [*Vernunft*], justice, truth",[50] values that, as he concedes, may be the source of endless philosophical discussions and definitions, but whose basic, straightforward meaning must not be forgotten: "What freedom means, everybody who has lived in unfreedom knows. That equality is not a myth, he who has suffered oppression will tell you from his own experience."[51] Throughout his work, Améry will consistently speak up for the immutability of values that have in his own life been trampled, and which he now defends against philosophers who in "dialectical acrobatics" attempt to void them of their substance. His defense of Enlightenment stems from the same concern. What Enlightenment stands for is too vital to be tampered with. Améry was well aware of reason's ambiguities, of the value-free neutrality that Adorno and Horkheimer denounced. In his essay "At the Mind's Limits", he noted in dismay that the SS-State "seemed in the end *reasonable* [to the prisoner]".[52] But he was too attached to the ideas of the historical Enlightenment, too aware of how threatened they were, how constant the attack on them, be it real or philosophical (particularly in the post-structuralist era Améry was writing in), to allow Enlightenment to be put in the dock. Améry, who had experienced in his own tortured body the total breakdown of what had up to that point been considered the intangible moral foundations of Western civilization, could not allow that Enlightenment, carried forward by champions of tolerance like Theodor Lessing and noble ideals such as Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité, was put into question, declared obsolete. Too much was at stake.

Améry's criticism—mirroring in that respect more prominent critics such as Habermas—does not do justice to the complexity of *Dialectic of*

[50] Améry, Aufklärung als Philosophia Perennis, 557.

[51] Ibid., 559.

[52] Jean Améry, *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne*, in *Werke 2* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2002), 40 (italics J.A.).

Enlightenment's arguments. His attack appears to ignore the dialectical nature of the authors' analysis, their acute conscience of the ambivalences of modern society, and maybe most importantly, the fact that the major critique they leveled against Enlightenment was precisely that it had betrayed the ideals that were so dear to Améry. In this respect, it is interesting to note that Améry was not always so critical. He admits that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* "filled [him] with enthusiasm three decades ago"[53]—when the book first came out in 1947, and Améry had been liberated from Auschwitz for only two years. At that time, with the experience of the horror still vivid and fresh, Améry was apparently more receptive to Adorno's and Horkheimer's analysis of Enlightenment's role in it—or rather, the role of the latter's shortcomings. His turnaround thirty years later is not a simple change of heart, but reflects to a large extent the different historical and personal context of the two periods in Améry's life. Two years after the camps, Adorno's and Horkheimer's interpretation of Hitler's Germany as an offspring of modern, enlightened Western civilization rather than as a temporary return to barbarism, their view of enlightened reason as an accomplice rather than as an innocent victim of Nazi crimes, appealed to Améry, whom Auschwitz had forced to the conclusion that "eternal human progress was nothing but a nineteenth century naiveté",[54] and who painfully understood that it was not culture and civilization on one side and the Nazis on the other, but that civilization was with them:

> A particular problem arose (…) for the Jewish intellectual of German background. Whatever he conjured up was not his, but the enemy's. Beethoven. But he was being conducted by Furtwängler in Berlin, and Furtwängler was a respected official figure of the Third Reich. On Novalis, there were essays in the *Völkische Beobachter* [the official newspaper of the NSDAP], and at times they were not all that stupid. Nietzsche belonged not only to Hitler, something one could have gotten over, but also to the poet and Nazi sympathizer Ernst Bertram—*he* understood him.[55]

Améry's painful realization that the Nazis did not interrupt culture, but inscribe themselves in it, however perverted their goals, resonates with the conclusions of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. But when he wrote

[53] Améry, "Aufklärung als Philosophia Perennis", 554.
[54] Améry, *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne*, 39.
[55] Ibid., 33.

"Enlightenment as Philosophia Perennis", his focus was elsewhere. In the immediate post-war years, it had been essential to acknowledge that national-socialism was not an unfortunate glitch in the otherwise smooth forward course of progress, a fluke that had nothing to do with the rest of us—which is precisely what *Dialectic of Enlightenment* tried to do. In the 1960s however, the frontlines had shifted. Enlightenment was under broad attack—not least from what should have been its natural allies. While the offensive from the conservative right, from "depth-chatters [Tiefschwätzer]"[56] such as Ludwig Klage or Oswald Spengler, seemed to be a thing of the past, the onslaught now came from the left, where "the cozy old irrationalism was dressed up in chic new clothes".[57] And these "stylish sophists [Hochschwätzer]",[58] the Barthes, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Améry viewed as a serious threat, for their "pseudo-radicalism" was highly appealing to the "en vogue intellectuals"[59] of the 1960s. In the light of these new voices, Adorno and Horkheimer's early warning suddenly sounded different. It appeared to chime in with the "anti-Enlightenment chatter"[60] coming out of France, adding one more voice to the flood of intellectual undermining of enlightened reason.

This is not the place to investigate the pertinence of Améry's critique of (post)structuralist thought. Instead, I propose to reexamine his critique of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in the light of the context just established. I have claimed that his criticism does not withstand a thorough reading of the incriminated passages of the book. But let us not discard it just yet. Despite their obvious shortcomings, Améry's objections are not irrelevant. As much as his simplifications and omissions distort the authors' message, his critique shines the spotlight on an important point which will haunt Adorno's work during his lifetime and will only become more acute after his death: the reception of his writings. Let us, by way of example, examine one of the sentences Améry criticizes: "Enlightenment is totalitarian." The words resound like a thunderbolt. Enlightenment, which in the collective consciousness epitomizes the historic victory of liberal and humane values over dogma and oppression, is linked to an attribute that, at the very moment Adorno and Horkheimer are writing, stands for

[56] Améry, "Aufklärung als Philosophia Perennis", 552.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid., 553. Améry borrows the term from Heinrich Mann.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.

repression, dictatorship, violence and unfreedom. The provocation is obvious, and almost certainly fully intentional. It is not, however, a provocation for its own sake or a frivolous catchphrase—it intends to provoke thought, reflection. “Only exaggeration is true”—not only because, as we have seen, “an exact description of the exception, the worst torture” (DA 3:139/92–3) brings forth the true essence of the whole, but also because an exaggeration provokes a reaction in a way a more guarded statement does not. “Only the extreme has a chance to escape the mush of mainstream opinion.”[61] Adorno believed it to be the task of the philosopher, particularly the teaching philosopher, to deliver shocks[62] which propel the listeners/readers out of their mental comfort zone and force them to think—a sort of radicalized twentieth century version of the Socratian question. His work contains many of these “shocks”, the most famous one being undoubtedly the oft-quoted (and misquoted) statement “Writing a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric”. Unfortunately—and this brings us back to the reception of Adorno’s writings—the latter’s fate is typical for many of Adorno’s more peremptory statements, which take on a life of their own and find themselves not seldom used in a way that betrays their constellational meaning in his work. Let us return to our initial example: “Enlightenment is totalitarian” presents both of the earlier mentioned elements—its strong (some might say exaggerated) wording brings forth a reality that might otherwise have been overlooked, and it is shocking enough to make the reader pause and reflect on it. I have already expanded on the sentence and its meaning within the work. The authors’ analysis is compelling and the use of “totalitarian” seems justified. Yet words are not inert—they have a life, a history of uses that keep evolving. When Adorno and Horkheimer wrote *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in the 1940s, “totalitarian” had been used mainly in connection with Italian fascism and was only just beginning to become the generic name for a twentieth century phenomenon which, in its Hitlerian (and later Stalinist) incarnations, would make the original, Mussolinian form of totalitarianism look almost harmless. Of the former, however, the gruesome details were yet unknown, and while the word was already highly charged, it was not yet associated with

[61] Adorno, “Graeculus (II). Notizen zu Philosophie und Gesellschaft 1943–1969” in *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter VIII* (München: text + kritik, 2003), 19.

[62] See PT1 82.

ruthless state violence, concentration camps and genocide. What Adorno and Horkheimer also couldn't know is that in the 1960s, "totalitarian" would, just like the related "fascist", become a catchword that, thanks to its capacity to express in crisp compactness the complex notion of an all-controlling, oppressive entity, would become very popular with the student protest movement and certain left intellectuals and be used so liberally that it ended up emptied of most of its substance. It is easy to see how, in the context of the 1960s, Améry could have read Adorno's and Horkheimer's use of "totalitarian" as another example of this abusive, thoughtless use of a word heavy with historical associations. It is highly possible that, in the above-mentioned circumstances and with a deeper knowledge of the unprecedented crimes of the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, above all of Hitlerism, the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* would have worded their criticism differently. And that they would have expressed more forcefully and explicitly their unwavering loyalty to the classic Enlightenment values that Améry defends with such passion. Indeed, in the preface to the second, 1969 edition of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer speak of the "temporal core" of truth, and of what that means for their writing:

> We do not unvariedly stand by everything we said in the book. That would be incompatible with a theory which attributes a temporal core to truth instead of presenting truth as the immutable in the constant flow of history. The book was written at a time when the end of the National Socialist terror was in sight. In not a few places however, the formulation is no longer adequate to today's reality. (DA 3:9/xi)

The authors do not specify what they would have written differently twenty years later. The link with the Nazi terror however is apparent. In that sense, the statement echoes the earlier mentioned comment in Adorno's preface to *Minima Moralia*, where he calls his book a "contestable attempt" written during the war: "The violence that expelled me at the same time denied me full knowledge of it" (MM 4:16/18). A close reading of Adorno's later writings shows that the notion of a temporal core to truth will become a central tenet of his philosophy of nonidentity. By denying immutable identity even to transcendent Truth, allowing it to be affected by the unpredictable, continuously moving human history, Adorno takes a clear stand for the nonidentical and against the Hegelian view of history which so deeply influenced him—a philosophical choice

that is reflected in the profound impact of the Shoah on Adorno's philosophy.

In the paragraph following the passage of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*'s preface quoted above, Adorno and Horkheimer put the theory of the temporal core into practice in a statement that is highly relevant to the questions that preoccupy us here, both in regards to Améry's criticism as well as for the larger theme that underlies the present work: "Critical thought that even before progress does not halt, requires today to side with the remnants of freedom, the tendencies toward real humanity, even if they seem powerless in the face of the great historical trend" (DA 3:9/xi). This idea is reaffirmed at the end of the preface, when the authors stress that "what matters today is to preserve, disseminate and encourage freedom" (DA 3:10/xii). Twice, Adorno and Horkheimer stress that the state of affairs "today" (i.e. in 1969) forces critical thought, which for them is synonym to philosophy, to affirm its a priori. The remnants of freedom and the tendencies toward real humanity they write about appear to be precisely what, according to Améry, was neglected in their harsh analysis of a bungled Enlightenment. Yet the contradiction is not as strong as it may seem, for that analysis was written in another 'today', one in which the urgent task was to expose instrumental reason's frightening affinities with totalitarian ideology. Even thus, Adorno and Horkheimer were far from denying the achievements of enlightened thought, its crushed potential—as we have seen, they stated them repeatedly, reminding the reader that the problematic path enlightened reason has taken was not inevitable. Yet at least at first sight, the redemptive remnants is not where their emphasis lies. The book is an indictment, a wake-up call that focuses on enlightened reason's betrayals, dangers and failures. Only a careful reading that pays close attention to form as much as content, to what is said between the lines, will notice that the book is in reality much more balanced than the initial impression may suggest. The authors' attachment to what Améry calls the classic Enlightenment values is tangible, if sometimes only in the merciless account of the latter's betrayal. The most explicit and forthright expression of their belief in the positive potential of Enlightenment is not found in the body of the text, but in the original 1944 preface, where they write: "We have no doubt—and herein lies our petitio principii—that freedom in society is inseparable from enlightening thinking" (DA 3:13/xvi). And again, they make it clear that it is out of concern for precisely that freedom that their book focuses on the regressive seed that Enlightenment and its institutions also contain: "The

mysterious willingness of the technologically educated masses to fall under the spell of any despotism, their self-destructive affinity with nationalist [völkisch] paranoia, all the uncomprehended insanity, reveal the weakness of the present theoretical approach" (DA 3:13–4/xvi).

Adorno's and Horkheimer's criticism of Enlightenment is so thorough and compelling that a hasty reader may only too readily forget the *petitio principii* that lies behind it. But if one loses sight of that, or takes out single sentences or paragraphs to let them stand on their own in a work where all parts are intimately connected, the result may very well be what Améry fears: a scathing indictment of Enlightenment whose intellectual brilliance is a welcome fodder for the less scrupulous and ends up serving goals diametrically opposed to those Adorno and Horkheimer were pursuing. "In a philosophical text, each sentence must be at equal distance from the center [Mittelpunkt]" (MM 4:79/71), Adorno writes in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*'s contemporary *Minima Moralia*. This assignment is true for the writer as much as for the reader, for who it means that "Enlightenment is totalitarian" and "Freedom in society is inseparable from Enlightenment thought" are of equal weight, each in need of the other, with the truth located somewhere in the tense force field between them. The importance of (apparent) contradictions and the need to hold them rather than resolve them are key elements of Adorno's philosophy. Contradictions are a major obstacle for the achievement of identity, which is precisely why Adorno cherishes them, and why they are logical reason's prime enemy. The difficulty, not to say inability, of many people to hold contradictions and integrate them intact into their cognitive experience, is arguably of the main reasons why the reception of Adorno's work has often been problematic, as readers have preferred to simply discard the "dissonant" parts, thus distorting Adorno's thought and betraying the whole that only appears through the constellation of its parts.

Améry's claim that the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* "utter true enormities which, taken literally, could serve as an alibi for the worst obscurantism"[63] is thus partially correct. To 'taken literally', we might want to add 'taken out of their (intratextual and historical) context', 'isolated from the rest of the work'. To the question how much Adorno and Horkheimer can be blamed for that obscurantism, my answer would

[63] Améry, "Aufklärung als Philosophia Perennis", 555.

however be: very little. An arguable shortcoming of their book is one they indirectly acknowledged in their 1969 preface: an insufficient stress put on the possibility of freedom Enlightenment thought carries within it, even at its most distorted. However, as I have demonstrated, the imbalance is not nearly as pronounced as Adorno's and Horkheimer's critics contend. There are frequent reminders that the dismal state of affairs is a betrayal of enlightened reason's liberating and redemptive potential. As noted earlier, in the historical context of the first publication of the work, their choice of emphasis is defensible. Under Hitler, it was of primordial importance to reveal the potential danger that lurks in the scientific, detached, instrumental thought which is one of Enlightenment's legacies. Their attack against Enlightenment, at that point in time, was not, unlike the post-structuralist assault in the 1960s, part of a philosophical trend, but an early, lonely warning voice. It is certainly no accident, but rather another indication of the temporal core of truth, that in 1962, during a lecture on philosophical terminology at Frankfurt University, Adorno chose to put the focus on the defense of Enlightenment, closing with the words: "Particularly in times of inhumanity, Enlightenment is an essential element of resistance against barbarity" (PT 1:135).

As for the provocative statements and exaggerations which so revolt Améry, an immanent critique of Adorno might point out that they negate the nonidentical that he purports to defend. The justifications put forward by Adorno—that these statements are necessary thought-provokers, that exaggeration helps the truth come forth—do not completely invalidate the objection. There are the problems already discussed: that these statements, by their deceptive "simplicity", can be particularly compelling in the eyes of those who precisely do not want to think any further and who are only too happy to take the provocative suppression of the nonidentical as the last word. Turned into catchphrases, detached from their context, they take on a life of their own where they do no longer provoke the anticipated thought but become the dogmatic declarations Adorno never intended them to be.[64] It seems unlikely that Adorno was completely indifferent to the fact that the reception of his writings was often contrary to his intention. Not only that: He himself repeatedly stated that what the

[64] Gillian Rose writes: "[The] deliberately paradoxical, polemical and fractured nature [of Adorno's work] has made it eminently quotable but egregiously misconstruable." Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), IX–X.

author was thinking when he was writing was irrelevant,[65] implying that the afterlife of a thought was as crucial as its genesis. His complicated relationship with the 1968 student movement, which considered him one of their spiritual mentors until the students turned against him, reveals the complexity of this issue in a very pointed way (I will examine that relationship at a later stage).

Dialectic of Enlightenment is not without flaws. But it remains, up to this day, a powerful and compelling critique of the dangers and shortcomings of rationalized thought turned identity thinking. The work is first and foremost a diagnosis that points to possible solutions only indirectly, by revealing where the problems lie—which is the primary method of critical theory. "By surrendering thought, which in its reified form as mathematics, machine and organization takes revenge on the men who forfeited it, Enlightenment has renounced its own realization" (DA 3:58–9/33), Adorno and Horkheimer deplore—and hint thereby at a way out of the aporia: reclaim the thought that was surrendered and thus save Enlightenment from its own demons.

To reclaim thought from the stultifying clasps of identity thinking—and thus, implicitly, to save the promise of Enlightenment—is precisely what Adorno's philosophy of the nonidentical is about. After the devastating verdict of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the task for Adorno was clear: to model a way of thinking that does not reproduce the pitfalls that turned enlightened thought from a harbinger of freedom to a handmaid of unfreedom, a way of thinking that will ensure that Auschwitz will never happen again. From as early as the 1940s, Adorno intuited the paramount role of the nonidentical in that undertaking. What exactly that role is, and more: how we can approach it with the cognitive apparatus at our disposal, are questions that will preoccupy Adorno until his death. After *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno published two more major works and literally hundreds of essays of often substantial length. It is to the two former, the 1967 *Negative Dialectic* and the posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory*, that Adorno himself ascribed the most weight in the work of these prolific twenty years. In his own words, *Negative Dialectic* and *Aesthetic Theory*, and a work on moral philosophy that he never got to write, "represent what I have to put on the scale".[66] While this statement must certainly be qualified by the importance attributed by Adorno himself to textual

[65] See e.g. KRV 121/78; AES 216-7/135-6.
[66] Quoted in AET 7:537/361.

constellations and thus to every single essay he wrote, there is no denying the prominent place the two mature works occupy in his philosophy. *Negative Dialectic*, a book 20 years in the making, the only work of those he intended to put on the scale that he had the time to finish, is where Adorno's philosophy of the nonidentical is most extensively elaborated. In a 1965 letter to Gershom Scholem, Adorno writes:

> My book [*Negative Dialectic*], which now energetically progresses, is in the closing phase of its writing. That I can actually successfully finish this book has only proven possible very late in the game—in April, after my return from Baden-Baden; before, I had consistently evaded a decisive point—I am talking about the problem of nonidentity—, but I believe that what I have on this now is quite presentable.[67]

It is therefore with *Negative Dialectic*, and the essays that accompany and illuminate it, that I will now continue my inquiry into Adorno's philosophy of the nonidentical.

[67] Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem, *Briefwechsel. "Der liebe Gott wohnt im Detail"* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2015), 359.

CHAPTER 3

The Torturable Body: Adorno's Negative Dialectic

The need to give voice to suffering is the condition of all truth.
—*Adorno,* Negative Dialectic

Identity and Affirmativity: Philosophy's Claim to Meaning

"That the immutable is truth, while the moving, ephemeral is mere appearance [*Schein*]—the indifference of the temporal and the eternal to each other—can no longer be claimed" (ND 6:355/361). The immutability of Truth, its immunity against time and history, against anything material and immanent, has been a major tenet of Western philosophy since at least Plato's theory of ideas. Metaphysics, the *prima philosophia*, is generally concerned with the timeless nature of reality, with first principles, with what is—supposedly—above and beyond the physicality of our world. Eternal has generally been considered synonymous for metaphysical, ephemeral for worldly. The first major thinker to seriously challenge that view was Hegel—not incidentally the one philosopher whose work Adorno was by his own admission most influenced by. Yet although the ephemeral plays an important part in Hegel's Spirit, its truth is in itself but fleeting, sublated as it is in the inexorable forward thrust of Spirit's "eternity of annihilation" (ND 6:354/361). Is metaphysics still metaphysics if it is contingent on the chaos and confusion of human reality and history? Doesn't metaphysical truth lose its very essence if it makes itself vulnerable?

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Adorno is acutely aware of this possibility, yet as we shall see, he claims that it is in this very vulnerability that metaphysics' salvation lies.

In the summer of 1965, Adorno taught a seminar based on the then yet unpublished "Meditations on Metaphysics", which he had just finished writing. Unlike the chapter in *Negative Dialectic* that bears that name, the lecture does not begin with Adorno's own reflections on metaphysics, but with an extensive study—spanning two thirds of the seminar—of the philosophy of Aristotle. Adorno himself explain this prominence by the fact that, as he claims, it is "with Aristotle that metaphysics truly begins" (MP 28/15) and that the seeds are planted for the challenges to come. For Adorno, Aristotle trumps his predecessor Plato because he was the first to reflect on "how the sphere of unmediated experience and the sphere of the idea, the concept, the one (…) relate to each other" and thus to turn "the tension between the sphere of transcendence and the sphere of that which simply is" (MP 32/18) into the object of philosophical reflection. In Plato, the realm of the ideas exists independently of the—in Plato's telling ultimately irrelevant—realm of worldly things and does not affect it, nor is it affected by it in any way. Metaphysics however, says Adorno, "begins where the world of experience is given its weight [*schwer genommen wird*]" (MP 33/18). Just how much weight the world of experience is given will ultimately determine for Adorno the credibility and viability of any philosophical theory. The conviction that it is not given its due emphatically shapes Adorno's philosophical outlook and lies at the outset of his reflections on the nonidentical. It is not surprising, therefore, that the question of the relationship between the transcendent and the immanent guides Adorno's reading of ancient philosophy, and more specifically of Aristotle. Aristotle, according to this reading, is the first to give the world of experience its weight, by arguing that the form (in post-Aristotelian philosophy: the universal, the concept) is not substantial in itself, but can only be thought through that in which it materializes: the matter. Adorno goes to great lengths to expose the complexity of the form-matter relationship in Aristotle, a complexity I will at most hint at here. Of more importance for our purpose, and of decisive importance for Adorno, are the ways in which these first metaphysical reflections have influenced philosophical thought and shaped the approach to metaphysics ever after. Two main issues emerge, intimately connected: identity and affirmativity. For Adorno, who puts the nonidentical, the sacrificed negative, at the center of his thought, these two concepts and their realities are what needs to be grappled with.

As mentioned, Aristotle's metaphysics is characterized by a fundamental duality, that of form and matter. Unlike his predecessor Plato however, Aristotle does not consider this duality to be one of two separate realms, but one where form and matter combine to create our reality. Matter is what things are made of, the tangible. It is therefore the only thing that concretely exists for us, yet separated from its form it cannot be—it is merely a potentiality, striving towards a form in order to actualize itself. Form brings order into the chaos. While matter is blind, form has a purpose, a goal. Matter cannot be without form, yet form equally cannot exist if it is not the form of something. It is in this last point that Aristotle makes the biggest departure from his teacher Plato, for whom the objects of our world were nothing but shadows of a higher reality that alone was real. But despite his strong intuition that the solely conceptual *form* (or its predecessor, the Platonic idea) cannot exist independently of its concrete realization, is in fact an abstraction of the latter, Aristotle did not completely break free of the idealism of his teacher. While matter is said to precede form, it is still form that is superior in Aristotle's metaphysics. Matter, the first reality, ceaselessly strives towards the higher reality of form, and this aspiration of matter to attain a higher level, to actualize its potentiality, is what creates change and movement in the world. With this Platonic enthronization of the concept over what it stands for in an otherwise Plato-critical philosophy, Aristotle cements what will, according to Adorno, become the "core of the metaphysical tradition": the claim that "the intelligible, noumenal sphere is more real than the empirical" (MP 60/37). From this first step in the devaluation of the empirical—or in Adorno's words, the nonidentical—, affirmativity and identity thinking naturally ensue. Form, hitherto designated as superior, is the identical which the nonidentical matter aspires to become, it is the order that swallows the chaotic to make it graspable, the categories under which the world is subsumed. Aristotle calls the relationship of form to matter "the one according to the multitude",[1] a term which, as Adorno points out, reappears almost identically in Kant when he calls the act of cognition the "unity in the multitude".[2] Seeing "all Western thought under the spell of this [identity] tradition", Adorno wonders whether Aristotle "caused a channeling of philosophy [into that one] constrained direction" (MP

[1] "Das Eine gemäß dem Vielen" in Adorno's translation of the Greek, see Adorno, MP 55/33.

[2] Quoted in ibid.

56/34). Whether Aristotle has indeed been pivotal or whether he only put into philosophical terms a trend that was by that time already deeply ingrained is a question that I shall not attempt to answer here. Suffice it to point out that from that point onward, the tension between the identical and the nonidentical, unity and multitude, is one of the most salient characteristics of Western philosophy, a tension that is almost universally resolved in favor of identity. For our purpose of equal importance is the fact that for Adorno, the metaphysical quest for identity coincides with metaphysics' beginnings, in fact in many ways metaphysics seems to *be* that very quest for identity—a point that is crucial when it comes to Adorno's reckoning with metaphysical tradition.

Adorno's other bête noire, affirmativity, is closely linked to identity thinking. It is a direct consequence of the metaphysical elevation of the identifying concept over the nonidentical particular. As we have seen, Aristotle considers matter a potentiality which has not yet found its form. In other words, nonidentity, that which is different from the unifying form, is a lack—"individuation, in Aristotle, is negative" (MP 125/79). Once more, Adorno sees Aristotle as the founding father of a "basic theme of Western metaphysics" with "unforeseeable consequences": the designation of "the universal as the positive metaphysical principle, and the individual and particular as the negative" (MP 126/79). Affirmativity ensues from this momentous designation in various ways. As Adorno points out, "the universal, pure form, is nothing but the form of social dominion in abstracto"—to identify it as the positive is an "a priori justification of the stronger batallions of world history" (MP 126/79–80), an affirmation of whatever and whoever happens to be on the winning side, usually determined by physical force or economical power alone. The particular is the loser, the nonidentical crushed and nullified by victorious identity. Prioritizing the universal over the particular easily turns into a philosophical sanction of power as such and an affirmation of the powers that be. In the same vein, Aristotle's incessant movement of matter towards form as its perfect actualization, pointing toward the absolutely perfect, unmoved mover, further affirms the positive nature of our reality. The latter, relentlessly striving towards perfection, becomes by virtue of that aspiration inherently good. Its forward thrust is unremitting and unidirectional, which means that not only is our world good as it is, it is constantly getting better and there is no stopping it. Progress is inexorable, and it is unquestionably positive.

Aristotle's philosophy, and according to Adorno most Western metaphysics after him, contain a philosophical endorsement of that which is

and a teleology of progress that conveys a transcendent positive meaning to what is, what has been and what will be—whatever it be. "If anywhere, it is here that the so-called great philosophical tradition turned ideology" (MP 126/79).

Adorno's criticism of the inherently affirmative nature of philosophy dates back to the very beginnings of his intellectual journey. Already in his 1931 inaugural lecture at Frankfurt University, Adorno stated: "It is not the task of philosophy to pose meaning as positively given, to present reality as 'meaningful' and to justify it. Every such justification of reality [Seiendes] is made impossible by the fragmentariness of Being itself."[3] The critique of a philosophy that glorified history as endowed with reason and meaning is, as Susan Buck-Morss points out, "a program that Adorno held in common with Horkheimer and Benjamin".[4] The latter's 1940 theses "On the Concept of History" pass a devastating verdict on the affirmative view of progress, in their famous description of the "angel of History"[5]:

> His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which piles ruins upon ruins and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.[6]

Benjamin wrote "On the Concept of History" in 1940, while exiled in Paris, shortly before committing suicide during a vain attempt to cross the French-Spanish border. His bleak view of progress is under these circumstances not surprising. In Adorno's case, it is interesting to note that his criticism of affirmativity and identity thinking, themes that he would later, with much insistence, link to the events that unfolded in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s, appear already in his earliest writings—in other words, before these events took place, or at least before he knew about their full

[3] Adorno, "Die Aktualität der Philosophie", in: GS 1:334.

[4] Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 48.

[5] Inspired by Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus*.

[6] Walter Benjamin, "Über den Begriff der Geschichte" in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band 1.2 (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1991), 697–8.

scope. In a 1962 letter to Ernst Bloch, he spoke in this context of a "dreamlike anticipation": "A lot of what I wrote in my youth resembles dreamlike anticipation, and only after a certain moment of shock which probably coincides with the beginning of Hitler's Reich do I believe to have done right what I did."[7] Was it prophetic foreboding? Adorno wouldn't have liked the word prophecy. In a comment on Hegel that could be extended to himself, he says that the latter's visionary statements are not due to some sort of "prophetic vision", but to a "constructive force which plunges deeply into that which is, without renouncing itself as reason, critique and conscience of the possible."[8] I would argue that prophecy has maybe never been anything other than precisely that: a "constructive force", a hyperacute awareness of the tensions and sensitivities of one's time, combined with the intellectual ability to elevate one's mind beyond the grasp of the here and now towards "the possible". Adorno's forebodings are the reactions of a hypersensitive intellect to the ominous signs of his time.

Still, it is with Hitler's rise to power that Adorno's "dreamlike anticipations" came into their own. After Auschwitz, the world is no longer just fragmentary, but broken, and Adorno's ancillary criticism of affirmativity turns into a condemnation so fierce that it affects every philosophical thought thereafter. A sentence from the beginning of his "Meditations on Metaphysics" illustrates this turn:

> The feeling which, after Auschwitz, rejects any affirmation of the positivity of existence as gibberish, injustice done to the victims, and revolts against the fact that a meaning, however trite, be extricated from their fate, has its objective truth after events that turn any attempt to construct a meaning for our immanence out of an affirmatively set transcendence into sarcasm. (ND 6:354/361)

To talk, after Auschwitz, of the inherent positivity of existence and the eternal victory of the good is an injustice done to the victims—an injustice so enormous that it turns the subjective rejection into objective impossibility. Just how that happens, how a subjective sense of revolt becomes the harbinger of objective truth, Adorno does not explain further, or at least

[7] Quoted in: "Editorische Nachbemerkung" in *Philosophische Frühschriften*, GS 1:384.

[8] Adorno, "Bemerkungen zu Hegel", in Adorno, *Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit. Reden und Gespräche*, Audio CD, (München: Der Hörverlag, 1999).

not yet. He simply appeals to yet another emotion by saying: everything else would be sarcasm.

The link between the impossibility of philosophical affirmativity and the suffering endured by the victims of the Shoah is a constant in Adorno's post-war writing. It is a connection that Adorno presents as self-understood—if explanation there is, it is negative: It is so because the opposite would be injustice, sarcasm, derision:

> The affirmative character of metaphysics, which it has had since Aristotle, even Plato, has become impossible. To claim an existence or a being that is in itself meaningful and posited towards the divine principle (…) would be, like all the principles of the true, the beautiful and the good that philosophers have invented, pure derision in the face of the victims and their infinite suffering. (MP 160/101–2)

In lieu of an explanation, there is an outcry—literally: "The positive assumption of meaning is no longer possible without lie (- who can claim after Auschwitz that life is meaningful !)" (VND 26/13).

While Adorno's explanation, or lack thereof, will hardly satisfy the gatekeepers of logical reasoning, it may well be precisely here that the crux of the matter lies. What Adorno claims, implicitly and explicitly, is that after Auschwitz, a literally world-shattering collective experience, experience—emphatically the experience of suffering—and its bearing on what we call objective truth is forever transformed. There is an absoluteness to the experience of the "torturable body [quälbarer Leib]",[9] the ultimate non-identical, that silences reasoning. When the suffering is millionfold, "quantity turns into quality" (ND 6:355/362) and it is philosophy as a whole that is momentarily silenced, that must subordinate itself to the voice of the victims.

"Give a Voice to the Pain of the World"

The victims, or rather: the victims' suffering, as the ultimate measuring rod, is an overarching theme in Adorno's writing, often linked to the necessity for philosophy to question and rethink itself. In a lecture on philosophical terminology, Adorno asserts that "after millions of innocent

[9] Adorno borrows the expression from Brecht's poem on the death of Walter Benjamin. See Adorno, ND 6:281/286.

people were murdered”, there is “nothing harmless or neutral left”, and that it is the task of the philosopher to “philosophize in such a way as to not have to feel shame in the face of the victims” (PT 1:167). In the lecture version of the beginning of his “Reflections on Metaphysics”, we read:

> We can, given what we have experienced in our time—and I know that in the light of these experiences, the form of a lecture, the attempt to even hint at these things in philosophical terminology, has something inappropriate, ridiculous, something impudent to it—and yet one cannot escape it… So these experiences, I say, change the content of metaphysics. The indifference of the temporal and the ideas to each other, as it is basically maintained throughout the history of metaphysics, can no longer be claimed. (MP 158/100)

He goes on to assert that “Auschwitz (…) has changed the concept of metaphysics to its core”, calling those who continue to philosophize as if nothing had happened “inhuman [*Unmenschen*]” (MP 160/101) and their thought, ideology. “I believe every thought that does not measure itself against these experiences is completely powerless, completely futile, pure ludus; and anybody who does not every single moment have present in their mind the potential of uttermost horror lives under such an ideological veil that whatever they think might as well not be thought at all “ (LGF 280/203). And further:

> I don’t know if it can be maintained that it is impossible to write a poem after Auschwitz. But that one cannot seriously claim after Auschwitz that a world in which this was possible and in which it threatens every day to reproduce itself in a different form (…),—to claim of such a state of reality that it is meaningful seems to me to be a cynicism and a frivolity that simply according to, well, let me say, pre-philosophical experience, is no longer tenable. (…) It really seems to me that you cannot expect anybody whose mind hasn’t completely been dulled by philosophy (and philosophy can amongst many other things unquestionably make stupid) to buy that.” (VND 35/19)

Adorno, in his own words, appeals to a “pre-philosophical experience”: horror and revolt in the face of unprecedented human bestiality and human suffering—a suffering so enormous that it becomes authoritative in itself. The rejection of any inherent positive meaning to existence is categorical, the only argument offered a reference to the victims which in

its repetitive forcefulness becomes almost dogmatic—Adorno is not so much trying to argue his case as hammering it home. That Adorno's otherwise so rigorous expression turns almost sloppy here is of course no coincidence. What he is trying to verify is, within the strict framework of logical, rational discourse, unverifiable. He is reduced to stammering—the very same stammering that, according to a remark in one of his lectures, philosophy is fated to be: "The whole philosophy is ultimately nothing else but an elevated stammering extended into infinity. It is always, just like stammering, like the Dada, the attempt to say that which cannot be said" (KRV 271/178).[10]

It would be wrong to discard Adorno's "pre-philosophical", impulsive thinking as an inconsequential lapse of an otherwise stringent thinker who occasionally takes some uncharacteristic liberties with his argumentation. The impulse is, on the contrary, at the heart of Adorno's thinking—as the driving force behind it, and as the application of his philosophy of the nonidentical to his own thought. The impulse and what it expresses are intimately connected: Adorno reacts impulsively, that is: somatically, to the reality of the other's pain. The fact that the he allows his impulse to weigh in is not least a result of the overwhelming suffering he was contemporary to—a quantity turned quality that has changed the weight and significance of the somatic, including in his own thought. In other words, what his impulse tells him—that individual suffering can never again be disregarded and discarded in the name of a greater truth—is decisive in his decision to allow his impulse to speak.

It is a central claim of the present study that Adorno's philosophy, arguably one of the most demanding philosophical works of the twentieth century, grows out of a 'pre-philosophical' impulse: visceral horror at the suffering of the torturable body, a horror highly exacerbated by the millionfold pain and murder that Adorno indirectly witnessed. Adorno's work, in other words, is the fruit of a life-long effort to turn into thought an impulse that precedes thought. He himself says as much in a remark in his *Lectures on Negative Dialectic*: "I must confess, I cannot help it: In my thinking, I react first of all idiosyncratically, that is to say, with my nerves, and the so-called theoretical thought is to a large extent but the attempt

[10] It is Adorno's response to Wittgenstein, who wrote in his famous last sentence of the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." Wittgenstein, *Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung. Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2003), 111.

to follow these instinctive reactions with my mind" (VND 49/29). As offhanded as this remark may seem, it gives a key insight into the genesis of Adorno's thought—a thought that cannot be remotely grasped without an understanding of the revolt it is driven by. What Adorno says in reference to Aristotle holds equally true for himself: "In order to understand a philosophy, one must know what its specific pathos is directed against" (MP 81/51).

Adorno's repeated, almost obsessive insistence on the suffering inflicted in his time leaves no doubt as to what his pathos was first and foremost directed against. The overwhelming scope of that suffering brought home a conviction Adorno had always intuitively had: that the individual's suffering is what philosophy is ultimately all about, must be all about if it doesn't want to sink into complete irrelevance. A thought that does not, every single moment, hold the pain of the torturable body present, and use all its force to protest that pain, might as well "not be thought at all". Philosophy's first role is to "give a voice to the pain of the world, the suffering of the world" (VND 158/108)—precisely what, as Adorno liked to quote Georg Simmel as deploring, it has done so little of.[11] For Adorno, the necessity is commanding. A misreading of Hegel, of whom Adorno must unconsciously have wished that he had in that respect a better record, is revealing here. In a phrase that Adorno repeatedly—and erroneously—referred to, Hegel speaks of the "*Bewusstsein von Nöten*", which Adorno literally understood as the "consciousness of pain", whereas Hegel uses "*von Nöten*" in an idiomatic way to simply mean "necessary".[12] This wishful reading speaks volumes about Adorno's ambivalent relationship to German philosophical tradition, especially Hegel, and his deep desire to save Hegel from himself.

Unlike Hegel, who ultimately lets human suffering be stampeded into oblivion by the inexorable forward thrust of the World Spirit, Adorno gives suffering not only a say, but the last word. In the crematoria of the

[11] Jay Bernstein frames Adorno's obsession with suffering differently. He asserts that Adorno's thinking "is fundamentally oriented by remorse, the need to make restitution, to repair the damage done, to seek reconciliation, to make amends." He calls it a "backward-looking impulse" that seeks to "redeem the hopes of the past". Bernstein, *Adorno: Ethics and Disenchantment*, 188. While this backward-looking impulse is undeniable, I want to claim that Adorno's preoccupation with suffering is just as much driven by a forward-looking "desire that things be right, that men reach a state in which the pointless suffering ends" (VND 82–3/53).

[12] See KRV 285/187 and KRV note 234, 400/note 8, 269–70.

camps, together with millions of innocent victims, the idea of the primacy of the spirit [*Geist*] over bodily existence went up in flames: "The somatic layer of the living being, which evades meaning, is the place of the suffering that in the camps turned the placating efforts of the *Geist* and its objectivation, culture, into ashes, without consolation" (ND 6:360/365). It is interesting to note here that these words of Adorno echo strongly with those of another thinker, whose harsh criticism of Adorno and Horkheimer I examined in the preceding chapter: Jean Améry. In his essay "Beyond Crime and Punishment", Améry reflects on the particular situation of the intellectual concentration camp inmate and wonders what the mind, the *Geist*, could do to help the prisoners cope with the horror. Améry's verdict is devastating: "Nothing".[13] Reciting to himself a Hölderlin poem he used to love, Améry has to resign himself that the words "do no longer transcend reality."[14] Philosophy does not fare any better: "A few weeks in the concentration camp were usually enough to break the spell of our philosophical baggage."[15] Looking back on his experience, he concludes that "we [the prisoners] have taken from this the henceforth unshakable certainty that the *Geist* is for most parts indeed a ludus, and that we are—or rather, were before we entered the camp—nothing more than homines ludentes."[16] Finally, in a letter to a friend, Améry—for very much the same reasons as Adorno—rejects the idea of the meaningfulness of existence by noting sarcastically: "The attribution of meaning to the meaningless is a game that is again and again upset by reality."[17]

Adorno, who read Améry's essay on torture in the German journal *Merkur*, praises him in his lectures on *Metaphysics* for "expressing in an admirable way the transformations in the strata of experience that [the Shoah] has caused" (MP 166/106). He refers to Améry again when he

[13] Améry, *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne*, 32.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid., 53.

[16] Ibid., The qualification "for most parts" is of course important. Let us not forget that Jean Améry spent the rest of his interrupted life as a public intellectual, a homo ludens. Adorno might even have agreed with Améry's statement, as his own reflections on the part of ludus in philosophy suggest (see ND 6:25–6/14). He would have insisted, however that the little part that is left to the humbled *Geist* can be redemptive, as long as the latter integrates the painful lesson of its own limits.

[17] Jean Améry to Ernst Mayer, 17.6.1965. Fonds Jean Améry, DLA Marbach, HS.2002.0083.

says that "these experiences concern all of us, not just the victims or those who narrowly escaped. (…) These experiences are of so powerful that nobody that was even remotely touched by them can ever elude them again (…). [They] are not simply absorbed by the subjectivity of the one who experiences them", but turn into "something objective" (MP 170/109). In other words, they become part of our cognitive and experiential reality, our here and now. To disregard them and not let them affect how we think and act would not only be "inhuman", but, in an emphatic sense, unreal.

And yet, Adorno's attempt to make human suffering, and by extension our whole somatic experience, an integral part of philosophy goes against philosophy's grain. It runs counter to centuries, not to say millennia, of a philosophical—and religious—tradition which made the separation of body and spirit, or rather: the protection of the higher realm of the spirit from sulliment by the corporeal, one of its superior goals. Pathos, nerves, impulse, idiosyncracies, pre-philosophical experience and not least: pain—all these, Western philosophy has, for its most part, labored tirelessly to expel, in an attempt to protect reason from the contingency and perceived relativism of individual experience. From Aristotle's form-matter duality to Kant's endeavor to anchor morality in reason alone, from the stoicists' rejection of emotions to the empiricists' fear to have their verifiable facts contaminated by murky subjectivity, the somatic has been banned from the realm of thought in the name of rational purity. We have seen in the previous chapter Adorno's and Horkheimer's analysis of the short-sightedness and danger of an absolutist rationalism in their reading of Sade and Nietzsche. For the later Adorno, there is no doubt that such purism is not only dangerous, but deluded. To "make the mind the absolute other of the body" contradicts the "immanently somatic element" of the former, which is "irreducible as the not purely cognitive moment in knowledge" (ND 6:194/194). Hence, "the philosophical prejudice against emotion [*Affekt*] is short-sighted. (…) For without *Affekt*, that is: without a will behind the thinking, it is impossible to have a philosophical thought at all" (PT 1:200). To think that body and spirit can be neatly separated without any residue on either side is an illusion. Our somatic reality affects our thought constantly, or rather, it *is* an integral part of our thought. Adorno's negative dialectic takes this truth from the individual to the collective level: When millions of bodies are martyrized and murdered, collective thought patterns and their theoretical mirror, philosophy—how we think, and how we think about how we think—are forever altered.

The philosophical prejudice Adorno exposes is not limited to the somatic. What idealism historically stands for, and what Kantian disciples like Fichte took to the ultimate extreme: the primacy of the rational subject, the claim that the whole world is founded on human reason, together with the scientific world view it encourages, has led philosophy to be increasingly hostile to anything that falls outside the strictly rational framework. Contingency as the incalculable, the nonidentical, that which eludes categorization, has been deemed unworthy of and irrelevant to philosophical consideration. Identity thinking, which cannot contain what it cannot subsume, must deny its very existence. Ultimately, it is content as such that is eliminated, leaving philosophy preoccupied with (the illusion of) pure thought, as predictable as it is empty. While the rise of analytical philosophy to nearly unchallenged dominion in the Anglo-Saxon world and the concomitant mathematization of philosophy is the most striking testimony to that evolution, it can also be observed within fields that initially grew out of the exact opposite aspiration. As Adorno puts it, in an obvious reference to Heidegger: "The development of phenomenology, which had once been animated by the need for content, into a conjuration of Being that rejects any content as pollution, bears witness [to that trend]" (ND 6:19/7).

A closer examination reveals that even where the eliminated content is not at first sight somatic, it is still the latter that is ultimately targeted. For when the object is cropped, categorized and homogenized, it is foremost nature, the ungraspable and unclassifiable living reality, that falls victim to rational purification: "'Object', the positive designation for the nonidentical, is a terminological mask. In the object, neatly cut and made into the object of cognition, the somatic is a priori sublimated by its translation into epistemology" (ND 6:192/192). The somatic is doubly discarded: in the *object* of cognition, and as a crucial factor in the *process* of cognition. Adorno's own "Copernican turn" towards the object, which culminates in his philosophy of the nonidentical, is an attempt to rescue the somatic in both, as it forms the core of the nonidentical and lies at the heart of the latter's plight in Western history of philosophy. The somatic is, in other words, what identity thinking is after.

To illustrate this, let us look at the example of a perfectly identical object: a cardboard box. There are thousands just like it. No somatic trace to be found, no tension, a priori, between subject and object. A cardboard box will not challenge the primacy of the subject, will not demand to be *taken into account*, in the way an animate object does, will not unsettle the

philosopher's identity thinking. It does not need to be cut to fit, for it already has been—it is the product of a human mind, without a life of its own. But if the box has a dented corner, if it is singed or torn, then the placid predictability of identity thinking is disturbed. What disturbs it is precisely the irruption of nature, a reality outside of the subject's control, a life capable of turning identical objects into nonidentical ones. As Adorno put it, protesting Husserl's attempt to elevate the noumenal thing—in Husserl's example, the apple tree in the mind that cannot burn down—above the "natural" tree: "*Particular things can burn down*"[18]—that is what makes them particulars. As Husserl's theory perfectly exemplifies, this is what identity thinking must eliminate: the somatic in the broadest sense, unsubordinated nature. In an inanimate object, this means the elimination of any trace of history. Identity thinking cannot allow history to interfere with the predictability of its categories and concepts—which is why Western metaphysics has for centuries declared the irrelevance of history to its higher truth.

For Adorno, there is no doubt that what is ultimately targeted by philosophy's historical forgetfulness is human suffering—the same suffering that even Hegel, who went so much further than his predecessors in acknowledging history's role in truth, felt compelled to "overcome". This "inhuman(e) forgetting", a rewriting of history by the victors and tormentors, erases the "accumulated suffering. For the historical trace in things, words, colors, sounds is always the trace of past suffering."[19]

Identity thinking needs to eliminate that trace, in the object of cognition and in the cognitive process itself, because it disrupts its inexorable forward thrust, disturbs its affirmativity. Adorno's writing is permeated by the conviction that the suppressed somatic element in the cognitive process is precisely what could, mediated by reason, set the record straight and bring the reality of suffering back into our conscience and consciousness, thus opening the possibility for a society without it. In an obviously autobiographic passage of *Negative Dialectic*, Adorno evokes a primal somatic impulse that is still, dimly, present in childhood, but is swiftly forgotten as the child is forced to suppress it for the neatness and predictability of so-called rational behavior:

[18] Adorno, "Dingliches and Noematisches in Husserls Phänomenologie" in GS 1:49. Italics T.W.A.

[19] Adorno, "Über Tradition". In: GS 10.1:314–5.

> In front of the eyes of the child who liked him, a hotel owner whose name was Adam clubbed to death rats swarming out of holes in the courtyard. It is according to his image that the child modeled that of the first human. That this is forgotten; that we no longer understand what we once felt at the sight of the dogcatcher's wagon, is the triumph of culture, and its failure. It cannot tolerate the memory of that zone, because it does like old Adam did, over and over again, and this is incompatible with its self-conception. (ND 6:357/366)

The child who watches old Adam turn rats into a bloody pulp vaguely senses that the violence he witnesses tells a primordial truth about man and his relationship to that which he cannot subjugate. Impulsively, he sides with the slaughtered rats, as "unconscious knowledge whispers into childrens' ears that what civilizational education suppresses is what it is all about: miserable physical existence" (ND 6:357/366). It is tempting here to see a parallel between the primal ethical knowledge of Adorno's child and the moral nobility of Rousseau's savage, both corrupted by Western civilization and its culture of reason. Adorno points to a semi-conscious feeling of solidarity with the suffering body, human or animal. While a child still dimly experiences this feeling at the sight of rats clubbed to death or dogs destined for euthanasia, the adult has been brought up to suppress the irrational impulse at the benefit of stolid reasoning.[20] Rousseau appears to refer to the same phenomenon, focusing on the childhood of our species rather than the individual child, when he notes that compassion is "a sentiment that is obscure and strong in savage man, and developed but weak in civilized man".[21] Rousseau's observations will lead him to a damning condemnation of the rational philosophy of his time, and an exaltation of man's lost state of nature. As fierce as his accusations are, there is an undeniable affinity between his bleak verdict on the moral indifference of the modern philosopher and Adorno's and Horkheimer's early warnings of reason's moral emptiness, as well as Adorno's later reflections on bourgeois coldness:

> [Reason] turns man back on himself, it separates him from all that bothers and afflicts him. Philosophy isolates him; because of it he says in secret, at the sight of a suffering man: Perish if you will, I am safe. No longer can

[20] More on Adorno's view of children in Chap. 4 below.

[21] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discours sur l'Origine de l'Inégalité parmi les Hommes" in *Oeuvres Complètes de J. J. Rousseau, Tome Premier* (Paris: Furne, 1837), 547.

> anything except dangers to the entire society trouble the tranquil sleep of the philosopher and tear him from his bed. His fellow-man can be murdered with impunity right under his window; he only has to put his hands over his ears and argue with himself for a bit to prevent nature, which revolts in him, from identifying with the man who is being assassinated.[22]

The philosopher who "argues with himself" while a man is being murdered under his window appears to be a more passive version of Sade's protagonists—while they use reason to justify and glorify murder, he only uses it to justify his own indifference to it. When he puts his hands over his ears, suppressing nature "which revolts in him", he is yet another offshoot of Odysseus who binds himself to the mast so as not to succumb to the sirens' call. Rousseau did indeed seem to perceive the same dangers in cold, detached reason that Adorno (and Horkheimer) so acutely felt—with the crucial difference that unlike Rousseau, who did not live to witness the man-made hell of the twentieth century, Adorno did not believe man to be innately good, and would have considered nature unmediated by reason as dangerous as reason unmediated by nature. Indeed, it would be a mistake to read his attempt to reintegrate the nonidentical in thought, his defense of experience and impulse in cognition, as a 'Back to Nature' in the Rousseauian sense. For Adorno, Rousseau's state of pre-enlightened nature is as prejudicial as reason's unchecked dominion. The somatic impulse Adorno wants to save does not take the place of reason, it mitigates and challenges it. Just like reason, it must not become totalitarian, lest the nonidentical is swallowed once more. The somatic—in the broad sense stated earlier—is but one part of a dialectic in which soma and logos mediate each other, a crucial addendum without which reason is paralyzed.

The Hinzutretende: When Freedom Breaks into Experience

The one Adornian concept that elucidates the nature of this addendum most vividly is that of the *Hinzutretende*, as developed in a mere three pages in the "Freedom" chapter of *Negative Dialectic*, which looks at the nexus of freedom, autonomy and morality through a close reading of Kant's moral philosophy. The *Hinzutretende*,—literally, that which draws

[22] Ibid.

near, steps close, joins in—is central to Adorno's conception of morality, and consequently plays a crucial role in his philosophy as a whole. While Adorno's nonidentical is not reducible to the *Hinzutretende*, the latter illuminates the former, as the *Hinzutretende* touches the very core of what the nonidentical stands for.

What is the *Hinzutretende*? "In keeping with the vagueness of its experience", it eludes clear definition. "I have a very hard time to express the element [*das Moment*] which we are talking about here", Adorno admits in a lecture, only to add immediately that "this is no coincidence, as what we are talking about is really the atheoretical element in morality" (PMP 18/7). The name he eventually gives it in *Negative Dialectic* is only tentative: it "may be called the *Hinzutretende*" (ND 6:226/226). As with all of Adorno's concepts, the *Hinzutretende* takes shape in between the lines, in the space created by Adorno's reflections on it. He calls it "a jolt", "the factual in which consciousness externalizes itself" (ND 6:226/227) yet which is not solely consciousness. It is an "impulse, intramental and somatic at once, [that] goes beyond the sphere of consciousness, to which it at the same time belongs" (ND 6:228/228–9). In the process of reasoning, it irrupts, suddenly: "The subject's decisions do not smoothly run down the causal chain, a jolt occurs" (ND 6:226/226–7). The *Hinzutretende* is somatic *and* mental, conscious *and* external (the German *hinzutreten* connotes a joining in from outside), rational with "an—according to the rational rules of the game—irrational aspect" (ND 6:227/228). From this first outline, the *Hinzutretende* could be understood as something that shatters our freedom, something that simply "happens" to us, overcomes us, against the better judgment of our temporarily overpowered reason. But this would mean to disregard the dialectical nature of the *Hinzutretende*, and to subscribe to the traditional view that every somatic urge is a heteronomous force that needs to be controlled and suppressed, while what is determined by reason is autonomous and free. As we have seen earlier, Adorno upends the traditional view by exposing reason's own enslavement: its identity drive, its submission to logic and the prevalent social discourse, its affinity with instrumentalism and an amoral utilitarianism. The rational subject gets easily caught in a web of—often unconsciously assimilated—reasons and reasonings and a logic of cause and effect that hamper freedom and stifle action—any action, let alone one that goes against the mainstream, against society's identity. Freedom is neither with reason nor is it with the somatic, which,

unreflected, is as enslaving as totalitarian reason—it is found in the mediated force field between these two poles, in reason joined by the *Hinzutretende*. Rather than a danger to freedom, the *Hinzutretende* is what makes freedom possible. In the lecture version of the "Freedom" chapter, where Adorno does not yet call the *Hinzutretende* by the name he will give it in *Negative Dialectic*, the latter is clearly identified as a precondition for freedom: "In order for stirrings of freedom, spontaneous behavior not guided by reasons, to occur at all, an archaic element is necessary, a much older element which for now I would like to call impulse" (LGF 294/213). In *Negative Dialectic*, the corresponding passage reads: "The *Hinzutretende* is impulse, remnant of a phase in which the dualism of the extra- and the intramental was not yet consolidated; it can neither be bypassed by the will nor is it an ontological last thing. (…) With it, freedom breaks into experience" (ND 6:227–8/228–9).

The idea that freedom is intertwined with impulse runs diametrically counter to the bourgeois idealist (and stoic) tradition Adorno's Germany was steeped in. Idealist freedom is freedom *from* impulses, inclinations and emotions. To be free, the idealist subject must make his mind the rational master over his nature and control his somatic urges, which are seen as weakness and enslavement. Adorno's paraphrasing of freedom as "spontaneous behavior not guided by reason" is an oxymoron for Kant, for whom a behavior is called spontaneous precisely if it is generated by reason alone, independent of inclinations, emotions or any factors exterior to the subject. There is no place for Adorno's *Hinzutretende* in idealist thought. If a somatic other is acknowledged at all in the rational process, it is only to be rejected and banished.

Adorno's *Hinzutretende* is a direct response to that banishment—it is, in fact, directly defined by it. As is the nature of Adorno's critical theory, the definition is negative much more than it is positive. The *Hinzutretende* takes shape *ex negativo*, as the negative of Adorno's critique of the moral philosophy of his time—as what the latter is lacking. It is, as it were, the determinate negation of the idealist conception of freedom. The shortcomings of Kant, and to a lesser extent Hegel, outline negatively the so hard to define other that is needed to turn an amoral reason into a moral one. With that in mind, let us have a closer look at Adorno's criticism.

"Die Gedanken sind frei"—The Aporias of Intelligible Freedom

First, a preliminary note: I will not even pretend here to give a full account of Kant's position—that would go far beyond the scope of this study and lead us away from what interests us here: Adorno's philosophy of the non-identical and its relationship to German idealism. Adorno's reading of Kant can be and has been challenged.[23] At the same time, it is a valid reading, and crucially, it is of a piece with how Kant has been widely read and received ever since his works were first published. Whether Adorno's reading and my interpretation of it are fully compatible with how Kant understood himself—and I want to claim that it is to a greater degree than some critics contend—is less relevant for our purposes than the fact that the elements of Kant's philosophy that Adorno criticizes are not only undeniably part and parcel of the former, but also had a lasting impact on the moral self-understanding of the Western world.[24]

Adorno believes, with Kant, that the one indispensable pre-requirement of moral agency is freedom—and this is precisely the starting point of his critique of idealist thought. For him, as we have seen, the *Hinzutretende* plays a decisive role in the possibility and realization of freedom. By banishing it, along with any other somatic trace in reason, Kant and his followers effectively destroy the possibility of freedom. What they are left

[23] For a thorough and thoughtful analysis of Kant's moral philosophy in relationship to Adorno that mitigates some of Adorno's criticism, see Martin Shuster, *Autonomy after Auschwitz. Adorno, German Idealism and Modernity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), chaps. 1–3. A prominent defense of Kant's moral philosophy against its critics more generally is Henry E. Allison's *Kant's Theory of Freedom* (Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[24] Robert Pippin claims that "Adorno's account is held captive by a distorted (if conventional) picture of this tradition, especially of the moral and ethical project tied to such idealism, so distorted that there is no good reason to accept Adorno's attack or his more general claim about what the tradition stands for (Western modernity, essentially)" (Pippin, *The Persistence of Subjectivity*, 101). Is there a better reason to accept Pippin's attack? His claim that Adorno's understanding of Kant is "distorted" seems to be based on little more than an intellectual disagreement. There is famously more than one way to read Kant, and with the great thinker himself no longer here to straighten things out, it seems hasty to discard Adorno's interpretation in such a peremptory way. Pippin's own acknowledgment that Adorno's reading is "conventional" moreover strengthens the very claim he wants to dismiss: that the Kantian tradition as read by Adorno "stands for Western modernity". If Adorno's Kant is the conventional Kant, he may well be the one who had the most lasting impact on his times.

with is a—literally—disembodied conception of freedom which is precisely that: a *conception*, nothing more. As epitomized by Kant's intelligible freedom, idealist freedom moves away from physical freedom of action and expression to freedom within the confines of the mind, the shrinking presented as not a want, but a victory. The traditional German song "*Die Gedanken sind frei*", thoughts are free, turns the lack into a cheer of triumph which successfully drowns the screams of the bodies that are not.

Whether the separation between intelligible and real is neat or blurry, whether we are talking about two worlds or rather two aspects of the same world—a popular argument in Kant criticism—does ultimately little to the fact that Kant discounts the sensible world in his moral considerations, that he grounds his moral philosophy not on the imperfect and often irrational human agent with his fears, weaknesses and contradictions, caught up in the world, but on the abstract, universal, rational subject who somehow manages to remain intelligibly free even when in chains. As freedom retreats into the subjective realm, morality follows suit. For Kant, the only true moral good, the highest good of all, is the good will, independently of whether the latter is acted on or not, independently of its consequences—although Kant works on the assumption that the right actions will inevitably follow the injunctions of the mind. That the latter is more than questionable is not the only problem with Kant's moral philosophy. Disconnected from any empirical reality, Kant's free agent risks to become a fictitious foil: "Whether autonomy exists or doesn't, depends on its opponent and contradiction, the object, which gives or refuses autonomy to the subject; disconnected from the object, autonomy is fictitious" (ND 6:222/223). As fictitious as Kant's examples which, meant to prove the validity of his philosophy of the non-empirical in the empirical world, instead cruelly expose its limits. In the "Freedom" chapter of *Negative Dialectic*, Adorno's most sustained argument with Kant outside of his lectures, he analyses two of these examples, both taken from the *Critique of Practical Reason*. The first one features a swindler: "He who lost in the game may be vexed at himself and his stupidity, but if he knows he cheated (although therefore won), he must despise himself as soon as he compares himself with the moral law."[25] The claim that the card player whose masterful cheating made him win the game "must despise himself" and (as Kant adds) silently call himself a "good-for-nothing" seems poignantly naïve. It assumes a moral compass unencumbered by narcissism and

[25] Quoted in ND 6:224/225.

lucre—as Adorno rightly points out, the swindler's assumed self-flagellation "presupposes the acknowledgement of the Kantian moral law which the example wants to prove" (ND 6:224/225). The very issues that any serious ethical philosophy must tackle—egoism, narcissism, lucre, Schadenfreude—are simply ignored.[26] In the second example, Kant asks an imaginary guinea pig whether, if threatened with the gallows by a tyrant ("who Kant respectfully calls a prince" ND 6:222/224), he would give a false testimony against an "honest man whose downfall [the prince] desires".[27] The subject, Kant admits, may not have the courage to assure that he would refuse. "But he must concede without hesitation that he has the ability to do so. He thus determines that he can, because he is aware that he should, and recognizes within himself the freedom that would have remained unknown to him without the moral law."[28] Whereas in the first example, it is the possibility of a self-righteously immoral agent that is denied, in the second one, it is the evil of the opponent and its effect on the moral agent that are discounted. That the freedom Kant resorts to in order to prove the validity and relevance of his moral law is the freedom to hang from the gallows is telling. With an utter detachment that mirrors the "pure" rationality of his thought, Kant imagines an extreme situation in which the subject is forced to choose between someone else's death and his own. Instead of strengthening Kant's case, however, his example makes it crumble. "Of nobody, not of the most integer person, can it be predicted how he will react under torture" (ND 6:224/224–5)—what is certain, however, is that Kant's immutable moral *law* will have very little to do with it. What will likely determine the outcome is precisely what Kant wants to ban—an impulse, a "jolt", an emotion. Empathy, fear, revulsion or, as Adorno will phrase it, a "resistance". Life is far from the "improbable thought experiment, which neutralizes [the fear of death] to a coldly ponderable idea" (ND 6:224/224). Kant must replace the unpredictable, nonidentical human being with an affectless, identical "reasonable being", lest his experiment blows up in his face. By triumphantly pointing to his Quod Erat Demonstrandum, the "freedom" the subject under death

[26] Jay Bernstein rightly remarks that "*the* type of moral failure" for Kant is "to be a free rider". The question whether free riding is wrong is ambiguous by measure of the very criteria on which Kant bases his judgment: instrumentality and morality. The fact that Kant conflates the two is one of the stumbling blocks of his moral philosophy. See Jay Bernstein, *Adorno: Ethics and Disenchantment*, 169.

[27] Quoted in ND 6:223/224.

[28] Ibid.

threat enjoys, Kant effectively negates the terrible violence the latter suffers. The theoretical freedom thus established indeed elicits, as Adorno writes, no more than a "shrug of the shoulders" (ND 6:224/225). If it should—impulsively, heroically, un-reasonably—assert itself in the situation described by Kant, it would be not because the subject followed the injunctions of his reason, but because he had the power to ignore them. Or, to speak in Adornian terms, because something "joined in" that, for the necessary split second in which the action materializes, pushed reason to go against its own urges.

Adorno did not deny that reason, too, played a crucial part in freedom: "Experience of freedom is linked with consciousness; the subject knows of himself as free only insofar as he experiences his own action as identical with himself, and that only happens in conscious acts" (ND 6:226227). Without a however dim self-reflection, freedom cannot be experienced. Yet, such is Adorno's claim against Kant, freedom cannot be reduced to that self-reflection, nor can it effectively spring from it. Freedom is inseparable from action—as Adorno, speaking above of "acts" and actions", makes abundantly clear. Kant's intelligible freedom, confined to the human mind, is a paper tiger, apt to guarantee the docility of the dictator's subjects, who endure their unfreedom by taking refuge in the freedom of their thoughts—kept to themselves. But "consciousness, rational understanding, is not simply the same as free action, which cannot be blankly equated to the will. That, however, is exactly what Kant does. Will is for him the epitome of freedom, the 'ability [Vermögen]' to act freely being what unites all the acts that can be considered free" (ND 6:226/227).

By making will the epitome of freedom, and good will the epitome of the good, Kant takes a huge burden off the shoulders of his moral agents, effectively liberating them from the responsibility to intervene in the moral course of their society—or even of their own lives. The (in)famous German *Innerlichkeit* is a direct consequence of the tradition Kant embodied and enthroned. Safely confining the subject's reflections, resistances and objections to their own mind, lulling them into the false comfort that the most important freedom is within ("*Die Gedanken sind frei*"), Kant and his followers remained faithful to—and solidified—a duality between the intra-and extramental that played an important role in the shaping of the German collective psyche, encouraging a submissiveness to authority that paved the way for Hitler's

accession to power.[29] The aptly termed "inner emigration" that so many German intellectuals chose over actual emigration or active resistance to the Nazis bears testimony to how *Innerlichkeit* can turn into a moral fig leaf in morally demanding situations. Citing the Himmler speech quoted above, Adorno writes in his notebook: "*Innerlichkeit* is riveted to murder, so abstract that there really remains simply nothing, a completely inner. *Very important*."[30]

Autonomous thought is a crucial first step in moral agency—but if, be it in the name of philosophical purity, from lack of moral courage or from a submissive sense of duty, it shuts out reality and remains "purely contemplative, self-sufficient, not aiming at praxis", it is, in Adorno's words, not only "pointless" (VND 75/47–8), but "has no right to exist" (VND 67/42). This stern conclusion is less surprising if we understand what is, once more, at stake: "Contemplative behavior, the subjective correlate to logic, is the behavior that wants nothing" (ND 6:229/230), Adorno writes in *Negative Dialectic*. What *should* thought want? For Adorno, there is no doubt: "I believe that one cannot even think a right thought if one doesn't want the right thing; that is, if behind the thought does not stand, as its inspiring force, the desire that things be right, that men reach a state in which the pointless suffering ends" (VND 82–3/53). Adorno's ceterum censeo once more: The suffering must end. Contemplative thought does not let the empirical, somatic reality affect it and will in turn do nothing to change that reality. Moral discourse, however noble, that does not translate into moral actions, is irrelevant—at best. If it falsely calms the subject's conscience and silences the urge to act, it can lead to questionable consequences—such as a moral agent who feels so good about his noble ethical thoughts that his moral self is thoroughly satisfied, seeing no need to intervene in the actual course of events, however bad they be.

Kant is one of the spiritual godfathers of the contemplative behavior Adorno so virulently condemns. The fact that he most likely did not

[29] I am not implying here that Kant is responsible for Hitler. I am simply pointing towards socially ingrained patterns of thought and behavior that Kant philosophically sanctioned, and which played an important part in Hitler's success. See also John Dewey, *German Philosophy and Politics* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1915) and Norbert Elias, *Studien über die Deutschen. Machtkämpfe und Habitusentwicklung im 19. Und 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1992).

[30] Adorno, "Graeculus (II). Notizen zu Philosophie und Gesellschaft 1943–1969", 26. Italics T.W.A.

intend for his philosophy to have this appeasing effect, but saw himself as an Enlightener and in many ways truly was one, only exacerbates the problem. How reassuring to be able to invoke the great Enlightener as the authority behind one's moral choices! But be it intentionally or not, Kant's neat separation between the intelligible and the real encourages moral passivity—at best. At worst, it leads the subject to believe that to submit to heteronomous authority while silently nurturing autonomous thoughts is the most commending moral choice—a reading reinforced by Kant's own authoritarian leanings, as manifest, among other examples, in his rebuke of the officer who speaks his mind (for who Kant coins the unfortunate term "vernünfteln"),[31] and his enthronization of duty as the supreme moral benchmark.

Kant, Eichmann and Radical Evil

The inadvertent collusion of Kantian idealism with moral passivity and submission to authority may historically be the most significant stain on Kant's legacy. Even more devastating, and closely linked to it, is the fact that Kant was diligently embraced by the Nazis.[32] That brazen appropriation of the great moral philosopher by unspeakable inhumanity made headlines in 1966, when during his trial in Jerusalem, Adolf Eichmann proudly stated that he had all his life lived according to Kant's moral precepts. When pressed by the judge, he did, to Hannah Arendt's great horror, "come up with an approximately correct definition of the categorical imperative."[33] Arendt calls Eichmann's claim "incomprehensible" and accuses him of having "distorted"[34] Kant's imperative. She concedes, however, that

[31] Immanuel Kant, "Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?" in *Werke in zehn Bänden*, Band 9, edited by Wilhelm Weischedel (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968), 56.

[32] As Otto Dietrich, Press Chief of the NSDAP, wrote in *The Philosophical Foundations of National-Socialism*: "Kant's moral law: 'Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal', is the classic formulation of national-socialist ethics." Otto Dietrich, *Die philosophischen Grundlagen des Nationalsozialismus* (Breslau: Ferdinand Hirt, 1935), 23.

[33] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 136.

[34] Ibid.

> Eichmann's unconscious distortion agrees with what he himself called the version of Kant 'for the household use of the little man'. In this household use, all that is left of Kant's spirit is the demand that a man do more than obey the law, that he go beyond the mere call of obedience and identify with the principle behind the law—the source from which the law sprang. In Kant's philosophy, that source was practical reason; in Eichmann's household use of him, it was the will of the Führer.[35]

Arendt adds that "in one respect, Eichmann did indeed follow Kant's precepts: a law was a law, there could be no exceptions."[36] While defending Kant against Eichmann's betrayal, Arendt (inadvertently?) puts her finger on precisely the characteristics of his philosophy that made that betrayal possible in the first place. Kant's veneration for the law and his call to go beyond mere obedience and identify one's will with "the source from which the law sprang" becomes easily disconnected from the moral law it was originally intended for. Kant himself, with his unconditional respect for authority, whichever it be (the gallows-wielding "prince" is a telling example) encourages that fluidity, while his moral law is by nature highly vulnerable to distortions and appropriations, as "the source from which it sprang" is placed by Kant in the subject's reason alone. Eichmann's household use of Kant, focusing on obedience and submission to the law, is less far from the original than we would like it to be. Kant, obviously, did not in his darkest dreams imagine that in his native Germany, the law of the land would one day become the law of unimaginable evil. He could not foresee that the moment would come when the only duty left was to *break* the law and to do everything in one's power to bring it down.

Kant did not deny the reality of evil. In his "Religion within the limits of reason", he even claimed that human beings had an innate propensity to it. But he ascribed evil to a silencing of reason, a subordination of reason under inclination—in other words, an overpowering of reason and not its own failure. True to Western philosophical tradition, the blame is on the somatic, the remedy is reason. Not only did Kant ignore how frightfully easy it is for evil to don rational robes, he also starkly underestimated reason's capacity to distort, manipulate, and tailor to the rational subject's need even the most noble, well intended, supposedly incorruptible imperative.

[35] Ibid., 136–7.
[36] Ibid., 137.

To underscore that fragility, let us try for a moment to read Kant's categorical imperative through Eichmann's eyes. How could one of the most zealous executioners of the Jewish genocide claim without flinching that he had lived all his life according to Kant's precepts? The first and most famous formulation of the imperative is arguably the most fragile: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law without contradiction."[37] As Adorno rightly remarks, in order to work, the imperative must take for granted an at least partial prior acknowledgement of the moral law which it is supposed to generate. It does not account for those who "childish, feel above any kind of social obligation" (ND 6:224/225), nor for those whose narcissism protects them against any self-critical reflection, nor for "those who are covered by the term moral insanity—who are anything but unreasonable" (ND 6:224/225). Last but not least, the imperative assumes a fully inclusive conception of humanity—in other words a non-discriminating, non-racist mind. When Arendt sarcastically remarks that in Eichmann's household use of Kant, the source of the law is the will of the Fuehrer, she doesn't dwell on how poorly Kant's imperative is prepared to defend itself against such appropriation. Let us assume Eichmann acted under the maxim: "All Jews must be exterminated". Would he have wanted it to become an universal law? Absolutely. All Jews must universally be exterminated. Kant's safeguard, the universalization requirement, can no longer guarantee the morality of a maxim when a distinction is made between one man and another.[38] Paradoxically, Kant's formalism, intended to guarantee equality by ignoring the nonidentical particular, eliminates precisely the corrective that prevents true equality in diversity from turning into "the triumph of repressive equality, the transformation of equality of rights into injustice administered by those that are the same [*die Entfaltung der Gleichheit des Rechts zum Unrecht durch die Gleichen*]" (DA 3:29/9). The second formulation of the categorical imperative appears to address that problem by emphatically focusing on the other's humanity: "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end."[39] Aimed at protecting the

[37] Kant, "Grundlegung zur *Metaphysik* der Sitten", BA 53, in *Werke in Zehn Bänden*, Band 6, 51.

[38] Jay Bernstein reflects on this shortcoming of moral universalism, using the example of slavery. See Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*, 154–7.

[39] Kant, "Grundlegung zur *Metaphysik* der Sitten", BA 66, 61.

other's humanity—every single human being's humanity—, Kant's imperative once more suffers, so to speak, from a pre-Shoah mindset. Kant's appeal to the other's humanity did not protect the Jews because in a Nazi's eyes, they did not have any. He did not account for the possibility—and one can hardly blame him for it—that a group of people could be purely and simply stripped of their humanity and declared "Untermenschen", subhumans, for whom human attributes and imperatives do not hold. The Nazis' victims were so thoroughly dehumanized that the great philosopher's appeal to treat the other's humanity as an end was unable to deter the Kantian perpetrator. In their tormentors' eyes, there was no humanity in them—they were vermin, numbers.

The third and last formulation of Kant's imperative, which is in part a combination of the other two, fares no better: "Therefore, every rational being must so act as if he were through his maxim always a legislating member in the universal kingdom of ends."[40] What ends? Kant does not feel the need to dwell on that. He sees his kingdom of ends as an additional safeguard, "a systematic union of different rational beings under common laws".[41] The intuitive idea behind the third formulation is that the great number of legislators who are all 'in it together' will ensure the morality of the laws adopted by each and every one of them. The moral bankruptcy of a Germany of 80 million in the 1930s and 1940s has given the lie to the idea of the human collective as a natural form of checks and balances that protects from a descent into immorality. Quite the opposite seems to be true—the collective can easily become a moral fig leaf ("I only did what everyone else did"), or worse yet, a breeding ground of disinhibition and radicalization in which all moral barriers crumble. No Nazi would have seen Kant's Kingdom of Ends as an obstacle in the way of the Final Solution, the Third Reich's ultimate end. As Emil Fackenheim writes: "Kant's universal law is law and universal only if it treats all as equals.(…) Eichmann's universal law discriminates between 'Aryans' and 'non-Aryans', between 'master-' and 'slave-races' (…). It is easy for us to know which to love and which to abominate. However, the philosophical question is: Just where is it written that all are equal?"[42]

[40] Ibid., BA 84, 72.

[41] Ibid., BA 84.

[42] Emil Fackenheim, *To Mend the World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 271.

While I have admittedly played the devil's advocate here, and have no doubt that Kant would be utterly horrified at Eichmann's claimed discipleship, the thought experiment shows the limitations of a moral law grounded in nothing else than the subject's own autonomous reason. Moral behavior, it seems, hinges at least partly on something that lies beyond the latter's realm.

The Force of Resistance

As Fackenheim points out, the principle of equality is not written in reason. Kant can only found his moral principles on pure reason because he silently assumes equality. In other words, as we have seen earlier, his moral philosophy takes for granted what it would be its foremost task to establish and guarantee. But equality is not a given, nor can it be established through 'pure reason'. To accept equality—the equal value of the other's life, liberty and happiness, to my own—requires from the subject a moral decision that will more often than not run counter to rational considerations. As Adorno and Horkheimer have demonstrated in the Sade chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, reason, subject to an amoral logic, has no moral content by itself. It is, as Adorno and Horkheimer write, an "empty vessel", driven by an instrumental, utilitarian logic that will ultimately always be on the side of self-preservation—at any price. "The 'philosophe mitré' who justifies murder uses fewer sophisms than Maimonides and St. Thomas, who condemn it" (DA 3:136/91), Adorno and Horkheimer pointedly wrote. By requiring altruistic acts that are, from a point of view of personal gain and survival, self-defeating, the moral good—such as the acceptance of the fundamental equality of rights and dignity of all men, with all its consequences—frequently goes against the natural urge for self-preservation and is therefore, strictly speaking, irrational. Kant's cheat, on the other hand, acts highly rational when he optimizes his gains at the expense of the other players—as much as Kant tries to claim the opposite. Yet, as we have seen above, the answer is not a return to an alleged natural state of pre-rational Rousseauian innocence. True praxis, Adorno's intuited path to the right life, is far from unmediated nature: "True praxis, the archetype of actions that are true to the idea of freedom, requires a full theoretical consciousness" (ND 6:228/229). At the same time, crucially, it necessitates an opening up to the other, the nonidentical: "Praxis requires also something else, not fully contained in consciousness, mediated through reason and qualitatively different from it. Neither element

[*Moment*] is experienced separately" (ND 6:228/229). Qualitatively different from reason yet mediated through it—such is the highly dialectical essence of the *Hinzutretende*, which transforms an intramental, detached reason into a transformative moral force. Without it, without that which "suddenly jumps out [*jäh Herausspringende*]", the self is paralyzed, caught up in a rationality that will only very rarely, and even then only incidentally, find itself on the side of the moral good.

In his lecture on "Problems of Moral Philosophy", Adorno adds a crucial term to the elucidation of the *Hinzutretende*: resistance[43]: "In the term resistance, you may be able to recognize best what I mean when I say that the moral sphere is not fully contained in the theoretical sphere" (PMP 18–9/7). True to the atheoretical nature of the *Hinzutretende*, Adorno does not explain the connection, but instead relates an experience he had upon his return from exile:

> I had the opportunity to meet one of the few leaders of the 20th of July,[44] and I asked him: 'You knew very well that your chance to succeed was minimal, and you must have known that if you get caught, you will face things worse than death—unimaginably worse. How then were you capable of doing what you did anyway?' And the man said to me (…): 'There are situations that are so unbearable that you simply cannot go on with them, whatever may occur and whatever may happen to you if you try to change them.' He told me this without any pathos—and I want to add, without any theoretical claim—simply to explain to me how the seemingly absurd action of the 20th of July came about. I think precisely this moment of resistance—that something is so unbearable that one must try to change it, whatever the possible consequence for oneself and (…) for others,—this is the point where the irrational element of moral behavior is located. (PMP 20/8)

This, in other words, is the *Hinzutretende*. The impulsive "This cannot continue, I must not allow this, whatever may happen to me and others" (PMP 20/8). This is what could have made the mortally threatened subject of Kant's prince withstand the violence done to him and assert the absurd freedom he was left with. While Adorno does not mention the

[43] On the centrality of resistance in Adorno's thought, see also Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy*, 162–86.

[44] On July 20, 1944 took place the only known attempt to assassinate Hitler, led by a group of German officers. The failed attempt led to the execution of almost 5000 Germans. See Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1936–1945: Nemesis* (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 693.

officer of the 20th of July in *Negative Dialectic*, the latter is present between the lines in a paragraph which I consider a key passage not only for Adorno's moral philosophy, but for his work as a whole:

> Moral questions present themselves stringently, not in their dreadful parody, sexual oppression, but in sentences like: There must not be torture; concentration camps must not exist, while all these things continue in Africa and Asia and are only suppressed because civilized humanity is as always inhumane against those it shamelessly brands as uncivilized. But if a moral philosopher seized those sentences and exulted that he had finally caught out the critics of morality: they too quoted the values moral philosophers love to declare, then the swift conclusion would be false. The sentences are true as an impulse, when word comes out that somewhere, somebody has been tortured. They must not be rationalized; as an abstract principle, they would immediately get caught up in the bad infinity of their derivation and validity. The critique of morality aims at the application of consequential logic to human behavior; stringent consequential logic becomes an organ of unfreedom. Impulse, naked physical fear, and the feeling of solidarity with the—to quote Brecht's words—torturable bodies, immanent to moral behavior, would be denied by the urge to ruthlessly rationalize; the most urgent would once more become contemplative, mockery of its own urgency. The difference between theory and praxis involves, that praxis cannot be purely reduced to theory, nor separated from it. The two cannot be glued together in a synthesis. The undivided lives solely in the extremes, in the spontaneous impulse which, impatient with the argument, does not want to tolerate that the horror continue; and in the theoretical consciousness which, free of any heteronomy, understands why it nevertheless continues indefinitely. This contradiction alone is, in the light of the real powerlessness of all individuals, the place of morality today. (ND 6:281–2/285–6)

It should not come as a surprise that in what could almost be considered the conclusion of Adorno's reflections on moral philosophy—if the idea of conclusion weren't completely alien to a thinker who rejected it as a forced "cutting off of thought [*Abschneiden des Gedankens*]"[45]—we find again, the "feeling of solidarity with the (…) torturable bodies". This feeling of solidarity, "immanent to moral behavior", is the source from which the *Hinzutretende* springs. As for the latter itself, we may indeed come closest to its ungraspable essence if we think of it as a resistance—a revolt, a "spontaneous impulse which, impatient with the argument, does not want

[45] Adorno, "Meinung Wahn, Gesellschaft" in GS 10.2:586.

to tolerate that the horror continue". Adorno's officer's "I cannot go on with this" is the primal impulse, "what we once felt at the sight of the dogcatcher's wagon" (ND 6:357/366), raising its battered head.

Experience seems to prove Adorno right. Historical examples suggest that it is not reasoning, but an impulse, an empathetic feeling of solidarity, that lies at the root of moral action. The good seems to happen when reason holds its breath, steps back for a crucial split-second to let the non-identical break in. Following Adorno's claims that the truth is revealed in the extremes, let us look at a case particularly relevant in our context: that of the so-called "Righteous of the Nations", non-Jews who helped Jews during the Shoah. When later asked what motivated them to save the lives of strangers at the risk of their own, very few of them conjured explicit values, ideas or ideologies.[46] In fact, what strikes is not the nature of the reasons invoked but the *absence* of tangible reasons—in most cases, there is nothing but a real or metaphorical shrug of the shoulders: I did what I had to do. Many of them, however, trace their involvement back to a key encounter or event that jolted them into action. For Irmgard von Neurath, a German aristocrat, it was the sight of a group of crazed, starved prisoners fighting over soiled potatoes on her kitchen floor—the same people who had a moment earlier, before it suddenly 'hit' her, caused profound disgust in her.[47] For the Italian Giorgio Perlasca, who had fought with Franco, it was the scene of a Jewish boy chased and killed` in the streets of Budapest by a gang of Hungarian Nazis.[48] For Oskar Schindler, it was a little girl in a scarlet coat led away by SS guards as she watched those who tried to escape being beaten to death.[49]

The experiences weren't all that dramatic. Sometimes, it was just the gradual social exclusion of Jewish acquaintances, or a desperate neighbor standing pleadingly at the door. But whether the rescuers were witnessing physical cruelty or just confronted with a person in need of help, what they reacted to was the same: the pain and suffering of the torturable body, the other's "miserable physical existence" trampled and violated. The first helping gesture was often impulsive, sometimes taking the rescuers themselves by surprise.

[46] See Samuel and Pearl Olimer, *The Altruistic Personality* (New York: The Free Press, 1988); Eva Fogelman, *Conscience and Courage* (New York: Doubleday, 1994); Tzvetan Todorov, *La fragilité du bien. Le sauvetage des juifs bulgares* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999).

[47] Fogelman, *Conscience and Courage*, 40–1.

[48] Ibid., 53.

[49] Ibid., 54.

Is the *Hinzutretende* then simply an urge of compassion? Compassion, literally co-suffering, certainly plays an important role in the "feeling of solidarity with the torturable body", but it lacks the active force of the latter. While compassion can lead to action, it doesn't have to—it can remain perfectly passive, a feeling and nothing else, as inconsequential as Kant's intelligible freedom. The *Hinzutretende*, on the other hand, is a force of action, a solidarity that does not allow for passivity. It pushes the subject to act, transforms compassion into *resistance*. Resistance once again appears to be a key term. While compassion is only concerned with the suffering without asking where it comes from, without relating it to one's own action or inaction—without revolt, in other words—the *Hinzutretende* "does not want to tolerate that the horror continue" yet at the same time knows why it does—and resists. This resistance, coupled with the consciousness that the *So ist es*, the all-crushing identical, is not the last word—"that which is, can be changed"[50]—creates the possibility of a different outcome and, as a consequence, the will to act. "Without it there would be no will at all" (ND 6:228/229). This is what Adorno means when he writes that with the *Hinzutretende*, "freedom breaks into experience." When Adorno later describes freedom as "the possibility of nonidentity" (ND 6:266/269), the intimate connection between the *Hinzutretende* and his philosophy of the nonidentical becomes apparent. The *Hinzutretende* makes freedom break into experience, opening up the possibility of nonidentity. That possibility, in turn, is the key to resistance against the *So ist es* and therefore, ultimately, to a different society—to Adorno's "right life". Just how closely the latter is linked to resistance is spelled out in Adorno's 1956 lecture on moral philosophy:

> One must, as much as humanly possible, live as one thinks one would have to live in a free world; anticipate, as it were, through one's own existence—with all the inevitable contradictions and conflicts that entails—the form of existence that would be the right one. This attempt is doomed to failure and contradiction, but we have no other choice, than to carry that contradiction to the bitter end. The most important form that takes on today, is resistance.[51]

[50] "Only if what is, is not everything, can what is be changed." ND 6:391/398.

[51] Adorno, *Probleme der Moralphilosophie*, 28.2.1957 (unpublished), quoted in: Schweppenhäuser, *Ethik nach Auschwitz. Adornos negative Moralphilosophie* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2016), 220.

In a lecture on philosophical terminology, Adorno puts resistance explicitly at the core of not only his work, but of all philosophy: "Philosophy is the force of *resistance*: I believe that another definition of philosophy than that of mental [*geistige*] force of resistance does not exist" (PT 2:148). In the same vein, Adorno answers the question "Why still philosophy?" in a 1962 radio lecture by saying that only "as critique, as resistance" has philosophy still a raison d'être, as it has been "of time immemorial".[52]

But while the original philosophical gesture—to search beyond the seemingly obvious, challenge the self-understood, ask questions that push common limits—seems to have a natural affinity with resistance, the history of philosophy shows that audacity of the mind and intellectual daring do not automatically lead to resistance in thought or action. Quite the opposite: Some of philosophy's greatest minds are the living proof that pioneering thought and intellectual courage can go hand in hand with social conformism or submission to authority. This tension is apparent from the very beginning of Western philosophy. Socrates, self-declared 'gadfly" and nonconformist who taught his young followers to think autonomously, and whom the Athenians considered threatening enough to sentence him to death, obediently submitted to the unjust verdict that put an end to his life even when given the chance to escape, claiming that it was his obligation to obey the law, whatever its consequences. Foreshadowing Kant's nearly unconditional submission to the law in the name of duty, the "father of philosophy", whose importance for the development of critical philosophical inquiry cannot be overstated, thus intentionally or not paved the way for the complicity between philosophy and power that has dogged the former throughout its history.[53] Adorno never tired to point out that complicity in the two thinkers he was most influenced by, Kant and Hegel. Despite the almost subversive potential of their philosophies—the Left Hegelians are not an accident—they neither in thought nor in action ever challenged the ultimate authority of the state, encouraging a conformity that seems to run counter to their philosophies' stirrings of freedom. Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* grew out of the desire to found moral behavior in autonomous reason independent of any

[52] Adorno, "Wozu noch Philosophie" in GS 10.2:464.

[53] See Anthony D'Amato, "Obligation to Obey the Law: A Study of the Death of Socrates" in *Southern California Law Review* 49 (1976), 1079–108. D'Amato offers an insightful analysis of the legal meaning and implications of the obligation Socrates' cites, as well as a comparison to John Rawl's theory of civil disobedience.

heteronomous obligation, thus reaffirming human freedom against dogma. Yet almost despite himself, Kant ultimately curtailed freedom, confining it to the intelligible world and further hampering it by his concept of duty and his distinction between public and private reason which rejects resistance as inadmissible *Vernünfteln*. Hegel's dialectic opened up the possibility of resistance against philosophy's affirmativity and affinity with the powers that be, yet Hegel, the Preussian court philosopher, sided with the latter and betrayed the promise of his own philosophy by letting totality crush its parts.[54]

That the liberating philosophical potential ultimately kowtows to suppressive conservatism is not simply a function of the thinkers' personalities—it is intimately connected to their epistemological choices. By insisting on the rational purity of moral action, Kant effectively bars the possibility of resistance, for the latter does not spring from "the causal chain"—it interrupts it, as the very same thing that Kant abhorred: "immediate behavior" outside of reason's categories: "When I say that philosophy is resistance, you must understand me right. Resistance is first a category of impulse, a category of immediate behavior" (PT 2:149). At the heart of resistance lies the somatic, as the jolt behind the subjective "this cannot continue, I must not allow this", and as the objective trigger of resistance: the suffering of the self or the other. Of all manifestations of the will, resistance is the most visible, because it causes a dissonance, goes against the current, breaks out of the identical. Neither Kant nor Hegel were willing to let that dissonance stand—hence the barely scratched political and social conservatism. While Hegel's dialectic undeniably created the crack in the wall that allowed for identity to be challenged by those who came after him—not least Adorno—he himself never went as far as to break the wall. He sensed the limitations of the logical framework that reason had for millenniums be coupled with, yet his challenge ultimately self-defeated itself, by enthroning rational thought, victorious identity, in the form of the literally irresistible World Spirit.

Where the non-rational is spurned, resistance is crippled. While rational reflection may inspire and strengthen resistance by helping the resisting subject justify the risk taken, it is just as likely, if not more so, to do the opposite, for reasons we have seen earlier: the drive for self-preservation that makes rational thought, unchecked by an "irrational" moral compass,

[54] Martin Shuster challenges not only Adorno's criticism of Kant, but also of Hegel in *Autonomy after Auschwitz*. op.cit.

naturally self-preserving and utilitarian; and reason's intimate relationship with logic, which is highly averse to any kind of disruption or change. In logic, difference is the problem to be resolved, identity is the solution. Contradiction is shunned, its reality denied. A closer look at the three classic laws of thought that have reigned nearly unchallenged since Plato—and that neither Kant or Hegel fundamentally questioned—makes their complicity with the *So ist es* strikingly apparent. The first one is the aptly named Law of Identity, often bluntly expressed as "Whatever is, is." The second one, the Law of Non-Contradiction, states that two contradictory statements cannot both be true, while the third, the Law of the Excluded Middle, says that everything must either be or not be. Rooted in logic, all three of them apply mathematical axioms to rational thought, determining on the grounds of logical consistency what can be thought and—more importantly—what cannot. As the general wording starkly highlights, the Law of Identity—the uncritical mirror image of Adorno's *So ist es*—stops resistance in its tracks, as the latter stands and falls on the possibility that things could be different than what they are. It states, in the mathematical notation that logic has naturally adopted, that A = A, presenting as self-evident and inescapable the smooth identity of a given phenomenon with itself, thus denying the intrinsic tensions and contradictions, the nonidentical cracks where questions and critical thinking take hold. The curtailing of thought is officially sanctioned—the same "cutting off of thought" that Adorno so violently denounced.

The ability to question that which is, even if or *precisely* if it presents itself as natural and self-understood, is the key prerequisite for critical thinking, which originates in the belief that the spell of identity can—and must—be broken, that whatever is, is not the last word. "Whatever is, is"—quite literally the "doubling of reality"[55] that Adorno called ideology out to be—is the mantra of authoritarian power, coercing the submission in thought that is demanded in reality. In a radio discussion between Adorno, Horkheimer and Eugen Kogon on the subject "Men and terror", Adorno points to the surreptitious power of the identity "artifice [Spuk]",[56] the "demonic illusion" created by a reality in which all elements "connect to form a whole which seems inescapable."[57] Nobody even thinks of resisting as—just like the falsely self-evident laws of thought—the identity pressure

[55] See e.g. DA 3:34/13; MM 4:161/141–2.

[56] Adorno, Horkheimer, Kogon, "Die Menschen und der Terror" (1953), in: Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 13 (Frankfurt, 1989), 152.

[57] Ibid., 151.

of society is interiorized, creating a "fatal harmony" in which "men tend to repeat within themselves the processes of control that are forced upon them from without."[58] As early as 1950, in another radio discussion with the same participants, Adorno underlines that this mechanism of adaptation, the kowtow to society's identity, is intimately connected with a suppression of the somatic impulse which is the locus of the human(e):

> Men conserve the characteristics that ease their adaptation to [rationalized society]—a certain efficiency, a swift look, quick reactivity, flexibility, etcetera, also a certain hardness against others and against themselves. They lose, however, all the characteristics that impede adaptation and which we consider to this day precisely the human(e) ones, the non-rationalized [i.e., nonidentical]. In other words, they lose their impulses, they lose their passion. The idea of a passionate person seems almost anachronistic today…[59]

In words reminiscent of Kierkegaard, Adorno links the impulse, which will become so prominent in his philosophy of the nonidentical, to passion—a lost passion which Kogon, in his response to Adorno, naturally associates with a "passion for justice as in the case of Dreyfus with Zola".[60] Horkheimer plays into the same theme when he notes that "there are few people today who know how to resist [when they witness what they intuit as wrong]."[61] In these early exchanges, the stage for Adorno's post-war philosophy is set: terror, identity, impulse, resistance. Why was there no collective *J'accuse* when millions of Dreyfuses were led to the slaughter? How must men "arrange their thinking and conduct" so that the passion to resist is refound? The educational intent behind the philosophical project is maybe never more explicit than in these early conversations of the 1950s, held only a few years after the collective moral breakdown of a highly educated nation seemed to put every educational claim into question. Horkheimer, seemingly undaunted, makes it clear where the focus of the philosopher's work must hitherto lie: "That we help to form people who, from within themselves, from within their own autonomy, learn to resist violence, and that we are capable of doing that, this is indeed the belief that must animate us as educators."[62]

[58] Adorno, Horkheimer, Kogon, "Die verwaltete Welt oder: Die Krisis des Individuums", in: Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 13 (Frankfurt 1989), 124.

[59] Ibid., 129.

[60] Ibid., 130.

[61] "Die Menschen und der Terror", 152.

[62] Ibid.

Education after Auschwitz

Did Adorno see himself as an educator? I believe that the answer is yes, be it not in a straightforward sense. There is no question, though, that he shared Horkheimer's educational priorities. In 1966, in a radio lecture on "Education after Auschwitz", he too underlined the need for resistance, and—in words that echo with the new categorical imperative of *Negative Dialectic*—spelled out what had to define men's resistance henceforth: "The demand that Auschwitz shall never be again is the very first demand on education."[63] The lecture that follows these opening words touches on many of the recurring themes of Adorno's thought. Addressing a broad audience, Adorno does not talk about the nonidentical nor the *Hinzutretende*, yet their force fields, to speak in Adornian terms, inform his partly improvised reflections. Adorno's uncharacteristic attempt to offer positive guidelines gives an indication as to how his philosophy of the nonidentical might translate into everyday life. "The sole true force against the principle of Auschwitz is autonomy, if I may use the Kantian term; the strength to reflection, to self-determination, to non-participation [*Nicht Mitmachen*]",[64] Adorno writes.[65] The most important commandment is negative: *Nicht Mitmachen*. It appears in different forms throughout the text, the nonidentical of individual action in a social setting. "The readiness to side with power and to accept that which is stronger as the norm is (…) the mentality that must *not* resurface",[66] he adds, and warns of the danger of the "blind identification with the collective", calling for resistance against the latter, society's identical: "The most important task against the risk of a repetition [of Auschwitz] is to weaken the blind preeminence of all collectives, to strengthen resistance against them by highlighting the problem of collectivization."[67] Those who

[63] Adorno, "Erziehung nach Auschwitz", in: GS 10.2:674. Translation: "Education after Auschwitz" in Adorno, *Can One Live after Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader* (Stanford University Press, 2003), 19.

[64] Ibid., 10.2:679/23.

[65] Martin Shuster explores the role of autonomy in Adorno's philosophy and the way it relates to Kant and Hegel in Shuster, *Autonomy after Auschwitz. Adorno, German Idealism, and Modernity*.

[66] Adorno, Erziehung nach Auschwitz/Education after Auschwitz, 10.2:679/23 (italics O.C.S.)

[67] Ibid., 10.2:681/25.

blindly identify with the collective will not only "erase themselves as self-determined beings", but also violate the other, whom they will "treat as an amorphous mass".[68]

The violence implicit in the act of integration is one of Adorno's ceterum censeos. In the Odysseus chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, he highlighted the painful process of integration of the dispersed, fragmented, dissonant pieces of the self into one "identical" self: "Terrible things did men have to do to themselves before the self, the identical, purposive, virile character of man was formed, and something of that recurs in every childhood" (DA 3:50/26). In *Negative Dialectic*, he saw the genocide of the Jewish people as integration brought into its own—"Gleichschaltung" driven to its logical conclusion: "Genocide is absolute integration, anticipated wherever men are leveled, whetted [geschliffen], as they used to say in the military, until they are no more than variances of their own nullity and are literally annihilated. Auschwitz confirms the philosopheme of pure identity as death" (ND 6:355/362).

Where there is violence, there is pain. Unsurprisingly, pain, suppressed and silenced, plays a prominent role in Adorno's radio lecture. Commenting on the recent Auschwitz trial—and thus circling back to the pain that lies at the root of his philosophy: that of the victims of the Shoah—, Adorno quotes one of the main defendants, "the terrible [Wilhelm] Boger" who praised "education instilling discipline through hardness".[69] This hardness, Adorno notes, means "indifference against pain as such, and whether it is one's own or the other's hardly matters. He who is hard against himself buys himself the right to be hard against others, and takes revenge for the pain whose stirrings he wasn't allowed to show, had to suppress."[70] Education, Adorno notes, must do the very opposite of what Boger preaches. Rather than harden the somatic into oblivion, it must teach the mind to allow the somatic in: "…that fear should not be suppressed."[71] Those who erase their own vulnerable self to vanish in the collective will likely not only "[lack] emotions", but be "[unable] to have an immediate human experience",[72] let alone have the capacity to imagine the experience of others.

[68] Ibid., 10.2:683/26–7.
[69] Ibid., 10.2:682/26.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid., 10.2:683/26.
[72] Ibid., 10.2:683/27

It is not surprising that at this point of the lecture, Adorno returns to the coldness that has preoccupied him since *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where he traced its beginnings to the birth of the proto-bourgeois individual in Homer's Odyssey. In front of his radio audience, Adorno—anticipating words he will use in *Negative Dialectic*—calls coldness "a fundamental anthropological trait, that is of the nature of men as they really are in our society", and asserts that if the people were not "profoundly indifferent toward whatever happens to everyone else except for the few to whom they are closely bound, possibly by tangible interests, Auschwitz would not have been possible, people would not have accepted it."[73] He goes on to pinpoint "the inability to identification [with the other]" as "without doubt the most important psychological precondition [for Auschwitz]", one that is connected to the economical substructure of society, to what Adorno calls "business interest: that one pursues one's own advantage before anything else."[74]

How does this "most important psychological precondition" relate to what Adorno earlier in the lecture calls "the sole true force against the principle of Auschwitz": autonomy? In other words, how does autonomy combat coldness as "the condition for disaster"? To answer this question, it is crucial to comprehend the meaning of autonomy in Adorno's philosophy of the nonidentical in its full depth. For Adorno, to think and live autonomously means to resist the pull of identity, to reject ready categorizations and to refuse to lose one's own and the other's difference in social labels and collectives. Positively speaking, it means true openness to the nonidentical from without and within—as Adorno writes in the *Minima Moralia* aphorism on giving presents, it means "live contact with the warmth of things", "the opposite of forgetfulness" (MM 4:47/42). He who thinks autonomously refuses to objectify, "forget" the non-identity of the other (or the situation) facing him and tries to hold the dissonances rather than erase them. Autonomous thinking is a constant giving and taking between subject and object, a dialectic renewed at every encounter with the outside world. For such autonomy holds true what Adorno, in the same aphorism, writes of human relationships: "Every relationship (…) is a giving. He who through consequential logic becomes incapable of it, makes himself a thing and freezes to death" (MM 4:47/42). Autonomy in Adorno's sense is not independence, but in a certain sense

[73] Ibid., 10.2:687/30.
[74] Ibid.

precisely dependence: The autonomous subject acts from within, and thus recognizes what Adorno will later call the "interdependence of all being [die Interdependenz des Seienden]" (AET 7:171/112). Such autonomy is a bulwark against the coldness that the heteronomy of consequential logic and its intrinsic utilitarianism bring about.

The obvious question, particularly in a lecture on education, is: How can this be taught? How does one educate towards autonomy and imagination, and against coldness? Adorno clarifies right from the outset that he does "not want to preach love". This would be "pointless" as long as the "social order which produces and reproduces coldness" remains untouched. Instead, the only thing that "can help against coldness as the condition for disaster is the insight into its conditions and the attempt to preemptively counter these conditions in the individual sphere."[75] When Adorno proceeds to explicate what this would concretely look like, he seems to run counter to his earlier reservation on "preaching love": "One would like to think that the less deprivation there is in childhood and the better children are treated, the more there is a chance."[76]

It would be a mistake to discard this unexpected turn towards the treatment of children as a casual aside. In the same lecture, Adorno reiterates on two more occasions the necessity to turn to childhood if we want Auschwitz never to happen again. "Education that aims at preventing a repetition [of Auschwitz] must focus on early childhood",[77] he claims, and later identifies "early childhood"[78] as one of the two domains of education after Auschwitz (more about the second one shortly). By focusing in this way on early childhood, Adorno appears to take the emphasis of education away from formal instruction towards what he himself claims to be unteachable: love, warmth, giving—qualities which, according to his own analysis, are desperately wanting in a society where it is since Odysseus considered a victory to resist love.

Adorno's emphasis on childhood is all the more striking if we take into account that, as a childless philosopher widely seen as difficult to understand even by adults, he could hardly have hoped to have a direct impact in that particular field. That he may himself have felt this want is at least

[75] Adorno, "Erziehung nach Auschwitz", 10.2:688/31.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid., 10.2:676/21.
[78] Ibid., 10.2:677/22.

hinted at in a 1953 letter to Max Horkheimer, in which Adorno reflects on the fact that "neither you nor I will ever have children", and adds: "Given that we can hardly hope anymore to be ourselves the subjects of the praxis that could overturn the calamity, it all hinges on our ability to be part of a continuity that gives us the hope that not everything which has accumulated within us will be lost."[79] Under this premise, the then still exiled philosopher argues for a return to Frankfurt and with it to academic life, as "[to be part of a continuity] is only possible where we can, literally and figuratively, speak"[80] in other words, teach in the mother tongue in which alone Adorno felt he could accurately express what he had to say.[81] This plea for a return to university and teaching, in order to help to form the next generation, may be Adorno's most explicit endorsement of his own role as an educator. Given his limited faith in the ability of formal education to further the goal he considered paramount: to ensure that Auschwitz will never happen again, there is no simple answer to the question as to how he envisioned this role. What is the "everything accumulated within us" that he wanted to see continued? How was he hoping to leave a mark on students for whom the crucial early childhood years were but a distant memory? Beyond these questions lurks the much wider one of whether, and how, Adorno's philosophy contributes to bringing about the "right life" it points towards.

The lecture on "Education after Auschwitz" provides only the beginning of an answer to these questions. As we have seen above, early childhood is one of two domains identified by Adorno as fundamental in post-Shoah education. The second one is an educational focus on a "general enlightenment that creates an intellectual, cultural and social climate that will not allow for a repetition, a climate in which the factors that lead to the horror are made conscious."[82] The instructions are vague, to say the least. What is general enlightenment? How does one create an intellectual, cultural and social climate that will prevent a future Auschwitz? Adorno immediately clarifies that he is not "so presumptuous as to draw up the plan of such an education, not even in its outline."[83] All he offers is to

[79] Theodor W. Adorno to Max Horkheimer, 12.3.1953, in: Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band 18. Frankfurt am Main, 1996, 247–8.

[80] Ibid., 248.

[81] See Adorno, "Warum sind Sie zurückgekehrt ?", in GS 20.1:394. Adorno names the German language as one of the reasons for his return.

[82] Adorno, "Erziehung nach Auschwitz", 10.2:677/22.

[83] Ibid.

"designate certain focal points [*Nervenpunkte*]"[84] that education has to address—which are precisely the issues we have examined above: autonomy, identity thinking, collectives, integration, coldness. How these focal points need to (and can) be addressed, Adorno does not spell out. This is not simply an omission. According to Adorno, the only goal we can positively designate, which is the most important one in the *Verblendungszusammenhang* in which we live, is the creation of consciousness—that "the factors that lead to the horror are made conscious". If only we can become conscious of the powerful identity spell we are under, and of its destructive consequences, then the first step towards a right life, where Auschwitz is no longer possible, is taken.

Adorno's Negative Morality

The absence of positive norms is not limited to Adorno's lecture on education—it is a fundamental element of his thought, a fully endorsed part of the edifice. The problem is not an inadequacy of the author, Adorno would say, but lies "*in der Sache*", in the facts themselves: it is our reality that is inadequate. To define and pinpoint the good in a world in which the bad is so dominant that the good can barely be glimpsed would a betrayal of the latter's—unknown—potential. It would imprison it in an identity that can only be lacking, thus paralyzing the possibility of its ever coming about, closing what desperately needs to remain open.[85] The bad, on the other hand, is knowable: "We may not know what absolute good is or the absolute norm, we may not even know what man is or the human or humanity—but what the inhuman is we know very well indeed" (PMP 261/175). From these premises, a negative normativity becomes not only

[84] Ibid.

[85] Adorno's refusal to name the good has been likened to the Jewish reluctance to positively describe what the world to come, the world after the advent of the Messiah, would look like, which prompted some commentators to call Adorno's philosophy messianic. See e.g. Hent de Vries, *Minimal Theologies: Critiques of Secular Reason in Adorno and Levinas* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2005), 147. Micha Brumlik, "Theologie und Messianismus" in Klein and Kreuzer and Müller-Dohm (eds.), *Adorno Handbuch: Leben-Werk-Wirkung* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2011), 295–309. Adorno himself refers to Jewish theology in *Negative Dialectic*: "In the right state [Zustand], everything would be, as the Jewish theologoumenon has it, only a tiny bit different than it is, but not the tiniest thing can be imagined as it would be then." ND 6:294/299.

the obvious choice, but the only possible option.[86] If the good remains vague and blurry, its true face unknowable, then we cannot depend on it to provide guiding norms for an ethical life. It can serve as a distant horizon, an utopian dream, but it is not distinct and determined enough to support an unshakable "You shall". With the bad, it is a different story. Its reality is so overwhelming—foremost through the suffering it causes—that it is not only knowable, it is known, every day, by everyone. This does not mean, however, that this knowledge smoothly translates into a set of rules of behavior. Adorno's *minima moralia* do not rely on rules to follow, but rather on a negative terminus ad quem—an endpoint that must not be reached, a "never again" that must accompany everything we think and do, as it is perfectly expressed in the new categorical imperative that according to Adorno, Hitler has imposed on men "in their unfreedom": "to think and live in such a way as to ensure that Auschwitz will never repeat itself, nothing similar will ever happen" (ND 6:358/365).

Our life is "damaged", we are "unfree". The all-powerful identity principle not only makes it impossible to live a "right life in the wrong one" (MM 4:43/39), it makes every positive norm, even the most well-intended one, a hazard, as the latter can be twisted, distorted, pulled down into the quagmire of its abstraction. This dilemma is perfectly expressed in the passage on moral questions quoted earlier. Adorno situates moral questions in "sentences like: There must not be torture; concentration camps must not exist", but immediately clarifies that these sentences are true only "as an impulse", in their immediacy, "when word comes out that somewhere, somebody has been tortured". They "must not be rationalized", must not be turned into a norm. Why? Because "as an abstract principle, they would immediately get caught up in the bad infinity of their derivation and validity, (…) the most urgent would once more become contemplative, mockery of its own urgency." Adorno acutely felt the need to protect the "feeling of solidarity with the torturable bodies" from "ruthless rational-

[86] Freyenhagen ascribes what he calls a "negative Aristotelianism" to Adorno, claiming that just as Aristotle indexes goodness and badness to the ergon, the essential teleological function of a thing, Adorno indexes the good to humanity and the bad to inhumanity, where humanity is a potential yet to be actualized and inhumanity directly related to suffering. See Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy*, 232–54. Adorno's "happiness", with its ungraspable yet most concrete nature, may come closest to his elusive idea of the good. For an analysis of Adorno's "concept of happiness", see Rufus Sona, *Der Begriff des Glücks bei Adorno*, http://www.kritiknetz.de/images/stories/texte/Der_Begriff_des_Gluecks_bei_Adorno.pdf

ization", from philosophers and other public figures arguing, reframing, qualifying and otherwise nibbling away at the primal, unjustifiable impulse. He knew that the dialectical movement of thought, essential in the groping search for truth, could, if left unmitigated, betray the latter. In his *Minima Moralia*, Adorno noted that the force of dialectic depended on the intention with which it was used, and warned that it could easily turn into the empty "principle of always and successfully turning the tables [*stets und mit Erfolg den Spiess umzudrehen*]" (MM 4:280/244). He affirmed what he saw as the legacy of Walter Benjamin's thought: "the necessity [Nötigung] to think at the same time dialectically and undialectically" (MM 4:173/152), and twenty years later, in his lecture on metaphysics, he told his students that certain truths lay beyond dialectics and beyond justification:

> I want to say that the moment you try to justify in any way a sentence like "You shall not torture", you lose yourself in a bad infinity, and are moreover likely, in any such attempt, to lose the battle,—whereas what is true in this sentence is precisely that which eludes such dialectics. (MP 182/116)

Adorno's objection against the act of justifying certain moral statements is multilayered. First, there is the undialectic—some would say: dogmatic—belief that these assertions are so unquestionable that attempting to justify them is not only unnecessary, but scandalous. We find this idiosyncratic, prephilosopical gesture, this impatience with the argument, at the beginning of "Education after Auschwitz": "The demand that Auschwitz shall never be again is the very first demand on education. It so much precedes every other that I don't think that I need to nor that I should justify it".[87] Similarly, after introducing the new categorical imperative, Adorno states: "This imperative is as recalcitrant against its justification as erstwhile the givenness of the Kantian. To treat it discursively would be sacrilege [*Frevel*]" (ND 6:358/365).[88] Closely linked to this visceral rejection, is the fact that Adorno saw justification as a double-edged sword that opened the door to "the bad infinity of (…) derivation and validity", the argumentative maelstrom. As Adorno and Horkheimer have shown in the Sade

[87] Adorno, "Erziehung nach Auschwitz", GS 10.2:674/19.

[88] Martin Shuster interprets this as saying that "there is no way to force, through discursive means, a somatic experience upon someone" (Shuster, "Nothing to Know", 17). I read this statement much more literally, as a visceral, 'prephilosophical' outcry at the sacrilege of dealing discursively with unspeakable physical suffering.

chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, reason, intrinsically amoral, can justify anything and its opposite—and is in fact more likely than not to defeat the moral good: "[Sade's] 'philosophe mitré', who justifies murder, must have recourse to fewer sophisms than Maimonides and Aquinas, who condemn it" (DA 3:136/91). The vulnerable "feeling of solidarity with the torturable bodies" must be protected from its deconstruction by reason, the "ungraspable" from its erasure by identity thinking.[89] The concrete, the pain, must not be abstracted.

Conversely, Adorno seems to suggest that sometimes, justification must step back so as to enable the lesser evil without sanctioning the unsanctionable. Commenting on Benjamin's words that "the execution of the death penalty can be moral, but never its legitimization" (ND 6:282/286), Adorno reflects:

> If the torturers [of Auschwitz] as well as their bosses and highbrow supporters had been shot [right after the war], it would have been more moral than to take some of them to court. (…) As soon as the justice machinery with penal code, [judges] gowns, and sympathetic attorneys is mobilized, justice—which in any case does not know of a sanction that would match the evil done—is already wrong, compromised by the same principle that guided the murderers. (ND 6:282/286–7)

In other words, it might have been the right thing to do to line up and execute the SS guards of Auschwitz at capture—but only as long as the deed remained unjustified, so to speak. The moment the justice system interposes itself, with its ballet of prosecution and defense, its abstract legal language, its suggestion that the punishment, or whatever the outcome of the trial, reflects a justly achieved equilibrium, in other words: is right and justified, it is "already wrong". The act must remain nonidentical for justice to have a claim. In the same vein, Adorno writes in *Minima Moralia*:

> To the question what needs to be done with defeated Germany, I could only say two things. One, I would not at any price, under no conditions, want to be a hangman or provide legal titles for hengmen. Two, I would not want to prevent anybody, much less yet by law, from taking revenge for what happened. (MM 4:62/56)

[89] More on Adorno's take on argumentation in Chap. 4 below.

That something may be right but unjustifiable, a paradox perfectly expressed by Benjamin's words on the death penalty, is yet another case of non-alignment between the world we live in and our conception of it. Identity thinking cannot comprehend this hiatus and must never try, under no circumstance, lest it abstracts and thus cements the "objective insanity" (MM 4:228/200) of our human reality. The contradiction, once more, lies "*in der Sache*": there should be no deeds so evil in this world that the unjustifiable becomes the right response to them. Yet there are, and if someone attempts to shift the cosmic imbalance[90] by doing the unjustifiable he may be right—unjustifiably so.

For the moral agent in search of certainties, this rejection of positive norms may seem dangerously close to moral relativism. If the wrong is sometimes right and the right so fragile that arguments can easily topple it, then no norms will ever be able to reliably found our behavior. As I will discuss below, Adorno, who called relativism "the brother of absolutism" (ND 6:44/34), would have vigorously rejected the accusation of feeding into it. He would have retorted that his thought is, through its constellations, more authoritative than the deployment of norms that can easily be distorted and manipulated. Still, it is a commonly voiced critique of Adorno that he did not produce a moral theory, and that his writings, foremost his *Negative Dialectic*, has little ethical content.[91] A moral theory, thus the claim, must provide positive guidelines of behavior—an explicit or implicit philosophical stance is not enough.[92] For Adorno, however, the latter, was the only approach possible—an *attitude* towards the moral question rather than a predetermined answer to it. The latter he considered not only impossible, but dangerous in its abstraction and deceptive finality.

The murkiness of morality, the elusiveness of norms to hold on to, the impossibility of leading the right life when you are caught up in the wrong

[90] While Adorno would likely not have used the term "cosmic imbalance", there are numerous indications that point toward the presence of such 'theological' notions in his thought. See Brumlik, "Theologie und Messianismus".

[91] The most sustained rejections of this claim can be found in Bernstein, *Adorno: Ethics and Disenchantment*, and Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy.* Espen Hammer's *Adorno and the Political* takes it a step further and demonstrates convincingly that, as Hammer writes, "Adorno was one of the most politically acute thinkers of the twentieth century." Hammer, *Adorno and the Political.* New York: Routledge 2006, 1.

[92] This was one of the most prominent accusations voiced by the German students during the unrest of the 1960s (see below).

one, and yet the need to resist from within our "unfreedom"—these tensions are the loci of Adorno's reflections on morality, and beyond. They intimately shape his theory and its relationship to praxis. The complexity of the latter is maybe nowhere more obvious than in the fraught encounter between Adorno and the students during the 1967–1969 student revolt in Frankfurt, which I shall now turn to.

Marginalia on Theory and Praxis: Adorno and the Student Movement

Like its American and French counterparts, the German student movement began in the early 1960s, with many of the same rallying cries: no to unquestioned authority, no to social and sexual bigotry, no to imperialistic wars, yes to reforms (or revolution, if necessary) towards a more open, egalitarian, just society. Specific to Germany was the students' critique of their parents' generation for their insufficient disavowal of the Nazi past (manifest in the swift reappointment of leading Nazi figures into government positions), as well as the movement's real and perceived relationship to the teachings of the Frankfurt school, first and foremost Adorno's.

Adorno's first public reflection on the student movement came in a radio conversation in October 1967, in which he supported the students' call for a university reform and reflected on its challenges. By that time, the movement, at least its most vocal members, had begun to turn against the teachers of the Institute for Social Research. At first, the affinity had seemed obvious: On the one side, thinkers who relentlessly called out the unkept promises of modern society, unmasking the latter's pervasive heteronomies and the seeming inescapability of the identity driven *So ist es*—in Adorno's words: the wrong life. On the other side, students who fought to overcome the shackles of tradition, demanded more autonomy, challenged exploitative capitalism and declared war on the "lies" of their parents. Indeed, many students explicitly named Adorno and Horkheimer's work, foremost their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, as their inspiration, and Adorno himself admitted that, as a journalist put it, "without [his] theory, the student protest would maybe never have happened".[93] But the seeming alliance did not last. After an unarmed student demonstrator, Benno Ohnesorg, was shot

[93] Theodor W. Adorno, "Keine Angst vor dem Elfenbeinturm", Interview with the magazine "Der Spiegel", May 5, 1969, in: Wolfgang Kraushaar, *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung*, Vol. 2 (Hamburg: Zweitausendeins, 1998), 621.

dead by a policeman in June 1967, the movement became radicalized and, at least in parts, more violent. At first, Adorno's affinity with the students' cause seemed unaffected. After Karl-Heinz Kurras, the policeman who shot Ohnesorg, was acquitted, Adorno sharply criticized those who sent armed police against unarmed students and called the "lack of emotion" of the incriminated policeman (who "regret[ted] that a student lost his life") "terrifyingly similar to what we hear in trials against the torturers of the concentration camps".[94] He compared the usage of "a student" in Kurras' statement to "the usage that continues to be made in trials and in the public of the word Jew" as "victims are reduced to exemplars".[95] Later, he forcefully spoke out against the so-called Emergency Acts [*Notstandsgesetze*], which were passed by a broad coalition in May 1968 and gave the government the power to disregard certain tenets of the *Grundgesetz* (the German Constitution) in a state of emergency. Adorno conjured up the ghosts of the past in his unequivocal rejection, noting that while there may be similar laws in other countries, the situation was "fundamentally different in Germany [where] such laws hold immediate repressive tendencies (…)."[96] He called the emergency laws a "self-fulfilling prophecy" which needed to be opposed by the "broadest possible public because of the emergency happiness [*Notstandsfreude*] of those that pass them. That the *Notstandsfreude* is not coincidental but expresses a powerful social trend should not weaken our opposition against the acts, but strengthen them."[97]

Yet despite being largely in agreement with the students in those and other major issues—such as the need for a university reform[98]—Adorno soon found himself under attack. For many students, his support did not go far enough. In the light of the powerful societal forces against them, they argued, unconditional loyalty was necessary. For Adorno, however, unconditional loyalty would have meant the same "capitulation before the

[94] Adorno, "Zum Freispruch des Polizeiobermeisters Kurras". Vor der Vorlesung am 23. November 1967, in: *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter III* (München: text + kritik 1994), 147.

[95] Ibid.

[96] Adorno, "Gegen die Notstandsgesetze. Ansprache auf der Veranstaltung "Demokratie im Notstand" im Hessischen Rundfunk, 28. Mai 1968", in GS 20.1:396.

[97] Ibid., 397.

[98] Adorno did however differ with the students on the exact scope of these reforms. He feared that the students' proposals ultimately meant a watering down, a "simplification" of studies. See Kraushaar, *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung*, Vol. 2, 307.

collective"[99] that his philosophy tirelessly denounced. When the students called his lack of support an act of resignation, a de facto siding with the status quo, he insisted that it was the identification with the collective that was a resignation, not the "unwavering thought" which he tried to avail himself of: "The I must erase itself in order to be blessed with election [*Gnadenwahl*] by the collective. Implicitly, a hardly Kantian categorical imperative has risen up: You must sign. The feeling of belonging is paid for by the sacrifice of autonomous thought."[100] Commenting on his refusal to serve as an expert witness for a student accused of arson, a refusal that had two years earlier sparked the first public protest against him, he asserted: "These attempts to force the conscience (…) serve the sort of collectivization that I see as the coercion to sign unconditionally, to give yourself with body and soul [*sich mit Haut und Haaren zu verschreiben*]. Precisely not to do that lies in the idea of Enlightenment that I hold onto."[101] Adorno was greatly concerned to see the student movement become increasingly monolithic, with a diminishing tolerance for dissonance as students relinquished their autonomy in favor of the 'party line'. For him, the growing force of the collective—in the form of the leading student organizations SDS and APO—at the expense of the individual not only seriously undermined the very goals the movement claimed to pursue—individual autonomy, equality, true democracy—but pushed it into dangerous proximity to the authoritarian tendency of society the students considered their ultimate enemy. Critical thinking seemed jeopardized: "It seems to me that the spirit of public criticism has suffered serious blows since it has been monopolized and thus compromised by political groups. I hope I am wrong",[102] he wrote in his last public essay in May 1969, two months before his death.

Just as Adorno's positions on the Kurras case and the *Notstandsgesetze* were informed and shaped by Germany's Nazi past (and its present repercussions, which he so acutely felt), so the shadow of what happened a quarter century earlier hovered, explicitly or implicitly, over his criticism of the student movement. In a podium discussion in September 1968, Hans-Jürgen Krahl, a leading figure of the movement and one of Adorno's students, who ended up turning violently against his teacher, accused Adorno

[99] Adorno, "Resignation", in GS 10.2:797.
[100] Ibid., 797–8.
[101] Adorno, Kritische Theorie und Protestbewegung, GS 20.1:400.
[102] Adorno, "Kritik", GS 10.2:792.

of "*fear* of praxis"—and in a sense, be it not the one he had in mind, he was right. Many of Adorno's objections with the student movement seem rooted in the fear to see the students go down the path too many collective actions do: the path of repression and violence. Still haunted by his experience of the 1930s in Germany, Adorno's acute sensitivity reacted idiosyncratically to the slightest sign of repressive behavior, of violation of the nonidentical. He perceived it not only in the "coercion to sign unconditionally", the "one-sided, terrorizing solidarity",[103] but also in what he saw as the replacement of open debate by "discussions in which it is decided in advance who is right",[104] the "precedence of tactics" over anything else, notably over "the right of minorities, which is constitutive of freedom".[105] And finally, he saw it in the actual physical violence that some of the students resorted to in the name of their cause: stone throwing, vandalism, arson, but also violent disruptions of classes and occupation of buildings, among them the Institute for Social Research.[106] "It doesn't take much to turn resistance against repression repressively against those who, as little as they may glorify the self, do not want to give up what they have become",[107] Adorno warned, adding: "Unmediated action, which reminds one of the blind punch, is incomparably closer to repression than the thought that pauses to take a breath."[108] In April 1969, still under the impression of the violent occupations of Frankfurt University's Sociology Department and the Institute for Social Research, Adorno voiced his fear, in a letter to Herbert Marcuse, that the student movement "[bred] in itself tendencies that directly converge with fascism", naming as symptoms "the barbarically inhumane, regressive behavior (…), the blind primacy of action, the formalism which is indifferent against content."[109]

The question of the primacy of action, and more broadly of the relationship between praxis and theory, was one of the most controversial

[103] Adorno, "Marginalen zu Theorie und Praxis", in GS 10.2:777.

[104] Adorno, "Resignation", GS 10.2:796.

[105] Adorno, "Keine Angst vor dem Elfenbeinturm", 622.

[106] In January 1969, a group of students led by Hans-Jürgen Krahl occupied the Institute of Social Research. When they refused to retreat, violently insulting the institute members, Adorno (who, according to his own account, was worried about potential damage to the premises for which he was legally liable), called the police. This event is commonly considered as the point of no return in the rift between Adorno and the student movement.

[107] Adorno, "Resignation", 10.2:795.

[108] Adorno, "Marginalien zu Theorie und Praxis", 10.2:776–7.

[109] Adorno, Brief an Herbert Marcuse, June 19, 1969, in: Kraushaar, *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung*, Vol. 2, 652.

issues in the virtual and actual debates between Adorno and the students. While he denounced their unmediated, "blind", in other words: unreflected actions, they accused him of retreating to the ivory tower of pure thought, in total disconnect from society and its necessary real life actions. Adorno, rather than outright rejecting the accusation, qualified its negative connotation: Thinkers, "rather frail instruments",[110] needed to remain at a certain distance from immediate action in order to "analyze ruthlessly",[111] which for Adorno meant without any consideration to a specific goal or outcome, without knowing ahead of time where the thought would lead. The relationship of such thought to praxis was, in Adorno's words, "very indirect".[112]

This is precisely where the crux of the disagreement lay. For the students, Adorno's insistence on theory came at the expense of practice. By failing to let his thought be followed by actions that would bring about the right life the former conjured, nor supporting theirs which tried to do just that, he betrayed not only their cause, they claimed, but also his own philosophy. Brandishing Marx's thesis of the unity of theory and praxis, the students denounced the disunity they perceived in his. But just as with the ivory tower, Adorno rejected the accusation not as wrongfully directed at him, but a faulty in its very substance. For him, the relationship between theory and praxis, and thus between his own thought and real-life actions, was far more complex than a call for unity—which in reality meant the submission of one to the other—allowed. Adorno unambiguously rejected Marx's thesis, equating it to a "fettering of thought" that "forcefully prescribes to thought the practical consequences it has to have".[113] Against it, he affirmed his unwavering conviction that "theoretical freedom and consequence must never be steered by a practical purpose"[114]—not just because that would mean a "censorship of theory",[115] a "prohibition to

[110] Adorno, "Resignation", 10.2:794.

[111] Adorno, "Keine Angst vor dem Elfenbeinturm", 621.

[112] Ibid.

[113] Theodor W. Adorno, Hans-Jürgen Krahl et al, "Ich bin der Bitte sehr gerne nachgekommen", Discussion during Adorno's lecture on Aesthetics, November 30, 1967, in Kraushaar, *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung*, Vol. 2, 328.

[114] Adorno, "Entwurf eines nicht abgesandten Leserbriefs an den 'Spiegel'", July 13, 1967, in Kraushaar, *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung*, Vol. 2, 271.

[115] Theodor W. Adorno/Ralf Dahrendorf, "Kontroverse über das Theorie-Praxis-Problem auf dem 16. Deutschen Soziologentag, April 9, 1968", in Kraushaar, *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung*, Vol. 2, 354.

think",[116] but because for him, complete freedom was the irremissible precondition for any thought that aspired to retain the possibility of change: "Only then has thought a chance to have any kind of practical effect if it doesn't let itself be shackled by the possibilities and postulates of a practice stemming from it"[117] Theory and practice were "neither immediately one nor absolutely different",[118] their relationship one of "discontinuity" where "alone contradiction has a chance to be fruitful".[119] Linked not through a mechanical connection of cause and effect, but by mutual mediation, theory and practice feed off each other without determining each other, each keeping its autonomy in mediation. In his most sustained effort to conceptualize the issue, his essay "Marginalia on Theory and Practice", Adorno returned to the *Hinzutretende* in his attempt to name that which eluded conceptualization in the complex interplay between thought and action, theory and praxis. The praxis Adorno advocates for is at the same time removed from theory and intimately connected to it. Removed, because it does not flow from theory in a linear way nor does it prescribe where the latter has to lead. It does not simply *translate* theory into action or, to paraphrase Adorno, realize a theoretical model with Molotov cocktails.[120] Yet it is intimately connected to its counterpart because without theory, praxis is "blind", and without praxis, theory is empty. Adorno called praxis "the power source of theory"[121] which within theory "appears merely, yet necessarily as its blind spot, as obsession with what is criticized"[122] Practice is the "obsession" behind the theory, what drives it—not as its required outcome, but as the possibility which theory keeps alive. Without the "detail [Einzelheit]", in other words without the singular, the nonidentical of true praxis, "theory would be naught".[123]

In the close interrelation of theory and praxis in Adorno's thought, there does eventually appear a form of unity—one very different, however, from what Marx had in mind. Rather than a unity of identical outcomes in which praxis dictates thought, it is a unity where thought, by "analyzing ruthlessly", by breaking through the context of delusion

[116] Adorno, "Resignation", 10.2:795.
[117] Kraushaar, *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung*, Vol. 2, 328.
[118] Adorno, "Marginalien zu Theorie und Praxis", 10.2:780.
[119] Ibid.
[120] See Adorno, "Keine Angst vor dem Elfenbeinturm", 620.
[121] Adorno, "Marginalien zu Theorie und Praxis", 10.2:782.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Ibid.

[*Verblendungszusammenhang*] of society, becomes a praxis in its own right, potentially more transformative than a praxis that tries to fence in unfettered thought and thus falls itself under the spell. "Is not theory also a genuine form of praxis?",[124] Adorno asks, almost defensively, in his last interview. For his own understanding, the question was rhetorical. In an early conversation with Horkheimer, he argued that "there was something delusional about the separation of theory and praxis",[125] and ten years later, in his radio lecture on resignation, he called open thinking "in itself a behavior, a form of praxis, closer to a transformative one than a thought that restrains itself in the name of praxis. In a way, thinking is, even before any specific content, the force of resistance."[126] The question of how that resistance turns from a subjective act into an objective force comes closest to an answer in the notion of "consciousness", more precisely in what Adorno calls "the foremost task of a moral philosophy today": the "creation of consciousness" (PMP 21/9). For Adorno, becoming conscious of a problem is the single most important step on the way to solving it. Applied to society, this means that "one of the most important preconditions for change" is for the ideological elements of society, its false identity, to "be made conscious (…) and thus lose some of their blind, fateful power".[127] In his interview with *Der Spiegel*, Adorno tentatively expressed the hope that his thought had done just that: "[My work] may have had a practical impact by instilling certain motifs into consciousness."[128] When asked by the interviewer how social totality could be changed without individual actions, he responded that he didn't know, only to immediately mitigate his statement by the reminder that "it has happened countless times in history that precisely works which had purely theoretical intentions *transformed consciousness and through it social reality*."[129] How much more so a work which did *not* have purely theoretical intentions? Adorno's philosophy, intimately intertwined with concrete human history, cannot be separated from a—however cautious—educational aspiration, the desire to ensure a continuity of consciousness that will keep open the possibility of a right life. "People who read what we

[124] Adorno, "Keine Angst vor dem Elfenbeinturm", 623.

[125] Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, [Diskussion über Theorie und Praxis] (1956), in Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1996), Bd. 19, 58.

[126] Adorno, "Resignation", 10.2:798.

[127] Adorno, "Kritik", 10.2:790.

[128] Adorno, "Keine Angst vor dem Elfenbeinturm", 621.

[129] Ibid. (italics O.C.S.)

write should have the scales fall from their eyes",[130] Adorno once confidently told Horkheimer. While he was not always that assertive, the belief that his writing and teaching could make a difference never left him. Accused of ivory tower philosophy, he affirmed his theory's transformative, subversive potential, opposing it to the students' "actionism",[131] which "through its collective coercion to a positivity that allows immediate translation into action (…) very much aligns itself with the dominant social trends."[132]

In the student movement's sit-ins, go-ins, occupations, disruptions and other "happenings", focused as they were on the immediate, the visible and the spectacular, Adorno saw the vital mediation with thought cut. Practice itself, rather than mitigating theory's identity drive, had become identical, with tactics and collective activism replacing open debate and reflective resistance. Failing to reflect adequately on the situation and the role of praxis within it, activity had become, in Adorno's words, "pseudo-activity: action that (…) self-incites in the name of publicity, without admitting the extent to which it serves as proxy, has become an end in itself".[133] Adorno's most devastating and also most controversial criticism, however, was not that the students did not think about what they were doing—it was that they did not think about what they were doing because if they did, they would have had to face the futility of their own actions. "One must fear the unfettered thought and those who refuse to renounce it because deep down, one knows what one cannot admit: that the thought is right",[134] he wrote in his essay "Resignation", seeing the students "cling to actions for the sake of the impossibility of action."[135] Adorno, in other words, did not just criticize the modus operandi of the student movement, but went as far as to question its very existence. There was no good modus operandi: "under current conditions", true praxis was "inaccessible".[136] The student movement, Adorno claimed, was "rooted in a complete misunderstanding of social power, the belief that intellectual discussion and

[130] Adorno, Horkheimer, [Gespräch über Theorie und Praxis], 53.

[131] Theodor W. Adorno, "Kritische Theorie und Protestbewegung", Interview with the "Sueddeutsche Zeitung", April 27, 1969, in: Kraushaar, 606.

[132] Adorno, "Kritik", 10.2:793.

[133] Adorno, "Resignation", 10.2:796.

[134] Ibid.

[135] Ibid., 10.2:795

[136] Theodor W. Adorno, "Kritische Theorie und Protestbewegung", Interview with the "Sueddeutsche Zeitung", April 27, 1969, in: Kraushaar, 606.

the invocation of higher principles can change power structures, and that demonstrations and spectacular practices can bring this change about. I would have to deny everything I know about society if I wanted to believe that this is possible."[137] This skepticism as to the possibility of true praxis was not a reaction to the student movement. In the very first paragraph of *Negative Dialectic*, which was first published in 1966, Adorno writes of the present impossibility of praxis in a passage that sounds like an anticipation of his differences with the students: "Praxis, postponed indefinitely, is no longer the authority that objects against self-righteous speculation, but rather an excuse to stamp down as vain the critical thought that transformative praxis would require" (ND 6:15/3). If praxis is inaccessible, indefinitely postponed, then "ruthless analysis" is not just one choice of action, but the only possible one. Adorno's conclusion, vigorously rejected by the students (and not only by them), must be read in a double context: One, the context of Adorno's understanding of "true praxis". And two, the context of the post-war West Germany of the 1960s, a young, fragile democracy in which the Nazi past, according to Adorno, lurked just under the surface.

Adorno's understanding of true praxis' was maximalist. True praxis had to be transformative—profoundly so. It had to take on and break open the all-pervasive *Verblendungszusammenhang* that defines modern society and prevents us from leading the right life. The *Verblendungszusammenhang*, as Adorno understood it, is made up of a net of intimately related elements that range from exploitative relations of production (the one point in which Adorno never stopped agreeing with Marx)[138] over the ruling culture industry to the all-powerful identity principle that governs public and private life. This was what true praxis had to tackle—if it was accessible. After "the transformation of the world [had] failed" (ND 6:15/3), leaving us with oppressive communist regimes in one part and fragile, less-than-perfect democracies in the other, Adorno saw praxis as shut—at least

[137] Theodor W. Adorno, "Es ist für einen älteren Universitätslehrer nicht ganz leicht…", in Kraushaar, 309.

[138] Adorno's critique of capitalism, which is not a focal point of the present study, is a function of his critique of identity thinking (or, as some would argue, the other way around). There is a direct link between the nonidentical's reification and fungibility in modern societies and the universalization of commodification and exchange value, just as the "identity spell" is intimately connected to the sheer might of capitalism. The two Adorno studies who most insistently foreground the capitalist reading are Rose, *The Melancholy Science*, and Jameson, *Late Marxism*, op.cit.

for now. In the Western world, the *Verblendungszusammenhang* of late capitalism was far too mighty, far too ingrained, to be transformed by any kind of immediate praxis. Change, if at all conceivable, had to begin with creating the conditions for the possibility of true praxis—and one of way of doing that, according to Adorno, was to create consciousness through theory. True praxis' ultimate goal was nothing less than the elusive *Glück* [happiness]—to transform the world into the paradise that it could, according to Adorno, here and now be.[139] Considering this distinct utopian undertone, Adorno's claim that the student movement fell short and was ultimately futile becomes more understandable. As his own interventions against the *Notstandsgesetze* and for university reform show, he was not opposed to targeted actions with clearly delineated goals, as long as they remained non-violent. Yet the movement's more sweeping ambitions—to "change power structures", transform capitalism, stop imperialistic wars—he considered illusory. These goals could only be attained by "true" praxis, which was out of reach.[140]

The second context to consider is the historical situation of the West Germany of the 1960s. Adorno acutely felt the fragility of democracy in a country with no real democratic history and with a Nazi past that he considered far from buried. Anything that could destabilize the however imperfect young Republic was a potential threat. Thus, when certain students interpreted Adorno's critique of their actions, his call for pause, analysis and reflection, as an attempt at appeasement that sided with the status quo, there was a grain of truth to their claim. While Adorno was the first to admit that a lot was wrong with post-war Germany, he also saw what was right, true to the epigraph of his *Minima Moralia*: "When everything is bad, it must be good to know the worst".[141] Having known the worst, and feeling its continuing threat, he was willing to side, however partially, with the bad. Acutely aware of the fascist tendencies in his

[139] "the world that could now, here be paradise (…)" Adorno, "Warum Philosophie?" in GS 10.2:471.

[140] In his analysis of why Adorno sees praxis as postponed for the foreseeable future, Fabian Freyenhagen identifies two decisive factors: one, that "the proletariat has been integrated into the capitalist social world in such a way as to blunt its revolutionary potential", and two, "that such a practice would presuppose free and possibly autonomous individuals [that] do not exist any longer" (Freyenhagen, "Adorno's Politics. Theory and Praxis in Germany's 1960s", in *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 40(9), 870–1). The two factors are of course related, and play a crucial role in the *Verblendungszusammenhang*.

[141] Quote by F.H. Bradley, in MM 4:94/83.

country, which he saw doubly exacerbated by the student movement—by certain traits within it as well as by society's reactions to it—, he believed that Germany's democracy, as flawed as it was, needed to be protected. When Krahl claimed in a debate with Adorno that German society was already fascist, Adorno rejected the rash identification, advocating differentiation and nuance:

> The difference between a fascist state and that which I believe to distinguish as a potential within the democratic framework is a difference *ums Ganze*. It would be problematically fanatic to ignore these differences and to consider it more important to fight the however inadequate democracy rather than the already very mighty enemy rearing his head.[142]

That the difference was for Adorno indeed a difference *ums Ganze* (one that changes everything) is manifest in his attitude to violence. In the interview with *Der Spiegel*, he affirmed that he had "the strongest reservations against any use of violence" and could "imagine a meaningful, transformative praxis only as non-violent praxis."[143] When the interviewer prodded: "Even under a fascist dictatorship?", Adorno responded without hesitation: "To real fascism, one can only react with violence."[144] Similarly, while he criticized the students' actions as "futile" in the face of the "true impossibility of decisive impact", he admired the actions of those who violently resisted the Nazi regime—independently of the action's real impact, of whether or not "the martyrdom was objectively wrong":

> Possible and admirable was the attitude on the outskirts of utmost horror that was taken on by the conspirators of the 20th of July [1944, the failed attempt at Hitler's life], who preferred to risk their own agonizing demise rather than to stay passive. (…) One cannot be scared enough of the world as it is. If somebody decides to sacrifice not only his intellect, but himself, then nobody is allowed to prevent him, despite the fact that some martyrdom is objectively wrong.[145]

Adorno was scared of the world as it is. Was his a "progressive fear of a fascist stabilization of monopoly capital [which had] turned into a regressive fear

[142] Adorno, Krahl, et al., "Ich bin der Bitte sehr gerne nachgekommen…", 328–9.
[143] Adorno, "Keine Angst vor dem Elfenbeinturm", 622.
[144] Ibid.
[145] Adorno, "Marginalien zu Theorie und Praxis", 10.2:778.

of the forms of active resistance against this systemic trend",[146] as Krahl contended? It is fair to assume that, as much as the stabilization of monopoly capital was of great concern to Adorno, the true root of his fear of a fascist resurgence lay elsewhere—that it had less to do with capital, and far more with the torturable body and what the various totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century had done to it, first and foremost in Germany. It is a fear that his students, blessed with the "mercy of late birth", were unlikely to share—if they had shared it, they might have judged less harshly Adorno's "regressive" fear of a potential backlash of the students' "forms of active resistance". As it is, there was mostly incomprehension. Just how deep the latter was comes starkly into the open in the critical obituary Hans-Jürgen Krahl wrote a few days after Adorno's death in August 1969. "Adorno was unable to translate his private passion in the face of the suffering of the damned of the Earth into an organized partiality of theory for the liberation of the suppressed",[147] Krahl deplores. Ignoring Adorno's plea for the independence of theory from any "organized partiality", he brands a failure precisely the insubmission of thought that Adorno considered its irremissible precondition, naming as desiderata of Adorno's theory the very characteristics the latter tirelessly denounced. "Thinking loses its authoritativeness if it cannot define itself in organizational categories", Krahl writes, seeing in the "inability to respond to the organizational necessity (…) an objective inadequacy of Adorno's theory."[148] Adorno would probably have taken as a compliment what Krahl meant as an ultimate condemnation: "Further and further did Adorno's dialectical concept of negation move away from the historical necessity of an objective partiality of thinking."[149] The ideological jargon makes one nearly miss the fact that Adorno's theory was likely much closer to Krahl's ideal than the latter suspected. For as much as Adorno rejected the submission of thought to any predetermined outcome (even "the liberation of the oppressed"), there is an a priori in his philosophy that precedes the theoretical reflection, and that results in a—be it implicit—partiality for the very same oppressed that Krahl conjures. It is manifest in Adorno's often reiterated description of philosophy as the attempt to "to give voice to the pain of the world, the suffering of the world" (VND

[146] Hans-Jürgen Krahl, "Der politische Widerspruch der Kritischen Theorie Adornos", in: Kraushaar, 674.

[147] Ibid.

[148] Ibid.

[149] Ibid., 675.

158/108), and it lies at the heart of Adorno's philosophy of the nonidentical, which could be described as the attempt to counter in thought identity thinking's compulsion to eliminate the nonidentical, oppressed other. Despite appearances, Adorno's thought may ultimately be more partial to the oppressed of this world than many openly politicized theories in which the determined jargon not seldom conceals a lack of depth.

What about *Adorno*'s incomprehension? "I'm the last one to underestimate the merits of the student movement", he wrote in a letter to Marcuse on the day of his death. "It has interrupted the smooth transition to the totally administered world. But there is a iota of insanity mixed in, in which the totalitarian is teleologically contained."[150] Did Adorno ultimately give too much weight to the iota of insanity, at the expense of the movement's merits? An objective evaluation of the student movement and its effects goes beyond the scope of this study. Suffice it here to point out that with a hindsight, some of Adorno's fears appear justified (most of the members of the German far left terrorist groups of the 1970s had been prominently involved in the student movement), while on the other hand, he may have underestimated the movement's benefits, as it arguably catalyzed more change in German society than Adorno expected.[151] In any case, there is no doubt that the differences between Adorno and the students were real and at times stark, in the assessment of the situation as much as in terms of the methods used. At the same time, it is legitimate to ask if the spectacular actions targeting Adorno, the fact that he was singled out by the movement's most "actionist" members—not least because of his "publicity value"—, did not distort the picture and make recede into the background—not only for the students, but also for Adorno—certain affinities that were just as real, as both parties, in their way, tried to stand up against the administered world. Similarly, and without belittling the differences on the subject of theory and praxis, one may wonder if Adorno might have been less harsh with the students' impulsive activism if it hadn't

[150] Adorno, Eilbrief an Herbert Marcuse, 6.8.1969, in Kraushaar, *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung*, Vol. 2, 671.

[151] There is no consensus on the matter—while some claim that the student movement triggered profound societal changes and was essential for the development of the modern Germany of today, others deny that the movement had any lasting impact and attribute the birth of modern Germany simply to the forces of progress and *Zeitgeist* (which again one could argue the students carried forward). See e.g.: Albrecht von Lucke, *69 oder neues Biedermeier. Der Kampf um die Deutungsmacht* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 2008).

been for the violence which he experienced firsthand (although one may contend that the former teleologically contained the latter). Let us recall here what Adorno writes in a key paragraph of *Negative Dialectic*:

> The difference between theory and praxis involves that praxis cannot be purely reduced to theory, nor separated from it. The two cannot be glued together in a synthesis. The undivided lives solely in the extremes, in the spontaneous impulse which, impatient with the argument, does not want to tolerate that the horror continue; and in the theoretical consciousness which, free of any heteronomy, understands why it nevertheless continues indefinitely. This contradiction alone is, in the light of the real powerlessness of all individuals, the place of morality today. (ND 6:281–2)

There seems to be a certain affinity between the two extremes invoked here, and the two sides of the conflict between Adorno and the student movement. On the one side, the students' "spontaneous impulse which, *impatient with the argument*, does not want to tolerate that the horror continue". On the other side, the teacher's "theoretical consciousness which, free of any heteronomy, understands why it nevertheless continues indefinitely". Even though Adorno had in mind a different horror, it is quite possible that under less confrontational circumstances, Adorno would have shown more understanding for the students' impatience with the argument, their "passion for justice"—as much as it sometimes misfired. Conversely, Adorno's vigorous defense of "theoretical consciousness, free of any heteronomy" must not make one forget that he was painfully aware of theory's own shortcomings, which he himself starkly expressed in a conversation with Horkeimer: "The discrepancy between the fact that Jews were beaten to death and buried alive because they were not worth the second bullet, and theory of which we expect that it changes the world."[152]

What remains, after studying the countless documents that trace Adorno's history with the student movement, is a feeling of incongruity at the depth of the misencounter. One cannot help the impression that, if things had gone but a little different, the opposition between teacher and students could have been fruitful—as the contradiction between the extremes that reveals to us "the place of morality today".

[152] Adorno, Horkheimer, [Gespräch über Theorie und Praxis], 40.

The Paralysis of Flawlessness: In Defense of Uncertainty

In the end, Adorno's philosophy could not satisfy the German student movement. The latter, like most popular protest movements, thrived on immediacy, visibility, concrete goals—"positivity that allows immediate translation into action".[153] By nature, it required a theory that could be declaimed, summoned, repeated, summarized, one that would lend its theoretical certainty to the movement's practical decisions. Adorno's philosophy does not meet any of these requirements—even more, meeting none of them may be considered its very essence. "Philosophy is essentially not expoundable [referierbar]", Adorno writes in *Negative Dialectic*. "Otherwise, it would be redundant; that it often can be expounded speaks against it" (ND 6:44/33–4). For Adorno, philosophy begins where certainty ends. It is the "infinitely expanded and elevated stuttering, (…), the attempt to say that which cannot be said" (KRV 271/178). In its quest for truth, philosophy must be completely open, vulnerable, be willing to lose itself in the object of inquiry. "Principally, it can always err; that's why it can win something" (ND 6:25/14). The nonidentical is the place of this vulnerability. While the prevalent identity thinking claims absolute certainty, Adorno's philosophy of the nonidentical holds that thought can only escape the tautological doubling of that which is if it exposes itself to uncertainty. Philosophy's paradoxical task is precisely that which Wittgenstein, in the name of epistemic certainty, wanted to prohibit: "to say by means of the concept that which technically cannot be said by means of the concept" (PT 1:56). Fully aware of the difficulty of the task, Adorno calls its goal utopian: "The utopia of knowledge would be to open up the non-conceptual with concepts without making it like them" (ND 6:21/10). Utopian, however, does not mean impossible.[154] Utopia is the

[153] Adorno, "Kritik", 10.2:793.

[154] In his comparison between Cavell's skepticism about other minds and Adorno's philosophy of the nonidentical, Martin Shuster neglects, in my view, the utopian aspiration of the latter, when he writes that "for Adorno, non-identity delineates a logical space where there is nothing to be *known*." (Shuster, "Nothing to Know", 12). While that may be true in the present state of our epistemic abilities (and the common understanding of what it means 'to know'), Adorno does not want to abandon the nonidentical to the unknowable, but harbors the utopian hope for a *different kind of knowledge* that would lead us to *know* the nonidentical (be it neither discursively nor conceptually). Adorno seems to believe that at least glimpses of that knowledge are within our reach. See Chap. 4 below (e.g. his view on children's ways of knowing). Similarly, when Shuster concludes that "Cavell and Adorno

name Adorno gives to "the consciousness of the possible" (ND 6:66/56), to what we can glimpse just enough to know that "what is, is not everything".[155] Philosophy therefore can and must hold on to the "however questionable confidence that it is possible; that the concept can transcend the concept, that which trims and cuts to fit, and can therefore attain the non-conceptual" (ND 6:21/9). This is much more than just a question of the limits of philosophical inquiry. What is at stake here is nothing less than the possibility of a different world, and with it of a right life. If thought cannot reach beyond its own concepts, if it surrenders to the categorical straitjacket of the identical, then "the mind capitulates" (ND 6:21/9), incapable to see beyond the *So ist es*. If that was the last word, then not only would there be no other possible world, "there would be no truth, everything would be emphatically nothing" (ND 6:21/9).

Adorno's insistence that truth is to be found in what the concept has "suppressed, neglected, discarded" (ND 6:21/9–10), in the nonidentical, the ungraspable, the uncertain, raises numerous questions and challenges. What good is a truth that is unsayable? How does a philosophy which explicitly makes the latter its terminus a quo and terminus ad quem, avoid to become itself unsayable, and ultimately irrelevant—esoteric rambling with no connection to our day-to-day reality? How can such philosophy defend itself against relativism or nihilism? The answer to these questions lies in an apparent paradox: For Adorno, the nonidentical is precisely the most concrete, and it is in order to remain relevant that philosophy must turn its focus toward it. By forcefully expelling anything that cannot be abstracted, subsumed under a concept, identity thinking erases the concrete—illogical, irrational, unpredictable singularity. Yet instead of becoming universal by "integrating", making the same the unwieldy particular, the purely rational becomes irrelevant: "The rule of its autarky condemns it to emptiness" (ND 6:44/34). Self-assured thought, impermeable to anything outside of itself that could question it, is caught up in a tautological spiral that it cannot escape. Only by exposing itself to the nonidentical can it avoid complete paralysis. Philosophy "must in its progress constantly renew itself, by its own force as well as by friction with that which it tries to grasp" (ND 6:44/33). Without friction, without the

share the idea that our basic relation to the world is not one of knowing" (18), it really all hinges on what is meant by "knowing". I don't think Adorno was ready to hand knowledge over to the kind of rational grasp it is commonly associated with.

[155] "Only if what is, is not everything, can what is be changed." ND 6:391/398.

hinzutreten, the joining in of pain, passion, impulse, resistance, the rational freezes to death, paralyzed by its own flawlessness. Certainty comes at the price of a mummification of thought that moves truth out of reach, for only a thought always prepared to lose the latter can, however fleetingly, apprehend it. The self-assurance of rational thought, once intended to ward off dogma, has put the mind into a new slumber—it has become "the social security of a knowledge to which nothing can supposedly happen. To the flawless, indeed nothing ever happens" (ND 6:45/35).

It is crucial to understand that Adorno's concreteness of thought is fundamentally different from the concreteness of theory the student movement sought out. It is not a concreteness that thought is applied to or serves, which for Adorno would have meant changing one straitjacket for another. Instead, it is a concreteness that lies at thought's root: "Not *about* the concrete one must philosophize, but out of the concrete" (ND 6:43/33). To fully comprehend what Adorno means by that, we must look at this sentence in a broader context. Earlier in *Negative Dialectic*, Adorno writes that the "transformed" philosophy that would draw the lessons from the failures of its predecessors would be "full, unreduced experience in the medium of conceptual reflection" (ND 6:25/13). The two statements seem at first sight to contradict each other. A philosophy stemming from "full, unreduced experience" would appear to be subjective in nature, whereas one that grows out of the concrete seems more likely to be objective. Adorno not only holds that there is no contradiction, but that the opposition between subjective and objective is itself constructed. As we have seen earlier, full, unreduced, "spiritual experience", which is but another term for Adorno's negative dialectic, is "contact with the warmth of things" (MM 4:47/42), thought that "loses itself in the object" (ND 6:43/33). Negative dialectic is "in a certain way more positivist than positivism (…). As thought, it respects that which is to be thought, the object, even where the latter does not follow thought's rules." To lose itself in the object does not, however, mean to lose itself. Dialectical thinking "is capable of thinking against itself without giving itself up" (ND 6:144/141). The mediation is vital to both: "Objectivity of dialectical knowledge requires not less, but more subjectivity" (ND 6:50/40). What may look to the skeptic like just another dialectical pirouette is in truth one of the centerpieces of Adorno's philosophy. That the relationship between the subjective and the objective is one of mutual dependence and enrichment, that "subjectivity requires facts and objectivity the subject", is indeed one of the most fundamental assertions of

Adorno's philosophy. This natural interdependence is, according to Adorno, unbearable only to those who "hypostasi[ze] the relationship of cause and effect, the subjective principle" (ND 6:144/141), and demonstrate by doing so the tautological entrapment of a thought caught up in its own categories. The question of the historicity of truth, central to Adorno's thought, is closely linked to the subject-object nexus. To admit that history has a bearing on truth, that "no word infused by the transcendent, not even a theological one, has unchanged a right after Auschwitz" (ND 6:360/367), means to challenge the hypostasis of the subjective principle. Without interdependence between subject and object, the centrality of suffering in general and of the Shoah in particular in Adorno's thought could not be understood—a centrality which, in keeping with the mediative nature of negative dialectic, is at the same time a consequence of Adorno's position on subject-object interdependence, and a contributing factor in the development of that position.

While the preceding observations make to it difficult to maintain that Adorno's philosophy is aloof, indifferent to the down-to-earth, the critique that it is by nature vague, uncertain and elusive, and therefore morally inconsequential, is at first sight harder to challenge. The fact that Adorno vindicates uncertainty as closer to the truth does not answer the question as to how a philosophy that is constantly, by its own admission, stammering, can be authoritative enough to fend off relativism.

The answer to this question is multilayered. First of all, Adorno does not claim that his philosophy of the nonidentical is unassailable—the very predication is oxymoronic. Truth is "floating, fragile by virtue of its temporal substance" (ND 6:45/34). Philosophy must therefore "let go of the consolation that truth cannot be lost" (ND 6:45/34). There is no guarantee, no safety net: "Against the risk of slipping off into randomness, open thought is unprotected" (ND 6:45/35). But the risk must be taken; it is the price to pay for the possibility of knowledge that goes beyond the "analytical, potentially tautological" (ND 6:45/34). Even more: knowledge is not seldom attained through the very failure to reach it.[156]

[156] Roger Foster remarks that "what matters for Adorno is what is revealed about our concepts in the very process of trying (and failing) to say something" (Foster, *The Recovery of Experience*, 33). The same can be said about the quest for truth: much can be learned from trying (and failing) to grasp it.

In his book on dominant theories of truth in Twentieth century continental philosophy, Lambert Zuidervaart writes that Adorno's concept of truth does not meet the requirement of public authentication, without which truth "is not truth at all" (Zuidervaart, *Truth in*

At the same time, open thought is not without foothold. Rather than through autarky and self-containment, it builds its strength through "the consistency of its realization, the density of its texture [*Gewebe*]" (ND 6:45/35). A thought that is consistently realized is not simply logically stringent. Logical stringency is indifferent about the object—taken on its own, unmediated, it is identity thinking at its most ruthless. Adorno's consistency of thought is stringency mediated by expression. In his philosophy, expression, *Ausdruck*, or more broadly: form, in other words all that is not pure, expoundable content, is at least as important as the latter. It is form in the broadest sense that makes a philosophy that refuses finality and vindicates fallibility compelling, even authoritative. Such a philosophy is "a behavior that does not guard anything first or unquestionable yet that, *through the stringency of its representations alone*, makes so few concessions to relativism—the brother of absolutism—that it approximates a doctrine [*Lehre*]" (ND 6:44/34).

Adorno naturally rejects the simple opposition of form and content; form, he writes, is "sedimented content" (AET 7:15/5). The further away a statement is from a simple predication—from the protocol sentence of the positivists—the more content will seep into form. In Adorno's work, form has many faces. First, it is simply the linguistic expression of an idea: the syntax and vocabulary chosen to convey a thought. Thought "becomes binding through linguistic expression; the laxly said is poorly thought." (ND 6:29/18). Second, form is the image that accompanies the thought. While Adorno rarely uses figures of speech such as metaphors, or allegories in the strict sense, he does resort to images—not in support of a philosophical statement, but *as* a philosophical statement. Related to the latter are images that accompany Adorno's thought in the background, Auschwitz being the name of the most omnipresent of them. Finally, there is the rhetorical element of language, which is strongly vindicated in Adorno's work, through its presence in his writing as well as through

Husserl, Heidegger and the Frankfurt School, MIT Press, 2017, 91). The question of what constitutes truth is too vast to be decided here. It seems, however, that the requirement of public authentication at the outset disqualifies certain conceptions of truth (particularly of the comprehensive, non-propositional nature), and that Adorno's aspiration to save the non-identical may be irreconcilable with that requirement (at least in the present state of our epistemic abilities). Whether a truth that is not fully shareable and communicable is still truth is debatable, but it is a question that cannot be decided one way or the other without presupposing a particular idea of truth that precedes the answer.

philosophical endorsement. In all these shapes, and their in-betweens, form plays a fundamental role in Adorno's philosophy. As the—in the broadest sense—aesthetic element, it gives voice to what discursive conceptuality alone cannot express, the nonidentical, thus bringing the "barrenly correct" closer to the truth. Not least, it is the way through which authoritativeness enters into a thought that is aware of its own fragility: "Philosophy must retain the aesthetic moment in the binding nature [*Verbindlichkeit*] of its insights into the real" (ND 6:26/15). The *Verbindlichkeit* stems not from instructions as to what to think, but from a way of thinking; not from norms, but from a "texture" [*Gewebe*] of thought in which the aesthetic plays a decisive role. In light of that centrality, and of the intimate relationship between the aesthetic and the nonidentical, a close analysis of Adorno's aesthetical writings, and of the different aesthetic elements in his writing, are crucial for an understanding of his philosophy. It is therefore to form—the form of Adorno's philosophy and his philosophy of form—that the third and last chapter of the present study will be devoted.

CHAPTER 4

Philosophy of Art, Art of Philosophy: Adorno's Aesthetic Utopia

Art is not to be subsumed under the concept of reason or rationality—rather, it is that rationality itself, only in the form of its otherness, in the form of a certain resistance against it.
—Adorno, Lectures on Aesthetics

A Palace Built from Dog Shit: On Art After Auschwitz

"To write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric"—of Adorno's vast and multidisciplinary work, it is a truncated statement on art that remains to this day inseparably tied to his name. As tends to happen with quotations that enter the public realm, Adorno's words have rarely been presented in their larger context—quite the contrary. Quickly dubbed "Adorno's *Diktum*", what is in reality a curtailed sentence plucked from the very end of a 20-page essay has been treated like an aphorism, in complete disregard of the rest of the essay, let alone Adorno's work. Yet as inadequate as this treatment is, those who ignore the dictum's context may ultimately be less wrong than it appears. Indeed, the sentence does have a meaning by itself, and the essay, important in its own right, does little to explain it, let alone lessen its force. It merely serves as a frame, which the *Diktum* shatters to point far beyond it.[1] The sentence in question appears at the end of

[1] For an overview of the German response to Adorno's dictum from poets and writers, see Petra Kiedaisch, *Lyrik nach Auschwitz? Adorno und die Dichter* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1995).

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O. C. Silberbusch, *Adorno's Philosophy of the Nonidentical*,
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"Culture Criticism and Society", written in 1949 in the Californian exile. The essay examines the aporetical situation of the culture critic in modern society who, himself part and product of the culture he sets out to pass judgment on, and compelled to unquestioningly hold an idealized notion of culture as a measuring rod, unwittingly strengthens the overarching structure which is ultimately responsible for the individual cultural products and phenomena he criticizes. Whatever he does, he plays into the system: Criticizing the travesty of culture modern society is left with, he strengthens the powers that want to do away with the latter altogether: "The struggle against deceit works to the advantage of naked terror. 'When I hear the word "culture", I reach for my gun', said the spokesman of Hitler's Reichskulturkammer."[2] Even the most commercial cultural product may still contain a vestige of the redemptive promise that culture once carried. Yet if the critic defends it against its barbaric enemies, that promise is equally betrayed, as the product in question does obviously not fulfill it. The totalizing trend of modern society has shattered culture's claim to autonomy and transcendence. "By relinquishing its own particularity, culture has also relinquished the salt of truth, which once consisted in its opposition to other particularities".[3] Reification is all-encompassing, dragging everything down with it into the abyss—even the voice that claims to denounce that very same state of affairs: "Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter."[4] Whereupon follows the sentence that interests us: "Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism: to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric, and that corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today."[5] Read in the larger context of the essay, Auschwitz could thus simply be seen as the paroxysm of the totalizing and reifying process Adorno denounces, an interpretation which seems supported by what immediately follows the "dictum" (and ends the essay): "Absolute reification (…) which is now preparing to absorb the *Geist* entirely" represents a challenge to which the latter "cannot be equal, as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation."[6] So is Auschwitz just an example of absolute reification,

[2] Adorno, "Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft" in GS 10.1:20.
[3] Ibid., 10.1:29–30.
[4] Ibid., 10.1:30.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid., 10.1:34.

which Geist in its contemplative nature cannot "be equal to"? This reading is certainly not wrong, but it reveals only a small part of what Adorno had in mind. Crucially, Auschwitz is not simply cited as an example, in the sense of "an example as something indifferent in itself, which Plato introduced and which philosophy has since repeated" (ND 6:10/XX)—Auschwitz as "absolute integration", the apex of the nonidentical's annihilation by identity, brings reification into its own, and by doing so irrevocably changes the meaning of the latter. The example, rather than something indifferent in itself, shines back on and transforms what it came to exemplify. The challenges that face poetry, meanwhile, and art more broadly, go far beyond the contradiction between the Geist's intrinsically contemplative nature and the horrors of a reality that turn contemplation into an act of indefensible passivity. What is at stake is the role and place of art and the artwork in society, in man's engagement with the world—a role which, as we will see, Adorno envisioned more broad than any other major Western thinker, with far-reaching epistemological, ethical and sociological implications. To strengthen this claim, I will begin by examining the *Diktum* and its various iterations and traces in Adorno's work in constellation with some of his other writings.

An early aphorism of *Minima Moralia* points to a recurring motive of Adorno's thought that plays a prominent part in the *Diktum*: affirmativity. "Even the tree that blossoms lies the moment one perceives its bloom without the shadow of terror; even the innocent 'How beautiful!' becomes an excuse for the infamy of a reality that is different" (MM 4:26/25). There is so much horror in the world that anything beautiful is inexorably tainted and threatens to become a lie, a deceit. We can safely assume that in this aphorism of 1944, which begins with the words: "There is nothing harmless left", Adorno had in mind the same "terror" that would move him ten years later to declare poetry not only impossible, but barbaric. The aphorism anticipates an interpretation of the dictum that later comments by Adorno support: that it must be read not as an unconditional prohibition, but as a warning, a reminder of the conditions the artist hitherto faces. For the three that blossoms does not lie irremediably—it lies only if we perceive it without the "shadow of terror", without the consciousness that its beauty grows on a scene of unspeakable horrors. Beauty must wrest itself from the negativity and never take its eyes off it: "(…) There is no beauty left and no consolation except in the look that faces the horror, withstands it, and, in unreduced awareness of the negativity, holds on to the possibility of a better [world]" (MM 4:26/25). For Adorno,

beauty's aporetic entrapment with horror is not simply a historical contingency, but an essential paradox intrinsically linked to art's foundation: "What beauty still flourishes below the horror is a mockery and ugliness to itself. And yet, its ephemeral figure attests to the avoidability of horror. Something of this paradox lies at the foundation of all art" (MM 4:137/121). The idea that culture is utterly inadequate in the face of the horrors of the twentieth century yet at the same time needed so as to ward off the worst, will return in different variations throughout Adorno's work. More than once, we find the same almost visceral outcry, the same "It's all over" that made it to such fame through Adorno's dictum. In an essay from 1962, "Those Twenties", he writes: "The idea of a culture resuscitated after Auschwitz is illusory and countersensical, and every creation that comes into existence at all must pay a bitter price for it."[7] Yet the categorical verdict is immediately qualified. Because, countersensically, "the world has survived its own end", art must, countersensically, continue to come into existence, for not to do so would mean handing Auschwitz another victory. "The world needs art as its unconscious historiography."[8] Therefore, and without taking back his assessment of the illusory nature of the undertaking, Adorno puts his faith into the "authentic artists" to somehow be able to navigate the aporia. Rather than disappear altogether, art must make the wound its own and integrate the abyss of its own negation into every single one of its creations: "The authentic artists of the present are those in whose works the utter horror still trembles."[9]

The most extensive discussion of the dictum is found in two later works, an essay on *l'art engagé* from 1962, "Engagement", and *Negative Dialectics*. In neither does Adorno mitigate, let alone retract his earlier words—quite the contrary. The relevant passage in "Engagement" begins with the unambiguous sentence: "I do not want to mitigate the sentence that writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric." Those who are not familiar with—or unwilling to follow—Adorno's dialectic of tensions may read the continuation of the passage as a contradiction: "It contains negatively the impulse that animates engaged poetry". Like in "Those Twenties" and *Minima Moralia*, Adorno upholds both the impossibility and the necessity to challenge it. Culture after Auschwitz is barbaric,

[7] Adorno, "Jene Zwanziger Jahre", in GS 10.2:506.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.

a truth that does not spare the philosopher either ("that corrodes even the knowledge…"), yet the only possible response to it is to do the impossible *in full awareness that it is impossible*. The fact that Adorno terms this awareness "impulse" here is significant. It is the very same impulse that, as I have argued earlier, animates his entire philosophical endeavor. Let us step back for a moment to reflect on the obvious question: Where is this impulse rooted? Why is art/philosophy/culture after Auschwitz impossible? What makes Adorno hand down such a damning verdict on what is commonly considered as representing the best in man? The answer has much to do with culture's self-understanding, as Adorno spells out in a passage from *Negative Dialectic* that eloquently expounds the inextricable conundrum of the artist and intellectual that lives and works "after the end of the world":

> [Culture's] palace, as Brecht says in a magnificent passage, is built from dog shit. Years after this passage was written, Auschwitz has irrefutably demonstrated the failure of culture. That it could happen in the midst of all the traditions of philosophy, art and enlightening sciences says more than simply the latter's inability to move and transform people. It is in these traditions themselves, in their emphatic claim to autarky, that the untruth lies. All culture after Auschwitz, including its urgent critique, is garbage. By restoring itself after what happened in its world without resistance, it has fully become the ideology that it potentially always was, ever since it pretended to infuse material existence, in opposition to it, with the light that the separation between *Geist* and physical labor deprived it of. He who pleads for maintaining the radically guilty and shabby culture becomes an accomplice, while he who rejects culture directly promotes the barbarity that culture turned out to be. Not even silence escapes the vicious circle. (ND 6:359–60/366–7)

Culture's fall is so great because so is its claim—its palace may be built from dog shit, but it is still a palace. Its failure to "move and transform people" is so shattering because it betrays its implicit or explicit promise to do just that. Since the beginnings of mankind, culture has elevated men above their purely natural existence, pushed them to go beyond themselves, carrying within it the assumption that the world will be a better place from it. At the same time, it has always, at varying degrees, requested autonomy from this world. Elevating man beyond his natural existence means leaving the sweat, pain and suffering of that existence below, in the far distance: "Art promises through its mere existence to dispense us from the omnipotence of the reality principle" (AES 80/48). Culture, and

emphatically art, separates itself from the "physical labor" that is the lot of most of those it pretends to address, it looks at the world from behind the safe walls of its palace, and it is in this "emphatic claim to autarky that the untruth lies." This cultural indifference (which even so-called political art cannot fully free itself of) has revealed its fundamental coldness long before Auschwitz. In the Odysseus chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno notes the "cold distance of [Homer's] narration" as he describes the hanging of disloyal maidservants by an island king: "With unmoved serenity, as inhuman as only the impassibility of the greatest novelists of the nineteenth century, [Homer] depicts the fate of the hanged", the "precision" of the account "already emanating the coldness of anatomy and vivisection" (DA 3:98/61). And that is just the extreme that shines a light on the normalcy. Art is entangled in the *Schuldzusammenhang* not only when it coldly aestheticizes the horrors of reality, but even when it shapes much more innocent material—like, for example, a tree in blossom—, simply by virtue of its detachment from a reality in which such horrors happen unresisted. Auschwitz has brought this disconnect to a paroxysm, the sheer scope of the cruelty and the suffering making any attempt to raise above it no longer just an act of coldness, but a barbarity, an outright impossibility. Again, the truth is laid bare in the extreme. In his book-long critique of Martin Heidegger *Jargon of Authenticity*, which I will further examine below, Adorno quotes Otto Friedrich Bollnow's[10] review of a 1950 poetry collection by Werner Bergengruen:

> O.F. Bollnow writes: "That is why it seems particularly significant that after all the terrible experiences, a new feeling of *Seinsbejahung* [affirmation of Sein] begins to transpire in the literature and poetry of the last years, a joyful and grateful consent with man's own *Dasein* as it is and with the world as he encounters it. (…). Bergengruen's newest book of poetry, *The ideal World* (Munich 1950, p. 272) closes with the confession: 'What came from pain, was but fleeting. And my ear heard, nothing but praise'. It is therefore a feeling of grateful consent with Dasein. And Bergengruen is certainly not a

[10] Otto F. Bollnow (1903–1991), a German philosopher and educational theorist whose collected works were recently republished, considered himself a critical disciple of Heidegger. From Adorno's point of view, it is worth noting that Bollnow, who joined Rosenberg's anti-semitic *Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur* in 1933, signed the loyalty oath of university professors to Hitler and became member of the NSDAP in 1940, continued his academic career after the war undisturbed and received numerous awards and honors, including the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1983. See Ernst Klee, *Das Personenlexikon zum Dritten Reich. Wer war was vor und nach 1945* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 2005), 62.

> poet one could accuse of cheap optimism (…)" [O. Bollnow, Neue Geborgenheit, Stuttgart 1956, 26–27]. The book by Bergengruen is only a few years younger than the time when Jews who hadn't been sufficiently gassed were thrown alive into the flames, where they regained consciousness and screamed. The poet, whom one could certainly not blame of cheap optimism, and the philosophically inclined educator who reviewed him, heard nothing but praise. (JE 6:429/24)

Bollnow and Bergengruen exemplify perfectly what Adorno means when he says that writing a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric. An abyss gapes between Bergengruen's ear that hears nothing but praise and the barely died away screams of the Jews who were thrown alive into the flames, and it is that abyss that poetry, and art and culture more broadly, henceforth dangle from. One could object that Bergengruen's "grateful consent with Dasein" is hardly representative of all poetry, which is certainly true. But the impossibility that Bergengruen, according to Adorno's reading, so blatantly violated, extends to all artistic productions. Some of the reasons have already been mentioned: art's detachment from the reality it shapes into its creations; its inherent affirmativity; its formative claim. All these premises, Auschwitz has quite literally reduced to ashes. The only way out of complete paralysis is not to look away, like Bergengruen and Bollnow, but to "face the horror, withstand it, and, *in unreduced awareness of the negativity*, hold on to the possibility of a better [world]" (MM 4:26/25). One possible reading of "facing the horror" would be that the artist must take that very horror as the new, inescapable material of artistic engagement with the world. But how then would he escape the trap that Homer fell into? According to Adorno, there is no escaping it. Even Arnold Schönberg, the Austrian-Jewish composer Adorno deeply admired, failed, despite his most noble intentions. Commenting on Schönberg's piece "A survivor from Warsaw", which sets to music the herding up of Jews destined for extermination, Adorno writes that the fact that "hell" is "made into an image" violates the victims' dignity:

> Something is made out of [the victims], artworks prepared for consumption by the world that killed them. The so-called artistic rendering of the naked bodily pain of those bludgeoned with rifle butts holds, however remotely, the potential to squeeze out pleasure. Morality, which obligates art not to forget even for a second, slithers into the abyss of its opposite. By virtue of the aesthetic principle of stylization (…), the unthinkable fate appears as if it had some meaning: it is haloed, something of its horror taken away. By this alone, injustice is done to the victims, while no art that avoids their plight

> could pass the test of justice. Even the cry of despair pays its dues to the despicable affirmation.[11]

The "despicable affirmation" trips up even the best artistic intentions. At issue is not only the clash between the factual horror and the pleasure its artistic rendering can potentially elicit,[12] but also the artwork's inherent propensity to convey *meaning*—a keyword in Adorno's struggle with the post-Shoah world. There is no meaning in the "unthinkable fate" of the victims, and to pretend otherwise is "gibberish", as Adorno writes in a sentence from *Negative Dialectic* quoted earlier: "The feeling which, after Auschwitz, rejects any affirmation of the positivity of existence as gibberish, injustice done to the victims, and revolts against the fact that a meaning, however trite, be extricated from their fate" (ND 6:354/361). Not only is the Shoah devoid of meaning, but it has forever shattered the possibility to attribute a positive meaning to existence. The implications of this statement go obviously far beyond the realm of art, questioning not only any quest for meaning—of which philosophy is part—but ultimately all human pursuit, including life itself. The latter, radical conclusion was not alien to Adorno, as one of the later variations of the original dictum, an implicit response to Paul Celan, shows:

> Perennial suffering has as much right to express itself as the tortured has the right to scream. That's why it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz, one could no longer write poetry. Not wrong, however, is the not less cultural question whether one can still live after Auschwitz, whether he who escaped by chance and should have been murdered even has the right to do so. (ND 6:354/362–3)

[11] Adorno, "Engagement", in GS 11:423–4.

[12] This clash (compounded by commodification) is also the basis of Adorno's critique of the popular protest music of the 1960s: "I believe, in fact, that attempts to bring political protest together with 'popular music'—that is, with entertainment music—are for the following reason doomed from the start. The entire sphere of popular music, even there where it dresses itself up in modernist guise, is to such a degree inseparable from commodity, from consumption, from the cross-eyed transfixion with amusement, that attempts to outfit it with a new function remain entirely superficial…And I have to say that when somebody…sings maudlin music about Vietnam being unbearable, I find that really it is this song that is in fact unbearable—by taking the horrendous and making it somehow consumable, it ends up wringing something like consumption-qualities out of it." Interview with Adorno, viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-njxKF8CkoU (accessed 07/11/2016).

What looks like a retraction—and was often considered one—turns quickly into a radicalization of the original statement, taking it to its abysmal apogee. What is questioned is no longer just the right of art and culture to reaffirm themselves after Auschwitz, but that of existence itself.

This conclusion is less surprising if we take into account what I noted at the outset of this inquiry: the centrality of art and the aesthetic in Adorno's thought. Art is for Adorno not simply a well limited compartment of human endeavor, an outlet for creativity and refuge of the beautiful. Rather, the aesthetic is intimately intertwined with cognition and lies at the center of Adorno's attempt to rethink the subject-object relationship and to integrate the nonidentical into our engagement with the world. In this light, Adorno's *Diktum* takes on a whole other meaning. If artistic expression is challenged, it is not only our aesthetic future that is at stake, but our future as human beings. Conversely, it is under such premises only natural that an unprecedented historical catastrophe would have a profound impact on the possibilities of artistic creation. It is therefore with the *Diktum* in mind that I will now turn to a closer examination of the role and weight of the aesthetic in Adorno's philosophy. Let us begin with a look at Adorno's own reflections on the nature of art, and the place of art and the artwork in the world as it is and as it could be.

A Realm Apart

"Art", Adorno writes, "is the secularization of the sacred sphere hallowed by a taboo" (AES 75/45). It is a "marked-off sphere" (AES 76/46), a "separated special domain", "bracketed out of the world, within the world [*in der Welt aus der Welt ausgeklammert*]" (AES 77/46), which "stands in opposition" (AES 78/47) to empirical reality. We have seen above the dangers of this detachment, its affinity with passive contemplation and its easy slip into the aesthetic sanctioning of a reality that allows no transcending. I will now turn my focus to the other side of the coin—the promise contained in this fragile autonomy, in art's otherness, its however threatened redemptive potential. For Adorno, the aesthetic, and art in particular, is closely connected to the nonidentical in all its dimensions. Its—be it limited—freedom from societal constraints, from "the hustle and bustle of the empirical world" (AES 78/47), predestines it to be the place where the silenced other, that which utilitarian rationality expels, gropes for expression. Just how close the affinity between art and the nonidentical is, is spelled out when Adorno, in his lecture on aesthetics, outlines the

underlying "idea of art": "[W]hat ratio, law, order, logic, classifying thought, all these categories make disappear, finds a voice, receives its due, against the odds" (AES 69/41). Art is an attempt to rescue "that which falls victim to the expanding concept of the mastery of nature" (AES 79/47); in art's realm, "the oppressed, that which is not ratio, is given a voice" (AES 84–5/50); and finally, art is "historiography from the point of view of the victims; and that which is ultimately expressed in artworks is always the voice of the victim" (AES 80/48). The intimate connection between the aesthetic and the nonidentical, the fact that art "embodies or represents that which has given way to *ratio*" (AES 68), point towards art as the locus of a possible answer to reason's shortcomings, a possibility that forms the core of Adorno's focus on the aesthetic.[13] It is this affinity that makes Adorno's aesthetic theory not just a reflection on taste and the beautiful, but a theory on how to engage the world, how to think, how to know—a theory on how to "arrange [our] thinking and conduct in such a way that Auschwitz will never repeat itself, that nothing similar will ever happen". Adorno, the philosopher who never stopped mourning the artist he did not become,[14] intuited the aesthetic as the place from which another way of thinking could stem, the place where reason could shed its identical straitjacket and allow itself to be affected by the nonidentical. Before examining the implications of this possibility, let us have a closer look at its premises: What gives art the capacity to express what conceptual thought cannot grasp? Where does art's affinity with the nonidentical come from?

Art's most obvious advantage over conceptual thought when it comes to apprehending the non-conceptual is that it is essentially non-conceptual itself: it does not signify, but (re)present. Art's singularity is thus closely connected to the dualism of sign and image, and to the fact that when the two were separated in the wake of the victory march of rational mastery, the image and its characteristics were handed over to art. Adorno and Horkheimer examine that historical process in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Reflecting on the fate of the image in language and expression, the authors

[13] For a look at the genesis of Adorno's aesthetic theory and its relationship to Benjamin's thought, see Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectic*, 122–35.

[14] In a letter to his friend René Leibowitz, Adorno wrote: "It requires no long explanation that the fact that, due to my biographical fate, and certainly also due to certain psychological mechanisms in my life, I have not remotely achieved as composer what I continue to believe that I could have achieved, is a trauma that has impacted my entire existence." T.W. Adorno to René Leibowitz, 3.10.1963, in *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter VII* (München: text + kritik, 2001), 61.

analyze the transition from myth to logos and the irreducible entanglement of the two. In the speech of the mythical preacher, they write, "sign and image coincided" (DA 33/12). Rational enlightenment puts an end to that: "With the neat separation of science and fiction, (…) the division of labor enters into language. As sign, the word is assigned to science, as sound, image, as actual word, it is distributed among the various art forms (…). As sign, language is supposed to settle for calculation, in order to *know* nature renounce the claim to resemble it. As image, it is supposed to settle for likeness, in order to fully *be* nature renounce the claim to know it" (DA 34/13). The image is no longer the bearer of truth it was in the time of myths and hieroglyphs. *Because* it resembles nature, it cannot know it—thus the verdict of a science for which the disembodied sign alone is neutral enough to provide pure knowledge. Philosophy, sensing the "abyss" opened by the separation, set out to rethink "the relationship between intuition [*Anschauung*] and concept" (DA 35/13)—yet overwhelmingly sided with the concept, transforming mythical unity into identity imposed by the sign. Plato "banned literature with the same gesture as positivism later banned his doctrine of ideas" (DA 35/13), affirming Homer's irrelevance for human affairs on the grounds that Homer's art had "neither won a war nor made an invention".[15] Literature, intertwining sign and image, failed the philosopher's usefulness test. Already in Antiquity, the image was thus discounted because it fell short of the standards set up by the sign. As a result, it remained confined to the clearly demarcated realm of the aesthetic, of taste and pleasure, its truth tolerated in the shadow of a rational, scientific truth to which it was deemed irrelevant. If scientific truth was challenged at all, it was not by aesthetic but religious truth—and even then not generally to the benefit of the image. Thus, Luther's Reformatory purge reinforced the hegemony of the sign as it took the "the transcendent principle of truth" away from the image to place it in the word itself—a move which, as we have seen, Adorno blamed for the "obedience to the word, and not the holy one" that played such a detrimental role in Germany's history.

The answer is not, however, a simple return to the mythical unity of sign and image—as Adorno and Horkheimer point out, their separation is "ineluctable" (DA 34/13). But it must not be "hypostatized", for the two isolated principles move inevitably towards the "destruction of truth"

[15] Ibid. See in particular Plato's *Ion*, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, edited by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 215–28.

(DA 34/13). The dialectic of sign and image demands not unity but its anamnesis, a consciousness of the lack that the separation left in both. The sign must carry within it the image as determinate negation, as its non-identical, just as true dialectic "reveals every image as script", expanding the boundaries of language so it be "more than a mere system of signs" (DA 41/18). What does it look like when the sign remembers the image? At first sight, the latter seems to be a danger for the former. Essentially non-conceptual, the image slips away from the sign's grasp, thus turning into a hazard for the latter's claim to certitude. To approach the image, the subject must forsake that claim and make itself receptive—and thus vulnerable—to the object in a way that objectifying conceptualization eschews. Image and sign each entail a fundamentally different subject-object relationship. It is in this difference, in other words: in the potential of aesthetic experience, as turned towards the appearance rather than the concept, to alter our cognitive engagement with the world, that Adorno's focus on the aesthetic is rooted.

The Fate of Mimesis

One concept, or rather: one behavior, whose pathological inversion we encountered in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*'s analysis of antisemitism, plays a prominent role in Adorno's aesthetic focus: mimesis.[16] Described by Adorno as the "nonconceptual affinity of the subjectively produced to its unposited other" (AET 7:86–7/54), mimesis engages the world without subjugating it. Closer to representation than signification, it has historically shared the fate of the image. After being disqualified by rational thought as a valid approach to cognition, mimesis had to retreat—and found "refuge" in art, "the organ of mimesis since the mimetic taboo"

[16] Despite the fact that Habermas dismissed Adorno's mimesis early on as insufficiently theorized (see Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), mimesis has been far from absent in Adorno scholarship. Josef Früchtl, *Mimesis: Konstellation eines Zentralbegriffs bei Adorno* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1986), looks at the various occurrences of the term in Adorno's work, without however lingering much on the meaning of their constellation. Karla Schultz, *Mimesis on the Move: Theodor W. Adorno's Concept of Imitation* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1990) traces the concept through Adorno's aesthetic writings and explores its Freudian undercurrents. Britta Scholze (*Kunst als Kritik. Adornos Weg aus der Dialektik*. Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2000) focuses mainly on the mimetic relationship between artwork and natural beauty (136–82).

(AET 7:169/110). Adorno's mimesis is only loosely related to the historical meaning of the term. He "stresses less the (Aristotelian) element of imitation than the aspect of making-oneself-the-same, the passive losing oneself. What matters for him is the unreserved abandon to what is facing us without knowing where it will lead."[17] In mimesis, Adorno writes, "the outer becomes the model against which the inner nestles [sich anschmiegt], the unknown becomes the familiar" (DA 3:212/154)—not by being forced into rational categories so as to resemble the reason that tries to grasp it, but by affecting a subject open to that which is other than itself. Adorno seems to presume a primeval time in which mimesis defined the human engagement with the world, but he does not tell us much about that golden age, focusing mainly on mimesis' gradual effacement. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, animistic rituals and magic invocations are presented as a transitionary stage of the mimetic impulse: "The [shaman] magician assimilates himself to the demons; to scare them or to placate them, he behaves scared or gentle" (DA 3:26/6). The magician still nestles up to the object of his magic, but he is already driven by a subjective goal. Animist mimesis, absolutized and purpose-bound, aimed at control and thus foreshadowed subsuming reason. Crucially however, it differed in one significant aspect from the latter: it did not impose the subject's template on the object, conceptual unity on nonconceptual multitude. It addressed the singular, not the exemplar, and thus allowed for difference, or as Adorno would put it: for the nonidentical. Its mastery did not come in the disguise of an all-encompassing, identical *Geist* appropriating all meaning, but as a contingent, unique respite, repeated over and over again—every object its own unique image rather than a specimen. Mimesis sees the object as something new, each time. With the victory march of reason and the conquest of nature through disenchantment and categorial subsumption, the "old diffuse representation" was displaced by the unified concept, truth equated to the ordering of the unwieldy world into neat compartments [*disponierendes Denken*] (DA 3:30/10). Adorno rejects Freud's claim that magic possessed "the unshakable confidence in the possibility of mastery over the world"—that confidence, he says, came only with science. As the latter enthroned the neutral sign and pushed the image to the aesthetic sidelines of cognition, the mimetic suffered the same fate. It became taboo, a suppressed residue, an unwelcome reminder

[17] Ruth Sonderegger, "*Ästhetische Theorie*" in: Richard Klein, Johann Kreuzer, Stefan Müller-Doohm (eds.), *Adorno Handbuch* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2011), 417.

of the painful process of alienation that man had to go through to become nature's master. Just like the image, mimesis was banished by *logos*, deemed cognitively irrelevant—a marginalization that has come at a high price. By discarding the non-objectifying engagement of the subject with its other as a valid element of cognition, reason has pushed the non-conceptual, the nonidentical, beyond its identifying grasp, leaving the truth it can attain irremediably lacking: "That to which mimetic behavior responds to is the *telos* of cognition which the latter, through its own categories, blocks out" (AET 7:87/54). Rational thought's suppression of mimesis is self-defeating. As a response to the telos of cognition, the mimetic is *also* rational and must be allowed to *join in* to save rational thought from tautological solipsism. Just like the *Hinzutretende*, Adorno sees mimesis as part of the larger force field of the nonidentical, in a necessary mediation with reason. "Ratio without mimesis negates itself" (AET 7:489/331), and the reverse is equally true: in pure mimesis, the subject, instead of enriching the object with its own subjective experience, simply erases itself. Truth requires the dialectic of both: it needs the self-conscious subject to mitigate its own identity drive by "losing [itself] in the object". With mimesis no longer a socially sanctioned form of cognitive behavior, the only place where this dialectic can still materialize today is in the "organ of mimesis since the mimetic taboo", art. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno writes that the "dialectic of rationality and mimesis [is] immanent to art" (AET 7:86/54), the latter "a mimetic in the midst of rationality [which uses] the latter's tools", as "the subject (…) confronts its other, separated from it and yet not completely separated" (AET 7:86/53). How does mimesis play out in art? What exactly is mimetic in art? Is it the artist's creative act, the artwork itself, or our engagement with it? As will soon become clear, for Adorno it is all of the above.

The Artist as Accoucheur

Adorno places artistic creation between two dialectic poles: "expression [Ausdruck]" and "construction [Konstruktion]". Expression is the material moment, the reality the artist is confronted with, the demand it puts on her. Expression is what the material—be it the tree to be painted, the scene to be lyricized, the rock to be sculpted—wants to say, before it is constructed, shaped into something by the creative act of the artist. Expression is raw, literally in our face, "a mimetic residuum, a

moment left over from the otherwise tamed nature" (AES 81/49). It is what the aptly named expressionism wanted to make art's sole pillar: "to let suffering speak directly" (AES 97/59), as Adorno puts it. For Adorno, "expression is always expression of suffering" (AES 81/49). Does that mean that every object suffers? The answer is yes—at various degrees. At one end of the spectrum, the object's suffering consists simply of its *being* an object, "tamed nature", of its reduction to a "for someone", cut to fit the subject's predeterminations. At the extreme end, the suffering turns into true physical suffering, torture of the torturable body, violence done by the powerful to the powerless. In both cases, the object's suffering is a function of the subject's mastery over it, over nature. Expression is the object's silenced scream that the artist's construction brings out into the open. It is a "mimetic residue", the not yet objectified voice of the object, that which does not signify, but *mime*, represent, speak non-conceptually; Adorno likens it to a "mimetic stirring" (AES 113/69). Construction is the other side of the coin. It is the artist's response to the object's demand, and as such it is equally mimetic: "For the artist, to command the material means nothing else than to surrender to this material as purely as possible, to gain the freedom to the object [*die Freiheit zum Objekt*]" (AES 109/67). In other words, the artist needs to nestle up to the object, lose [himself] in it; he needs to see the object for what it uniquely is, free of the subjective categories that want to latch onto it and turn it into a specimen. Adorno defines the artist's construction as "the effort to extract purely out of the object [*Sache*] and purely out of the postulates of that *Sache*—yet through all the work of the organizing artistic conscience—precisely the objectivity [of the material]" (AES 103/63). To command means to surrender—this is, in a nutshell, the essence of the subject-object relationship Adorno' negative dialectic aspires to, and which art so sharply foreshadows. The true artist does not objectify. She is the midwife that helps the object's objectivity come forth. Her artistry does not consist of imposing a form, a message, a mold onto the material, but of allowing it to express itself, its suffering, through her art. Adorno goes so far as to assert that in art, "the so-called creative act is reduced to something infinitesimal, a kind of boundary crossing" (AES 110/68). The claim is odd only if we equate infinitesimal with negligible, irrelevant. But the infinitesimal contribution of the artist is vital—without it, the artwork would not exist, its objectivity remain buried. While for the

ultimate essence of the artwork, the artist's intention may be secondary (Adorno maintained that—for art as well as for philosophy—what the [artist/philosopher/writer] had in mind was irrelevant[18])—it is the latter's creative act, her talent, which brings this essence into being. It would therefore be wrong to conclude that Adorno considers the artist a mere tool at the service of a transcending objectivity. A tool is fungible, exchangeable: a hammer will always be a hammer. The artist, on the other hand, is unique, and while her subjective *intent* is not determinative, her subjectivity is. The Kreutzer Sonata could not have been written by anybody but Beethoven, even if the final artwork is significantly more than what its creator had intended. "Creations of the mind [*geistige Gebilde*] are not the expression of the intent of their creator, they are the vanishing of this intent in the truth of the thing [*Sache*] itself" (PMP 138/92). It is a Hegelian vanishing however, in the sense that the subjective intent is "*aufgehoben*" in that truth, in every sense of the word—abolished, lifted up, preserved.

Artistic creation, with its strong mimetic element, is a perfect illustration of Adorno's concept of mimesis, and it illuminates why the latter is so central to the other way of thinking his philosophy seeks. The artist-subject does not erase himself by losing himself in the material-object, but enters into a dialectic that gives him a freedom the rational, conceptualizing subject-object relationship does not have—*die Freiheit zum Objekt*. Mimesis is a kind of cognitive empathy, or empathetic cognition, a compassionate relationship to the object in which the subject's "making itself the same" is not limiting, but liberating, allowing it to see beyond the narrow framework of its own subjectivity and of the powerful patterns perpetuated by society's identity spell. The artist "frees himself from his entanglement in immediate purposes" (AES 28/14), from his drive for self-preservation and self-affirmation. The greatest artworks are those in which the artist's construction and the material's expression are indistinguishable—the artist's subjectivity, has, as it were, sublated itself into the material, creating the work's objectivity.

[18] See for example: "I have not tried to explain to you what Kant himself was thinking as he was thinking [was Kant sich bei seinem Denken gedacht hat], something which I consider perfectly irrelevant to a philosophy." KRV 121/78; see also AES 216–7/135–6.

Wirf weg, damit Du gewinnst: The Utopian Promise of Aesthetic Experience

The mimetic encounter between subject and object is stored up in its result, the artwork. Art essentially consists of that very dialectic, which takes place within it at all times. This is likely what Adorno means when he says that "art is imitation, but not imitation of an object" (AES 70/42). It is "the attempt to recreate, through its gesture and its overall attitude, a state of affairs in which (…) the relation of similarity, that is of relatedness between subject and object, was prevalent, rather than the antithetical separation of the two that we have today" (AES 70/42). The artwork contains that relatedness—which presided over its creation—and moves those who seek to truly engage it to mirror the mimesis. Thus the "gesture and overall attitude" of similarity also shapes aesthetic experience from the point of view of the beholder. Aesthetic experience moves us, according to Adorno, "away from the subject", away from the overwhelmingly conceptual, objectifying engagement with our reality. In everyday life, the latter's primacy is crushing. We constantly, whether fully consciously or not, conceptualize the world around us, even when there is no immediate need for it, that is to say: no intention of communication. When we see a dog walking towards us in the street, the concept "dog" swiftly latches on to that experience, even if we have no intention of verbalizing it. Our minds are so conditioned that we cannot look at a phenomenon without having the "appropriate" concepts immediately swirl around it, whether we called them up or not. Aesthetic experience, Adorno claims, moves us away from this constitutive subjectivity: "Aesthetic behavior is the unimpaired corrective of the reified consciousness that wants to claim totality" (AET 7:488/330). The artwork is not grasped by us, we are grasped by it, it "absorbs us as we enter it and follow it" (AES 193/120)—in other words, we nestle up to it, lose ourselves in it. The subject experiencing aesthetically is willing to "hear the unheard of" (DA 3:54/28), to be affected by the object, to let the ungraspable stand without subjugating it. This experience, when "genuine" (AES 196/122), can be extremely liberating. Adorno speaks of "breakthrough", of "the feeling of being lifted out, (…), of transcendence over mere existence" (AES 196/122), and calls these moments of aesthetic experience moments "of being overpowered, of self-forgetting, of extinction of the subject" (AES 197/123). As he immediately clarifies, it is not the artwork extinguishing us, it is *us* extinguishing ourselves, a self-extinction that can procure moments of authentic

"happiness" (AES 197/123). It is the same kind of self-extinction that shaped the creation of the artwork, and just like the latter it is not a loss but a gain. Aesthetic experience is not an erasure of one's individuality, of the singular, suffering self, but in many ways quite the opposite—it is Friedrich Hebbel's "Lose so that you can win [*Wirf weg, damit du gewinnst*]" that Adorno loved to quote, or as he put it elsewhere in regards to the artwork, a way "to demonstrate in this losing oneself (…) the actual strength to find oneself again" (AES 183/114). The question of why the subject needs to throw itself away in order to find itself again—the core question of Adorno's philosophy—brings us back to themes treated prominently in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Minima Moralia:* the formation of the identical self, and the withering of experience. Both remind us that the first victim of identity's suppression of the nonidentical is not the object, but the subject itself: "Terrible things did men have to do to themselves before the self, the identical, purposive, virile character of man was formed, and something of that recurs in every childhood" (DA 3:50/26). The first nonidentical to be crushed is the subject's—everything within the self that does not quite fit the only framework rational thought will tolerate: that of logic, coherence and accountability. What does that mean for our experience? What is sacrificed *within ourselves* when we force the world into Procrustean bed of conceptual logic? It is our own sensory awareness of the thing in front of us—an awareness that, unfettered by the limitations of constitutive categories, is so rich that it has the potential, any given moment, to burst the boundaries of conceptualization. Forced to discard the diffuse, the vaguely intuited, the contradictory, everything we cannot quite conceptualize, we are left with an impoverished experience and thus with an impoverished self. As the unsayable is disqualified, parts of the self are forced into silence and left to wither away. The claim that intuitions without concepts are blind quite literally blindfolds the intuiting subject, shutting out a rich array of sensations, emotions and impulses that have no place in the "identical, purposive, virile character of man". The thus impoverished subject has no choice but to project its own experiential paucity onto the objects it tries to comprehend, thus cognitively mirroring its own privations and erasing the nonidentical twice—in itself and in the object. The result is a world where everything is fungible: the objects around us, our way of (not) experiencing them, and ultimately ourselves.

"To Reclaim Childhood"—Excursus on Another Refuge of Mimesis

If something of the battle between identity and nonidentity recurs in every childhood, as Adorno claims, it invites us to have a closer look at a part of humanity that philosophy has routinely ignored: children. The overwhelming majority of Western philosophers—with the notable exception of Rousseau, and later Benjamin[19]—show no interest in children, considering man's so-called pre-rational stage philosophically irrelevant. Not so Adorno. For the very same reasons that his peers hold children in philosophical contempt, Adorno looks at them with a mix of nostalgia and hope: because they remind us of the parts of our beings that we "did terrible things to" in order to become rational, identical adult selves. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*'s phylogenetic account of the transition from myth to logos is mirrored ontogenetically in every childhood: our first engagement with the world is not only non-conceptual, it is profoundly mimetic. The child's play echoes the mimetic rituals of ancient cultures as "children at play do not sharply distinguish between themselves and the role they play" (AET 7:485/328). But mimesis is not just a game, it is what turns children into humans: "Humanity [*das Humane*] is tied up with imitation: a human being becomes human by imitating other human beings" (MM 4:176/154). The child will naturally "nestle up" to the world rather than grasp it through concepts—until social and familial norms begin to work against the natural impulse. Education "cuts off [children's] regress to mimetic forms of existence", encouraging instead the "objectifying behavior that prevents them from losing themselves in the ebb and flow of surrounding nature" (DA 3:205/148). But traces of the mimetic linger on, even once conceptual identification has set in and begins to push out the nonconceptual impulse. What remains is a muted hunch, an "unconscious knowledge whispering into children's ears that what civilizational education suppresses is what it is all about"—that what rational thought throws overboard, "miserable physical existence", may ultimately be closer to "absolute knowledge" (ND 6:359/366) than even the most brilliant philosopher's attempt to reveal it. In an autobiographical passage I quoted earlier, Adorno powerfully evokes what it is that is forgotten:

[19] Shierry Weber Nicholsen points to the importance of children in Benjamin's writing and the latter's possible influence on Adorno in this matter. See Nicholsen, *Exact Imagination, Late Work*, 141–5.

> In front of the eyes of the child who liked him, a hotel owner whose name was Adam clubbed to death rats swarming out of holes in the courtyard. It is according to his image that the child modeled that of the first human. That this is forgotten; that we no longer understand what we once felt at the sight of the dogcatcher's wagon, is the triumph of culture, and its failure. (ND 6:359/366)

What is lost is the sensory awareness of the object as something else than just an object of cognition, the awareness of its "miserable physical existence"—whether that object be a rat, a dog, or a tree. Mimesis, in which the subject assimilates itself to the object, does not allow to block out that object's singular being and hence its suffering (be it actual physical suffering or the suffering of objectification). In yet another autobiographical passage, Adorno vividly evokes the physical inability of the still mimetically cognizing child to block out the "miserable physical existence"—even against his own attempts to rationalize it away:

> Early in my childhood, I saw—for the first time—men shoveling snow, in thin, shabby clothes. In response to my question, I was told that these were people out of work, who were given this job so they could earn their bread. "That serves them right that they have to shovel snow!" I yelled angrily, only to immediately break into uncontrollable sobbing. (MM 4:217/190)

The incident shines a glaring light on the contradictory forces at work within the boy, who at first tries to rationalize what he sees, in keeping with the model proposed by the adults: these men are out of work, we give them work so they can eat. He even tries to outdo the parental model by making explicit what their explanation implies: this is how it should be, this is the order of things. Yet the mimetic legacy, not yet silenced, breaks through the rationalization and makes the boy nestle up to the men freezing in their rags. Against the 'better judgment' of his rational self and in stark contrast to the angry confidence exhibited by the latter, he breaks down, overwhelmed by their miserable physical existence. The fact that in this instance, rational thought fails so conspicuously to block out the non-identical, to prevent the mimetic assimilation to the suffering men, highlights just how well it usually succeeds.

Conceptualization eliminates everything that makes an object unique and thus alive. It is, in Adorno's characteristically stark wording, mimesis to the dead: "Mimesis ans Tote" (DA 3:76/44)—instead of mimesis of

the unchartered, unpredictable object, it is mimikry of the subjectively predetermined and thus silenced (dead) object.[20] Hence the intrinsic indifference of rational thought, in every sense of the word. Because the objects in the child's world are still singularly alive (the broom turned monster is but the colorful tip of that iceberg), the world has a sensory and cognitive richness, which rationalization puts an end to: "Precisely the ability to differentiate, to perceive the qualitatively different, is the mimetic legacy in children that the adults force them to lose [*ihnen abgewöhnen*] as they make them see reason [*sie zur Raison bringen*]."[21] In his lectures on *Negative Dialectic*, Adorno equates that same mimetic legacy to the very ability to think philosophically: "The ability to think philosophically is essentially the ability to experience the crucial differences [*Differenzen ums Ganze*] in the minimal differences, in the differences *ums Kleinste*" (VND 53/31). The mimetic legacy is not enough to make all children philosophers, but it makes them more attuned to the minimal differences that form the indispensable substrate for philosophical experience. To think philosophically is to look at something as if we had never seen it before. While we indeed most often have not, conceptuality acts as if we had, thus preventing us from seeing the object's singularity: "The concept smugly pushes itself in front of what thought wants to grasp" (ND 6:17/5). The simple fact that children don't yet have that many concepts waiting to push themselves in front of the world and to cut off further engagement with it, makes them naturally mimetic, and thus more receptive to the kind of differentiated experience that informs philosophical thinking as Adorno understands it. "Their spontaneous perception [read: without a concept blocking the view] still grasps the contradiction between the phenomenon and the fungibility that the resigned perception of the adults can no longer see, and tries to escape from it" (MM 4:260/228). Adorno perceives in the child's interaction with the world traces of a different, pre-conceptual way of cognition that sees things as what they are, and not just as what they are for us. Pretend play, in its irreality and its lack of purpose, takes things and actions "out of their mediated usefulness",

[20] In this respect, Jay Bernstein remarks "how ruthlessly dry and dead are the objects of perception with which philosophy has classically dealt: impressions and ideas, qualia and sense data, synthesizing perceptual manifolds (…) and so on. Even G. E. Moore's 'This hand I see before me' is more ghost hand than living one." Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 257.

[21] Adorno, "Zur Musikpädagogik" in: *Dissonanzen. Einleitung in die Musiksoziologie. GS 14*, 117.

thus "remaining faithful to their inner calling [*Bestimmung*]" outside of the "process of abstractions that levels that calling" (MM 4:260/228). The irreality of the child's world is thus not simply, as adults like to think, the result of a lack (of conceptualization, of perspective, of sense of reality) but just as much of a richness not yet lost. Adorno sees in the child's play nothing less than a glimpse of utopia: "The irreality of [children's] games tells us that the real is not yet real. They are unconscious exercises towards the right life" (MM 4:261/228). The fact that children's exercises towards the right life are unconscious does not mean, however, that they don't have a—however dim—understanding of the latter. Just like in the case of the "unconscious knowledge" that whispers into children's ears, it is an inarticulate, intuitive understanding, one that does not translate into conceptual terms, yet that still has a cognitive dimension. The child "understands what [he feels] at the sight of the dogcatcher's wagon"—but he cannot express it, which disqualifies this knowledge in the eyes of rational adults, and eventually—once he has come to "see reason"—in his own.

The universe of children is not just another refuge of mimesis next to the aesthetic realm, but intersects at various places with the latter. The mimetic, non-objectifying moment in the subject-object relationship, the nonconceptual knowledge that stems from it, the utopian element, the stress on "minimal differences", and not least: the element of play—these are but some of the (interrelated) aspects common to art and the child's world. What unites these different elements is, as Adorno puts it in *Aesthetic Theory*, a certain resistance against the all-powerful principle of reality: "In the behavior of art survives something that does not comply with the principle of reality [*ein dem Realitätsprinzip nicht Willfähriges*], something of the child, something that the norms of the world term infantile" (AET 7:500/337). It is not that art represents an earlier stage of human development—rather, it draws on and activates faculties which the fully rationalized, identical self that embodies the mature stage of development *terms* infantile. In other words, "[art] is childish only by the measure of a pragmatically narrow rationality" (AET 7:71/43).

Aesthetic Vertigo

Whether in art or in childhood, mimesis counters the impoverishment of the world brought on by that narrowness. By assimilating ourselves to the object, that is by attempting to see the object as what it really is: an ungraspably rich nonidentical, rather than what we make it: a subsumed,

identified specimen, we render a richness to the object which will be reflected in our own experience of it, bringing us closer to reclaiming the sensory awareness of things that our conceptual rationality has truncated. Identity thinking cuts both ways (quite literally): The subject, by cutting to fit the object it objectifies, mutilates itself, and virtually shuts out the possibility of true knowledge of the world: real contact with the warmth of things. Mimesis brings back that lost warmth, the experience of the object as unique and alive—and in dialectic with the rational, it gives us a glimpse of what Adorno calls "the utopia of knowledge: to open up the nonconceptual through concepts without assimilating it to them" (ND 6:21/10). Art, as the locus of the dialectic of the rational and the mimetic, has the potential to edge us closer to that utopia, to the concept that can unify without "making the same". In art, "the evanescent is objectified and made to last: inasmuch, art is concept, though not like in discursive logic" (AET 7:114/73). As nonconceptual objectification, art keeps alive what Kant terms the "free play of the faculties of imagination and understanding", with the former not subjugated and enslaved by the latter. Aesthetic experience thus holds the truly utopian potential of giving us a glimpse of the nonidentical without and within. The experience of that glimpse, of the warmth of things, can be overwhelming for subjects conditioned to coldness, and it is the shock of that glimpse that explains the powerful nature of certain aesthetic experiences: "the feeling of being lifted out, (…), of transcendence over mere existence" (AES 196/122), "of being overpowered, of self-forgetting, of extinction of the subject" (AES 197/123).

The vertigo Adorno associates with aesthetic experience is thus simultaneously an extinction of the self and a heightened attunement to it. It is a temporary extinction of the "identical, purposive, virile" self, which provides an opening for the nonidentical, purpose-free self the former crushed; as a result, the "extinguished" subject feels not dead, but uniquely alive. As Adorno writes: "For a brief moment, the I becomes aware of the possibility to leave self-preservation behind" (AET 7:364/245), that is, to let go of the constrained unity of the self, the compulsion to 'make sense', and to step out of the *Verblendungszusammenhang*. It is only a brief moment, as the aesthetic experience alone "does not suffice to realize that possibility", yet that glimpse is enough for the subject to "feel the potential as if it were actualized" (AET 7:364/246). Aesthetic experience is thus truly utopian, insofar as it reveals to the subject that the *So ist es* is not

everything, that there is another possible, even if it is—for now—accessible only through a fleeting experience.

At first sight, there seems to be a parallel between the "self-forgetting" of aesthetic experience Adorno describes, and Kant's account of the sublime. The latter evolves around certain natural phenomena whose might is so disproportionate to the subject's faculties to grasp them that it is experienced by the latter as simultaneously beautiful and terrifying:

> Bold, overhanging, as it were threatening rocks, dark clouds piling up into the sky, moving with lightning flashes and thunder peals; volcanoes in all their destructive violence; hurricanes leaving behind a trail of devastation; the boundless ocean in a state of tumult; the high waterfall of a mighty river, and the like, turn our capacity to resist, in the face of their might, into an insignificant trifle.[22]

Kant goes on to state that "we like to call these objects sublime because they elevate the force of the soul above its usual mediocrity (…)".[23] Until here, one might be tempted to see Kant's experience of the sublime as a particularly strong instance of what Adorno sees happening in any aesthetic experience. Adorno himself hints at this when he writes: "The experience of anything beautiful does what Kant attributed to the sublime alone: make the subject aware of its own nothingness" (AET 7:396/266). We are thrown back onto our own vulnerability, our "torturable bodies", as it were. The result, as we have seen, is in both cases an elation: "the force of the soul [is elevated]" in Kant, we have a "feeling of being lifted out" in Adorno. However, when we look more closely at where the feeling of transcendence originates in each, we notice significant differences—indeed, Adorno seems to turn Kant on his head. Kant ascribes our feeling of elevation to the "discover[y] in ourselves of a capacity of a totally different sort, which gives us the courage to stand up against the seeming omnipotence of nature."[24] We realize that while we may be "physically impoten[t]"[25] against nature's might, we have the ability to transcend our purely physical being, to see ourselves as "independent from nature",[26] in

[22] Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, § 28, in Kant, *Werke*. Band 8, edited by Wilhelm Weischedel (Wiesbaden: Insel, 1957), 349.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, 349.

[25] Ibid., 349–50.

[26] Ibid., 350.

a different realm, so to speak, and from that vantage point, we are "superior to nature even in its immensity."[27] In other words, our physical being may be infinitely small and powerless in the face of nature's greatness, "in our mind", "in our rational faculty",[28] we discover that we can transcend that vulnerability, a discovery that makes the mind "feel its own sublimity", even over nature.[29] The terminological analogy is anything but incidental. In an ultimate Copernican twist, Kant takes sublimity away from the natural phenomena associated with it and relocates it in the mind: "Sublimity, therefore, is not to be found in anything of nature, but only in our mind (…)"[30]—in our own subjectivity and its ability to resist the feeling of empirical, objective annihilation.

In Adorno's aesthetic experience, the feeling of elation equally results from a strengthening of the subject, but both the way in which the latter achieves that strengthening and what it ultimately means are very different from what happens in Kant's account—in fact, they are almost diametrically opposed, reflecting Adorno's own Copernican turn against Kant's transcendental subject. In Kant, as we have seen, the overpowered subject finds in his subjectivity the power to resist the forces that crush him—his resistance is thus directed *against* the irreducible other. At the same time, it is a purely subjective resistance, relegated to the intelligible world, just like Kant's freedom. In Adorno, the "feeling of being lifted up" is the consequence of the subject's losing itself in the object, being absorbed by it; as Adorno puts it, "the subject extinguishes itself and finds its happiness in this extinction—and not in the fact that something is bestowed on it as subject" (AES 197/123). Adorno's *Glück* and Kant's *Wohlgefallen* thus find their source in two very different ways of engaging with the world and with our own vulnerable corporeality as part of that world. In Adorno, the vertiginous happiness results from the subject's freeing itself, for the brief moment of the aesthetic experience, of constitutive subjectivity, reclaiming a sensory awareness buried under the neat categories of conceptuality. In Kant, the pleasure stems from a reaffirmation of constitutive subjectivity and the transcendent power of reason in the face of a threat that has the might to transform us into a bundle of fear. In Adorno's aesthetic experience, the subject gives back to the object and finds joy in the unknown this

[27] Ibid., 349.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid., 350.
[30] Ibid., 353.

self-extinguishment reveals, in the object and in itself; it "become[s] aware of its own nothingness and goes beyond it"—not to its own overruling reason but "to what is other" (AET 7:396/266). In Kant, the subject *seemingly* effaces itself ("in the face of its might", we are but "an insignificant trifle"), only to forcefully reclaim its superiority, as its brief encounter with the non-silenceable claims of the other but affirms the power of subjective reason, to the point where the latter becomes itself the (one and only) sublime—thus robbing nature, and with it objectivity, of its most grandiose attribute. It is as if Kant had intuited that there is something about our corporeality, our vulnerability, that is as constitutive to who we are and to our place in the world as is our rational self, yet felt the need to relativize that insight, as it would have challenged the systematic coherence of his philosophical edifice.

The Normativity of Natural Beauty

Natural beauty occupies a central place in Adorno's aesthetic theory, a point in which he follows Kant, against Hegel. In Kant however, the focus remains subjective, as his account of the sublime perfectly exemplifies—nature *itself*, as the non-subjective other, is secondary, ultimately but a foil for the subject's own self-affirmation, or simply a source of pleasure. The beautiful object is beautiful not in itself, but only *for us*—a fact that holds for the flower no less than for the artwork. For Adorno, nature and natural beauty play an essential part in the subject's aesthetic engagement with the world. The latter originates as an engagement with nature, and that original encounter (Adorno calls it "*Urphänomen*") informs all aesthetic experience thereafter, initiating a "behavior that remains binding vis-à-vis every artwork" (AES 46/26). Nature, in the broad sense of that which is not subjective, plays also a key role in the artwork itself, providing the material and the medium for expression in the dialectic of expression and construction. Adorno thus not only affirms a close connection between natural and artistic beauty, but also unequivocally rejects Hegel's claim that the former is "inferior",[31] asserting its significance for the same reasons that Hegel discards it. Hegel's depreciation of natural beauty, Adorno notes, is a consequence of the fact that "all things fleeting or ephemeral are of little value

[31] Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, in *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, Band 13 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 190. For Hegel's justification of this assessment, see ibid., 190–2.

in [his] philosophy" (AES 42/23), a prejudice that makes him blind to what is the very essence of art: "It is precisely in this moment of fleetingness, of the not quite graspable, of that which cannot be pinned down, that art has its vital element" (AES 43/24). The fact that it is not quite graspable is inherent to the object of aesthetic experience, and plays a crucial role in the affinity of art and the aesthetic with the nonidentical and mimesis. What Hegel could not tolerate in natural beauty—"that [it] eludes determination by the mind" (AES 43/24)—is no less central in art; by rejecting it, "as by tendency everything nonconceptual, [Hegel] makes himself narrow-mindedly indifferent against the central motif of art: to grope for truth in what slips away, in the derelict" (AET 7:119/76). Art, as we have seen, has the potential to offer us a glimpse of something other than our subjectively constituted and neatly categorized world. For Adorno, the fact that it explodes our concepts, crosses the limits of our constitutive subjectivity, is its very essence; art forces us to acknowledge the latter's limits, and thus the limits of our objectifying object relationship. This is where the mimetic comes in: As our conceptual grasp flounders, we feel compelled to find a different way of relating to the object in front of us.[32]

For Adorno, this mimetic way of engagement is rooted in our engagement with nature as the other of our subjectivity, and it is exemplified in how we experience natural beauty. We cannot conceptually pin down what we find beautiful, there are no decipherable rules, yet there is a general agreement about it—what Kant called the "universal shareability of the aesthetic judgment",[33] and what Adorno expressed in the verdict that "he who is blind to beauty in nature remains the archetype of the boor [*Banause*]" (AET 7:113–4/73). Engagement with natural beauty is preconceptual, it requires "unconscious perception"—to the point where any attempt to conceptualize it threatens its very existence: "The 'How beautiful' in nature hurts its mute language and diminishes its beauty; appearing nature wants silence" (AET 7:108/69). We must perceive natural

[32] Kant himself was arguably well aware that his transcendental subjectivity could not account for the full range of our experiences; his *Critique of Judgment* could be considered an attempt to respond to this shortcoming. Tom Huhn writes: "The Critique of Judgment might be read as an attempt to rectify the [occlusion of the pervasiveness of subjectivity in representation], to reveal what has been concealed, and to offer a more sweeping, though less cognitive basis for subjective unity." Huhn, *Imitation and Society* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 115.

[33] See Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft, particularly §18–22, in Kant, Werke*, Band 8, 319–24.

beauty "involuntarily" or we will not perceive it: the more "one looks intently, the less one will be able to see [nature's] beauty" (AET 7:108/69). Often, it strikes us like a flash—the glimpse of the utopian that Adorno ascribes to aesthetic experience.

Despite all efforts to the contrary in early aesthetic theory, natural beauty cannot be reduced to rules, be it symmetry or other formal characteristics. It is not a characteristic, but a way of leaving all characteristics behind: an excess of form.[34] "What is beautiful in nature is what appears as more than what is literally there" (AET 7:111/70–1). That *more* is what makes the beautiful stand out, turning it back from a specimen into a singular object, irreplaceable and unique. The fact that "any part of nature [has the ability] to become beautiful" underscores that any object has the potential to go beyond its conceptual markers and reclaim its uniqueness. Does the subject simply bestow this unicity on the object by perceiving it as beautiful? If that was the case, then constitutive subjectivity would still have the last word: the object is unique only because we see it as unique. Adorno does not deny the subjective aspect of beauty, yet unlike Kant, he does not reduce beauty to it, but sees the latter as a dialectic between the subject's receptivity and the object's demands. Natural beauty stands out by "the degree in which something not made by man speaks: in [nature's] expression", and while such objective expression demands the subject's receptivity (any expression wants to be heard) "it cannot be reduced to the subject" (AET 7:111/71). Again, Adorno turns against Kant's Copernican turn, against the claim that beauty is in the eye of the beholder—not to upend it, but to mediate it. Beauty, according to Adorno, is both subjective and objective. Subjective, because beauty always *appears*, and thus appears to someone who receives it; objective, because beauty is a claim staked by the object, a demand put upon the subject: Look at me, look at my difference. The "consciousness that lovingly loses itself in something beautiful is *urged* to differentiate" (AET 7:110/70). We do not produce the object's demand to be seen as different, nonidentical, it is there independent of us, yet it is only by yielding to it that we perceive the object as beautiful. The request for a response is particularly imposing in the case of natural beauty. There is something humbling about the latter, even in our secularized world, because of the normative claim that emanates from the

[34] I owe the notion of an "excess of form" to Jay Bernstein's *Lectures on Kant's Third Critique* held at the New School for Social Research in New York, accessible at www.bernsteintapes.com. See notably the lectures of 10/31/07 and 11/14/07.

non-subjective other that we cannot grasp. "Natural beauty", Adorno writes, "points to the primacy of the object in subjective experience. It is perceived simultaneously as stringently binding and as something incomprehensible that waits quizzically for its resolution" (AET 7:111/71). These two sentences contain in nutshell what lies at the heart of Adorno's aesthetic theory, and by extension of his philosophy as a whole. Object primacy, bindingness, ungraspability and the enigmatic,[35] presented here as the defining elements of natural beauty, form the force fields around which Adorno's thought circles, revealing the centrality of natural beauty, or more precisely: of the challenges it poses, in the development of that thought. By forcing us to question the assumptions of our constitutive subjectivity, natural beauty "points toward the primacy of the object"—a primacy not limited to but rather brought out in the open by objects of natural beauty. Their "double character" (AET 7:111/71) of bindingness and ungraspability—where the former is irreducibly linked to the latter—has been bequeathed to art, which is defined by this legacy. Every artwork tries to imitate the rationally incomprehensible normativity of natural beauty: "Art does not imitate nature, nor beautiful objects of nature, but natural beauty as such" (AET 7:113/72). Art, in other words, is the attempt to recreate the "enigmatic quality" of natural beauty, its "objective strength" and the "weakness of thought" (AET 7:114/72–3) in the face of it, accessing thus a different way of signifying, outside of the narrow limits of discursive rationality, one in which the image *means* without the judgment of the sign. In an artwork, Adorno writes, "one is faced with an experience of 'meaning [*Bedeuten*]' as something objective" (AES 46/25), and it is in this claim to objective truth, and the ability of the subject to hear the work's claim rather than to project its subjectivity onto it—both aspects a legacy of natural beauty—that the essence of art lies. Adorno makes his Hegel's famous phrase of art as an "unfolding of truth" (AES 78/47),[36] yet rather than excluding natural beauty from that truth, he sees nature as its original source. "(…) Natural beauty gets very close to truth, but veils itself in the moment of closest proximity" (AET

[35] The enigmatic is an integer part of many of the elements examined in this study: natural beauty, aura, gaze, mimesis, the animal's otherness, uncertainty, and of course the nonidentical in general. For further analyses of the enigmatic in Adorno's philosophy, see Nicholsen, *Exact Imagination, Late Work: On Adorno's Aesthetics*, 150–7; Alexander Garcia Düttman, *So ist es. Ein philosophischer Kommentar zu Adornos 'Minima Moralia'* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2004), 55–63.

[36] See Hegel, *Werke*, Bd. 15: *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik III*, 573.

7:115/74)—its truth content being inseparable from that very elusiveness. The sentence brings to mind Benjamin's famous definition of aura: "the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be".[37] In his lecture on aesthetics, Adorno points out that Benjamin, who introduced this definition in his essay on "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility", significantly does not exemplify aura by pointing to a work of art, but to natural beauty, which shows that "the phenomenon [Benjamin] wants to describe in reference to the artwork is a phenomenon one apprehends in the contemplation of landscapes" (AES 44–5/25). The concept of aura touches closely on what defines, for Adorno, the singularity of the aesthetic object, whether artistic or natural. The auratic object is utterly compelling in (and because of) its unicity, its distance-closeness like an address one cannot eschew. Its claim is absolute, as absolute as, according to Adorno, the beautiful object's claim to beauty: "Every natural object seen as beautiful presents itself as if it were the only thing beautiful in the entire world; that is inherited by every artwork" (AET 7:110/70). Aura makes a thing stand out, which is why it often finds itself figuratively associated with a certain halo, a shine. Adorno uses that same image to speak of the phenomenology of beauty: "Any part of nature, just like anything made by man that has congealed into nature, has the potential to become beautiful, shining from within" (AET 7:110/70). Beauty and aura both stand for the ungraspable more that stops conceptualizing perception in its tracks and compels us to experience an object differently. When he tries to describe that more, Adorno explicitly connects it to aura:

> To describe that 'more', the psychological definition of *Gestalt* according to which a whole is more than its parts is not sufficient. For the 'more' is not simply the relationship but an *other*, mediated through it yet separated from it. (…) Benjamin has drawn our attention to this in his treatment of aura, whose concept approximates the appearance which, by virtue of its closedness, points beyond itself. (AET 7:122–3/79)

Benjamin, however, declared aura in irreversible decay, its constitutive unicity made impossible by the reproducibility of the mechanical age. As the above statements make clear, Adorno did not share that assessment.

[37] Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 1.2 (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1977), 479.

Without denying the challenges Benjamin focuses on, he criticized his friend's categorical verdict, implicitly blaming it for contributing to the state of affairs it deplores: "Not only the here and now of the artwork is, according to Benjamin's thesis, its aura, but whatever in it points beyond its givenness: its substance [*Gehalt*]. One cannot abolish the latter and want art" (AET 7:73/45). Benjamin transformed into a dichotomy between the auratic and the mass-produced artwork what is in fact a complex dialectic—a fact that Benjamin himself did much more justice to in an earlier essay on photography, as Adorno points out.[38] "Anything made by man that has congealed into nature has the potential to become beautiful" (AET 7:110/70)—and that includes mass-reproduced photos, or film scenes. What makes things made by man shine is not so much a de facto unicity as the fact that something in them opposes swift subsumption (despite and against their reproducibility) and addresses us, forces us to look at them as if they were the only thing in the entire world. Aura is precisely the moment of *resistance* against what Benjamin so acutely felt; it is "that which recedes, which is critical against the ideological surface of existence" (AET 7:89/56). By burying it too soon, we are burying the glimpse of utopia that refuses to accept the *So ist es* as the last word. The "obtrusive popularity"(AET 7:89/56) of Benjamin's essay has—unintended by its author—furthered the demise of the auratic, yet somehow, against the odds, aura persists: "And yet, in the by now socialized rebellion against aura and atmosphere, that crackle [*Knistern*] in which the 'more' of the phenomenon makes itself heard has not simply vanished" (AET 7:123/79). It is that crackle that turns the object of aesthetic interest into something "stringently binding and (…) incomprehensible that waits quizzically for its resolution" (AET 7:111/71). In other words, the elusive 'more' that speaks through beauty, aura and aesthetic expression is what aesthetic experience ultimately hinges on. Without it, the aesthetic object becomes identical, conceptualizable, predictable, and aesthetic experience—which for Adorno is the model for authentic experience—is lost. Mimetic engagement is triggered by the inability of the subject to wrap its rational mind around the object: something eludes the ready-made concepts, a crackle that addresses us and that we cannot comprehend. Where Benjamin sees aura, Adorno, widening its phenomenological scope, sees a nonidentical "more" that can make *any* object shine,—"the

[38] AET 7:89/56. See Benjamin, "Kleine Geschichte der Photographie", in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 2 (1) (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1998), 368–85.

trace of nonidentity in things under the spell of universal identity" (AET 7:114/73), as he writes in an arresting definition of natural beauty. It is the expression of the object, what it says without our being able to translate it into discursive knowledge. The intimate relationship between aura and the nonidentical explains Adorno's claim that "the allergy against aura, which no art today can escape from, is inseparable from the erupting inhumanity" (AET 7:158/103). Aura is like a wall that places itself between the subject and its urge to subsume and objectify. Without it, there is no stopping identity thinking with all its injurious consequences. Unsurprisingly therefore, aura is—in its various guises—pervasive in Adorno's thought. It plays notably a crucial role in his intertwined reflections on animals, the gaze, and aesthetic semblance.

"I Am a Rhino": The Aura of the Speechless Gaze

Adorno's concept of aura, as we have seen, implies a *demand* emanating from the object, an "experience of objective meaning", of the object addressing us. This idea of address is cogently expressed in a passage from *Aesthetic Theory* where Adorno reflects on the non-conceptual language of art:

> Etruscan vases in the villa Giulia are intensely *eloquent* [*sind sprechend im höchsten Mass*] and incommensurable to all communicative language. The true language of art is speechless, its speechless moment has primacy over the significative one of poetry, which even music is not completely lacking. The vases' similarity to language accords most closely with a 'Here I am' or 'This is me', a selfhood which has not been cut out of the interdependence of all being [*alles Seienden*] by identifying thought. In the same way, a rhino, the mute animal, seems to be saying: 'I am a rhino'. Rilke's verse 'for there is no place/which does not see you' which Benjamin thought highly of, has codified this non-signifying language of artworks in an unsurpassed way: expression is the gaze of artworks. (AET 7:171–2/112)

The vases' and the rhino's "selfhood", their "gaze" that says "Here I am", resists identity thinking and its urge to "cut [things] out of the interdependence of all being". The onlooker is swept up into that interdependence, her categorial apparatus silenced by the imposing self-assertion of the speechless object that refuses to vanish into the concept. The result is a unique appearance of distance in proximity as the object returns our

gaze. The subject is no longer solely responsible of shaping the encounter, but must take into account the mute demand of the object. Aura draws us into mimesis.

The two objects in this passage stand for the two intimately connected elements of auratic objectivity in Adorno's thought: history, and the living gaze. The history of the object as the presence of time past is for Adorno an indispensable moment of the aesthetic. Natural beauty is thus not found in the classic ideal of "untouched" nature, but rather in the "interplay of natural and historical elements" (AET 7:110/71): "A group of trees will stand out as beautiful—more beautiful than others—where it appears, however vaguely, as the mark [*Mal*] of a past event" (AET 7:110/71). That trace of history is precisely what we determined earlier to be the nonidentical in every object, whether natural or man-made: the sign of life turning identity into "history in suspension [*sistierte Geschichte*]" (AET 7:110/71). The Etruscan vases' gaze is the enigmatic expression of two thousand years of suffering, the "caleidoscopic" interplay of nature and history, testimony of the object "made by man that has congealed into nature". Benjamin similarly speaks of the "historical testimony" of an object as constitutive of its "authority"[39]—and thus of its aura.

In Adorno's "aesthetic domain", Shierry Weber Nicholsen writes, "subject and object, consciousness and matter, the human and nonhuman are on equal footing; (…) a language is 'spoken' without subsuming the object to concepts through definition and conceptual identification."[40] How far does this "aesthetic domain" reach? The second example in the passage quoted at the outset of this chapter seems to take us outside of the boundaries of what is commonly considered the aesthetic. The rhino is neither an object of art nor does it fit the classic standards of natural beauty. Its aesthetic quality is of a different kind, one that exemplifies the "aestheticization" of the subject-object paradigm that Adorno moves towards—an aestheticization very different from the one thinkers like Kierkegaard denounced.[41] Like the Etruscan vases, the rhino asserts its selfhood, its aliveness, over and against identifying thought that wants to cut it out of the interdependence of all beings and make it into something

[39] Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit", in Gesammelte Schriften, Bd. 7(1), 353.

[40] Weber Nicholsen, "*Aesthetic Theory*'s Mimesis of Walter Benjamin" in *Exact Imagination, Late Work* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 165.

[41] See notably Soeren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* (London: Penguin, 1992).

'for us'. As its gaze, literal this time, returns ours, we see in it—mimetically mediated through our own subjectivity—its miserable physical existence, its seemingly purposeless "This is me", resulting in "an object of a completely different kind" (AES 303/190–1). Of what kind? We get an early hint in a passage of *Minima Moralia* in which the same rhino makes a first appearance: "In existing without any purpose recognizable to men, animals present as expression their own name, as it were, the utterly non-fungible. This makes them so beloved by children, their contemplation a bliss. I am a rhino, is what the figure of the rhino means" (MM 4:261/228). The rhino is simply there, without any other claim than being there, as rhino, a claim that turns out to be weightier than it seems. The animal's presence does not stand for something else, it is an end in itself, as Kant would say (except that he, like most philosophers, reserved that dignity to human beings alone). To the eyes of the still mimetic child, the animal, just like the object that meets the aesthetic gaze, is "utterly non-fungible", in other words: nonidentical. Adorno seems to suggest that there is something about the animal, its mute gaze—close and yet so far—that actively resists objectification, even if that resistance is not necessarily perceived anymore by the identical, rational self who has successfully silenced the animal's "Here I am" and turned it into a "Here for you": for eating, for hunting, for entertainment. The not fully rationalized child is still receptive to the animal's mute profession of its non-fungible physical existence, and reacts to the sight of its torturable body with a mimetic impulse, an unconscious understanding, as we have seen in the passage about the killing of the rats and the dogcatcher. The implicit claim here is that the experience of the torturable body, acutely felt in the animal's speechless presence, and the experience of beauty—or, more broadly speaking: of the aesthetically compelling—call for the same kind of object engagement: an *aesthetic*, mimetic nestling up to the object, a throwing oneself away so as to gain. In the animal's raw aliveness that mirrors our own, coupled to an irreducible otherness, the nonidentical shines through, breaks the identity spell, and forces, just like the artwork, a different acknowledgement. "Animals", Hegel wrote in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, "are indeed the incomprehensible; a man cannot imagine what it is like to be a dog, as similar as their natures may be, it remains wholly alien to him."[42] At the same time close and far, similar to us yet utterly enigmatic, the

[42] Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, in Hegel, *Werke in Zwanzig Bänden*, Bd. 12, 261.

animal is not an object like others. Even if we resist to engage it mimetically and attempt to forcefully subsume it under concepts, our relationship to it will never be quite the same as that to an inanimate object. Wittgenstein reflects on the difference in his *Philosophical Investigations*:

> Look at a stone and imagine it having sensations. One says to oneself, 'how can one so much as get the idea of ascribing a sensation to a thing?' One might as well ascribe it to a number.—And now, look at a wriggling fly. And at once these difficulties vanish, and pain seems to be able to get a foothold here, where before everything was, so to speak, too smooth for it. And so too a corpse seems inaccessible to pain. Our attitude to what is alive and what is dead is not the same. All our reactions are different.[43]

We may end up subsuming the animal, but it will not go smoothly. Its sensitivity to pain, its torturability, to speak in Adornian terms, resists swift conceptualization and forces a different cognitive attitude upon us. The fact that Wittgenstein associates the nonidentical he pinpoints (without naming it) with aliveness echoes with many of our earlier observations. Wittgenstein's fly and Adorno's rhino both assert their unicity, questioning through their mute "Here I am" *any* subsumption and objectification. Animals that are, in their physiognomy, their reactions to fear and pain, closer to man than the fly, such as Adorno's dogs, rats and rabbits, only exacerbate the demand for a different object engagement. A fly may be more "incomprehensible" than a dog, yet it is likely the dog's gaze—precisely *because* of its eerie similarity with ours—that will force us to confront the incomprehensibility—his own *and* the fly's, and by extension, the irreducible leftover in every object we pretend to grasp. This is what seems to be at stake in a 1956 conversation between Adorno and Horkheimer, where after an animated discussion on the aporias of argumentation, Adorno makes a striking comment that seems like a complete non sequitur: "Philosophy", he says, "is really here to make good on what lies in the gaze of an animal."[44] The above reflections illuminate the meaning of that seemingly enigmatic statement. What lies in the gaze of an animal, in other words, what is it philosophy must make good on? It is the rhino's "I am a rhino", "This is me", as a mute yet unsilenceable challenge to our

[43] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2003), 160.

[44] Adorno and Horkheimer, [Diskussion über Theorie und Praxis] in Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 19 (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1996), 58.

subsumptive, reifying relationship to the world. The animal's gaze unmasks the scandal of identity thinking, our treatment of animals as objects a testimony to the violence of all objectification—which is precisely what the child unconsciously understands at the sight of the dogcatcher's wagon. Christina Gerhardt rightly points out that the trope of animals in Adorno's oeuvre "consistently highlights the inhumanity of humans."[45] The animal's otherness, representative of all that is not us, stands for the violence of man's suppression and oppression of nature, the animal's incomprehensible gaze a mute *J'accuse* of reason's drive to annihilate the non-rational. "The animals play virtually the same role for the idealist system than the Jews play for the fascist system",[46] Adorno pointedly wrote. It is this inhumanity in thought—and its murderous consequences in reality—that philosophy must confront head on. To think the nonidentical, the "incomprehensible", the "utterly alien" without reducing the irreducible is the demand in the animal's gaze that philosophy must make good on. It contains both the challenge to the reification that shapes the *Verblendungszusammenhang*, and the utopian glimpse that reminds us that the latter is not everything. A passage in *Negative Dialectic* headed "Nihilism" testifies to the enormous power Adorno ascribed to that glimpse. After wondering whether for a concentration camp inmate, it would have been better not to be born, he writes: "And yet at the lightening up of an eye, even at the feeble tail-wagging of a dog one gave a treat he promptly forgets, the ideal of nothingness evaporates" (ND 6:373/380). The seemingly mundane—a dog's momentary contentment, the spark of an eye—carries a power so great that the nihilistic ideal crumbles, even in the light of unprecedented suffering and evil. We must read this striking claim in constellation with the Adorno's entire work. The lightening up of an eye is the auratic, ungraspable "more" that whispers into our ears that "that which is, is not everything" (ND 6:391/398)—it is the *Schein* which Kant wanted to discard, and which for Adorno is the locus of a transcendence that prevents thought from breaking off—a transcendence, in other words, of utter relevance to the down-to-earth:

> There is no light on men and things in which there is not a shine of transcendence. An indelible part of the resistance against the fungible world of

[45] Christina Gerhardt, "The Ethics of Animals", *New German Critique* 97 (2006): 160.

[46] Adorno, *Beethoven: Philosophie der neuen Musik* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1993), 123.

exchange is the resistance of the eye that does not want the colors of the world to vanish. Semblance is the promise of nonsemblance [*im Schein verspricht sich das Scheinlose*]." (ND 6:397/404–5)

Semblance is thus not simply illusion—it is the glimpse of the nonidentical that unmasks the one *Schein* that holds us all captive: the spell of identity. At the very heart of the aesthetic, it links the rhino to the Etruscan vases (- and to Picasso, Beckett and Beethoven) and turns them into loci of resistance.

Not Playing Along: Art as Resistance

The vases' "Here I am" and the rhino's "I am a rhino" are their way of "resistance against the fungible world of exchange"—a *Schein*, yet one that, closely connected to aura, is essential to their truth content. To a Kantian judgment, neither the rhino nor the vases say anything; they silently wait to be subsumed. Only aesthetic-mimetic engagement, which "abstains from judgment" and gives cognitive weight to the 'more' of semblance, can hear the inaudible and thus go beyond that which is, the "pale, colorless, indifferent" (ND 6:396/404), to see the colors of the world. Art, Adorno writes, "is semblance even in its highest elevations" (ND 6:396/404), but that does not make it a lie—quite the opposite. In the authentic artwork, the dialectic between construction and expression generates a re*semblance* that does not veil reality, but rip off the veil, bring forth the silenced other.

In light of the unprecedented suffering that Adorno's century has witnessed, one may rightly wonder how an artwork that rips off the veil covering the ugly reality could possibly reveal, under it, the colors of the world. For Adorno, however, there is no contradiction here—quite the opposite: it is only, precisely, in facing the horror without looking away that we can see the colors, the beauty that could be: "There is no beauty left and no consolation except in the gaze that faces the horror, withstands it, and, in unreduced awareness of the negativity, holds on to the possibility of a better [world]" (MM 4:26/25). In other words, utopia lies in the unflinching gaze that, by relentlessly confronting the darkness, does not betray the colors. In that gaze lies for Adorno the foremost task of the artist—and of the artist-thinker, the philosopher. In our modern society, where the *Schuldzusammenhang*, the tightly knit net of guilt that makes all of us players in the self-perpetuating wrong life, is utterly inescapable, that

task has become more difficult than ever. The line between (re)semblance as dissonance and critique, and (re)semblance as affirmation and doubling of what is, is vanishingly thin in our post-apocalyptic world. To avoid falling into the affirmative trap, art must integrate and mime the brokenness of reality. "The explosion of the metaphysical meaning that alone guaranteed the unity of aesthetic meaning, makes the latter crumble with relentless necessity (…)"[47]. Adorno's passionate advocacy for modern art—be it by far not in all its forms[48]—has much to do with the latter's acknowledgement and mimesis of that brokenness. In its rejection of harmony and positive meaning, its reliance on dissonance, fragmentation and obscurity, most modern art at least tries to integrate the hurt and rupture, forcing the onlooker/listener/reader to look again rather than look away. Rather than affirming the given, the modern art Adorno admired constructs a semblance that grates against the deceptive smoothness of identical reality, revealing it as the *Verblendungszusammenhang* it is. An artist who, according to Adorno, mastered this aesthetic unmasking to perfection was the Irish writer and playwright Samuel Beckett. His *Endgame*, subject of a long essay by Adorno, is a dramatic heap of ruins that leaves nothing to be understood "but its incomprehensibility", no other "context of meaning" than "that it has none".[49] The utter bleakness of the events on stage—a shattered non-dialogue between what may be the last two survivors of the last apocalypse, "dreaming their own death" and waiting for it "to be over"[50]—represents the reality off-stage without the ideological veil of the *Verblendungszusammenhang*. Adorno does not mince his words when he spells out what that reality looks like: "After the Second World War, everything, including the revived culture, is destroyed, without knowing it; humanity vegetates on, barely, after events which even the survivors really cannot survive, on a heap of ruins in which even the self-awareness of its own brokenness is shattered."[51] There seems to be little room for hope, let alone utopia. In reality however, the bleak passage—and the play

[47] Adorno, "Versuch, das Endspiel zu verstehen" in GS 11: 282.

[48] In a note in 1961 where he deplores the state of the *Geist* in post-war Europe, he fustigates "the kind of art which mistakes the—literal—whetting [*Zurüsten*—the German word has a strong military connotation] of natural material (…) with aesthetic objectification." Adorno, "Graeculus", 21.

[49] Adorno, "Versuch, das Endspiel zu verstehen", 283.

[50] Ibid., 286.

[51] Ibid., 285.

that inspires it—are the necessary counterpart to the utopian element in Adorno's thought, underscoring his negative approach to the latter. At first sight, it seems difficult to imagine how *Endgame* could make us see the colors of the world. Yet in a radically dialectical way, which defines Adorno's own approach to art and philosophy, it does precisely that. By painting in the most glaring gray the violence of a reality that deceives men, and deprives them of the happiness that could be, Beckett stands firmly with the colors; his abjuration of even the slightest trace of positivity is his refusal to betray them. Beckett is the negative of Bollnow: where the latter hears but praise, Beckett hears but the screams of the Jews burned alive. For Adorno, Beckett's writing is the exaggeration that alone is true, the "utmost horror" that reveals the essence of our normalcy; what Beckett makes implacably explicit, *all* art must carry within it. Art gives voice to the suffering of the nonidentical, and it is through this expression, and through the subject's mimetic experience of it, that it gains its utopian potential. Whether it be of natural beauty, of an object made by man, or of an animal, aesthetic experience always responds to pain: to the suppressed nonidentical, to the miserable physical existence of the torturable body, to the "historical trace in things, words, colors, sounds [that] is always the trace of past suffering."[52] That this is the only path through which we can "negatively attain the truth of a phenomenon" (AES 127/78), its negated potential, is Adorno's version of Hegel's determinate negation, and it is "constitutive" not just for art: "Therein lies a radical unity between art and philosophy"—that "not [as Spinoza claimed] 'verum index sui et falsi', but falsum index sui et veri" (AES 127/78). In the same vein, Adorno turns Marx on his head by appropriating the latter's concept of alienation for art and turning it into something positive. Art's "expression of alienation" is "the only way to give the suppressed a voice" (AES 126/78). What according to Marx falls prey to alienation—a person's connection to their humanity—, art reclaims by expressing the alienation, causing the subject to become aware of and feel alienated from it. Art, in other words, is alienation from alienation.[53]

What connects the expression of suffering to the utopian glimpse, alienation to understanding, and the subject's self-abandonment to its self-discovery, is what we have early on recognized as one of the pillars of Adorno's thought: *resistance*. Aesthetic experience, as we have seen, is

[52] Adorno, "Über Tradition" in GS 10.1:314–5.

[53] See Adorno's analysis of alienation in art, *AES* 124–9/77–9.

foremost a kind of resistance—against the overwhelming pull of identity thinking, against the claim that "that which is, is everything", against the erasure of the colors of the world by their glaring ersatz. In his lecture on *Aesthetics*, Adorno points out that it is Kant who first introduced resistance into aesthetic philosophy, through the nexus of the sublime. In Kant, as we have seen, the resistance is of the individual's rational subjectivity against overpowering nature. Without denying the reality of that aspect of resistance, Adorno takes Kant's insight beyond its original intent to turn it on its head. Ultimately, aesthetic experience is for Adorno not resistance against first nature, within and without, but against second nature: against the demagogy of an alleged collective subject, translated into an identity thinking that cements the oppression of the nonidentical—in other words, against second nature's silencing of the first. The acknowledgement of suppressed suffering by the aesthetic gaze is by itself resistance against that oppression. It opens a crack in the smoothness of the neatly subsumed world through which the utopian light, the possibility of a different, right life, gets in. Utopia is emphatically negative: "The inerasable color comes from that which is not [*dem Nichtseienden*]" (ND 6:66/57). The only way to edge us closer to it is to resist that which is. "The feeling of resistance against mere existence contains the utopia that this existence has not the last word" (AES 52/30), Adorno tells his students in his lecture on *Aesthetics*. That he intuited art as a privileged locus of that resistance plays a key factor in the significance of the latter in his philosophy—and it explains why he stood by it, against his own harsh verdict on art's own ambiguities. "Art keeps itself alive only in virtue of its force of resistance against society" (AET 7:336/226), he writes in his *Aesthetic Theory*, pointing out that aesthetic-mimetic engagement is resistance independently of the nature of the object, as it temporarily puts on hold the subject's participation in the *Verblendungszusammenhang*: "Even the mere contemplative behavior vis-à-vis the artwork, wrested from the objects of action, seems like a break from immediate praxis and insofar itself practical, as resistance against playing along [*Mitspielen*]. Only artworks that feel like a form of behavior have their raison d'être." (AET 7:25–6/12). The subject that engages the object aesthetically, in other words: through a dialectic of mimesis and reason, rather than subsuming it conceptually, thereby partakes in resistance against the dictates of our thoroughly rationalized world—a form of resistance which Adorno held particularly high: *Nicht Mitmachen*. Likewise, the true artwork is "a form of behavior"—setting itself against the world it aestheticizes, it becomes, through its

non-participating presence, a praxis, an act of resistance: "No artistic form is conceivable today that is not a protest."[54]

Elective Affinities

Resistance against identity thinking and its enthronization of conceptual categorization at the expense of other moments of our relationship with the world does evidently not entail that reason and concepts must be thrown overboard. What Adorno aspired to was not a return to pre-conceptual mimesis, but an integration—a *Hinzutreten*—of mimetic elements into the conceptual framework: a dialectic of mimesis and reason, so as to save the latter from its own totalitarian tendencies. Aesthetic engagement, which exemplifies that dialectic, underscores the importance of both poles: "As a product of the mind [*ein Geistiges*], art rests on mental presuppositions"—in other words, "you need more than just your eyes and your ears" (AES 246/154) to experience art. Nestling alone will not do: "If we don't know anything, however derivative, about the concept of man, the concept of humanity, the concept of autonomy and of freedom and such categories, then we may register all kinds of sensory things in Beethoven, but that we actually *get* a piece of Beethoven is completely out of the question" (AES 246/154). It is the interplay between the sensory, somatic apprehension and the at least partially conceptual *awareness* of what makes us human that leads to a full aesthetic experience.[55] Adorno's choice of concepts here—man, humanity, autonomy, freedom—is of course anything but incidental, and certainly not limited to Beethoven. Aesthetic experience reconnects us in a unique way to our own humanity, to that bundle of somos and logos that makes up who we are. Through art, we glimpse, in the fleeting moments of aesthetic experience, the wholeness of our being and the true richness of the world around us, as the nonidentical in both briefly emerges from oblivion. The implications of that claim, and of the possibilities it adumbrates, are of enormous scope. If the aesthetic has the potential of resurrecting the buried multitude in us and in the world we engage, and of creating the unity in the multitude

[54] Adorno, "Jene zwanziger Jahre" in GS 10.2, 506.

[55] There is an obvious affinity between this account of aesthetic experience and Kant's free play of the faculties of imagination and understanding as developed in his *Critique of Judgment*. For an insightful reading of Kant's Third Critique through Adornian glasses, see Huhn, *Imitation and Society* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004).

that would turn our wrong life into the right one, then the other spheres of human life—namely cognition and ethics—may need to be, bluntly put, aestheticized. That this is precisely the road Adorno's philosophy seems to take—be it not at all in the conventional sense of "aestheticization"—has often been criticized, although more recently, a more sympathetic literature has emerged.[56] In the remainder of this chapter, I will show how for Adorno, an 'aestheticization' of the subject-object relationship is—in a very precise sense that we will have to elucidate—a decisive step towards the right life, towards a relationship to the world that will give the non-identical its due.

Adorno considered art and philosophy to be allies, connected precisely by what lies at the heart of his own philosophical endeavor: "Philosophy is allied with art inasmuch as it wants to salvage in the medium of the concept the mimesis that the latter represses" (DSH 5:354/123). A quick glance at Adorno's predecessors is enough to ascertain that this statement says more about his own philosophical aspirations than about the history of philosophy—as we have seen above, after the split between sign and image, between the concept and the mimetic, philosophy overwhelmingly sided with the former. Similarly, Adorno's claim that art has a "deep affinity with philosophy [that] makes it become itself philosophy, demand philosophy" (AES 205/129), says more about his own aesthetical thought than about the relationship of art and philosophy in history. For the first two thousand years of the history of philosophy, aesthetics was confined to the sidelines, considered unworthy of further philosophical consideration

[56] Jürgen Habermas and Albrecht Wellmer have written prominent and influential critiques of Adorno's intertwine of art and philosophy. In *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (*Der Philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*; Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1998, 130–57), Habermas argues that by blurring the boundaries between art and reason, Adorno ignores their vital separation and weakens both, thus undermining his own argumentation; the result, Habermas writes, is something that is neither philosophy nor art. Habermas' critique appears to completely ignore the larger context of Adorno's philosophical approach, ascribing to a methodical flaw a reality that, as Adorno repeatedly pointed out, lies "in der Sache". Wellmer's criticism ("Truth, Semblance, Reconciliation" in *The Persistence of Modernity*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997, 1–35) is a variation of Habermas' (see critical discussion by Zuidervaart in *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, 276–303). Bernstein discusses both in *The Fate of Art*, 245–8. For a more recent critique, see Rüdiger Bubner, "Concerning the Central Idea of Adorno's Philosophy", in Huhn and Zuidervaart (ed.), *The Semblance of Subjectivity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 147–75. For an overview of the criticism, see Scholze, *Kunst als Kritik*. Nicholsen, Jameson, Scholze (all op.cit), and Bernstein in *The Fate of Art*, offer a more sympathetic reading of Adorno's conjunction of rationality and aesthetics.

by most major thinkers. Even once that changed at the end of the eighteenth century, with Kant's *Critique of Judgment* leading the way, philosophers tended to maintain the separation that Plato had consecrated.[57]

For Adorno, the intertwinement of art and the aesthetic with the various fields of philosophical inquiry (epistemology, morality, metaphysics, etc.) is fundamental. In his last interview, in the spring of 1969, he declared that that he "experienced theoretical thought as extraordinarily close to his artistic intentions",[58] a closeness that becomes tangible when we compare his description of the process of artistic creation with that of the ideal subject-object relationship. Artistic creation, he writes, is "nothing else than the freedom to abandon oneself (…) with utter concentration to what the object wants purely in and out of itself" (AES 110/68). The subject meanwhile, in his relationship with the object, must "completely give oneself to a thing [object], do it justice".[59] When Horkheimer, in conversation with Adorno, asks: "What does it mean to do justice to the object?", he answers in terms that again strikingly echo Adorno's description of aesthetic creation: "To express what the object itself really wants. The element of the accoucheur [*Geburtshelfer*]."[60] Both the artist and the philosopher are accoucheurs of a truth that is not theirs but lies "*in der Sache*", their creative act consisting of bringing it out into the open through the artwork or philosophical reflection. The mimetic gesture, the nestling up to the object in order to hear it speak, is—in dialectic with rational subjectivity—a pillar not only of the aesthetic engagement with the world, but also of a philosophical engagement that looks to aesthetics to escape the iron cage of identity thinking.

[57] A parallel reading of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* and his *Critique of Pure Reason* points to numerous connections between judgments on beauty and cognitive understanding, without Kant explicitly consecrating the conjunction. Adorno would have called this an instance of Kant going beyond himself. For a wide-ranging exploration of the relationship between aesthetics and cognition in Kant, see the essay collection by Rebecca Kukla (ed.), *Aesthetics and cognition in Kant's Critical Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[58] Adorno, "Keine Angst vor dem Elfenbeinturm", Interview with the Magazine "Der Spiegel", May 5, 1969, in: Wolfgang Kraushaar, *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung*, Bd. 2 (Hamburg: Zweitausendeins, 1998), 607.

[59] Adorno and Horkheimer, [Diskussion über Theorie und Praxis], 58.

[60] Ibid.

Content as Form

Adorno was keenly aware of what Max Weber terms the "iron cage [*stahlhartes Gehäuse*]" of modern society, the all-pervasive rationalization that imprisons us all—the terms *Verblendungszusammenhang* and *Schuldzusammenhang* express precisely that aporia. In today's disenchanted world, identity thinking and its social ramifications have inherited the ubiquity and all-powerfulness once ascribed to the divine. There is no escape. The only way to pry open the cage is from within—not by launching a self-defeating (and futile) attempt to overthrow conceptual rationality but by exposing its inadequacies, its betrayal of its self-declared goals: human progress, and true knowledge of the world.

I have exposed at length how Adorno's philosophy of the nonidentical does just that. His entire philosophical edifice rests on a critical analysis of our thoroughly rationalized rationality, with his aesthetic theory outlining a way in which reason, by modeling its subject-object relationship on the aesthetic-mimetic engagement with the world, could overcome these shortcomings. But Adorno did not limit himself to theoretical reflections, did not simply *conceptualize* what a new way of thinking could look like; rather, throughout his vast, multidisciplinary work, he *practiced* the negative dialectic he theorized, modeled the new way of thinking by a new way of writing. His unique style, frequently criticized as convoluted and obscure, is in his own words an attempt to do justice *in form* to the theoretical content.[61] How do the two poles connect up? How does Adorno try to integrate the nonidentical into form? In what sense does he write mimetically? Before we look at concrete examples from Adorno's writing, let us first turn to some of his own reflections on philosophical form.

In his most famous work on the question of style, the 1955 essay "The Essay as Form", Adorno underlines that content is not "indifferent to its form" but that the latter is "demanded by the matter [*Sache*]",[62] i.e. by the

[61] I don't share Martin Jay's assessment that "[Adorno's] writing was *deliberately* designed to thwart an effortless reception by passive readers". Rather (as Jay himself continues), he "refused to present his complicated and nuanced ideas in a simplified fashion" (Jay, *Adorno*, 11, italics added) because, in his own words, "the laxly said is badly thought" (ND 6:29/18), and "where linguistic intensity lessens, the moral responsibility to the object [Sache] also lessens" (Adorno, "Der Begriff der Philosophie" in *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter II*, München: text + kritik, 1993, 31).

[62] Adorno, "Der Essay als Form", in GS 11:11. English translation: "The Essay as Form", trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, in *New German Critique*, No. 32 (1984), 153.

object it tries to elucidate. Form therefore cannot be merely "conventional".[63] Rather, an "autonomy of form" is required, a freedom that Adorno equates to "artistic rendering [*künstlerische Darstellung*]".[64] The separation of art and sciences "must not be hypostatized",[65] lest we too hastily discard the considerable swaths of knowledge that elude the purely scientific mind. A simple look into our own consciousness is enough to ascertain "how acts of knowledge that are by no means nonbinding intuitions fall through the cracks of the scientific grasp".[66] The essay broadens the cognitive scope of inquiry through an openness that allows for fragmentariness and non-systematicity, challenging Spinoza's theory that "the order of things is the same as the order of ideas" and rejecting a "closed, deductive or inductive structure".[67] Rather than aspiring to a totality that belies the brokenness of reality, the essay "thinks in fragments, just like reality is fragmented, und finds its unity through the fissures, not by smoothing them out."[68] In other words, the essay "takes into account the nonidentity" that scientific inquiry tries to suppress, by "abstaining from any reduction to a principle, by accentuating the partial over the total".[69] Its concepts are not nailed down once and for all by a definition that feigns certainty, but take shape "through their relationship to each other",[70] their "interaction".[71] In the essay, the thoughts "intertwine like in a tapestry", and it is "on the density of this intertwinement that the fertility of thoughts depends".[72] In this "emphatic work on the form", the "unlimited effort" of the latter, the essay indeed "resembles art".[73]

"The Essay as Form" outlines the key elements of Adorno's own style of writing: fragmentation, constellation,[74] and parataxis (non-systematicity).

[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid., 14/156.
[66] Ibid., 15/156.
[67] Ibid., 17/158.
[68] Ibid., 25/164.
[69] Ibid., 17/157.
[70] Ibid., 20/160.
[71] Ibid., 21/160.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid., 26/166.
[74] In his use of constellations, Adorno is indebted to Walter Benjamin. Benjamin first mentions constellations in his 1925 "The Origin of the German Tragic Drama", where he writes that "ideas relate to things as stars do to constellations" (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften 1.1*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991, 214) and speaks of "truth represent[ing] itself in the

The three are intimately linked—one could say that Adorno's parataxis puts fragments into constellation—as they reflect in form Adorno's rejection of a way of thinking that equates truth with identity, univocity, systemacity and exhaustiveness. Against it, Adorno puts a mode of inquiry that does "not so much neglect absolute certainty as revoke its ideal",[75] favoring a paratactic groping for truth over a hypotactic assertiveness that unmasks the latter as decided in advance. In an aphorism of *Minima Moralia* entitled "For Post-Socratics", Adorno develops further the discursive, syntactic implications of renouncing absolute certainty. He calls for philosophy to free itself of the "urge to want to be right", residue of the same "mentality of self-preservation which philosophy precisely aspires to overcome" (MM 4:78/70), and to look instead for "insights that are not absolutely right and ironclad—those are inevitably tautological—but insights in which the question of rightness hands itself its own verdict [*die Frage der Richtigkeit sich selber richtet*]" (MM 4:79/71). The rejection of certitude, of the claim that the last word is said, is translated into a new form of argument: "This does not call for irrationalism, however, for the erection of arbitrary theses justified by epiphanic intuition, but for the abolition of the difference between thesis and argument. In this regard, dialectical thinking means that the argument must have the drastic force of the thesis, and the thesis must contain in itself the fullness of its foundation" (MM 4:79/71). What does it mean to abolish the difference between thesis and argument? In common parlance, a thesis is a claim, an assertion in search of the arguments that will buttress it into accepted truth. The role of the argument is precisely to support a thesis—that is its very definition. How then does Adorno intend to melt these mutually dependent elements into one? While an argument that takes on the force of a thesis is conceivable, the demand that the thesis "contain in itself the fullness of its foundation" is a tall order. It requires from the argument-thesis to take its justification entirely from within rather than look for outside help—in other words, it must be its own justification. This has not least formal implications: "All conceptual bridges, all connectors and logical operators that are not part of the thing itself (…) must be omitted" (MM 4:79/71).

dance of represented ideas" (209). Adorno took up the idea as early as 1931, in his lecture on "The Actuality of Philosophy", where he says that "philosophy must put its elements… into changing constellations" (GS 1:335).

[75] Adorno, "Der Essay als Form", 21/161.

The conventional framework of argumentation and discursive logic is eliminated; no more subordinate clauses, causal connectors or other syntactic devices, as "all sentences must be at equal distance from the center" (MM 4:79/71). In place of a deductive structure in which every sentence is causally connected to the preceding one and the argument is presented with a certain logical inevitability, Adorno appeals for a parataxis rid of any even remote resemblance to "the gesture of persuasion", one that relinquishes the "advocatory gesture of thought" to rely solely on "inferences saturated with the experience of the object" (MM 4:78–9/70–1). The latter phrase makes it clear that what we are looking at here is nothing less than the introduction of mimesis into philosophical argumentation. In response to a discursive syntax that forces an identical straitjacket on the object, thereby erasing the nonidentical, Adorno takes his Copernican turn into form. Hypotactic discursive syntax, with its hierarchy of main clause and subordinate clauses, its conjunctions and connectors, reproduces at the level of sentence structure the supremacy of a subjective rationality for which everything is decided in advance, the outcome but a tautological wanting-to-be-right, a categorical calling to order of a disorderly empirical reality. Parataxis unmasks the deceptive self-evidence of the hypotactic structure and invites the reader to question it. In Adorno's paratactic argument-thesis, stripped of all formal signs of a logical-discursive intent, the outcome is not predetermined by a syntactic forward thrust that forcefully persuades—instead, the object, freed of the subjective stencil that cuts it to fit, is left to speak for itself, to reveal "the fullness of the foundation" it contains within.

How does the argument that refuses to argue remain compelling? How does it offset its deliberate justification deficit and defend itself against argumentative deconstruction? For Adorno, the question itself is flawed—not because the argument-thesis is unassailable, but because *no* argument, not even the logically solid one, is. As *Dialectic of Enlightenment* demonstrates, rational thought is intrinsically critical[76] and therefore self-defeating; as Horkheimer puts it in the conversation quoted above: "you can argue anything about everything [*man kann auf alles immer alles sagen*]".[77] The logical argument's seeming solidity is purely formal, lies in its structure alone—which is why it is itself highly vulnerable to formal

[76] On the self-destructive skepticism of enlightened rationality, see Bernstein, *Adorno: Ethics and Disenchantment*, 75–135.

[77] Adorno and Horkheimer, [Diskussion über Theorie und Praxis], 57.

attacks and deconstructive sophistry. The vulnerability of the argument-thesis, on the other hand, stems from its deliberate openness to the object, from the dialectic groping of a thought that refuses to break off—it is the seal of its truth. Yet despite this relativization of epistemic certainty, Adorno's argument-thesis still claims for itself a however mitigated bindingness—it is, after all, still an argument. For Adorno, that bindingness is, for one, an inherent result of the mimetic approach itself, that is of the "satiat[ion] with the experience of the object" which gives voice to the latter's objective demand. It is not the philosopher that imparts authoritativeness to his thoughts but the object he contemplates. As Adorno writes in *Negative Dialectic*: "Not *about* the concrete one must philosophize, but *out of* the concrete [*Nicht über Konkretes ist zu philosophieren, vielmehr aus ihm heraus*]" (ND 6:43/33). Like the artist, the philosopher-accoucheur does not determine truth, but simply bring it into the open. If he does it well, the compelling objectivity of truth will supersede the "gesture of persuasion" of the hypotactic argument. Whether he succeeds depends, like in the artwork, largely on the *Konstruktion* of the text. Adorno likens the work of the philosopher to that of the composer:

> Philosophy must not reduce itself to categories but in a certain sense first compose [*komponieren*] itself. It must in its progress constantly renew itself, by its own force as well as by friction with that which it tries to grasp: what occurs in it is not decided by a thesis or a position; the tapestry [*Gewebe*], not the deductive or inductive one-track train of thought. (ND 6:44/33)

The term *Gewebe*, which Adorno also uses in regard to artworks,[78] is crucial here. Elsewhere, reflecting on Plato's dialectic, he speaks of *Teppich* [rug, tapestry].[79] The idea is the same both for art and philosophy: The "whole is given (…) through the configuration of its moments" (AES 331/209), that is, "the singular moments are brought into a stringently necessary constellation [*Zusammenhang*] which conveys it the force of the spiritual [*die Kraft des Geistigen*] that each moment by itself, in its isolation, does not have" (AES 212/133), he writes in his lectures on Aesthetics. In the same way, the force and objective bindingness of a philosophical work stem from the force field created by the constellation of

[78] He frequently uses the term in his writings on music. "Far more important than [the leitmotive] however is the inner composition [*Zusammensetzung*] of the music, the *Gewebe*." Adorno, "Zu Werken. Alban Berg, Wozzeck" in GS 13:432.

[79] See AES 142–3/88.

the paratactic threads in the big tapestry of the text. In none of its moments "in isolation" but only in the constellation of the whole does truth transpire—a constellation that spans not just the single text, but the entire work of a given author, as Adorno makes clear in "The Essay as Form": "The incidental and isolated nature of [the essay's] insights is corrected by their multiplication, confirmation and qualification in either the essay's own progress or in its mosaic-like relationship to other essays."[80] The movement of the constellation is dialectical: it does not just bring forth truth, but is also brought forth by it, as Adorno writes in a comment on the genesis of *Aesthetic Theory*: "The books must be written concentrically, as it were, in paratactic parts of equal weight which are arranged around a center [*Mittelpunkt*] that their constellation expresses".[81] The *Mittelpunkt*, in other words, is simultaneously the veiled premise of the text and the truth content that its *Konstruktion* brings forth. The idea of *Mittelpunkt* returns time and again in Adorno's work and is usually presented as a kind of central reference point around which a text circles: "In a philosophical text, all sentences must be at equal distance to the *Mittelpunkt*" (MM 4:79/71). It is not the object of a text, but what is expressed by the constellation of its parts.[82] If we extrapolated the concept to Adorno's entire work, we could say that the one center around which his philosophy tirelessly circles is the nonidentical—both as wound, and as almost utopian promise. As wound, it takes the form of suffering—the suffering of the reified object, of the torturable body, of the victims of the Shoah. As promise, it takes the form of what is not but could be, the colors of the world, the gaze of an animal. Together, the two moments—the suffering, and the glimpsed possibility of its end—form the *Mittelpunkt* of Adorno's work, its terminus a quo and terminus ad quem. In "The Essay as Form", Adorno speaks of the latter as the light that shines on the concepts: "[The essay's] concepts receive their light from a terminus ad quem that it itself cannot see, not from an obvious terminus a quo; this is how its method expresses the utopian intention."[83] In the very last aphorism of *Minima Moralia*, entitled "Finale [*Zum Ende*]", Adorno makes that invisible

[80] Adorno, "Der Essay als Form", 25/164. This underscores how problematic it is to pluck a sentence out of Adorno's work and consider it self-sufficient, as it is too often done (the "dictum" on poetry after Auschwitz being but one famous example).

[81] Quoted in AET, "Editor's Afterword", 541/364.

[82] Adorno frequently uses the expression in his writings on music. See e.g. GS 11:578; GS 12:61; GS 13:244, GS 13:393.

[83] Adorno, "Der Essay als Form", 21/161.

utopia, the place of redemption where suffering is no more, the *Mittelpunkt* from which all philosophy receives its light: "The only philosophy that can still be responsibly practiced in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed onto the world from redemption" (MM 4:283/247).

Constellation, parataxis and *Mittelpunkt*—all essential components of Adorno's writing—make for a work that often reads as if it was composed rather than written. That impression is further heightened by the strong rhetorical element in his texts. For Adorno, rhetoric used rightly—that is, put in the service of truth rather than in the service of the utterer—is much more than a simple "creator of persuasion".[84] Just like beauty, it is an excess of form that stops the subject in its tracks, preventing thought from smugly ambling on. In *Negative Dialectic*, Adorno called dialectic "the attempt to critically salvage the rhetorical moment: to approximate to the point of indifference thing and expression" (ND 6:66/56). Rhetoric is a means to introduce through form what content alone cannot express: "In dialectic, the rhetorical element (…) sides with content. In mediating the former with the formal, logical element, dialectic tries to navigate the dilemma between arbitrary opinion and the barrenly correct" (ND 6:66/56). In a vital dialectic with logic, the rhetorical moment can do what a language stripped of any formal 'excess' cannot: through dramatic structure, tone of voice, exaggeration, and Adorno's much favored rhetorical shocks, it brings passion into language, in the double etymological meaning: emotion, and suffering. "The rhetorical moment", Adorno writes, is the means "through which expression has managed to preserve itself in thought" (ND 6:65/55). Without it, language is but sign, "blindly sacrificing what made it treat the object differently, not by mere signification" (ND 6:65/56). That it treats the object not by mere signification is precisely what makes rhetoric so crucial in Adorno's eyes. It opens language to the image, and through it to the latter's unique power of non-conceptual expression, which Plato wanted to exile to the realm of literature. Plato famously put rhetoric into the same category as poetry, a view Adorno likely shared—except that while for Plato, it discredited both, for Adorno, the affinity was precisely where rhetoric's strength lay. Adorno's own writing is far from being "mere signification". Not only is

[84] Plato, "Gorgias", 453a, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*. Edited by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 236.

his style very lyrical and uses form to convey meaning, but Adorno also frequently weaves images and narrative passages into the text, as we have seen above, in the passages on childhood and animals. As epitomized in the narrative style of *Minima Moralia*, Adorno's images—in the broadest sense—are not simple examples that illustrate a thought, but carriers of epistemic weight and meaning that stand for themselves. Expressing something that could not be expressed otherwise, they challenge, as Jameson puts it, "the *Bilderverbot*, the ban on graven images, of a henceforth secular, skeptical, mathematizing thought".[85] Here as elsewhere, the key lies in the dialectic—between the rational and the mimetic, the sign and the image. The images take their full meaning in constellation with the signs, just as the latter are strengthened by the image. Where this dialectic is cut, "where philosophy, by borrowing from literature, thinks that it can abolish reifying thought and its history (…), and even expects that a poetry patchworked from Parmenides and Jungnickel expresses Being itself, it turns into trite cultural chatter."[86] The continuation of this passage of "The Essay as Form" leaves no doubt as to who Adorno has in mind when he fustigates

> peasant's cunning posing as authenticity [that] refuses to honor the commitment of conceptual thinking it signed the moment it used concepts in sentence and judgment… Out of the violence that image and sign mutually do to each other springs the jargon of authenticity, in which words quaver with emotion without revealing what moved them.[87]

Jargon of Authenticity is the title of Adorno's book-long critique of the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, the one contemporary philosopher who can rightly be considered his nemesis. Adorno's relentless criticism of Heidegger can be found throughout his work—indeed, there is hardly a substantial text of his in which the Freiburg thinker is not mentioned, usually in illustration of the ideology Adorno's philosophy is trying to defeat.[88]

[85] Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno and the Persistence of the Dialectic*, 161.

[86] Adorno, "Der Essay als Form", 13/155.

[87] Ibid., 13–4/155.

[88] Hermann Mörchen, a disciple of Heidegger's, took it upon himself to write a 700-page study on the relationship of the latter's philosophy to Adorno's, and vice versa. The author tries to convince the reader that the two thinkers' "refusal to communicate" is due to too much proximity rather than unbridgeable differences. While I will not deny that Adorno and Heidegger were moved partly by similar concerns (critique of scientism, of systems, question

For our purpose particularly significant is the fact that the one text Adorno consecrated specifically to Heidegger's philosophy focuses on its language. Given what has just been said about the importance of form in Adorno's philosophy and his rejection of conventional linguistic standards, one might wonder why he so virulently attacked a philosophy that arguably shared both these characteristics. Where did Heidegger's 'excess of form' go wrong? *Jargon of Authenticity* is Adorno's answer to this question. With its valuable insights into Adorno's philosophy of form and content, the text is crucial for an understanding of Adorno's own relationship to language.

"Homey Murmur"—Excursus on Heidegger's Deceit of Form

From the very first pages of *Jargon of Authenticity*, it becomes clear that the focus on Heidegger's language is for Adorno imposed by the object of inquiry, as Heidegger's jargon and what it expresses are so closely connected that they cannot be separated. While form and content are intertwined in any expressive act, in Heidegger, Adorno claims, they are almost indistinguishable, as the form, bloated with meaning, becomes itself content, de facto replacing the latter. The method is anything but harmless: From the very first pages, Adorno links Heidegger's jargon with fascism, blaming it for offering the latter refuge in language by replacing the "authority of the absolute" with "absolutized authority" (JE 6:416/5). Heidegger "bloats the single word at the expense of sentence, judgment, thought" (JE 6:418/8), conveying it an almost mythical "aura"[89] that dispenses it of actual meaning. In the disenchanted world where aura is decaying, its fraudulent copy lends its deceptive authoritativeness to whoever knows how to manipulate it. Heidegger, says Adorno, masters this art to perfection. He cites as example the word "commission [*Auftrag*]", used by Heidegger in "a tone that posits it as transcending its own meaning" (JE

of historicity), the driving force behind their thought, or, to put it in Adornian terms, the point from which they philosophized, is very different in each of them. Mörchen's book makes for a fascinating study of these differences "ums Ganze", even if that was not the author's intention. See Mörchen, *Adorno und Heidegger. Untersuchung einer philosophischen Kommunikationsverweigerung* (Stuttgart: Klett Cotta, 1981).

[89] The jargon is according to Adorno a "product of the disintegration [Verfallsprodukt]" of an aura that the disenchantment of the world has made inaccessible to our experience. See JE 6: 419/10.

6:418/8) in which the "difference between a commission from a just or unjust authority, and an absolute obligation, is purposefully blurred" (JE 6:468/83). The simple word, stripped of context, takes on "unquestioned authority" (JE 6:471/88). The jargon thus not only "models thought in such a way as to prepare it for submission" (JE 6:416/5), it weaves at the web of the *Verblendungszusammenhang* by making it all look inescapable. Terms like *Geworfenheit*, *Eigentlichkeit*, *Jemeinigkeit* feed a fatalistic outlook on a life in which the highest goal is to be authentically oneself (whoever that be[90]), while the biggest evil is not the betrayal of the nonidentical and of man's potential happiness by a society that crushes both, but metaphysical *Seinsvergessenheit*, the oblivion of being. "Authenticity (…) becomes mythically veiled fate" (JE 6:498/127) in which a mean laborer is a mean laborer, a factory owner a factory owner and a torturer a torturer, and all we are left with is to embrace our "mineness", which is teleologically vindicated by our being-toward-death. Ultimately, Heidegger's philosophy, embodied by its jargon, not only leaves the world as it is, but glorifies it in its inescapability, "relegating reification into Being and the history of Being so as to mourn and consecrate as fate what self-reflection and the praxis it triggers could possibly change" (ND 6:98/91). What is left is a doubling of that which is, making "the jargon of authenticity (…) ideology as language, even before any specific content" (JE 6:520/160). Its main victim is the torturable body whose suffering is "sublimated into metaphysical suffering" (JE 6:438/38) and thus obliterated into universal fate. The jargon's "hatred of suffering", the intrinsic affirmativity of its solemn fatalism, the philosophical consecration of submissiveness, sacrifice and death and the glorification of the German soil—all these lie behind Adorno's assertion that Heidegger's philosophy is "fascist to its innermost core".[91]

Language is not just the *vehicle* of ideology, but the thing itself. As the word "posits itself as transcending its meaning", it becomes theology—but without the redemption whose promise traditional theology kept alive.[92] "Man is the shepherd of Being", Heidegger writes. "He gains the essential poverty of the shepherd, whose dignity consists of being called by

[90] "In the name of contemporary authenticity, even a torturer could make all sorts of ontological claims, as long as he was a good torturer." JE 6:497/125.

[91] Adorno, Brief an Herrn S., 3.1.1963, published in: *Musikalische Schriften*, GS 19, 638.

[92] "Betrayed is not only thought, but also religion, which once promised humanity eternal bliss, while authenticity quietly resigns itself to a 'ultimately idyllic world'" JE 6:429/25.

Being itself into the trueness of its truth. This call comes as the throw that corresponds to the Thrownness of Da-Sein."[93] Why would the shepherds of Being, their dignity assured by their being called by Being itself into the trueness of truth, want to protest their living conditions, wages, political powerlessness, lack of equality? "Philosophical banality" becomes the unassailable handmaid of the powers that be as the flock is kept at bay with the help of a fraudulent transcendence—achieved by "attributing to the concept the magical share in the absolute which its own conceptuality belies" (JE 6:447/51). Rather than reflecting on and integrating in his thought the limits of the concept, Heidegger blows the latter out of proportion and turns it into the ultimate bearer of a near transcendent meaning that needs no spelling out. By misusing and abusing the concept's potential, he destroys the faint possibility that the latter break free of its own conceptual straitjacket to point beyond itself. Indeed, Heidegger's jargon is in many ways the negative mirror image of Adorno's attempt to salvage the nonidentical and make the concept say more than its conceptually sanctioned content. The difference between his approach and Heidegger's is, as he would say, a difference *ums Ganze*. Nowhere is this better expressed than in a passage of *Jargon of Authenticity* which, for its crucial insights into Adorno's philosophy of form and the form of his philosophy, I will quote in its entirety.

> What philosophy wants; its singularity, which makes its form essential, implies that all its words say more than each one. The technique of the jargon exploits that. The transcendence of truth over the meaning of the single words and judgments is assigned by the jargon to the words as their immutable possession, whereas the 'more' is formed solely in constellation. Philosophical language goes, according to its ideal, beyond what it says, in the wake of thought. It transcends dialectically, as the contradiction between truth and thought becomes conscious of itself and apprehends itself. The jargon confiscates such transcendence destructively and hands it over to its chattering. What the words say more than what they say is shoved onto them once and for all, dialectic is cut off—that between word and thing as much as that within language, between the single words and their relation to each other. Without judgment and unreflected, the word is expected to leave its meaning behind, seemingly creating that 'more', in mockery of the mystical speculation of language which the jargon (…) carefully avoids to conjure. In it, the difference between the 'more' which language gropes for

[93] Quoted in JE 6:447/51.

> and its being-in-itself blurs. Hypocrisy becomes the a priori: mundane language, spoken here and now as if it were holy. Yet profane language could draw near to holiness only through distance from the holy tone, not through imitation. The jargon blasphemously ignores this. It cloaks words for the empirical with an aura, while general philosophical concepts such as Being are laid on so thick that their conceptual nature, the mediation through a thinking subject, disappears behind the coating: as a result, they beckon as the most concrete. Both transcendence and concretion shimmer; ambiguity is the medium of a linguistic attitude whose favorite philosophy claims to condemn it. (JE 6:420–1/11–3)

The problem is not that Heidegger and his disciples give too much weight to expression—form is "essential" to philosophy. Through constellation, parataxis, rhetorical and figurative/narrative elements, it opens the possibility for the nonidentical to get into content. Yet Heidegger betrays that possibility by "bloating the single words at the expense of sentence, judgement, thought" (JE 6:418/8), freezing the concept into a meaning (or lack thereof) rather than letting it go beyond itself as it takes shape in the constellation of words, texts and the spaces in between. The transcendence of thought, which grows out of the tense dialectical force field between truth and its groping expression in thought, and which hinges on this tension remaining intact, is replaced, in the jargon of authenticity, by a transcendence "shoved onto" the single words as a given, the dialectic which alone can keep it alive, cut off. The jargon builds on the rightly perceived "transcendence of truth over the meaning of the single word", but destroys it by wanting to confiscate as an "immutable possession" of the concept what only appears in mediation with that which the concept is not. As a result, the concrete and the transcendent "shimmer" in unison, concealing a vacuity that convicts the jargon and the thought it expresses of its own untruth (JE 6:421/12).

That the content which Heidegger's form more or less openly conveys is what is ultimately at stake, becomes clear in Adorno's virulent criticism of Heidegger's more bucolic texts, where his proudly vindicated provincialism coalesces with his philosophy in sentences like: "In the deep winter night, when a wild snowstorm lashes around the hut and covers and veils everything, it is the high time of philosophy. Its questioning must then become simple and essential",[94] or: "Philosophical work is not the secluded

[94] Quoted in JE 6:448/53.

occupation of an eccentric, but belongs right with the work of the peasant (…). When the shepherd, in his slow and dreamy pace, drives the cattle up the mountain (…), then my work is of the same kind."[95] Where others may see just an "endearing quirk" of the great thinker, Adorno sees ontology turning into a "sort of blood and soil ideology" (PT 1:152), as Heidegger "alleges prestabilized harmony between essential substance and homey murmur" (JE 6:448/53), turning the mundane, with all its inadequacies—in the case of Heidegger's province: peasant poverty, backwardness, archaism, xenophobia—into an idyllic haven of Truth. Adorno rejects the idea that these texts from the 1940s are but an "insignificant byproduct" (PT 1:161)—the opposite is true: in them, Heidegger's philosophy "shows its true colors" (PT 1:162).[96] They shed a glaring light on his obsession with authenticity, origin and rootedness and expose, through solemn, blood-and-soil tinged half-poetry,[97] the root and essence of his thought. That essence transpires in the form as much as in the content, or rather: in a form and a content that are inextricably intertwined. In a philosophy which, like Heidegger's, is "essentially a philosophy of language", language is not the vehicle but the locus of truth. By showing the language—and the thought behind it—"unleashed" (PT 1:163), these wartime texts are but the exaggeration that exposes the ugly reality.[98]

Adorno calls Heidegger's jargon of authenticity "ideology even before any specific content", yet it is the content that is ultimately targeted: the meaning concealed in and through the form. In other words, Adorno criticizes Heidegger's language because of the content it directly or indirectly articulates (or leaves conspicuously unsaid), not in abstraction of the latter. He denounces Heidegger's philosophical meditations on mountain scenery and peasant life not just because they deceive the reader in posing as a higher truth, but because that truth's false harmony silences a not remotely as harmonious reality. Heidegger brings Adorno's bête noire, affirmativity, to a paroxysm. His transcendentally cloaked acceptance of the *So ist es*, stirred solely by socially indifferent ontological goals, betrays what Adorno sees as philosophy's first raison d'être: resistance. Suffering, and whatever other existential grievances we might have, are passed over in Heidegger's quest for authentic Being. The fact that he traces the

[95] Quoted in PT 1:153.

[96] See Adorno's lecture on the topic, PT 1:161–73.

[97] As Adorno points out, Heidegger himself uses the term 'half-poetic", JE 6:448/53.

[98] See Adorno, "Was bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit" in GS 10.2:567.

latter's roots to the German soil at the very moment that the German people are carrying out an unprecedented genocide exponentially magnifies the wrong. The historical background of Heidegger's ontological consecration of the German province, Adorno repeatedly reminds us, is Auschwitz. It is in a lecture on these 1940 texts that Adorno tells his students that "after millions of people were murdered", there is "nothing harmless and neutral left", and that one has to "philosophize so as not to feel ashamed in the face of the victims" (PT 1:166). Heidegger's deafening silence on suffering, his consecration of fate and the given, his jargon's affirmative essence and affinity with authority, make his philosophy "fascist to its innermost core." Adorno's criticism is far more than a theoretical disagreement between philosophical colleagues ("the term colleague is no longer applicable when what is at stake is so deadly serious" PT 1:165)—it touches the heart of what Adorno is thinking and writing against.

It is in this context that we have to read Adorno's critique of Heidegger's language. The latter's fault is twofold: There is the "blood guilt of that which today echoes in the jargon"—the content it expresses, however subliminally. And there is, of particular significance to our purpose, the form more specifically—the fact that the deliberate oracularity of Heidegger's language puts his philosophy out of argument's reach. Prone to "primal sounds [*Urlaute*]" (JE 6:452/58), Heidegger "surrounds himself with the taboo that any understanding falsifies him" (JE 6:475/93),[99] thus making himself unassailable. Posing as a truth that lies beyond, or more precisely: before argumentation, his "homey murmur" allows him to "deny any content against which one could argue" (JE 6:475/93). It is difficult to argue against snowstorms and mountain huts, even if their subliminal message is indeed—as Adorno claims—one of nationalist bigotry. Similarly, the claim that man is the shepherd of Being, with its figurative, biblical language, eschews argumentation, thus strengthening its intrinsic affirmativity. "The pure tone drips with positivity, without needing to lower itself to plead for things that carry a bit too much baggage" (JE 6:426/21). Obsessed with the primeval, with *Ursprünglichkeit* or, as Adorno puts it bluntly: with whatever "has been there first" (ND 6:158/155), Heidegger replaces the argument with the "sixth-hand peasant symbol" (JE 6:451/56), charged with a meaning that remains

[99] Martin Jay's claim that this criticism "could perhaps be extended to [Adorno] as well" misrepresents in my opinion the relationship of form and content in Adorno's work. See Jay, *Adorno*, 11–2. See also Note 62.

deliberately blurry. What the latter does say is up to the philosopher's manipulative discretion: "[Heidegger] manipulates the preconceptual, mimetic element of language to serve his own desired causes and effects" (JE 6:418/8). The dismissal of argumentation at the benefit of figurative insinuation serves Heidegger's own cause, the affirmation of what is and has been, which for Adorno amounts to the perpetuation of the "wrong life" at best, the strengthening of the lurking fascist ideology at worst. That is why, against Heidegger, Adorno, whose own reservations on the hegemony of discursive and argumentative language we have amply explored, firmly takes the side of the latter. Adorno's work leaves no doubt that he himself aspired to strengthen the role of the "preconceptual, mimetic element" in philosophy that Heidegger manipulates so well—but from a very different terminus a quo. For Adorno, the use and theoretical vindication of nonconceptual elements in philosophical texts are an integer part of his effort to salvage the nonidentical. In other words, nonconceptuality in Adorno is intended to give more to the object, not less. Heidegger, Adorno asserts, uses preconceptual language to "serve his own desired cause and effects"—thus taking away from the object at the benefit of an all-manipulating subject. Rather than salvaging the nonidentical, he feeds the ideology that crushes it.

The Meaning of Despair

The importance of the intent behind the discursive and conceptual choices is at the heart of the 1956 conversation between Horkheimer and Adorno about the paradoxes and aporias of argumentation which I have quoted earlier. In it, the two thinkers stress that both non-conceptual thought and logical reasoning ultimately hinge on a third element which alone will decide whether or not they slip into irrationality or tautology. To Horkheimer's remark that "you can always argue anything about everything", Adorno responds that "thinking that renounces the argument—see Heidegger—turns into pure irrationalism",[100] only to later reaffirm that the moment you start "justifying why something is bad, you have already lost".[101] The only way to navigate the aporia without falling into either extreme—abstract argumentative sophistry or irrationalist dogmatism—is to bring in what Adorno calls the "intuitive impulse", and

[100] Adorno and Horkheimer, [Diskussion über Theorie und Praxis], 57.
[101] Ibid., 59.

Horkheimer "a practical tendency [behind argumentation]",[102] which he spells out as "the goal that lies behind everything we say, the totality of our experiences and our suffering".[103] Suffering, impulse, experience—the nonidentical in rationality's inexorable progress—are once more called upon to give a direction to the otherwise rudderless thrust of logical reasoning. It is their anamnesis, as a practical tendency behind every thought, that prevents Adorno's vindicated uncertainty from slithering into relativism and nihilism.

We have seen the many different ways in which this anamnesis plays out in Adorno's work, and the prominent role played by the aesthetic. As this chapter draws to an end, I want to illustrate one last time the intricate nexus of art and philosophy, meaning and its shattering, despair and utopia in Adorno's philosophy, by reflecting on a phenomenon that Adorno, borrowing (and transforming) a term from biology,[104] calls "homeostasis" (AES 259/162). Adorno describes homeostasis successively as a "commitment" (AES 259/162) of the artwork, a "context of meaning", a "balance of forces" (AES 260/163). Applying it to Schoenberg, he speaks of the commitment of the first notes, pointing to an affinity with dialectic theory:

> Schoenberg thinks—and that is initially well in keeping with a dialectic theory—that an artwork, in his case a composition, with its first tact, its first notes, in a certain sense takes on a commitment. The notes represent a kind of tension [*Spannungsverhältnis*]. By putting anything at the beginning of an artwork (…), I commit myself to pursue what I posit here, as well as to pursue the tensions and contradictions contained in that position. (AES 259/162–3)

In the first sentences of his two major works, Adorno seems to be doing just that. In *Negative Dialectic*, we read: "Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, keeps itself alive because the moment of its realization was missed" (ND 6:15/3). It is hardly an overstatement to say that the entire book evolves in the tension set up in that first sentence. *Aesthetic Theory* begins no less ominously: "It has become self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, neither in itself nor in its relationship

[102] Ibid., 57.

[103] Ibid.

[104] In biology, the term homeostasis refers to the complex set of interacting metabolic reactions that ensure the equilibrium of the whole organism.

to the whole, not even its right to exist" (AET 7:10/1). Again, the first sentence is binding for the rest of the book—Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* can only be understood if art's right to exist is not even for a split moment taken for granted. In both works, Adorno "commits [himself] to pursuing what [he] posits" at the outset, thus mirroring the "homeostasis" he perceives in artworks. Significantly, Adorno asserts that in the latter, the "uninterrupted give and take" initiated with the first commitment eventually leads to "a kind of reconciliation of the tensions". While "every singular moment on the artwork is tension", their "configuration" brings about a certain "harmony, balance" (AES 260/163). At first glance, this seems to run diametrically counter to Adorno's idea not only of philosophy, but also of art: Aren't both precisely meant to bring forth the cracks that identity thinking wants to smooth over? Isn't harmony Adorno's declared bête noire, in art as in life? The continuation of Adorno's reflection on homeostasis reveals that he was himself acutely aware of the paradox, and point towards a possible answer to it. On the one hand, Adorno writes, "an artwork that does not contain a moment of homeostasis, that does not succeed in bringing about a balance through the process it initiated, is indeed always on the point of becoming meaningless" (AES 261/163–4). Calling homeostasis the "context of meaning [*Sinnzusammenhang*]", he claims that only through homeostasis, "something meaningful" (AES 261/164) can be constructed. Meaning here, or rather: context of meaning, is not metaphysical meaning, the "meaning for our immanence out of an affirmatively set transcendence" (ND 6:354/361) which to claim after Auschwitz Adorno considered sarcasm. Rather, it is the relationship between form and content that results in something (rather than nothing) being expressed. And yet, Adorno is well aware that even in this minimal sense, homeostasis "brings a harmonistic, affirmative moment into art" (AES 261/164). The question this paradox prompts is for Adorno the "the truly central and most difficult question of modern art" (AES 262/164): "Whether this moment is an inalienable part of the utopian, of the moment of reconciliation that all art means, or if it contains indeed a conformation to the reigning ideology" (AES 261–2/164). Adorno adds that he "does not dare to answer" (AES 262/164) this question. In truth, the question likely *is* the answer—the tension Adorno points out cannot and must not be resolved. Only in constant confrontation with its affirmative potential can the utopian element prevail—the moment art loses sight of the former,

it falls prey to it. Thus, homeostasis, the moment of "lack of tensions", dialectically brings tension back in. In this light, Adorno's philosophy does indeed contain the element of homeostasis he describes. To call his work affirmative would be absurd, but at the same time, he does not take the rejection of affirmativity and harmony to the point of meaninglessness, where everything simply falls apart. While "every singular moment" of his work "is tension", its "configuration" brings about something that, while I hesitate to call it harmony, is clearly a "context of meaning" that goes beyond the tension of its parts. Adorno is no nihilist. His entire work is driven by the possibility that things could be different, that that which is, is not everything. The negativity, the bad and the worst that Adorno's philosophy tirelessly unmasks do not have the last word. This fact is powerfully expressed by what could be considered the last word of *Negative Dialectic*, i.e. its very last sentence. After describing negative dialectic as the "micrological gaze that smashes the shells of what according to the subsuming concept is helplessly isolated, and bursts its identity, the illusion that it is a mere exemplar", Adorno ends the books with the words: "Such thinking stands in solidarity with metaphysics at the moment of its downfall" (ND 6:400/408). Metaphysics, the claim that there is something that transcends the down-to-earth, something other, is slowly falling into the abyss of our bleak reality. Yet, against the "horror of the suspicion that what must be known resembles more what is down to earth rather than what elevates itself" (ND 6:357/364), there are certain "micrological" glimpses, "the lightening up of an eye, the feeble tail-wagging of a dog", that point toward the possibility that this is not all there is. In solidarity with that possibility, we have to hold on to a "concept of truth that is not that of adequatio [rei]" (ND 6:357/364). A truth that is more accessible to a mimetic, aesthetic engagement than to a conceptualization which cannot withstand the contradictory forces pulling it apart, the absurdity that is an integer part of its force field. In a passage of *Minima Moralia*, Adorno powerfully evokes that truth by reflecting on a children's song he grew up with. Neither the fact that he resorts to a song here, in other words: to an aesthetic object, nor that it comes from the world of childhood, are incidental:

> Ever since I can think, I have been filled with happiness by the song: "Between the mountain and the deep, deep valley", of the two hares that are feasting in the meadow, are shot down by the hunter, and when they realize they are still alive, hop away. But only late have I understood the lesson it

> contains: Reason can only survive in despair and exuberance; it requires absurdity not to succumb to the objective insanity. One should do as the two hares do; when the shot rings, foolishly fall dead, then recollect oneself and think again, and if one still has some breath, run off. The force for fear and the force for happiness are the same: a boundless openness for experience that borders self-abandonment, in which he who succumbs finds himself again. (MM 4:228/200)

"It requires absurdity not to succumb to the objective insanity." But for philosophy, which is first and foremost resistance, the alternative is not an option. It is the philosophers' task, a task Adorno took on with despair and exuberance, to "stand in solidarity with metaphysics at the time of its downfall". The above hares have an important part to play in that solidarity. Only in art's own alogical logicity[105] are they able to hop away merrily after dropping dead. A part of "absurdity", of complete disregard of the rules of discursive logic and instrumental rationality, is paramount for thinking the possibility of another ending. Therein lies the potential of the aesthetic: the aesthetic relationship to reality creates an opening, a crack, by allowing for a "freedom to the object" that conceptual rationality has not. Any attempt to salvage transcendence—and solidarity with metaphysics is precisely that—hinges on this however absurd, however limited freedom: the freedom to experience the nonidentical, to perceive the traces [of suffering] in things, words, colors, sounds",[106] and "in unreduced awareness of the negativity, hold on to the possibility of a better [world]."[107]

[105] "Logizität" is Adorno's term for art's own internal logic. See e.g. AET 7:151/98; 181/119; 205–11/136–40.

[106] Adorno, "Über Tradition" in GS 10.1:314–5.

[107] Ibid.

CHAPTER 5

Epilogue

Where the Light Gets In

The inquiry that now comes to a close is inspired and informed by the one notion that, explicitly or implicitly, pervades all of Adorno's work: the nonidentical. I have shown the intimate connection between the nonidentical and the caesura of Auschwitz, and shed light on the many interconnected forms in which nonidentity plays a role in Adorno's philosophy: as the unsaid of conceptual thought; as that which reason cannot subsume and must therefore eliminate; as the other in a society intent on making everything the same; as the somatic, the torturable body, the silenced victim of progress' victory march; as the trace of history in a present that likes to forget; as the *Hinzutretende* that makes freedom break into experience, thus making morality possible; as resistance, nonidentical action, against the all-powerful *So ist es*; as the utopian, possible other that puts the actual to shame; as art, the bracketed-out-of-the-world that challenges the world by not taking part. What connects all these different dimensions of the nonidentical is a moment of resistance against what claims to be *it*, a glimpse of something beyond the immediately graspable.

The nonidentical, by definition elusive, epitomizes what Adorno means when he calls philosophy "essentially not expoundable" (ND 6:44/33), making the line between elucidating it and betraying it a very fine one indeed. My intention was neither to define the undefinable nor to paraphrase Adorno's own superior "stammerings", but rather to bring to light the nonidentical's pervasive and multilayered presence in his work—in

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other words, to make visible the constellations that shape it and give it its content, even if it eludes smooth conceptualization till the very end. In the multifaceted form presented here, the nonidentical is the *Mittelpunkt* of Adorno's thought, the force field that his philosophy tirelessly circles. The fact that this *Mittelpunkt* is so hard to pin down, only takes shape between the lines, is indicative of the work it is the center of. For Adorno, what escapes the powerful grasp of our minds is not an unfortunate residue that we haven't mastered just yet, but rather an essential moment of our reality—not a lack, but a wealth. Identity thinking's nearly unchallenged dominion over our relationship to the world and to ourselves has led to a great impoverishment of our cognitive and experiential abilities. The fact that only once we have made an object "identical", squeezed it into the Procrustes bed of our conceptual categorial framework, is it worthy of acknowledgement or worse: of existence, not only prevents us from seeing the colors of the world, but carries a destructive, "deadly" (JE 6:506/162) grain.

Adorno's entire work is an effort to think against the strong identifying current our mind is caught up in and try to find a way to *know* that would not rest on the erasure of the nonidentical. His escape out of the iron cage of rationality rests on three main pillars. The first is his version of Hegel's determinate negation, and a reversal of Spinoza: "Falsum index sui et veri" (AES 127/78)—the wrong, which "we know very well indeed" (PMP 261/175), points us *ex negativo* towards the good as that which it is not, its negative force dialectically revealing another possible—and, according to Adorno, obligating us to pursue it. That holds for the morally bad—Auschwitz as the very worst that must henceforth negatively guide our thinking and acting—as well as for the epistemically wrong: acknowledging that conceptual rationality's picture of reality is incomplete is a major step towards a more inclusive reasoning. The second pillar is Adorno's use of *form* as an integral part of content, a carrier of epistemic meaning. A different way of thinking calls for a different way of writing, one that unmasks the deceptive certainties of hypotactic discursivity and favors constellations and parataxis over a hierarchical syntax for which everything is decided in advance. The third pillar, finally, and the one which Adorno's late work most emphatically points to, is the aesthetic—art and the aesthetic relationship to the world as a path towards a different way of knowing. Far from conflating art and philosophy, Adorno sees an almost utopian potential in their dialectic encounter, in a mutual mediation

in which aesthetic mimesis interweaves with discursive conceptuality to give the nonidentical its due.

Neither of the three pillars I just named—the cognitive validation of the negative, the dialectic of form and content, and the integration of the aesthetic into cognition—seem conducive to the kind of certainty that science holds to be the highest goal of any inquiry into the world. Adorno's work not only *lacks* the latter, but goes further by declaring it adverse to truth. Certainty's staunch defenders have unsurprisingly accused Adorno of obscurity, of "fleeing into a pseudo-artistic hermetic style rather than giving arguments for what is enigmatically claimed".[1] That Adorno's philosophy does not meet the clarity, non-contradiction and univocity criteria set up by science, and by the analytic philosophers who have turned philosophy into one, is certainly true—how could it, since the scientization of thought is precisely what his entire body of work is up against. Just how profoundly this holds true, comes to light in two entries from Adorno's personal notebook. The first is from 1960:

> Since my earliest youth, probably since my childhood, through the experience of the contrast to my English cousins, I have known that everything I stand for is caught in a hopeless battle with what I consider to be the anti-spiritual par excellence [*das Geistfeindliche schlechthin*]: the spirit of Anglo-Saxon scientific positivism. This inarticulate, vague, but unwavering knowledge was later pushed back by my education and the direction my life took, but it grounded everything (…).[2]

To judge Adorno on analytic terms means erasing "everything he stands for", holding him accountable to a standard all his intellectual energy is directed against. The "unwavering knowledge" that scientific, positivist thought is destroying the *Geist* that alone maintains the possibility of a different outcome grounds his entire philosophical endeavor. The second entry, from 1961, expresses Adorno's aversion even more drastically—and draws, in stark words, a line to the murder of European Jewry:

> Nobody seems to have given much thought to what the murder of the Jews means for everybody else. But in the 15 years since the end of the war, it has come to light through the state of the *Geist*. That all which is, is mediated

[1] Ruth Sonderegger, "Essay und System" in Klein, Kreuzer and Dohm, *Adorno Handbuch*, 427.

[2] Adorno, "Graeculus (II)", 15.

> through the *Geist* and justified from within it, was implicit in all things Jewish, even when they did not know it. Even the last shmock was a shmock through a perversion of the *Geist*. A Jewish joke has a son ask his father how we know that a centipede has a thousand feet,[3] and the father answer: A goy has counted them. That goy has taken possession of the *Geist*. He is equally busy in *empirical social research** as *glorified nose counting** as in the kind of art which mistakes the—literal—whetting [*Zurüsten*] of natural material (…) with aesthetic objectification. If what I do has a historical legitimation, it is that I try to do what the Jews no longer can because they are gone, and because those who survived had to blend in [*sich gleichschalten mussten*] as social marranos.[4]

The feet and nose counters, in other words: analytic thought with its scientific, mathematical method, have taken over the world, their claim that everything can be brought down to an equation, an aedaquatio without leftover, reducing truth to a tautology—an analytic reformulation of the given. What they reject in the name of scientific certainty: that anything be added, however tentatively, to what is perceived as empirically verifiable, is precisely what Adorno holds dear. Convinced that the ungraspable other—the nonidentical, the utopian, the glimpse of beauty, the transcendent—is the crack where the light gets in, the locus of the possibility that what is, is not everything, he held on to the "solidarity with metaphysics at the moment of its downfall" (ND 6:400/408) and was strikingly unmoved by the risk of theological promiscuity: "Effectively, one has to choose between theology and tautology. I would in that case prefer theology."[5] Indeed, Adorno never attacked the theological remotely as harshly as the "spirit of anglo-saxon scientific positivism". The reason, I want to wager, is that whereas scientism inexorably *closes*, shuts down, cuts off thought's velleities to venture beyond the immediately given, the theological allows for the intangible and ungraspable. Adorno's philosophy's affinity with the theological lies not in any given dogma—far from it—but in a fundamental

[3] In German, the centipede is called "Tausendfüssler", thousand-feet.

[4] Adorno, "Graeculus (II)", 21.

* in English in the original

[5] Adorno, "Graeculus (II)", 38. Horkheimer once said about his friend: "The difference between us is that in Teddie, there is always a part theology."Adorno and Horkheimer, [Diskussion über Theorie und Praxis], 41.

openness to the possibility that there is more to the world than our reason can grasp.[6]

The same openness informs the questions behind the various forms of the nonidentical: Is there more to this? What has been left out? What has been silenced? Adorno's biggest bête noire is the cutting off of thought that scientific and religious dogmatism are equally guilty of, the claim that everything has been said. The dialectic movement of his thought, which once led Kracauer to complain that Adorno's writing made the reader feel dizzy,[7] is his response to that claim: a thought that refuses to break off. That does not mean, however, what certain critics accused him of and what he himself vigorously rejected: "to systematically and successfully turn the tables" (MM 4:280/244)—rather, it reflects an acute awareness of the incompleteness of any thought in standstill, the realization that even the strongest subjective claim has a nonidentical that scratches at its surface. What prevents this dialectical self-questioning of thought from turning into relativism is yet another dialectic:

> A reflected humanity consists as much of not being dissuaded [*dass man sich nicht abbringen lässt*], of a moment of unswerving persistence, of holding firm to what one believes to have experienced, as of a moment of not only self-criticism, but criticism of the very rigidity and implacability one feels raising up inside… [What counts is] to learn, in reflection on one's own conditionality, to give its due to what is different (…). This abstention from self-assertiveness (…) seems to me to be the crucial thing to demand of individuals today. (PMP 251/169)

To integrate the nonidentical into thinking means simultaneously "holding firm" and being "conscious of one's own fallibility" (PMP 251/169)—both moments informed and shaped by the knowledge of the nonidentical's suffering. Holding unswervingly on to the imperative that the latter must end; and at the same time, being aware that unswerving righteousness is the first wrong done to the nonidentical. The two poles dialectically mediate each other, *must* go together. The former is expressed in the new categorical imperative: to arrange *all* thought and *all* action in such a way as to ensure that Auschwitz will never happen again. The latter is expressed in a certain modesty, the opposite of the "wanting-to-be-right" and the

[6] For more on Adorno's "theology", see Micha Brumlik's essay "Theologie und Messianismus" in *Adorno Handbuch*, 295–309.

[7] Quoted in Jay, *Adorno*, 11.

"advocatory gesture of thought" that Adorno held to be utterly "inadequate to philosophy" (MM 4:78–9/70–1). In his lecture on moral philosophy, Adorno even named modesty as the one cardinal virtue he could think of (PMP 252/169). It would be a mistake, however, to conclude from this stance of intellectual modesty, from this acute awareness of his own fallibility, to an overall *modest philosophy*. The modesty of the epistemic claim does not entail a modesty of aspiration—quite the opposite is true, as the dialectic counterpart of "holding firm" and the categorical imperative it is bound up with make abundantly clear. Calling Adorno's philosophy modest would not only betray the despair and the feeling of urgency that animate it, but also completely miss the substantial demand it puts on us. To call for the subject to question the infallibility of its assumptions and allow for the possibility of an objectivity beyond its grasp, to take into account the claim of the object even if it does not fit its own, and to never lose sight of the nonidentical's suffering, is a tall order. This simple *Innehalten*, this pause in which rational subjectivity holds its breath to question its own omniscience and nestles up to the object's otherness, is quite possibly the most important element of morality, the first step to the right life. It is also the first step towards a richer experience of the world—towards that very same spiritual experience Adorno's *Negative Dialectic* is all about. Both elements together, the nonidentical's "rescue" in the object and within the subject, hold the elusive promise of that better world that Adorno, faithful in this point to the Jewish *Bilderverbot*, only ever spelled out negatively: a state of reality in which there would be no more suffering.

According to Adorno, we can get a glimpse of that paradise through the aesthetic in the broadest sense. Aesthetic experience, be it in the face of natural beauty, of an eye that lights up, or of an artwork, has the potential to take us beyond our own constraining subjectivity to a place where conceptuality is challenged and enriched by other ways of engaging the world. Even if the true aesthetic experience as Adorno describes it—the feeling "of being overpowered, of self-forgetting, of extinction of the subject" (AES 197/123)—is rare, the fact that it does happen is enough to ascertain that another way of knowing is possible: a mimetic, empathetic way in which the object of cognition is given a voice rather than being subdued by constitutive subjectivity. In his lectures on aesthetics, Adorno calls aesthetic experience a "feel-

ing of the world which the artwork produces, that is, of the nature of the world in its concreteness and not *in abstracto*" (AES 323/203). While that feeling does not have the univocity of the judgment, Adorno continues, it contains "extraordinarily concrete moments" (AES 327/207). Unlike the former, it does not simply affirm or negate but reflects the "intertwinement of truth and untruth, the intertwinement of the living", a dialectic that brings it closer to the truth, for "as complex as the feeling of the world which a significant artwork produces, as complex is the world indeed" (AES 327/206–7). Art, Adorno concludes, takes us "beyond isolated narrowness in a way in which otherwise only speculative thought can" (AES 325/205). Art and philosophy meet in a *feeling* of the world they produce in the subject, a feeling which Adorno explicitly opposes to the epistemic judgment and considers superior to the latter in the groping search for truth. This preference given to feeling, the "feeling of the world", over judgment is remarkable in a philosophical context. For Kant, the act of thinking *equates* judging, a view only rarely challenged since. It is the judgment that provides the criteria of coherence and non-contradiction that rule rational discourse and deny cognitive validity to the somatic: to feelings, impulses, idiosyncracies and other impure elements of our contradictory self. Of course, it is precisely what disqualifies the feeling in Kant's eyes—its impurity, its equivocity—that makes it cognitively meaningful for Adorno, more truthful in its complexity to the complexity of the world. But it is not just cognition that is at stake. The *feeling of the world* philosophy and art convey echoes with another feeling, one that, according to Adorno, lies at their heart: the feeling of solidarity with the torturable body. Both testify to the central role of the somatic in Adorno's reason.[8] The feeling he wants to make heard in the latter is doubly 'irrational': it is the somatic solidarity with the somatic, a mimetic empathy not so far from the love Adorno did not want to preach. At the end of an excursus of *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno links it to *eros*: "Feeling and understanding [*Verstand*] are not absolutely separate in the human predisposition", Adorno

[8] As Julia Scherf points out, the intertwinement of feeling and ratio is a "red thread of Adorno's theory that even the lay public will recognize". Julia Scherf, "Grusswort" in Zuckermann (ed.), *Theodor W. Adorno—Philosoph des beschädigten Lebens* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2004), 7.

writes, warning that "the thought that recoils from the sublimation of mimetic behavior nears tautology. *The deadly separation of both* is a result, and reversible. Reason without mimesis negates itself" (AET 7:489/331). After defining aesthetic behavior as the "ability to shudder [*erschauern*]", he ends with the words: "The shudder [*Schauer*] in which subjectivity stirs is the fact of being touched by what is other. Aesthetic behavior draws close to the latter instead of subjugating it. Such constitutive relationship of the subject to objectivity in aesthetic behavior weds eros to knowledge" (AET 7:490/331).[9] There lies the crux of Adorno's philosophy of the nonidentical: a dialectic of eros and knowledge, of feeling and reason, the somatic/mimetic and the rational—a dialectic that saves reason from its own coldness and the somatic from turning into a "trivial sentimental enclave" (AET 7:489/331), allowing the nonidentical to express itself and to stake its normative claim.

Adorno's attempt to break out of the dominant rationality, the rationality of the victorious battalions, has lost nothing of its relevance today. The urge to crush what is different, in thought, society and within ourselves, is as strong as ever, even in so-called pluralist societies where the vaunted pluralism is hardly the unity in difference that Adorno aspired to, but rather a unity controlled by the powerful in which the differences are proudly paraded only to be better assimilated.[10] Identity thinking, the forceful elimination of the nonidentical, is rife, and so are the social phenomena it feeds: racism, discrimination, intolerance, and not least: indifference to whatever happens to those who are not part of one's own in-group. Adorno's philosophical achievement is to have laid bare the far-reaching implications of our deeply ingrained cognitive patterns, in other words: the intimate link between *how* we think and *what* we think and do, or, as he puts it in his notebook: the "intertwinement of cognitive and moral categories (whose separation is a false abstraction)".[11] The cognitive categories through which we read the world are not morally neutral: identifying means freezing the dynamic into a static, turning the many into a one,

[9] See Jay Bernstein on the "shudder" in *The Fate of Art*, 219–24.

[10] At the time I am writing this epilogue, the spate of shootings of unarmed black people by white police officers in the US are an acute reminder of the precarity of the nonidentical in a society flaunting its diversity.

[11] Adorno, "Graeculus", 33.

the singular into a fungible. While it is impossible—and hardly desirable—for us conceptual beings to throw constitutive subjectivity overboard, the *consciousness* of rational conceptuality's limitations and shortcomings, and with it a certain epistemic modesty, an "abstention from self-assertiveness" and an openness to the possibility that things could be different than what we make them be, is a fundamental first step towards making cognition more moral, identity more nonidentical. Adorno has shown how other cognitive models, notably the aesthetic, can point towards a different way of engaging the world. "Thought *models*" is precisely what Adorno himself considered the philosophical form most true to the nonidentical—unlike the system, paroxysm of identity thinking. "The demand for bindingness without system is the demand for thought models" (ND 6:39/29), he writes in *Negative Dialectic*, where the third and last part is entitled "Models". "The model hits the specific and more than the specific, without diluting it in its generic concept. To think philosophically is to think in models" (ND 6:39/29). Adorno does not provide the reader with expoundable truths and unshakable certainties—rather, he acquaints us with a *model* of thinking that invites our mimetic engagement much more than our analysis. In a letter to Horkheimer, Adorno compares their work to a "gesture [*Gebärde*] rather than a thought. As when, abandoned on an island, one desperately waves after a disappearing boat with a piece of cloth, when it is already too far away to hear one's cries. Our writings will increasingly have to become such gestures from concepts [*Gesten aus Begriffen*], and less and less theories in the conventional sense."[12] Adorno's philosophy is far from a theory in the conventional sense. It is part theory, part musing, part gesture, part artwork, part the desperate cry of somebody abandoned utterly alone on an island surrounded by corpses. Itself nonidentical, it demands a willingness to let go of the claim to certainty, and to hold the tensions rather than trying to solve them. It is not an easy task. But in a world where the ugly faces of identity thinking loom as large as ever, with all the suffering that entails, we have a lot to gain from heeding Adorno's cry.

At the end of an inquiry into a philosopher's thought, scholars often like to ask: What does X mean to us today? In a speech on the occasion of the 125th anniversary of Hegel's death, Adorno called the question

[12] Adorno to Horkheimer, 21.8.1941, in Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 17, 153.

"despicable". Much rather, he contended, one should ask "what the present means to Hegel" (DSH 5:251/1). With the 50th anniversary of Adorno's death not so far off, the same could be said for him. True, truth has a temporal core—but Adorno does not give us truth. He gives us a way to edge closer to it, and that *way*, that *model*, has lost nothing of its relevance. So what, then, does the present mean to Adorno? This much larger question has not remotely received the attention it deserves. There are many present phenomena that Adorno's philosophy of the nonidentical could illuminate: religious fanaticism, systemic racism, the growing economic divide, the rise of populism, social media, to name but a few. Much remains to be said, but here is not the place for it. The essay, Adorno writes, "breaks off when it feels it has reached the end, and not when there is nothing left."[13] There is a lot left, but I have reached the end, for now—an end that I hope will inspire many new beginnings.

[13] Adorno, "Der Essay als Form", 10/152.

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